

NAVIGATING VOICE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN EDUCATION POLICY
MAKING IN NEPAL: AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

Chandra Kanta Bhusal

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AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Chandra Kanta Bhusal* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership* presented on 4 September 2025 entitled *Navigating Voice of Stakeholders in Education Policy Making in Nepal: An Interpretive Inquiry*.

APPROVED BY

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Prof. Dhanapati Subedi, PhD

Dissertation Supervisor

The study was conducted with the main purpose of exploring the perceptions and reflections of key stakeholders on their engagement in the education policy-making process of Nepal, with a particular focus on the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) making. I purposively selected seven participants and gathered their perceptions, stories, and experiences through in-depth interviews. Adopting an interpretive inquiry as my research method within the broader interpretive research paradigm, I analyzed their insights through the conceptual frameworks of three different theories, viz. Voice Theory, Policy-Making Theory, and Social Systems Theory.

By exploring how participants perceived and reflected on their roles and the representation of their voices in the SESP making process, I saw a disconnect between the claims made in official policy documents, i.e., SESP and the realities experienced by stakeholders on the ground (MoEST, 2022d). Although such documents highlight meaningful stakeholder engagement in education policy processes, the participants revealed a different reality. While certain influential actors, like government officials and central leaders of the Confederation of Nepali Teachers (CNT), had substantial access and influence, other groups, including parents, community representatives, and local government representatives like NARMIN, were either marginally engaged or completely excluded from the SESP process. This dissonance between documented policy intent and actual practice illuminated the contested nature of stakeholder ownership and engagement in Nepal's education policy landscape.

Furthermore, I came to understand that entrenched power structures, hierarchical decision-making, and inadequate mechanisms for communication and feedback significantly limited authentic stakeholder engagement. Even those who had formal opportunities in policy decision-making often felt that their substantive contributions were not taken into account during the finalization of policies and plans, as they informed their critical inputs were often overlooked during final decision-making. These insights reinforced theoretical perspectives suggesting that structural constraints and institutional hierarchies influence whose voices are sincerely heard in the policy-making arena. Participants also indicated that mechanisms such as consultations and committee memberships tended to be more symbolic than impactful, challenging the nature of inclusion as portrayed in official policy documents.

This study concluded that creating inclusive and actionable education policies like the SESP requires more than procedural engagement. It calls for the establishment of enduring, well-structured, and systemic strategies that actively involve diverse voices throughout the policy process, engaging the stakeholders to whom the policies are meant. The interpretive inquiry underscored the importance of re-evaluating current models of stakeholder engagement and fostering mechanisms such as feedback loops, capacity development, and inclusive dialogue forums. Through this research, I came to see the critical need for a transformative shift in Nepal's education policy-making approach, one that is rooted in meaningful stakeholder engagement and informed by both theoretical insight and lived experience.

.....

4 September 2025

Chandra Kanta Bhusal
Degree Candidate

शोध सार

शैक्षिक नेतृत्व तथा व्यवस्थापनमा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीको लागि चन्द्रकान्त भुसालको शोध प्रबन्धको शीर्षक " नेपालमा शिक्षानीति निर्माणमा सरोकारवालाहरूको आवाजको नेभिगेसनस् : एक व्याख्यात्मक अनुसन्धान" १९ भदौ २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

.....

प्रा. धनपति सुवेदी, पीएचडी
शोध निर्देशक

नेपालमा शिक्षा सम्बन्धि नीति निर्माणका क्रममा खासगरी विद्यालय शिक्षा क्षेत्र योजनाका सम्बन्धमा मुख्य सरोकारवालाहरूको संलग्नता बारे उनिहरूको धारणा र प्रतिविम्बन अन्वेषण गर्ने मुख्य उद्देश्यका साथ प्रस्तुत अध्ययन गरिएको थियो । अध्ययनका लागि विविध पृष्ठभूमि सहितको प्रतिनिधित्व हुने गरी सात जना सहभागीहरू उद्देश्यमूलक ढँगले छनोट गरी अन्तर्वार्ताका माध्यमबाट तिनिहरूका धारणा, कथा एवम् अनुभवहरू सँकलन गरिएको थियो । मैले वृहत्तर व्याख्यात्मक आदर्श भित्र रहि मेरो अनुसन्धानको विधिका रूपमा व्याख्यात्मक सोध लिई उनिहरूको अन्तरदृष्टि सम्बन्धि अवधारणा बनाउनका लागि आवाजको सिद्धान्त ,नीति निर्माणको सिद्धान्त र सामाजिक पद्धतिको सिद्धान्त जस्ता सिद्धान्तलाई उपयोग गरेको थिएँ।

यस अध्ययनमा मैले विद्यालय शिक्षा क्षेत्र योजना निर्माण प्रक्रियामा उनिहरूको भूमिका तथा आवाजको प्रतिनिधित्वका सम्बन्धमा मेरा सहभागीहरूको धारणा र प्रतिविम्बनको अन्वेषणबाट सरकारका उपर्युक्त योजना जस्ता नीतिगत दस्तावेजहरूले तिनिहरूमा सरोकारवालाहरूको अर्थपूर्ण सहभागिता छ भनि गरेको दावि भन्दा सहभागीहरूको अनुभवका प्रतिविम्बनले देखाएको वास्तविकता फरक महशुस गर्दै (शिक्षा,विज्ञान तथा प्रविधि मन्त्रालय,२०२०डि) । त्यस्ता दस्तावेजहरूले नीति निर्माण प्रक्रियाहरूमा सरोकारवालाहरूको अर्थपूर्ण सहभागिताको उल्लेख गरेपनि मेरा सहभागीहरूले बताए अनुसारको वास्तविकतामा फरकपन पाइयो। सरकारी अधिकारीहरू तथा शिक्षक महासंघका केन्द्रिय नेताहरू जस्ता निश्चित प्रभावशाली कर्ताहरूको बढि पहुँच तथा प्रभाव देखिन्छ भने अभिभावक, समुदायका प्रतिनिधि तथा गाउँपालिका राष्ट्रिय महासंघका प्रतिनिधि जस्ता अन्य समूहहरू भने विद्यालय शिक्षा क्षेत्र योजना निर्माण प्रक्रियामा आलंकारिक रूपमा मात्र संलग्न भएको वा पूर्ण रूपमै बाहिर पारिएको भन्ने पाइयो। संग्रहित नीति दस्तावेजको आशय तथा सरोकारवालाहरूको वास्तविक धारणा विचमा देखिएको फरकपनाले ममा नेपालका नीतिहरूको अपनत्व तथा सरोकारवालाको सहभागिताका सम्बन्धमा भएको विरोधाभासयुक्त प्रवृत्तिका बारेको अवधारणागत गहनता थपिएको छ।

त्यसैगरि जडित शक्तिढाँचा, पदसोपानयुक्त निर्णय तथा अपर्याप्त सञ्चार एवम् पृष्ठपोषण संयन्त्र लगायतले वास्तविक सरोकारवालाहरुको सहभागितामा विशेष रूपले अवरोध सिर्जना गरेको भन्ने पनि मैले महशुस गरें । नीति निर्माणको निर्णय प्रक्रियामा औपचारिक अवसर प्राप्तहरुले पनि तिनिहरुका सान्दर्भिक एवम् आलोचनात्मक योगदानलाई योजना तथा नीति निर्माणको अन्तिम चरणमा वेवास्ता गरिएको महशुस गरेको पाइयो। यी प्राप्तिहरुबाट संरचनागत बाधाहरु तथा संस्थागत तहले नीति निर्माणको मैदानमा कस्को आवाज बढि सुनिश्चित हुन्छ भन्ने सैद्धान्तिक दृष्टिकोणलाई जोड दिएको पाइयो। मेरा सहभागिको प्रतिविम्बनबाट के पनि पाइयो भने परामर्श तथा समितिमा प्रतिनिधित्व जस्ता संयन्त्रहरु प्रभावकारी हुने भन्दा औपचारिक नीतिगत दस्तावेजमा उल्लेख भएजस्तो समावेशिकरणको प्रवृत्तिलाई चुनौति दिनेगरी आलंकारिक जस्ता भए भन्ने महशुस भयो ।

प्रस्तुत अध्ययनको निष्कर्ष यो भयो कि विद्यालय शिक्षा क्षेत्र योजना जस्ता शिक्षा नीतिहरु समावेशि र कार्यान्वयनयोग्य बनाउन प्रक्रियागत भन्दा बढि खालको सहभागिता जरुरी हुन्छ। यसले जसको लागि नीति बन्दै गरेको हो तिनिहरुलाई सहभागि गराउने, विभिन्न खाले सरोकारवालाको आवाजलाई समग्र नीति निर्माण प्रक्रियाका दौरान समेट्न सक्ने एउटा दिगो,व्यवस्थित र पद्धतियुक्त संरचनाको अपेक्षा गरेको छ। प्रस्तुत व्याख्यात्मक सोधले सहभागिताका वर्तमान अभ्यासहरुबारे पुनर्विचार गर्न जोड दिनुका साथै पृष्ठपोषणका मार्ग निर्माण गर्ने, क्षमता विकासको पहलकदमी गर्ने तथा समावेशी बहसका अवसरहरु बनाउने जस्ता प्रयासबाट नीतिबाट प्रभावित हुनेहरुको आवाजलाई नीति निर्माण प्रक्रियामा प्रतिविम्बित हुनेगरी सरोकारवाला सहभागिताको विद्यमान नमुनालाई पुनःमूल्यांकन गर्नुपर्ने पक्षलाई महत्वका साथ उजागर गरेको छ । यो अध्ययनको माध्यमबाट मलाई नेपालको नीति निर्माणका सन्दर्भमा सिद्धान्त र जिवन्त अनुभव दुवैमा आधारित वास्तविक सरोकारवालाको सहभागिता सुनिश्चित गर्ने रुपान्तरणकारी दृष्टिकोणको टड्कारो आवश्यकता औल्याउन महत्वपूर्ण सहयोग गरेको छ।

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चन्द्रकान्त भुसाल
उपाधि उम्मेदवार

१९ भदौ २०८२

This dissertation, entitled *Navigating Voice of Stakeholders in Education Policy Making in Nepal: An Interpretive Inquiry*, presented by *Chandra Kanta Bhusal* on 4 September, 2025.

APPROVED BY

..... 4 September 2025
Prof. Dhanapati Subedi, PhD
Dissertation Supervisor

..... 4 September 2025
Hari Prasad Lamsal, PhD
External Examiner

..... 4 September 2025
Asst. Prof. Rebat Kumar Dhakal, PhD
Head of Department, Educational Leadership

..... 4 September 2025
Prof. Bal Chandra Luitel, PhD
Dean/ Chair of Research Committee

I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

..... 4 September, 2025
Chandra Kanta Bhusal
Degree Candidate

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

.....

4 September 2025

Chandra Kanta Bhusal

Degree Candidate

DEDICATION

To my father, mother, wife, son and daughter.

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Chandra Kanta Bhusal
Degree Candidate

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ABBREVIATIONS

BS	Bikram Sambat
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
CFEA	Compulsory and Free Education Act
CLC	Community Learning Center
CNT	Confederation of Nepali Teachers
CSO	Community Sector Organization
GON	Government of Nepal
KUSOED	Kathmandu University School of Education
LGOA	Local Government Operation Act
MOEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MUAN:	Municipality Association of Nepal
NARMIN	National Association of Rural Municipality in Nepal
NEP	National Education Policy
NESA	Nepal Education Sector Analysis
NPC	National Planning Commission
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ReAL	Recovery and Accelerated Learning
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SESP	School Education Sector Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Program
TPD:	Teacher Professional Development
TSC	Teacher Service Commission
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UGC	University Grants Commission
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I have started by setting the scene, which reveals what made me begin my study on this topic. In the background section, I have discussed the importance of the study with the support of the related literature. Under the statement of the problem, I have problematized the study topic. The purpose of the study section gives the major aims of my research. In the research questions section, I have included two questions to clarify my research aims, followed by the rationale of my study. Then, I have delimited my study. After that, I have mentioned the structure of the dissertation. Finally, I have provided a summary of the chapter.

Setting the Scene

Considering the voices of concerned stakeholders in policymaking is important to enhance ownership and make the policy more implementable. In the context of Nepal, most of the policies seem to have been made with the inadequate engagement of the key stakeholders in policy formulation and execution processes, as Dhakal (2019) highlights concerns that the development partners are most often used as the instruments to marginalize domestic policymakers, leading to policies that do not fully address grassroots needs. I also have felt it while working under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) over the last two decades. The key stakeholders of the education policies like teachers, SMCs, parents, community people, and even the government officials are left unheard while developing the policies as (Khanal, 2012) analyzes how policy provisions are manifested in local school practices, shedding light on the difficulties of stakeholder engagement in policy implementation to decentralize school education in Nepal, focusing on the experiences and interpretations of stakeholders.

To make the policies more implementable and build ownership in them, the real grassroots-level stakeholders are supposed to be engaged in the formulation and execution processes of the policies. Parajuli (2015) discusses Nepal's new Constitution and its implications for education development. He emphasizes that school-level education now falls under the jurisdiction of municipal governments, suggesting that the engagement of local governments and communities can lead to better educational outcomes if grassroots stakeholders are placed at the center.

My experience under the MoEST and the above-discussed literature shows the inadequacy of stakeholder engagement in the education policies of Nepal. In most cases, I myself, even being a member of the government bureaucracy under the MoEST of Nepal, am not consulted in the formulation process of many policies related to education, even school-level education policies. The case of grassroots-level stakeholders, as per my experience, is quite pathetic in this regard. Most of the grassroots-level stakeholders are not even informed after the finalization of the policies. In this regard, I explored the ground realities of the representation of stakeholders' voices in the education policy-making process in Nepal through a study taking the SESP formulation process as the base of my study, which I thought essential.

Background of the Study

Having worked as a school teacher in different public and private schools of Nepal and in different institutions under the MoEST, I have experienced the implementation context of education policies, most specifically the school-level education policies in Nepal. As per my experience, I can say that the grassroots level stakeholders are found to be unaware of their valued presence in the policy formulation process, and the policies are developed under the influence of elite people and donor communities. It might be a reason for the ineffectiveness of education policies (Budhathoki, 2018). In the same way, weakness in communication and consultations, as well as fewer discussions with the stakeholders, use of a top-down approach, and inadequacy in understanding the grassroots level realities are some of the reasons for the failure of education policies in Nepal (Budhathoki, 2018). Furthermore, it is also said that the policies are heavily influenced by the donor communities' interest, which hinders the participation of the real stakeholders, basically hindering the representation of their voice in education policies (Dhakal, 2019). So, it inspired me to conduct a study to navigate the voice of stakeholders in education policy making in Nepal, most specifically the latest school education sector plan (SESP) that is under implementation by the Government of Nepal.

In the education policy formulation process of Nepal, there is an inadequacy in the representation of the voice of the stakeholders. In his 2012 study, Khanal explores how decentralization policies are applied in the sector of school education in Nepal, highlighting power dynamics resulting in winners and losers in policy formulation and implementation. The study emphasizes efforts such as transferring school

management, encouraging community participation, and promoting local-level decision-making as ways to better reflect the needs and realities of communities on the ground. However, it discloses inadequacies in replicating the voices of stakeholders throughout these processes. Similarly, Neupane (2019) provides a conceptual framework to address inclusion challenges in Nepal's education policy-making, emphasizing the barriers caused by the country's multi-ethnic, caste-based, and linguistically diverse societal context. Regmi (2023) informs Nepal's educational policy-making, highlighting the domination of foreign aid in the process and the exclusion of key stakeholders like teachers and communities. Dhakal (2019) highlights the lack of citizen participation and analyzes the top-down approach, calling for evidence-informed policymaking and deeper engagement of local actors to advance inclusive education policies, challenging existing donor-driven and personality-centric decision-making processes in the context of Nepal's education policy formulation and implementation.

From my own experience, it appears that there is a huge inadequacy of stakeholders' engagement in education policy-making in Nepal, hindering the representation of the voices of the real stakeholders in this process. Even I myself have been a case of not having the opportunity to be a part of most of the education policy processes of Nepal. The recent school education bill, tabled in the federal parliament, development process was also not so participatory as I myself being a member of government bureaucracy under the MoEST did not get chance to be the part of its development process may be because of the influence of the donor communities and the insignificance of some of the policy-level people to get all stakeholders to be the part of the policy processes. If a member of government bureaucracy does not get a chance to put his/her ideas or discuss the concerned matter, what could be the case of grassroots-level stakeholders like students, teachers and parents? The studies of Khanal (2012), Dhakal (2019), Neupane (2019), and Regmi (2023) briefly talk about the low engagement of stakeholders in the education policy formulation process in Nepal. Even in the context of the government's attempt to engage the stakeholders in the formulation of policies like the Constitution, National Education Policy, 2019, SESP, etc., the engagement does not seem that visible (Dhakal, 2019; Regmi, 2023).

Plan International Nepal (2025) brings the narratives of various stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and local officials, reflecting on their experiences and

perspectives regarding inclusive and quality education in Nepal. It highlights the significance of incorporating their voices into policy-making processes to ensure that educational reforms are responsive to the needs of all grassroots-level stakeholders. But it also indicates lower engagement of the concerned ones in the policy-making process of Nepal. In the same way, UGC Nepal (2021) outlines the strategies for stakeholder engagement in the Nurturing Excellence in Higher Education Project. It also underlines the importance of involving diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, and community members, in the planning and implementation of higher education reforms in Nepal. But is it happening? There is again the issue of stakeholders' engagement in Nepal's education policy process. These two documents also focus on the need for stakeholder engagement in the policy process, but show the inadequacy of the engagement, which demands further research on it.

Dhakal (2021) investigates women's participation in school governance within a rural Nepali community. It reveals systemic barriers that limit women's contributions in decision-making processes, despite formal structures promoting inclusivity. The research emphasizes the need for sincere empowerment and active engagement of women in educational leadership roles. Similarly, Katel and Katel (2024) explore the current state of parental involvement. The study identifies barriers such as a lack of awareness, socio-economic constraints, and inadequate communication between schools and parents. The authors propose strategies to foster active parental engagement, emphasizing its importance in improving educational outcomes. Furthermore, Panthee (2021) observes the implementation of language policies in education by local governments in the Rupandehi District of Nepal. Even if policies aim to respect linguistic diversity with stakeholders' engagement, the research finds a gap between policy and practice, with a predominant focus on the Nepali and English languages. The study also highlights the need for more inclusive practices that sincerely reflect Nepal's multilingual context in the education policies. Similarly, from the essence of these three scholarly works, I also came to know that there is the expectation of scholars on the need for greater stakeholder engagement in the policy process and this made me study the voice of stakeholders in the education policy process of Nepal, most specifically the SESP formulation process.

In the context of education policy making, there seems to be a basic need for engagement and participation of concerned stakeholders, leading to representation of their voices in the policy, but the studies do not resemble the aforementioned reality.

Hadijah (2024) investigates the rationale behind stakeholder engagement in education policy, examining both the potential benefits and the challenges to effective engagement of the stakeholders. Case studies from Italy and Bulgaria exemplify the outcomes of varied engagement strategies and highlight the adaptability required in stakeholder engagement frameworks. Although engaging stakeholders presents logistical, financial, and representational challenges, the benefits include enhanced policy legitimacy, transparency, and community support. Future directions for education policy development emphasize using technological tools to broaden engagement and sustain stakeholder interest through continuous, adaptive processes (Hadijah, 2024) that could be of high value to make the policies more owned by the concerned stakeholders.

The scholarly works mentioned above and my experience show that the engagement of concerned stakeholders is of great importance in the education policy formulation and implementation process of any country, but the inadequacy of it in our context may have impacted the implementation of the policies, resulting in poor results in achieving the desired objectives. This context demanded a study related to navigating the key stakeholders' voices in Nepal's education policy-making, and so, I became interested in conducting a study on this topic.

Through the studied literature and my own experience, I came to know that there are very limited studies in the sector, and the engagement of the related stakeholders is also very low. So, I came to think of the need for this study, taking the case of the SESP, to see whether there is engagement of concerned stakeholders and their voices are represented in the plan formulation process through an interpretive inquiry.

Statement of the Problem

In any education system in the world, formulating policy plays a vital role. In principle, it is assumed that the policies, including education policies, are to be developed and implemented in the engagement of concerned stakeholders. The education policies should consider the beneficiaries' voices to be implemented well (Rana, 2019). So far as the context of Nepal is concerned, it is found that they are taken as not meeting this parameter in the real sense. Less engagement of the stakeholders or almost a lack of representation of the voices of stakeholders in the education policy processes of Nepal is the problem. In the formulation and execution of education policies of Nepal, most of the grassroots-level stakeholders are found

unaware of it. Even the policy discussions at the MoEST and other policymaking agencies underscore that the policies are to be participatory. But why are the policymaking practices not so participatory? Do they engage real stakeholders for whom the policies are made? Who comes to the decision-making table? How are stakeholders' voices valued? (Dhakal, 2019). These questions come to my mind when thinking of the existing policy-making scenario, which expects a thorough study on navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, especially the SESP-making process.

The importance of stakeholder engagement in any public policymaking has been highlighted across the literature (Hutahaeen, 2017). In the same way, the betterment of any education system is based on the development of a good policy and its appropriate implementation. The practice of such is somehow bleak in the context of Nepal (Dhakal, 2019; Khanal, 2012; Neupane, 2019; Regmi, 2023; Subedi, 2020). For this, engagement of the stakeholders is another crucial part. But in the case of Nepal, I see, it is not well articulated. In this context, the stakeholders do not own policies and they are not giving good results. The ground realities of this problem are to be studied well and the issues are to be resolved. If the problem is not solved, it would rather hamper the education results of the country hindering its prosperity (K.C., 2023; Regmi, 2023). The inadequacy in the engagement of the key stakeholders in education policy-making leads specifically to lower learning achievement of children, ultimately hindering the prosperity of the country (Dhakal, 2019), which may degrade the status of the country at the regional and global level.

The Government of Nepal seems trying to increase the engagement of the concerned stakeholders and make the policy development process participatory. Some of the areas where the citizens were asked to participate are: taking the feedback of citizens in the constitution formulation process, which gives major policy direction to education policies. The above studies of Khanal (2012), Neupane (2019), Dhakal (2019) and Regmi (2023) give a slight indication of it. Similarly, in the SESP, which is now in operation, the participation of concerned stakeholders is much expected. The political and other stakeholders' consensus is also expected in the assumption part of SESP (MoEST, 2022d). But the engagement seems quite inadequate, which demanded a thorough study.

Theoretically, the policies are supposed to be developed in the proper engagement of the stakeholders with effective representation of their voices. The

studies so far made do not resemble the actual engagement of the concerned stakeholders in education policy making and the execution process of Nepal (Subedi, 2020). Though some studies have been made so far, they have not fulfilled the required indication for navigating the voice of stakeholders in Nepali education policy formulation and execution processes, most specifically in the SESP making process. The studies made so far in this regard do not give a clear picture of the positive status of the engagement of concerned stakeholders in the latest education policy formulation attempts of Nepal. As per my understanding, no study has been conducted regarding the representation of the voice of stakeholders in the National Education Policy, 2019, SESP and the latest school education bill tabled in the federal parliament. In this connection, a study to navigate the voice of stakeholders in the SESP formulation process was conducted and some insights and corrective measures were tried to be found out so that the children's learning be improved and ultimately a prosperous Nepal and happy Nepali could be maintained.

Furthermore, the SESP is one of the important policy documents that is implemented to enhance the overall school education system and the quality of school education in Nepal. The studies and related scholarly documents mentioned above show less engagement or almost a lack of engagement of the related stakeholders in the formulation processes of school education policies, especially the SESP of Nepal. This attempt has tried to study thoroughly to navigate the voice of stakeholders in SESP of Nepal.

Furthermore, the SESP that is presently in operation has been minimally studied from the perspectives of the representation of the voices of the stakeholders. As the literature studied so far showed very little engagement of the stakeholders in the policy process of the education sector, especially the school sector education policies of Nepal, I became interested to make a study on navigating voice of stakeholders in education policy making in Nepal taking SESP as a case.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of stakeholders regarding their engagement in the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) making process. Furthermore, it unfolded whether the voices of the concerned stakeholders are represented in the SESP making process in Nepal.

Research Questions

1. How do stakeholders perceive their engagement in the SESP (2022/23-2031/32) making process in Nepal?
2. How do they reflect their experiences of situating their voices in SESP?

Rationale of the Study

I, having experienced as the school teacher of various private and public schools of Nepal and as the personnel of MoEST, have experienced the education policy formulation and execution process of Nepal. From my experience, I can say that there is an inadequacy of engagement of the grassroots level stakeholders in education policy-making processes. Sometimes, I myself find it quite difficult to be engaged in the policy-making process. In other words, in our context, it is not even easy to raise my own voice and put my concerns during education policy formulation processes, what might be the case for grassroots level stakeholders? Basically, the education policies are for students, teachers and parents. But their voices are not listened to well during the policy formulation process (Oyedeki, 2015).

The importance of stakeholder engagement in any public policy-making has been discussed a lot in various literature (Hutahaeen, 2017); however, the practice of it is somewhat weak in the context of Nepal (Khanal, 2012; Neupane, 2019). The inadequacy of stakeholder engagement is highlighted in the studies of Regmi (2023) and K.C. (2023), which indicate the need to listen to the voice of stakeholders to make the policies more implementable. The education policy practices seem to be just trying to involve some Nepali officials, but exclude teachers, students, parents, and communities from the process of policy development, neglecting the need for improved and meaningful engagement of the stakeholders in the education policy development process (Regmi, 2023). Although some attempts like taking the feedback of people in the constitution development process, engagement of limited stakeholders while developing the policies like National Education Policy, 2019a; SDG 4: 2030 Nepal National Framework, SESP, etc. are found (MoEST, 2019b; MoEST, 2022d; MoEST, 2023), the engagement seems quite inadequate from the studied literatures and from my own experience.

This study is quite important because it can give a picture of stakeholders' engagement in education policy-making and execution processes in Nepal. Similarly, I myself, being a member of government bureaucracy, as a real stakeholder of policy processes of Nepal and a student of educational leadership, am an appropriate person

to conduct research on this study topic. So, this study is further important. Furthermore, for the betterment of any education system, developing a good policy and its appropriate implementation is a must. For this, engagement of the stakeholders is another crucial part. But Nepal's education policy process seems weak in this regard because, in most cases, even the policy-level personnel are left unheard, as the donor community people consult with only a few concerned people and are compelled to develop new policies and plans. In this context, policies are not owned by the stakeholders and they are not giving the expected results. This scenario reflects that if the problem is not solved well, it would rather hamper the education results of the country, leading to poor conditions of its prosperity. So, if the problem is not solved, it may finally lead to disaster in the country, making it almost like a failed country (Dhakal, 2019; Regmi, 2023; Subedi, 2020).

From the literature reviewed and my own experience, it appeared clear that the voices of stakeholders were not heard well in the education policy-making processes of Nepal. In the same way, the studies regarding the engagement of stakeholders in policy formulation processes were also inadequate. It demanded a study to explore the scenario of representation of key stakeholders' voices, seeing whether they are really engaged in the education policy processes, especially the SESP making process, in Nepal. In other words, navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy making, more specifically in SESP, which has been under implementation in recent years, was highly demanded.

Delimitations of the Study

In this study, I have delimited the study to explore/unpack the perceptions of stakeholders on their engagement in the formulation process of SESP (2022/23-2031/32). So, I have delimited the policy to SESP and navigated the voice of stakeholders to unpack their voice in the SESP. My focus was on unpacking how the education policy stakeholders (government official, leaders of CNT, SMC association, Parents' association, and NARMIN) perceive their engagement in the different stages of the SESP formulation process. Furthermore, I have also delimited my study on bringing the reflections of experiences of the aforementioned stakeholders to confirm their representation of their voices in the SESP.

Structure of the Dissertation

There are six chapters in this dissertation. The first chapter introduces and develops my research issue of navigating the voice of stakeholders in education

policy-making in Nepal. The second chapter is related to the literature review, where I present thematic, empirical, policy, and theoretical reviews. It is followed by the methodology of my study in the third chapter.

Fourth and fifth chapters present and interpret the sharing of perceptions, narratives, stories, experiences, and ideas of my participants as they reflected during the interview process through the lens of the existing literature, slightly linking with related theories. The sixth chapter presents key insights and discussion with a conclusion and implications of the study, as well as a reflection of my research journey.

Chapter Summary

I began this chapter by setting a scene. To contextualize my research topic, I mirrored the journey of my academic career as well as my career under the MoEST through the lens of the topics mentioned in this chapter. This helped me to come closer to the main issue and develop the solid foundation for the statement of the problem. The clarity and deep understanding of the issue or problem guided me to structure the purpose of the study and draft the research questions. Finally, I concluded this chapter by exploring the need and significance of the study and narrowing the scope and field to figure out the rationale and setting clear boundaries as a delimitation of the study, also indicating the structure of my dissertation and presenting this chapter summary.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the first section of this chapter, I have presented the concept, argument and understanding related to education policy, and the voice of stakeholders in the education policy-making process, taking the support of related literature. Then, in the second section, I have reviewed the related studies. After that, in the third section, the policies have been reviewed and they are tried to be seen from the perspective of the voice of stakeholders in education policy making, most specifically in the context of Nepal, capturing the appropriate literature as well. Then, in the fourth section, the theories that backed up my study have been reviewed. Then comes the section on the research gap for the study. Finally, there is an indication of the summarized highlights of the chapter.

Understanding Education Policy

Education policy incorporates policy decisions, principles, and laws that govern the education system of a country. The education policies are the strategies and decisions that governments make to improve education in regard to education funding and curriculum (World Bank, 2015). The strategies and set of laws that are created by the governments to promote education as a right and development driver are generally known as education policies (UNESCO, 2021). From the World Bank (2015) and UNESCO (2021) mentioned above, my understanding regarding the education policy in brief is that the education policies, as various laws, strategies, policy decisions, plans, etc., are developed and executed for the betterment of the education system of specific countries and their people.

Voice of Stakeholders in Education Policy Making

The voices of the concerned stakeholders in policy are taken as a crucial aspect of enhancing the ownership and implementation of the policies. If done so, the possibility of meaningful engagement of real users in the formulation and execution process of the policies can be materialized. Stakeholder participation is vital not only for policy effectiveness but also for fostering democratic accountability and localized relevance (Puri & Chhetri, 2024). The education policies are basically for students, teachers, parents, community members, bureaucrats, and the policymakers themselves. The essence of the policies has to resemble the voices of them all. In

other words, the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making processes most specifically indicates the active participation, influence, and decision-making authority that various stakeholders, as mentioned above, have in the processes of formulating education policies. However, recent findings of the studies from Nepal suggest that engagement of grassroots-level actors with education policy remains limited, especially in multilingual and inclusive education, due to poor communication, low familiarity, and weak participation mechanisms (Poudel, 2024). Thus, meaningful stakeholder inclusion from the inception to the finalization of policies is essential for enhancing both ownership and policy sustainability.

Hargreaves (2007) highlights that stakeholders' voices in education policymaking are critical for ensuring policies are responsive to the needs, interests, and aspirations of learners and communities. Meaningful engagement of stakeholders nurtures democratic governance, enhances policy legitimacy, and promotes accountability in education systems. In the same way, UNESCO (2017) underscores the transformative potential of empowering stakeholders in education policy processes to promote social justice, equity, and inclusive development. It further underscores that stakeholders' active engagement in decision-making enables the identification of systemic barriers, the co-creation of innovative solutions, and the mobilization of resources to address major challenges in education.

Meaningful participation of stakeholders in Nepal's education policy processes for ensuring policies are contextually relevant, responsive to local needs, and inclusive of marginalized groups, as the engagement of the grassroots stakeholders facilitates the identification of grassroots challenges, the mobilization of community resources, and the promotion of culturally sensitive and sustainable solutions. This discussion expects the realization as well as conceptualization of the meaning and necessity of the voice of stakeholders in education policy making and execution processes, both globally and in the specific context of Nepal. But in the case of Nepal, as per my own experience, it has not materialized well.

From the discussion above, I came to the point of understanding that the education policies, which include laws, strategies, policy decisions, etc., are developed and executed for the betterment of the education system of specific countries and their people. These policies are to be developed by considering the voice (ideas, perspectives and visions) and engagement (contribution and participation) of the stakeholders, which seems inadequate in the context of

developing education policies, most specifically the school education policies in Nepal.

Review of Related Studies

This section deals with the review of studies and literature related to navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal. The review is focused on finding whether previous studies resemble the voice of real stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal. In the context of Nepal, the policies of the education sector are found not to capture the voice of stakeholders in policy formulation and execution processes well.

Khanal (2012) discusses and looks at the status of decentralization policy in the school education sector of Nepal. The study basically emphasizes the qualitative methods to give a picture of decentralization discourse in the education policy-making process. The study presents its concerns on power dynamics, creating winners and losers in the policy formulation and implementation setup. It has identified some key decentralization provisions like school transfer, community involvement, and local decision-making as part of adapting to ground reality. In all the processes of policy formulation and implementation practices, it reveals the sort of inadequacy of reflecting the voices of the stakeholders (Khanal, 2012).

Dhakal (2019) explains the lack of people's participation in education policy-making in Nepal. Despite the global commitment of the government of Nepal to engage stakeholders in policy-making, the author argues that Nepal lacks mechanisms for citizen participation, hindering the representation of their voices. The present top-down approach, where policy decisions are negotiated among elites, is criticized for its failure to realize the grassroots level realities and engagement of citizens. He has further emphasized the need for evidence-informed policymaking and greater participation of local actors to ensure better-informed and inclusive education policies in Nepal, and has challenged the existing donor-driven and personality-driven decision-making processes in education policy development practices (Dhakal, 2019).

Neupane (2019) provides a conceptual framework required to address challenges to inclusion through the perspective of education policy-making in Nepal's diverse societal context. The article basically emphasizes the hurdles of education in the Nepalese context of multi-ethnicity, caste-baseness, and a linguistically varied society. With a thorough review of the concerned literature, she has proposed five major steps for education policy formulation, focusing on an in-depth analysis and

outcome assessments of the related areas. The framework, considering socio-economic disparities and reflecting the policy trends of Nepal since 1950, expects to empower local governance for practical policy development aligning with the mandate of the Constitution of Nepal (Neupane, 2019). It shows the need to cover the voice of the concerned stakeholders.

Subedi (2020) informs that there is the influence of environmental, organizational, and individual aspects in policy implementation and also focuses on the importance of representing stakeholders' needs and reducing socioeconomic barriers in the practices of education reform initiatives in Nepal (Subedi, 2020).

Dhakal (2021) explores women's engagement in school governance within a rural Nepali community. It uncovers systemic barriers that limit women's participation in decision-making processes, despite formal structures promoting inclusivity. The research emphasizes the need for genuine empowerment and active engagement of women in educational leadership roles. In the same way, Panthee (2021) examines the implementation of language policies in education by local governments in the Rupandehi district of Nepal. While policies aim to respect linguistic diversity with stakeholder engagement, the research finds a gap between policy and practice, with a prime focus on Nepali and English languages. The study highlights the need for more inclusive practices that sincerely reflect Nepal's multilingual context in education policies. In the same way, UGC, Nepal (2021) outlines the strategies for stakeholder engagement in the Nurturing Excellence in Higher Education Project. It underscores the importance of involving various stakeholders, including students, faculty, and community members, in the planning and execution of higher education reforms in Nepal. But is it happening? There is again the issue of stakeholders' engagement in the case of the education policy process of Nepal.

Regmi (2023) explored educational policymaking in Nepal, as a recipient of foreign aid, and the policy development process of Nepal is dominated by the aid provider's influence. The research has found that in the education policy formulation process, the influence of foreign aid agency representatives is more powerful than that of national bureaucrats. Despite the engagement of Nepali officials, the policy sphere excludes teachers, students, parents, and communities from the process of policy development. The study also highlights the need for improved engagement of the stakeholders in the education policy formulation process (Regmi, 2023).

K.C. (2023) analyzes education as a basic human right, highlighting the constitutional provisions of Nepal that provide free and compulsory basic education and free secondary education. It has also focused on the government's policy of "Education for All" and the provision of free education up to the secondary school level in community-managed schools, seeking participation of concerned stakeholders in the policy formulation and execution processes (K.C., 2023).

Katel and Katel (2024) explore the current state of parental engagement in school governance. The study recognizes barriers such as a lack of awareness, socio-economic constraints, and limited communication between schools and parents. The authors, through this study, propose strategies and policies to foster active parental engagement, emphasizing its importance in improving educational outcomes.

Hadijah (2024) investigates the rationale behind stakeholder engagement in educational policy, examining the potential benefits and the barriers to effective participation. Case studies from Italy and Bulgaria exemplify the outcomes of various engagement strategies and underscore the adaptability required in stakeholder participation frameworks to make the outcomes of the education policies more meaningful. Although engaging stakeholders presents logistical, financial, and representational challenges, the benefits include enhanced policy legitimacy, transparency, and community support. The study also highlights the need to use technological tools to broaden engagement and sustain stakeholder interest through continuous, adaptive processes (Hadijah, 2024).

Plan International Nepal (2025) accumulates narratives from varied stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and local government officials, reflecting on their experiences and perspectives regarding inclusive and quality education in Nepal. It further underscores the importance of incorporating these voices into policy-making processes to ensure that educational reforms are more responsive to the requirements of community members and grassroots stakeholders. But again, it indicates less engagement of the concerned ones in the policy-making process of Nepal.

The review of related literature about the voices of stakeholders in education policies, especially those of Nepal, highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement in education policy-making and implementation, but resembles the inadequacy. These studies and literature also focus on the necessity of inclusive, participatory, and locally-informed policy-making processes, most specifically in the context of Nepal, by considering the voice and engagement of education policy

stakeholders. In this connection, it was thought urgent to see through an interpretive inquiry why the education policy-making and execution process in Nepal is not engaging real stakeholders, i.e., ignoring the voices of key stakeholders.

Review of Related Policies

While going through the Nepali education sector policies (including directives, guidelines, procedures, and programs), I could not locate any section on how the policies or guidelines were developed, which could have given a sense of the engagement of stakeholders. Having worked in the education sector as a public servant i.e, member of government bureaucracy under the MoEST, I had a sense of the language of the policy documents, yet to reconfirm, I scanned the National Education Policy 2019, Directive related to the approval of abroad study 2022 (MoEST, 2019a; MoEST, 2022a).

A framework for school operation in the COVID context 2020 has indicated that the ministry prepared the framework, collecting feedback from local levels and provinces. It also includes the fact that the ministry conducted rounds of consultations with stakeholders related to education (MoEST, 2020). But the specific stakeholders are not named. However, its subsequent Student Learning Facilitation Directives, 2020 and Integrated Educational Information Management System Operation Directives, 2022, have clearly spelled out that, following the right of the Education Act 2028, Article 19A, the MoEST prepared and issued these directives (MoEST, 2020; MoEST, 2022b). The foreword of the Recovery and Accelerated Learning (ReAL) Plan, 2022, mentions that it was developed by the MoEST with the contribution of various stakeholders. It also acknowledges the contributors and stakeholders who participated in development and review of the plan, namely the SESP Joint Financing Partners: the ADB, the EU, the Embassy of Finland, the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the UNICEF, the USAID, the World Bank, the Association of INGOs, other civil society organizations and other active development agencies (MoEST, 2022c). However, it does not specify the engagement of the real grassroots stakeholders.

To see the engagement of the concerned stakeholders and the representation of their voices in the education policies, I reviewed the following policies:

Constitution of Nepal

The present constitution of Nepal, as a major guiding policy document in regard to education policies as well, has incorporated people's right to education in its

fundamental rights and policies of the nation. In the same way, education is provisioned in the list of powers and concurrent powers of all three tiers of government. It slightly indicates the representation of the voice of stakeholders. In the same way, during the process of its development, the government announced people to give their feedback on the draft constitution (GoN, 2015). Similarly, the constitution provides a legal foundation for stakeholder engagement in governance and policymaking. Article 31 talks about every citizen's right to education and Article 51 guides the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the education policies to be developed. The decentralization framework that is inbuilt in the constitution encourages local government and community engagement in education, as the main policy document of the country, in the guidance of which the other policies are developed. Even so, some of the members of the constituent assembly boycotted the process of the promulgation of the constitution, which indicate the engagement of people in this process was not quite adequate.

School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), 2016–2023

The SSDP, an important policy document developed for the school education sector, highlights stakeholder engagement as a cornerstone of education reform. It stresses the need for inclusive and participatory approaches in planning and policy-making, particularly at the local level, in its introductory chapters. It highlights in its foreword that the SSDP has been developed with a participatory and inclusive approach, with continuous consultation and validation of stakeholders and beneficiaries within Nepal's education sector (MoEST, 2016). As such, the SSDP has been developed on a strong evidence-based foundation. However, as most of the stakeholders, like the teacher community, experts raised their concerns in its development as it was developed with the influence of DPs, the claim of the document seems not that valid.

Local Government Operation Act, 2017

It mandates local governments to engage communities and stakeholders in decision-making related to education service delivery and policy implementation of school education. In the initial parts, it talks as it is developed with the required engagement of the related stakeholders. In the same way, in the contents like the works, duties and authority of local level in the education sector, it has provisioned 23 different tasks to be conducted by the concerned local levels, most specifically related to school education, expecting the engagement of stakeholders. It also provides an

indication of the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the education policy process. Again, there seems to be very little engagement of the concerned ones in its formulation, as there was a reaction of stakeholders like teachers, blaming the act for ignoring them in its formulation process.

Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2018

To implement the constitutional provision of the right to education, the government has brought the compulsory and free education act in 2018, claiming to have developed it by taking feedback from the concerned stakeholders. This act gives an indication of stakeholders' representation in regard to free and compulsory education (GON, 2018) through its introductory chapters/sections. In its aim as well, it talks about ensuring easy and equal access for all in education to make education universal, useful for life, competitive and qualitative, focusing on building a nation, inculcating democratic values and norms, taking education as a human right of every person to acquire education and a fundamental right conferred by the constitution (FCEA, 2018). However, the representation is not well-articulated in it, as stakeholders like CNT leaders, NARMIN, and MUAN have raised concerns in its formulation and execution process since its inception.

National Education Policy, 2019

The policy explicitly emphasizes the role of stakeholders in shaping education policy. It acknowledges that policies should be formulated through consultations with a broad variety of actors or stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, local governments, and marginalized communities (MoEST, 2019a) in the initial chapters. It provides a direction to all sectors of education viz., school education, higher education and TVET, which can be taken as the representation of stakeholders' perspective where the engagement of the related stakeholders is slightly sought. Again, in its development process, related stakeholders were consulted, which is slightly discussed in its introductory sections. However, the representation is found quite weak in it, as most of the concerned experts from the school education sector and of higher education raised their concerns of being ignored after its promulgation.

SDG 4: 2030 Nepal National Framework

After the international commitment of the government of Nepal for Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 4: 2030 Nepal National Framework was approved in 2019, which also gives an indication of stakeholders' voice in the education policies. The midterm review of this has also taken place in 2023, with

feedback from some stakeholders. In its foreword section, it has taken itself as a collective effort, grounded in a participatory process, informing that multiple consultations have taken place with key stakeholders, including children, parents, teachers, schools, local government, provincial government, and federal government, as well as development partners (MoEST, 2019b). It has acknowledged the concerned stakeholders like three tiers of governments, teacher communities, students and parents, business and industries, experts and academia, CSOs, DPs, and other stakeholders, mentioning it was developed through a highly participatory consultative process. But referring to my experience as a member of government bureaucracy, there seems to have less opportunities to be the part of framework development and midterm review process, which shows a restriction to the voices of the concerned stakeholders in the development process of it even most of the teachers, students, parents are also found to be unaware of it as they had presented their ignorance of its development and mid-term review process in the various forums.

School Education Sector Plan (SESP), 2022/23-2031/32

Since 2022, the government has implemented the new plan in the school education sector, namely SESP. In its development process, the engagement of concerned stakeholders was encouraged, as mentioned in its foreword. Referring to the document, to ensure the evidence-based plan, a comprehensive education sector analysis was undertaken and key aspects of it were identified through a highly consultative process. Similarly, in its assumptions, it has highlighted national consensus and political commitment as critical components that demand the engagement of the stakeholders in its implementation processes (MoEST, 2022d). So far as the development and implementation context of SESP is concerned, inadequate engagement of concerned stakeholders is experienced, as I, being one of the members of the government bureaucracy, did not get adequate opportunity to be a part of it well.

Federal School Education Bill

Historically, education bills in Nepal have mirrored the country's socio-political changes. The National Education System Plan (NESP) of 1971 was a momentous initiative aimed at restructuring education to make it universally accessible. After the democratic reforms in 1990, the 1971 Education Act was amended multiple times to incorporate democratic principles and enhance educational standards (Parajuli & Das, 2013). The Government of Nepal has recently tabled a new

School Education Bill in the federal parliament, intending to reflect the perspectives, ideas, and voices of various stakeholders in the context of federalism (MoEST, 2023). This statutory framework is expected to improve the quality of education and ensure equal access to education for all citizens.

The current bill seeks to align the education system with the federal structure established by the 2015 Constitution, with a focus on devolving the educational governance system and giving local governments more control over schools. The bill was developed with some input from the concerned stakeholders, like educators, policymakers, and civil society members, to address Nepal's diverse educational needs (Nepali Times, 2023). It highlights quality education, inclusive policies, and resource allocation to underserved areas of the country. However, the bill has sparked controversy due to its significant changes to existing structures. It allows local levels to manage schools while maintaining federal oversight through district-level offices, leading to concerns about privatization and competition reduction (Ghimire, 2023). However, the bill overlooks important recommendations from the High-Level Education Commission and lacks sufficient stakeholders' engagement in its formulation, as I, myself, a member of government bureaucracy under MoEST, did not get the opportunity to put my ideas in its formulation process.

Sixteenth Plan (2024/25-2029/30)

The recent periodic plan of the government of Nepal, the sixteenth plan, also talks about engagement of the related stakeholders in its formulation process. It is mentioned in its introductory sections. It mentions the engagement of all concerned, including three tiers of government, political parties, special officials, employees, experts, representative organizations of the private sector, NGOs, and DPs, in its foreword and acknowledgements section (NPC, 2024). But again, the engagement is experienced as quite inadequate, as I myself, a concerned member of government bureaucracy, got very few opportunities to put the ideas to enrich it in its formulation process.

In the development processes of various policy documents like the Constitution of Nepal 2015, National Education Policy, 2019; and SESP (2022/23-2031/32), there seemed to be some attempts to engage stakeholders in connection to incorporating their voice in those policies (GoN, 2015; MoEST, 2019a; MoEST, 2022d). Similarly, for the betterment of the initial grades' learning, the CDC brought the integrated curriculum for grades 1-3, taking the feedback of the stakeholders

(CDC, 2023). In the same way, MoEST brought the SDG 4: 2030, Nepal National Framework in 2019 and the mid-term review of which was completed in 2023, which also has tried to engage the stakeholders in its development and review processes (MoEST, 2023). However, due to less awareness of the stakeholders, inadequate support and concern from the policy leadership, and the influence of donor communities and education elites, initiatives taken were not enough to appropriately engage the stakeholders and enhance their voices in education policy-making processes.

After navigating the depth of the policy review, I understood that there are many different policies and plans related to the sector of education, basically of the school education sector, for providing the right to quality education to Nepali children. So far as the engagement of the concerned stakeholders with real inclusion of their voices in education policies of Nepal is concerned, only a very few attempts have been made. The government tried to take the feedback of the concerned stakeholders and incorporate it in the formulation process of the constitution, National Education Policy, SESP, the sixteenth plan, and other contemporary education policies and programs. But the studies on it and my experience show the inadequacy of representing the voices of the key stakeholders in the education policies of Nepal. Although the SESP has taken political as well as other stakeholders' commitment as an important aspect of the plan, it also does not resemble the real engagement of the key stakeholders in its formulation processes, as I, myself, am an example of not being engaged well. As per my understanding, no studies seeking to determine whether the voices of stakeholders are represented in SESP had taken place to date of the proposal defence for my study, which demanded a study to explore perceptions, experiences, and reflections of the key education policy stakeholders in it.

Theoretical Referents

A theoretical basis is a standpoint taken by the researcher that provides direction for many phases of the research project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, as cited in Subedi, 2021). Generally, in quantitative research, the researcher may test theories and use them as a lens that guides the whole study (Subedi, 2021). In the case of qualitative research as well, theories can be used to make the study more valid and enhance its trustworthiness. In this study, I have reviewed three theories i.e. (a) Voice Theory, (b) Policy-making Theory, and (c) Social Systems Theory, relating to the nature of my study. Since the study is related to navigating voice of stakeholders in

education policy-making, most specifically in the context of SESP making in Nepal, the theories have also been taken from that specific area to guide it so that there would be better alignment of those theories with the core essence of the study.

Voice Theory

Albert Hirschman's Voice Theory (1970) emphasizes voice as a mechanism for stakeholders to express ideas, concerns, as well as dissatisfactions and influence systemic change. The concept of the Voice Theory talks about the importance of engaging and empowering diverse stakeholders, such as educators, students, guardians, and community members, in the decision-making processes concerning educational policies. This approach ensures that the perspectives of all individuals are taken into account. Research indicates that when stakeholders participate with their empowerment in these processes, resulting policies tend to be more effective and enjoy greater support and ownership, thus increasing the likelihood of successful implementation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001). In the context of Nepal, engaging stakeholders in educational policy-making is particularly vital to align policies with the country's heterogeneous needs, obstacles and priorities. Studies have demonstrated that when Nepali stakeholders are included in decision-making, it results in policies that are more successful and receive community support (Gurung, 2018).

Moreover, voice theory suggests several advantages of the voice of stakeholders in policy processes like empowerment through participation, building trust and collaboration, enhancing policy implementation, addressing inequities, a catalyst for innovation, and so on. (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001). From this, it can be said that in education policy-making, the voice of the concerned stakeholders plays a vital role in making policies more authentic and implementable to achieve the expected results. So is my understanding in the case of the SESP formulation. But, in the case of Nepal, especially in the case of the SESP formulation, as per my experience, it has not been materialized well yet, as there is a huge influence of the DPs and the elites in the policy process. So, I chose this theory to inform my study.

Policy-Making Theory

Policy-Making Theory, particularly the Stages Model (Lasswell, 1956) highlights seven stages of policy process, like: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal, which provides a framework for

understanding the sequential phases of policy development: agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation i.e. the agenda setting, designing, dialogue and decision. The theory related to making public policies talks about the procedures and methods that are used by the government entities and related organizations in the process of developing and executing the policies. It further deals with various steps like setting the agenda, formulating the policy, adopting, implementing and evaluating the policies. To make the policy-making effective, it is necessary to include and consider the voices, experiences and diverse needs of grassroots level stakeholders. This sort of modality, having ideas on stakeholders' engagement, supports in enhancing the relevancy and ownership of the policy (Howlett et al., 2020).

So far as the education policy making context of Nepal is concerned, it is supposed to listen to the voices of real stakeholders like bureaucrats, teachers, parents, students and community people. The engagement of the stakeholders' voice is supposed to be beneficial to address the local and contextual needs and to promote the sustainability of the reform process through policy interventions. The studies indicate that the engagement of stakeholders in the education policy process assists in making the policies equitable, effective, and efficient. To enhance the educational outcomes and effectiveness of education policies, representing the voices of the concerned stakeholders is crucial. However, through the reviewed literature so far and my own experience, I have found the inadequacy of it and demanded a study on it, for which this theory could be of great help. This theory offered insights into how the concerned stakeholders are engaged in different stages of the SESP formulation, what they perceive and how they reflect on their engagement in the SESP formulation processes. It became instrumental throughout the process of my research.

Social Systems Theory

Social Systems Theory, developed by Talcott Parsons with the idea of social systems within a sociological content, putting forth the AGIL Paradigm describing the basic conditions for the survival of societies that include: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency i.e. AGIL (Parsons, 1991), and expanded by Niklas Luhmann, views society as a network of interdependent subsystems (e.g., education, politics, economy) that maintain stability through specialized functions and feedback loops (Luhmann, 1995). The education policy sub-system, as illustrated in the SESP development process, reflects functional differentiation, where thematic committees

address specific areas like early childhood education and development, basic education, secondary education, and non-formal education and lifelong learning, as well as other crosscutting areas like curriculum and assessment, teacher management and development, etc. where the AGIL concept is linked to the study.

The participant's engagement in thematic committees highlights the feedback mechanisms of policy development within the education sub-system. However, his concern about the exclusion of grassroots stakeholders' points to weak structural coupling or link between the education sub-system and its surrounding environment (Luhmann, 1995). This inadequacy, almost a lack of connection, weakens the system's ability to incorporate diverse perspectives, reducing its responsiveness and inclusivity, hindering the ownership of the key stakeholders in the concerned policies, and losing the effective implementation of those policies. So, again, this theory was also very valuable for my study topic. It supported me to look at the data from the perspective of the social system, i.e., taking the base of the AGIL paradigm, which I found crucial while proceeding with my study and finalizing this dissertation.

The theories discussed above viz. Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory, and the Social Systems Theory best fit my study as Voice Theory basically talks about the empowerment of the concerned people and stakeholders for their rights and duties, enabling them to put their voices and concerns in formulating the policies. So, it can easily be said that the Voice Theory provided backup for my study. In the same way, the Policy Making Theory also helped in the process of navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, highlighting the scientific steps to be followed in policy-making processes, seeking the engagement of the concerned stakeholders, which was important in my study. Similarly, the Social Systems Theory, which talks about the interdependence of education sub-systems in education policy processes and expects the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the policy processes, was helpful to explore the contextual perceptions and reflections of the concerned stakeholders. So, these theories basically talk about the consideration of stakeholders' engagement to make the policies more implementable with greater ownership. I found this very important in my study, which assisted me in proceeding with my study in the right direction.

Research Gap

The importance of stakeholder engagement in any public policymaking has mostly been highlighted in many different literatures (Hutahaeen, 2017), but the

practice of it seems very weak in the context of Nepal (Dhakal, 2019; Khanal, 2012). Most of the policy-making agencies like MoEST discuss the necessity of participatory policy-making practices, engaging the real stakeholders. But are the policies engaging the grassroots level stakeholders? Are they really participatory? Are the voices of the key stakeholders of policies listened to? There seems to be an inadequacy in engaging real stakeholders for whom the policies are made (Dhakal, 2019). Thus, the grassroots level stakeholders are not actually able to put their voices in the process of education policy making, which could have a remarkable impact on the implementation of the policies. Although there are a few practices of engaging key stakeholders in education policy making, in the real context, it has not been put into maximum practice, which has resulted in less implementation of the concerned policies (Dhakal, 2019; Regmi, 2023). These questions came to my mind when thinking of the existing policymaking scenario.

I reviewed the studies and policies on the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making related to the national and international contexts. While reviewing these, I found literature related to two specific categories, namely (a) understanding education policy, and (b) the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making processes. As I went through the literature, I found that the research gap is divided into different categories, like methodological gap, conceptual gap, theoretical gap, and contextual gap. I do not claim that I approached all the national and international studies regarding the current issue; I found most of the research works from the context of the developed countries. Besides, as per my information, no research regarding the voice of stakeholders in SESP had taken place up until the date of my proposal defense. Considering these gaps in research, a study to explore the situation of the voice of stakeholders and their engagement in education policy-making processes of Nepal, taking the case of the SESP, appeared important. In short, from the reviewed context, a study on navigating the voice of stakeholders in the education policy-making process in Nepal was felt essential.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed, explored and reviewed two different themes, journal articles, empirical studies, policies, and theories related to the voice of stakeholders in policy-making, specifically in the education policy-making in Nepal. I began this chapter by presenting the clarity of the concepts like education policy, and the voice of stakeholders in the education policy-making process, linking them with the

representation of the concerned stakeholders in education policy, especially the SESP making processes of Nepal. This was followed by the review of related literature, policies and theories, most specifically linking them to the context of Nepal.

In short, what I did in this chapter is I reviewed the themes like education policy, and the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making processes. I also discussed various empirical studies conducted on voice of stakeholders in education policies to get the basis for my study and find the research gap. To get a better understanding of the existing plans and policies, I also reviewed the international commitments, constitutional provisions and other education acts and regulations. I then viewed the context of stakeholders' engagement in the SESP formulation process through the lenses of Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory and Social Systems Theory. These theories supported me in exploring the perceptions and reflections of education stakeholders regarding the representation of their voices in the education policy process of Nepal, most specifically in the SESP formulation process. Then, I mentioned a little bit about the research gap and ended the chapter with this summary.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the present chapter, I describe in detail the overall methodological aspect of my study. The chapter begins with mentioning the philosophical foundations of my research, followed by interpretivism as my research paradigm and interpretive inquiry as my research method. It further talks about my research site and participants, and strategies for data generation. I then discuss the data analysis and meaning-making process, and the quality standards of my study design. Finally, the chapter ends with ethical considerations of my study and a brief summary of the chapter.

Philosophical Foundations of the Study

In this section, I explored my belief system as to what constitutes my foundational assumptions and fundamental presumptions regarding the nature of reality, sources of knowledge and methods employed to generate knowledge. These philosophical insights and in-depth understanding in terms of the search for reality and the acquisition of knowledge enriched me to add clarity in the area of my research problem: navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy making in Nepal.

I sought three main areas of philosophical foundation i.e., ontology, epistemology and axiology, as the philosophical underpinnings of my study to get closer to the crux of my problem area. This guided me to finalize my overall study design.

Ontology

Voice of stakeholders in education policies is a multifaceted, critical and complex issue, influenced by varying socio-political contexts, and it is linked with diverse practices and group dynamics of the society. So, the ontological orientation of my study is based on the assumptions that knowledge is inherently personal, subjective, constructive and shaped through interpretive experiences (Lincoln et al., 2018). Human practices, beliefs, views, and perceptions are fluid, evolving over time and varying significantly across individuals and settings. In line with this worldview, my study embraces the notion that reality is not fixed or absolute, but rather continuously constructed and redefined through interactions, lived experiences, as well as perceptions and interpretations (Chilisa, 2020; Tracy, 2020). I further, as a

nature of my study, took hold of the belief that there is nothing as ultimate truth and it is a relative process of being and emerging as per the changed context.

I therefore followed the relativist ontological stance throughout my study. I mean, in the context of this study, my ontological stance is social constructivism, as there are multiple realities of the issue being researched. In it, reality is seen as a socially constructed and subjective phenomenon (Crotty, 1998), rather than objective, as shaped by the interactions and interpretations of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the case of navigating the voice of stakeholders in education policy making, it is crucial to recognize that each stakeholder may perceive and experience reality differently, as per their social, cultural, and political contexts. Similarly, in the context of education policy making in Nepal, this implies that the voice of stakeholders is understood as being shaped by diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts of the country, which this study tries to capture as my ontological position.

To get answer to my research questions on stakeholders' perceptions of their engagements in the school education policy, specially SESP, making process in Nepal and reflections of experiences of situating their voices in SESP, I allowed my participants to reflect their perceptions, experiences and understanding of their engagement in the education policy processes, especially in the SESP context, in order to get detailed and comprehensive information which can be subjective in nature and multiple in realities.

Epistemology

For this study, my epistemological stance was interpretivist, providing necessary room for analysis with some critical ideas that align with the constructivist ontology. By being a qualitative researcher, I basically believe in the co-construction of knowledge, where I generated the knowledge in a combined engagement of participants and myself. The interpretivist epistemology suggests that knowledge is increased through understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals (Crotty, 1998). This perspective emphasizes understanding the meaning and interpretations that individuals assign to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this specific study, knowledge is acquired through the subjective experiences and insights of the stakeholders engaged in education policy, the SESP, in the making processes. To get into the divergent views of the participants on their engagement in the SESP process, I explored their perceptions and experiences through informal dialogues, conversations and interactions, basically in the form of an

interview. This process helped me to know about my research participants, which is also taken as the process of how people acquire knowledge (Mack, 2010). So, for unpacking different people's ideas, perceptions, assumptions, and experiences associated with different contexts of education policy, I followed social constructivist epistemology. This supported me in my epistemological assumption that reality is socially constructed by people who experience it.

In this study, understanding stakeholders' perspectives and the status they hold in education policy, the SESP, is achieved through interpreting and critically analyzing their experiences and viewpoints, as the goal of this study is to understand the complexities and degrees of their perspectives-and reflections of their experiences rather than seeking objective, generalizable truths.

Axiology

Whatever we perceive, understand and think is always guided by certain assumptions or belief systems. Our thoughts and worldviews are value-laden. These values and assumptions are subjective in nature because nothing remains as an absolute truth. So, I, as a researcher/one of the research participants, along with my research participants, hold different beliefs as values which shape our worldviews. These values guide us and come forth in the form of insights and guiding principles. I believe that exploration of all these diverse views, experiences and practices of my research participants in terms of their engagement in the SESP development process was the foundational basis of the study. So, I, as a researcher, gave utmost importance to respect and record their perceptions, experiences and values which they experienced in my study.

In this connection, I am convinced that all so-called truths generated through investigations and understandings are not free from value, but they are value-laden. So, my axiological assumption was guided by relativist ontology and social constructivist epistemology. To unpack my research participants' values and experiences and their connection to the topic of my study, I initiated informal discussions in the form of interviews in a natural setting. This allowed my research participants to reflect on their socio-cultural values affecting their engagement in the SESP development process. As a qualitative researcher, I also gave value to contextualized understanding, assumptions and ideas of my research participants related to how they have felt about their engagement in SESP processes to enrich my study with subjective and context-based knowledge. So, my axiological assumptions

were instrumental in digging further in-depth into the problem area of my study and finding more reasoned logic as to how this issue could be addressed in the context of Nepal.

To be brief, in this interpretive inquiry, the axiology is value-laden, acknowledging that the researcher's and participants' values and biases influence the research process (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, I gave value to the stories and experiences of each participant. Whatever they said, I recorded and used later, where necessary, for the meaning-making process.

Interpretivism as My Research Paradigm

As the nature of my research problem and purpose, I had formulated (to explore the perceptions and experiences of my research participants, I assumed that I could do more justice to my study through the lens of interpretivism: recording the views and opinions of my participants through informal discussion and interview, and analyzing/interpreting them from various socio-cultural and contextual aspects. As realities are multiple and people perceive things differently, most of us form multi-layer interpretations for the same thing and knowledge is generated from diverse contents and contexts. While doing so, I got a detailed and in-depth description related to my problem area rather than many inputs from a large group of people, which, in a way, could be done through interpretivism as a best-fit approach to fulfill the purpose of my study. I also focused on constructing new context-induced knowledge, as opposed to reproducing prior established knowledge as a truth (Bryman, 2008), which was also best achieved from the interpretive paradigm.

Collecting opinions and views of my research participants and enriching my inner thoughts related to perceptions and experiences of my participants regarding their engagement in the education policy-making process of Nepal, my study assumed that knowledge is generated through context and it is always relative. In doing so, I focused on extended casual and informal discussion, situating myself in their places in order to make them feel comfortable in sharing their experiences, revealing their perceptions and value system and unfolding all their pleasures and pains they went through in the context of education policy processes of Nepal, especially the SESP making process. In the process of doing so, I could also put my perspectives and opinions as a research participant as and when needed as a gesture of appreciation to their efforts and showing respect to their values and practices, so that they could open up more and share multiple realities going into the core of the issue. Thus, the

interpretive paradigm allowed me to make meaning from the sharing of the participants.

In it, I went to the participants, asked about their real engagement with them and had the opportunity to put their voices in education policy processes and finally made meaning from that. I mean the research paradigm guiding this study was interpretivist with space for critical analysis. This paradigm most specifically focuses on understanding the experiences of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) through subjective meanings and social constructions of reality. It is particularly suited to exploring the dynamics of voice among stakeholders in education policy-making, as it basically prioritizes the accounts of individuals' experiences and the context-specific nature of those experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It involved methods like interviews and document analysis to gather in-depth insights into stakeholders' perceptions in Nepal's education policy making i.e., the SESP making process.

Interpretive Inquiry as My Research Method

There are many approaches under qualitative study. As per my study purpose and research questions, my research approach is interpretive inquiry, which is a qualitative research method aimed at understanding how individuals perceive and experience their social environments. This approach is influenced by the subjective nature of reality and the researcher's role in data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It highlights the need for close engagement between researchers and participants to gain deep insights into participants' experiences. Under this inquiry approach, the methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis are commonly used to collect data, which is then interpreted to identify themes and patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As per the nature of this approach, researchers must be reflexive and acknowledge their biases, as these can impact the data interpretation process. This inquiry approach is mainly important in fields like education, sociology, and health sciences, where understanding complex human behaviors and social phenomena is essential (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Furthermore, interpretive inquiry explores how people interpret their actions and those of others. This approach resembles ordinary conversation and uses questioning and observation to gain a deep understanding of the subject being studied. It is closely linked to qualitative research methods, focusing on the meanings behind human behavior, subjective understanding, and empathizing with individuals'

experiences. Unlike hypothesis testing, interpretive research involves observing to gain a thorough understanding of a topic. It analyzes data at both surface and deeper levels to tell a coherent story that includes historical context and theory. This approach sees reality as socially constructed through people's understanding of events (Morehouse, 2012). In fields like education and organizational communication, researchers study the complexities of meaning expressed through symbols, language, and interactions, highlighting sense-making and comprehensive description. Interpretive research emphasizes understanding the meanings behind social phenomena. The researcher serves as the primary tool for data collection, analyzing participants' experiences and meanings. A phenomenological perspective in interpretive inquiry suggests that understanding humans is inseparable from their social and cultural contexts, which are constantly evolving (Morehouse, 2012). Based on the ideas of this background, I conducted an interpretive inquiry to navigate the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal.

As we pass through various stages of our life, those stages contribute to the formation of chunks of experiences in the form of stories, experiences and ideas. We recount, reflect and relearn through those stories of our own and others too and strive for better practices and pedagogies as an immediate reform. As the nature of my research problem, interpretive inquiry allowed me to collect, promote and explore the stories, perceptions, experiences and reflections of my research participants as to what and how they have been feeling with their engagement in the SESP formulation processes in Nepal as the key stakeholders of school education. Interpretive inquiry seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within social and cultural contexts. It emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and involves close interaction between the researcher and participants to uncover deeper meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similarly, Smith et al. (2008) argue that interpretive inquiry focuses on interpreting meanings, purposes, intentions and interpretations people offer to their actions and interactions with others. So, envisioning their varied and diverse told and untold stories, experiences, and perceptions of past and present in connection with their personal, social and cultural life and the environment in regard to their engagement in the SESP formulation process gave me insights for my study.

As the nature of my study, I explored the issue in depth rather than getting opinions from many people in a closed-ended format of yes-no questions. I also gave the open space to my participants to share the perceptions of their engagement in the

SESP making process, and to reflect on the experiences of situating their voices in the SESP.

More specifically, this study employed an interpretive research method with ideas and experiences of research participants to explore and unfold the voice of stakeholders in SESP making process. In brief, interpretive inquiry, a qualitative research method, was used for my study to understand the subjective meanings and social realities constructed by individuals engaged in the SESP making process. This approach has allowed for in-depth exploration of stakeholders' experiences in the context of Nepal's education policy, especially in the context of SESP. In it, I brought the stories, sayings and experiences of the participants through interviews and analysis of the concerned documents.

Research Site and Participants

As a process of data collection, I selected the research site and participants purposively because qualitative sampling allows the researchers to select the participants as per the needs of the researcher and the nature of the study (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). So, I purposively selected seven participants who are key leaders of various sectors of school education of Nepal (one government official, one CNT leader, two NARMIN leaders, two SMC association leaders and one leader of the parents' association) who have experiences of at least 5-10 years working in the area of education and education policies, especially in the sector of school education policies of Nepal and were the part of SESP process as well. While selecting them, engagement of them in the education policy process, especially in the SESP development process, was considered as the prime factor.

Regarding the selection of the participants of my study, as per the purpose, I took seven participants: one government official, one central leader of CNT, two central leaders of SMC association, one central leader of parents' association, and two central leaders of NARMIN, as they are the key stakeholders in the case of policy formulation for school education. I used the purposive sampling method to select participants who, by default, have key roles in school education policy making and implementation process. In this connection, the participation of women participants in the research process was also taken into consideration, as two of my participants were women. In the same way, the study was conducted in Kathmandu, focusing on a key location where education policymaking is most active, and the availability of diverse stakeholders was possible. Most specifically, my study site was the capital city

Kathmandu (e.g. MoEST Singh durbar/Central Level Agencies under MoEST at Sanothimi, central offices of CNT, SMC Association, Parents' Association, and NARMIN). It was taken to make me feasible from the perspective of my resources and time.

My research participants are introduced as follows:

The research participant one is a government official under MoEST with more than 20 years of experience in educational governance and management. He worked in various district education offices (DEOs) and many different entities like MoEST, CEHRD, TSC, etc. He is originally from Kaski of Gandaki. His schooling and academic degree up to the bachelor level were completed in Kaski. As he performed in various roles under the MoEST, I selected him as my research participant. Although it was very tough to get his time for the interview and discussion in the initial phase, he turned out to be one of the participants who shared so much knowledge in the area of my study.

My second participant is the leader of the SMC association, who has more than 10 years of working experience in the related role. He is from Kavrepalanchok. So, he was also purposefully selected for my study to learn and reflect upon his perception, experiences and find new insights in the area of my study.

My third participant is the leader of the parents' association, who is from Lalitpur. He has worked in the association for more than two decades and raised his voice on the issues of education. So, I found him very relevant for my study. His experiences, perceptions and the stories happened to be so much new wisdom and insight for my study.

My fourth participant is the leader of CNT. He was from Dhankuta and had worked in various capacities of the CNT for more than fifteen years. He is the one raising the voices of the teachers for policy processes. So, he happened to be one of the participants of my research.

My fifth participant is again the leader of the SMC Association. She has also worked as its leader for more than 10 years. Bringing the inclusivity and for cross validating the ideas of my second participant, as well as digging out the perspectives of the SMC association's women leader, I purposively chose her.

My sixth participant is the leader of NARMIN. She has also worked in the association for more than six years. To bring the voices and experiences of the NARMIN's women leaders, I chose her as my research participant.

My seventh participant is again the leader of NARMIN. He has worked in the association for about five years. To cross-validate the ideas of the previous NARMIN leader i.e. the sixth participant, I chose him as my research participant.

Strategies for Data Generation

I employed interviews, document analysis and study of meeting minutes as my key strategies of data generation.

Open-ended Interviews

While conducting the study, interview was taken as one of the major strategies of generating information and unfolding experiences and understanding of my research participants. For getting closer to their experiences, ideologies, feelings, perceptions and motivation, one-to-one in-depth and focused interviews are highly effective tools for data collection in qualitative study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In-depth multiple interviews were carried out in both formal and informal settings. Open-ended and general interview questions were also used to let the participants unfold their views without any constraints from the researcher (McNabb, 2017). So, open-ended questions were asked to the participants without any interferences and disturbances to get answers to my research problem. The interview guidelines, in consultation with my research supervisor, were prepared and followed before, during and after the interview with my participants. I also slightly used document analysis for some data generation.

For my data generation purpose, I basically used the instruments like open-ended guiding questions regarding stakeholders' views on their engagement and influence in the policy-making i.e. the SESP making process.

In brief, in my study, I used the open-ended interviews that are ideal for interpretive inquiry as they allow flexibility in exploring the perspectives of stakeholders while maintaining some structure. This helped to understand the experiences and opinions of the concerned study participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants as mentioned in the heading study site and participants to gather detailed information about their experiences, perceptions and reflections that they encounter in education policy making (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) process of Nepal, most specifically in the case of SESP formulation.

Analysis of Policy Documents

The existing education policy documents, government reports, and other

relevant literature, like media articles, were analyzed to contextualize and confirm the data obtained from interviews. Most specifically, I went through the related official documents of the MoEST to provide context and help identify the official stance regarding stakeholder engagement in the SESP making processes (Bowen, 2009), which was very much applicable in my study.

Analysis of Meeting Minutes and Reports

Reviewing the tentative ten minutes of the meetings conducted by the MoEST and reports from stakeholder consultations offered insights into the extent of stakeholder engagement in the SESP formulation process. I delved into those documents, focusing on stakeholders' engagement in the SESP formulation process.

Data Analysis and Meaning-Making Process

I collected data through interviews, both formal and informal. I also made field notes and did journaling. The interviews of each participant were recorded with their consent. The recordings were listened to multiple times as needed, and the recorded data were then transcribed. I confirmed and reconfirmed the transcriptions to make sure that all the information contained in the audio was accurately transcribed: nothing added, substituted and deleted, being conscious of meaning violation.

On the basis of transcribed interviews, I developed themes and sub-themes, based on the stories, experiences and ideas shared by my research participants. Finally, I generated meaning to the theme since the prime focus of interpretive inquiry is generating meaning from the experiences, perspectives and reflections of participants.

Most specifically, in my study, I used the following techniques for data analysis and meaning-making. To be specific, thematic analysis was employed, following these steps:

Transcription

I audio-recorded the information generated from interviews with participants and transcribed it. Transcription is crucial for accurate analysis as it allows for a detailed review of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While transcribing what I did is, I listened to the audio of the interview time and again to make an exact transcription in the Nepali language. Then, I translated it into English in the form of a field note.

Coding

After transcription, I coded the transcripts using both inductive and deductive approaches. I generated the initial codes from the data, and existing literature also

guided me in the development of a coding framework. The use of a dual approach ensured a comprehensive capture of themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initial codes were made and they were grouped for categorization.

Categorizing

I categorized the coded responses of my participants to organize them into themes, identifying patterns and insights related to their engagement and influence on the SESP making in Nepal. This process helped me clarify stakeholders' roles and perspectives, enabling a deeper understanding of their impact on policy development (Creswell & Poth, 2018), i.e. SESP development in my study.

Theme Development

I developed the broader themes from the grouped codes that were categorized, capturing the essence of stakeholders' voices and engagement in the SESP formulation process in Nepal. This step is essential for understanding complex interactions within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I developed some themes and the sub-themes for analysing and interpreting the data.

Meaning-making

The developed themes and sub-themes were interpreted to understand the underlying patterns and relationships, contextualized within the socio-political background of Nepal, relating them to the voices of stakeholders in SESP making. This step involved connecting findings to theoretical frameworks and broader social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I interpreted to bring the essence of the responses of the participants.

Additionally, I also used the ideas generated from the analyzed documents during the process of data analysis and meaning-making to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. This holistic approach enabled drawing key insights/findings from the data analysis and meaning-making process, such as the influence of stakeholder engagement on policy outcomes and identifying gaps in current practices.

Positionality: Locating Myself in the Research Process

In qualitative research, the positionality of the researcher is not a neutral element but a critical aspect that influences every stage of the study, from framing of research questions to the interpretation of findings (Berger, 2015). Reflexively acknowledging one's positionality allows the researcher to situate knowledge construction within the broader social, political, and institutional contexts (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). As a member of government bureaucracy under MoEST, my insider status in the school education policy processes has both afforded unique opportunities and posed potential challenges for this inquiry to unpack the voices of stakeholders in education policy-making, particularly in SESP.

Insider Positioning

My role within MoEST provides me with privileged access to official documents, policy deliberations, and institutional networks that are not readily available to external researchers. This insider status enriches my understanding of the technical language, bureaucratic processes, and power dynamics embedded within the education system of Nepal, which is led by the MoEST. Such access is significant, as the voices of diverse stakeholders such as government officials, teachers, parents, students, civil society actors, and local officials often remain underrepresented in official policy discourses (Anderson & Herr, 1999). My positionality thus enables me to act as a bridge between formal policy structures and the lived realities of those affected by the process of education policy making and planning, like the SESP, that are developed and executed by the Ministry itself and the various entities under it.

Potential Biases and Reflexivity

While insider status grants depth of access, it also carries risks of bias. There is a possibility of unconsciously privileging official narratives, aligning too closely with institutional perspectives, or interpreting stakeholder voices through the lens of bureaucratic experience (Chavez, 2008). To mitigate these risks, I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process, maintaining a reflective journal to critically examine how my professional identity may shape the research encounter and the subsequent meaning-making process. Triangulation of data sources and member checking are employed to enhance the credibility of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and maintain the rigor of the study.

Navigating Insider-Outsider Dynamics

Although I am an insider to the bureaucratic and policy-making context of the school education sector of Nepal, I remain an outsider to many grassroots realities, especially the everyday experiences of students, parents, provincial and local education authorities, and marginalized communities. This dual positioning situates me in what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as the “space between,” allowing me to draw upon insider knowledge while also practicing critical empathy toward perspectives that challenge or diverge from institutional priorities. Recognizing these

dynamics strengthened the interpretive richness of the study by enabling multiple vantage points.

Ethical Commitments Regarding Positionality

Given my institutional role, ethical considerations are of paramount importance. Stakeholders may perceive me primarily as a government representative, which could influence the openness of their responses. To address this, I explicitly clarified the academic purpose of the study and assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity. The ethical guidelines of KUSOED informed the research process, ensuring that participants' voices were represented authentically and without bureaucratic filtering. In this way, I aimed to position myself as a facilitator of voice rather than an arbiter of truth.

Contribution of Positionality

My positionality contributed to the study in two critical ways. First, it enabled access to policy spaces and institutional discourses, thereby contextualizing stakeholder narratives within the broader framework of the SESP. Second, it underscored the interpretive nature of the inquiry, where knowledge is co-constructed through the interplay of insider access and outsider sensitivity. By situating myself reflexively, I strived to ensure that this research not only illuminates the voices of stakeholders but also critically examines how those voices are navigated within the structures of Nepal's education policy-making.

In short, in this study, I positioned myself as an insider within MoEST, directly engaged in the policy processes of school education in Nepal. My insider status provided privileged access to the SESP, official documents, and institutional networks, enriching the contextual depth of this interpretive inquiry. Such access allowed me to bridge the gap between policy discourses and the voices of diverse stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and civil society representatives (Anderson & Herr, 1999), NARMIN and others.

At the same time, I acknowledge the challenges associated with this position. Being part of the government bureaucracy created risks of bias, particularly in privileging institutional perspectives over dissenting voices. To address this, I adopted a reflexive stance, maintaining a reflective journal and applying strategies such as triangulation and member checking to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While I am an insider to the bureaucratic processes, I am also an outsider to many grassroots experiences, enabling me to balance institutional understanding with

sensitivity to marginalized perspectives of the grassroots education stakeholders of Nepal (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

I made it clear to participants that this research was an academic endeavor rather than an extension of my official duties. I followed the ethical guidelines of KUSOED, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and authentic representation of participants' voices. My positionality thus functioned as both a strength and a challenge, which I navigated through reflexivity, ethical rigor, and a commitment to foregrounding stakeholder perspectives in the SESP making.

Quality Standards of the Study

There are no fixed and final parameters of quality standards in a qualitative study. As stated by Creswell (2014), a qualitative study has the challenges of representation and legitimation. However, the quality standards of reliability, validity and objectivity of positivism are replaced with trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, as cited in Taylor & Medina, 2013).

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness specifically includes four criteria i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure these criteria in my study, I employed the following strategies:

Credibility

Credibility in a qualitative study is maintained through confidence in the data, as well as in-depth and thick descriptions with thorough discussion. It is the process of giving assurance to all participants and readers that the results and findings of the study were believable and there was richness in information and quality outweighed the quantity. This was achieved in my study through prolonged participation; use of best-suited research methodology; collecting data through multiple methods; selecting information-rich research participants and sharing data, interpretations and findings with them. I also shared analysis and conclusions with co-workers and peers for debriefing and making sure that research findings were consistent and could be applied to similar contexts and situations. The study was conducted with a rigorous process and all the interpretations, analyses and results were based on data where there was no room for personal prejudices and bias from the researcher.

Prolonged Engagement

I spent sufficient time in the field to understand the context and to establish rapport with participants. This engagement helped gain deeper insights and more reliable data (Shenton, 2004). I sat informally as well as formally with the participants

to make rapport and bring out their true ideas without influencing them or creating the context of any kind of biasness.

Triangulation

I used multiple data sources to cross-check and verify the findings of the study. For example, combined interviews and document analysis were done to verify the data (Denzin, 1978). In other words, I triangulated multiple data sources (interviews and documents) to enrich my findings. I tried to cross-validate the ideas and experiences shared by the participants.

Member Checking

I shared the findings and interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy of the analysis and meaning. This ensured that the participants' perspectives were correctly understood and represented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in my dissertation report.

Peer Debriefing

I was also engaged with colleagues or mentors to review and discuss my data and findings. This external check helped me identify any biases or assumptions and enhance the credibility of my study (Spall, 1998). I spent a lot of time discussing the findings of my study with my colleagues, course facilitators, and supervisor.

Transferability

For transferability, i.e. the extent to which findings can be applied to other circumstances, I went through the process of thick description. In it, I provided descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings in detail. This allows readers to determine whether the findings could be applicable to another context (Geertz, 1973).

Dependability

For dependability, which involves consistency and stability of the research process over time, I used specifically the audit trail technique, which is the process of keeping detailed records of the research process, decisions made, and reflections to provide transparency. In which I maintained a detailed record of all research decisions, procedures, and changes. This includes documentation of my research design, data collection methods, analysis process, and reflective notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Besides the above criteria, I also included reflexivity and authenticity.

Reflexivity

As the nature of my study and philosophical underpinnings of relative ontology, I believe in multiple realities. So, I reflected on my own practices and the insights I got from my research participants before, during and after taking interviews. I remained aware of the diverse views, ideas, perceptions, and reflections of the participants. I also became reflective throughout my study, including transcription, interpretation and analysis of the data and during literature reviews on the basis of the argumentation of stories, perceptions, and understanding shared by my research participants (Joshi, 2022).

Authenticity

I made my study authentic on the basis of prolonged engagement and formal and informal talks with my research participants. Lincoln and Guba (1989) asserted that authenticity in study is maintained through ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, tactical authenticity and fairness. I also focused on these ideas so that my readers would take it as an authentic document. In brief, I ensured the authenticity of my study through the engagement with my participants in a detailed manner.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research are personal and professional codes of conduct that the researchers need to practice right from the time of selecting the study topic to finalize the research report. It is a challenging task for qualitative researchers to get informed consent, finalize participants, maintain confidentiality, and do unbiased interpretation and ownership of the knowledge generated in the study.

I maintained all of these ethical considerations in my study and visited the research site and talked to the participants only after getting their consent. Research participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, its procedure, their anticipated and voluntary roles and responsibilities, issues to be sought and outcomes (Creswell, 2014). After getting their consent, I also personally met them and discussed the interview and fixed the time for the meeting as per their preference and convenience. The participants were made fully aware of their voluntary participation.

I assured all the participants would feel safe and protected and that there would be no harm for their participation. They were given utmost respect and shown sincerity. Participants were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Similarly, I also promised to my research participants that their interview would only be used for

research purposes and it would not be shared with any other party without taking the consent of them.

The accuracy of data is critical in a qualitative study (Joyner et al., 2018). This ethical issue was addressed by sharing transcription, coding and analysis of the text data with research participants for auditing and member checking. The audio and information shared by the participants were protected, and they were clearly informed about their right to reject and withdraw from participating in my study at any time. The participants were also informed that they could disagree and deny responding to any or part of the questions if they wished to do so. I also took ethical approval from the concerned authority before conducting the study. Most specifically, I followed the ethical guidelines of KUSOED.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the overall methodological process of my study. I began with mentioning the philosophical foundations of my study, followed by interpretivism as my research paradigm in detail. It is then followed by interpretive inquiry as my research method. I further discussed the process of selecting the research site and participants, followed by instrumentation. I then talked about data analysis and the meaning-making process of my study. After that, I have discussed positionality, followed by the quality standards of my study design. I also talked about the ethical considerations of my study and the chapter ended with this concise aspect of it.

CHAPTER IV

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN SESP FORMULATION PROCESS IN NEPAL

In this chapter, I have explored/unpacked the perceptions, experiences, understanding, as well as the stories of my research participants related to their engagement in the process of SESP formulation. This chapter responds to my first research question i.e.; how do stakeholders perceive their engagement in the SESP making process in Nepal? This brings out all their views and visions in connection with different theoretical underpinnings, scholars' ideas and existing knowledge to make meaning about the representation and engagement of stakeholders in connection to the SESP formulation scenario of Nepal through perception, reflection and retrospection following interpretive inquiry as my method of study. While doing so, I read, reread and reflect upon the views, ideas, as well as stories of my participants in detail. This has helped me to form the themes and sub-themes representing my participants' perceptions, experiences, and understanding related to their engagement in the SESP context of Nepal. I have then discussed upon developed theme viz. stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagement, the sub-themes of which are understanding engagement in SESP making process, contribution to SESP decision making, barriers to engagement in SESP process as these are linked with the interview questions/guidelines that were developed for the interview purpose and were emerged through the ideas, experiences, understanding and the perceptions of the participants. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief summary of it.

Stakeholders' Perceptions on Policy Engagement

While studying the context of the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, I tried to explore/unpack their perceptions on policy engagement, taking the case of SESP. This was developed as a theme for interpreting the data generated through the interview. I divided the theme into three different sub-themes: understanding engagement in the SESP making process, contribution to SESP decision making, barriers to engagement in the SESP process as per the brought perceptions, ideas, experiences, and stories of all of my participants, and also tried my best to link them from the perspective of the literature and theories.

Understanding engagement in SESP Making Process

As discussed briefly above, after the interviews with my participants, I have developed three different sub-themes under the theme stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagements, taking the case of the SESP formulation process. I sought the understanding of their engagement in the SESP making process as the sub-theme of the aforesaid theme, as most of my participants' perceptions were captured during the interview process.

Indicating his engagement in the SESP process, my first participant shared: *"Umm.... Yes, I got the letter/invitation of the MoEST, sometimes from the email, in a formal manner for the responsibility of being engaged in the SESP process and got engaged"* (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024). He further said, *"Yes, I was engaged in the crosscutting issues in the various programs of education in many different events. Besides this, I could contribute by being engaged in the agenda-setting process of the SESP."* (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024)

The above sharing of my first participant means that, as he is a government official under the MoEST, he had the opportunity of being part of the SESP process in a formal manner. He specifically shared that the formal instruments, like the letter or email, were the means used to invite him to the engagement in the SESP process. From his sharing, it can be noted that he got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP formulation process by participating in many different events organized during the process. He also shared that his contribution was there in the agenda setting as well. It makes me understand that the first participant, as a government official and having power, had a very good opportunity to be a part of the SESP process, which is also linked with the essence of the Voice Theory.

He further said:

Um...yes, as personnel related to planning, I was engaged even in the initial discussion of the SESP, chaired by the respected secretary. In that meeting, there was a discussion about what themes are to be kept, who is to lead the thematic committee, what role is to be given to the personnel from the bureaucracy and who can take the leading role from the outside experts. I could recommend the expertise of the various experts for thematic lead and also give some ideas regarding specifying the themes which was agreed and accepted in the team, as well as in the general framework development.

Um...I had very good opportunity to be the part of the SESP in various events of its development. (#Participant 1, Interview, 24 December 2024).

In relation to his engagement in the SESP process, my first participant also shared that as he was the personnel of planning during that period, he was engaged from the initial stage of SESP formulation. His sharing also informs that the initial discussions were chaired by the Secretary of Education. As per his sharing, what I can understand is that the initial discussions were to clear out the themes, the lead of the teams, the roles to be provided to the bureaucrats and the outside experts, in which he had the opportunity of providing feedback based on his experience. Not only that, but he could provide his ideas in specifying the themes where his ideas were accepted and agreed upon in the team while developing the initial general framework of the document.

In the SESP designing process, he shared:

“As per my experience, the SESP was designed with developing some of the themes in the beginning. Then feedback was taken from the concerned stakeholders in different programs.” (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024).

Similarly, he also shared:

Ah...yes, I was engaged in the framing of the SESP. Yes...Um...(longer)...I was heavily engaged in the template/framework development as well as keeping the kinds of themes in the main document, developing the crosscutting themes, and determining which subjects are to be kept in the various parts of the document. I could contribute to the discussions for fixing the subjects like main sub-sectors, cross-cutting sub-sectors, strategies, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), etc. I think in those discussions my sayings were listened to in the development process of SESP. Um...as per my experience, the SESP template and themes were developed taking the feedback of the concerned stakeholders in different programs, of which I was a participant. (#Participant 1, Interview, 24 December 2024).

In connection to his engagement in the designing process of the SESP, my first participant added that he was heavily engaged in the template/framework development, as well as keeping the kinds of themes in the main document, developing the crosscutting themes, and determining which subjects were to be kept in the various parts of the document. He further shared that he could contribute to the discussions for fixing the subjects like main sub-sectors, cross-cutting sub-sectors,

strategies, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), etc. He happily shared more that in those discussions his sayings were listened to in the development process of SESP, also adding that, as per his experience, the SESP template and themes were developed taking the feedback of the concerned stakeholders in different programs of which he was a participant. This makes me understand that in the policy design of the SESP, my first participant, who is a government official of the MoEST, had the opportunity to contribute to the process. He expressed that he got the chance of being engaged in various steps of the SESP process, in which there also came the step of designing the SESP. He further added that he had the opportunity to take part in many different events of the SESP where he could put his voice/ideas, as he shares, he was heavily engaged in developing the frame of the main document, developing the crosscutting themes, and determining which subjects were to be kept in the various parts of the document. All these ideas shared by my first participant in the context of designing the SESP, I come to understand that he, being in authority under the MoEST had a very good opportunity of being engaged in the designing process of the SESP.

Similarly, in a policy dialogue context, he said:

Yes, I was engaged in different kinds of policy-related dialogues and discussions. Yes, I could contribute to the process of format development. I also put my ideas in the drafting process, where they were considered. I had developed the draft myself and shared it with the committee. There was no problem in keeping my ideas in the initial draft of the SESP, as that was developed by me and presented to the committee. I also sat with experts in the finalization/ final draft development. So, I had no problem up to the finalization of the initial draft from the thematic committee. (#Participant 1, Interview, 24 December 2024).

In connection to the policy dialogue context, he shared that he was engaged in different kinds of policy-related dialogues, discussions and informed that he could contribute to the process of format development. He further shared that he also put his ideas in the drafting process, where his ideas were considered, adding that he had developed the draft himself and shared it with the committee. As per him, there was no problem in keeping his ideas in the initial draft of the SESP, as that was developed by him and presented to the committee. Furthermore, he shared that he also sat with experts in the finalization/final draft development. In brief, he highlighted that he had no barrier up to the finalization of the initial draft from the thematic committee.

He added:

Ah...the open schools and the religious schools were taught/taken differently. I mean, there was the condition that those schools were considered part of the formal education. But I recommended/ presented to think of them as part of lifelong learning rather than formal education. Um... (With smile) ...I could convince the thematic committee in my opinion and ... (#Participant 1, Interview, 24 December 2024).

In addition to the above, sharing what my first participant informed was the open schools and the religious schools were thought/taken differently, taking them as part of the formal education, but he recommended/presented them as part of lifelong learning rather than that of formal education. He happily shared that he could convince the thematic committee in his opinion i.e., taking the religious schools as part of lifelong learning.

In the context of policy dialogue of the SESP, my first participant, who is a government official of the MoEST, had a very good opportunity to be part. He shared that he got the chance of being engaged in various steps of the SESP process, in which there also came the step of policy dialogue of the SESP. He interestingly shares that he himself developed the draft for discussion and presented it in the committee, which gives the picture of his engagement in the policy dialogue. He also adds the story of convincing the committee regarding keeping the religious and open schools as part of lifelong learning rather than part of formal education, which resembles his influence in the policy dialogue. Here, I am convinced by the Voice Theory, which talks about the power of the stakeholder in the policy process as the first participant, being the powerful government official of the MoEST, could put his voice in the policy dialogue of the SESP.

The above sharing of the participant's one and the interpretation of which again gives me the picture of his engagement in the dialogue process of the SESP. He highlighted that he was engaged in the format development, putting his ideas, which are also linked with the concept of the Voice Theory, which focuses on the voice of stakeholders in the policy process. His sharing provides the idea that he drafted the plan and shared it with the committee for the dialogue process. His sharing makes me understand that he had no problem keeping his ideas in the policy dialogue of the SESP, as he himself developed the draft and presented it in the committee for discussion and dialogue. It sometimes relates to the Social Systems Theory as well.

He further shared that he had no problem keeping his ideas till the finalization of the initial draft from the thematic committee.

But the context of participant two, who is the central leader of the SMC association, is completely different than that of participant one, who opined:

We got no opportunity to participate. No formal letter came from any structure/entity of the government. One agency, as I remember, UNICEF, organized a discussion program where I participated in a formal manner. I think we were not asked to participate, as we could say the real issue and pressure the policymakers to put our agenda in the policy/plan. Again, we were asked to participate at the end, but we refused. (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

From the above sharing of my second participant, it is understood that he did not have the chance to participate. Furthermore, he informed that there was no formal invitation to him in the beginning from any entity of the government. But not the government agency, but UNICEF, as per his remembrance, asked him to participate in a discussion program where he got a very limited chance to put only a few ideas in a general manner. He expressed his aggression blaming that he was not called upon as the policymakers thought they (SMC association leaders) could raise the real issue and pressurize them (policy decision makers) to put the SMC related agenda in the policy/plan, which again makes me remember the Social Systems Theory as well as the Voice Theory which talk about the influence of societal machinery and power in the policy processes. He also informed that he was asked to participate in a neglected manner at the end, but he rejected the offer and did not take part in the event, which brings me to think that even being one of the key stakeholders as the SMC association leader, he was unable to be engaged in the SESP formulation process. This can also be linked with the concept of the Voice Theory, which talks about the influence of the powerful ones hindering the meaningful participation, i.e., engagement of a broader number of stakeholders. It further makes me think again about whether there is a required engagement of all the concerned stakeholders in the SESP process of Nepal. It also shows how the policy formation process sidelines some key stakeholders.

In the same way, my third participant, who is the leader of the parents' association, shared his experiences as follows:

In various Meetings/Missions with the development partners, we were asked to participate. As far as the SESP is concerned, we were asked to provide

feedback from the parents' perspective. As per my memory, I was not asked to take part in SESP with a formal letter/invitation. No formal letter was sent from any authority of the government. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

From the above sharing of my third participant, who is the central leader of the parents' association, I came to know that he was asked to take part in some of the activities of the SESP process, but he mentioned that a formal invitation was not forthcoming. But as per my understanding, though there may not have been a formal letter or email, he was invited by any means, which might be by telephone or a message from an authentic entity, because without which, how could he not go to those meetings/missions as he has said that he was asked to provide feedback from the angle of parents. This makes me understand that the notable kind of invitation and engagement was restricted in the SESP process to the leaders of the parents' association, which aligns with the concept and ideas of Social Systems Theory, which discusses the influence of societal structures or social dynamics on policy processes.

He further shared:

... We were not linked in setting the agenda. We were only made to be a part of it in a general manner, not in a specific way. The agenda was not set involving us. I mean, there was no engagement of the parent association in the agenda setting of the SESP. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

The above sharing of participant three indicates that he was not made a part of the agenda setting of the SESP. This means that there was no engagement of the parents' association in the SESP agenda-setting process, which resembles apathy towards the active engagement of key stakeholders in the policy agenda-setting and formulation process.

In the second round of the interview with him, the third participant, about agenda setting, reiterated:

Um... as per my understanding, we were not asked to be engaged in the process of SESP agenda setting. We were only asked to be part of some of the discussions where there were the donors as well, not more than that, as I remember. Um ... we were not asked to put our ideas in the process of agenda setting. I mean, we were not asked to present our concerns and ideas. We were just asked to be a part, only as the ornament. (#Participant 3, Interview, 1 March 2025)

The above experience sharing of my third participant indicates that he was not engaged in the SESP agenda setting in a rigorous manner, which means, in principle, there was representation, i.e., engagement, of the parents' association in the formulation process of the SESP for the sake of formality. He further added that their engagement was not in that formal manner, as they were not invited by the concerned authority of the government. He satirized, saying they were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the missions or meetings where there were DPs as well. This sharing of my third participant reveals that, in principle, there was the representation of the parents' association, but they did not get an opportunity to be well-engaged in its process. Although the concerned stakeholders are supposed to be part of each and every policy from agenda setting to the policy decision, his sharing shows there was no engagement in the agenda setting of the SESP, which is related to the Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory, as well as the Social Systems Theory.

In the same way, in the context of the designing process of the SESP, the third participant, who is the leader of the parents' association, presented his view as:

I do not have very good experience with the design process of the SESP. We were not engaged in the SESP design. In my understanding, we were not made engaged in it ... We did not get engaged in designing. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

In the second round of interview with him, the third participant, in regard to the designing process of the SESP, reiterated, "*Um... (with pause) we also were not engaged in the designing process as well. It also was as I said in the above discussion of agenda setting.*" (#Participant 3, Interview, 1 March 2025)

The above experience sharing of my third participant informs that he was not engaged in the SESP design. He further informed that he was not engaged in the agenda setting as well as the design process of the SESP. Even if the concerned stakeholders are supposed to be part of each and every policy, from agenda setting to the policy decision, their involvement shows there was no engagement in the design process of the SESP.

In relation to the engagement in the SESP process, my fourth participant opined:

Um...I participated in the SESP process many different times. I participated in getting a formal invitation from MoEST/CEHRD. The invitation was in various forms i.e., sometimes through email, sometimes through a letter, etc.

Then our committee of the Confederation of Nepali Teachers (CNT) asked me to participate in the process. In this way, I got engaged in the SESP process.
(#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

As per the above sharing of my fourth participant, who is the leader of the CNT, he got the opportunity to be part of the SESP process in many different events, getting a formal invitation from the government entities like MoEST/CEHRD. As per him, the invitation was in a different manner, i.e., sometimes through email, sometimes through a letter and sometimes through other means. After the invitation from the government agency, the CNT committee asked him to participate in the SESP formulation process, and he took part. This makes me understand that he got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP process well. This indicates to me that the leader of CNT, being a powerful stakeholder, got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP process with due process of invitation or correspondence, which resembles the ideas of Voice Theory, which talks about the influence of powerful ones in the policy formulation process.

In the context of agenda setting, he reiterated:

No, I was not engaged in the beginning. As I have already said, we were not invited in the process of the concept paper development and the agenda-setting activities of the plan. I mean, I did not get any chance to participate in the beginning-level agenda-setting process. Then I took part in the discussion on that format/template. (#Participant 4, Interview, 13 February, 2025)

Through the above sharing of my participant four, who is the central leader of the CNT, I came to realize that he had no opportunity to be a part of the SESP agenda-setting process, as he mentioned he sat in on discussions after the development of the template, not at the beginning of the agenda-setting process. It shows that even the key stakeholders, like the leaders of CNT, did not get the opportunity of being part of the major events of policy formulation, like the agenda setting of the SESP, as claimed by Dhakal (2019), Neupane (2019), and Khanal (2012). It is also linked with the concept of Policy Making Theory, which reveals that sometimes in the formulation process of the policies, some of the key stakeholders are also excluded in the major steps of policy, like in the case of participant four in the SESP agenda setting.

In the design process of the SESP, the perception of the fourth participant was as follows:

In the case of design as well, it is very difficult for me to say I was engaged. I do say I was not informed of it. I guess, I mean I do say, MoEST, NPC, and DPs jointly designed it. I became a part of a thematic group. I got engaged in a certain thematic group rather than in the whole designing process.

(#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

In the second round of the interview with him, the fourth participant, in relation to the design of the SESP, further shared:

Um...(pause) we also were not engaged in the designing process. I mean the concept paper and themes were already developed. ...(Pause) we took part then after in the thematic discussions. What is to be discussed, um...I mean, what themes are going to be discussed was already designed. Um... (with longer pause) as per my assumption, the part of MoEST and development partners (DPs) may have sat for its design. We did not sit in on the design process of it. (#Participant 4, Interview, 13 February 2025)

From the sharing of my fourth participant, who is the leader of the CNT, it is clear that he was not engaged in the initial processes of agenda setting to policy design, as he mentioned he was engaged only in the thematic discussions that took place after the framework development. He further added that the discussion themes were already designed, which, as per his assumption, were designed by the MoEST people and the development partners (DPs). It makes me understand that even the key stakeholders, like the CNT leaders, did not have the opportunity to be part of the SESP design process, hindering them from being part of an important plan/policy document like the SESP.

My fourth participant in the context of the policy dialogue of the SESP shared, “Yes, I participated from the beginning meetings after I was assigned to the team. I did not leave any meeting of the thematic group besides the beginning meetings of agenda setting... I got engaged in all of them.”. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

He also told a story:

There came the voice that it would be almost impossible from the perspective of financial management to provide incentives or equal facilities to teachers. Then I debated with the DPs as well. Then I said to them um... (with laughter) to write in the document that the quality of education will be better if there are teachers with varied incentives, terms and conditions. Otherwise (with a

smile) ..., let's write that there will be the teachers with the same terms, conditions and incentive processes. Later, I could (smile) ...convince them of the second concern and they agreed with my voice on the provision of teachers having the same standards, terms and conditions. (#Participant 4, Interview, 13 February 2025)

The above sharing and story of my fourth participant resembles that he was engaged in the policy dialogue of the SESP, as the team had initial ideas that keeping similar facilities to the teachers was almost impossible from the perspective of the financial management, he debated and finally became able to convince all to put the provision of teachers having same standards, terms, and conditions. This can be taken as a very good capacity of his in convincing the team with his dialogue, which makes me understand that he was engaged in the policy dialogue of the SESP. Here I am again convinced by the Social Systems Theory, which discusses the interdependence of education sub-systems in education policy processes and emphasizes the engagement of relevant stakeholders in these policy processes. From this, I came to know that he had the opportunity to be part of the policy dialogue of the SESP, as he highlighted that he was engaged after the framework development. He shared that he sat in on the theme of the TPD, where he contributed to various aspects of teachers, which makes me understand that he had the opportunity to be part of the policy dialogue of the SESP. This is also evident in his sharing, where he highlighted that he focused aggressively and satirically on the idea of having teachers with the same kind of incentives, terms, and conditions for the quality of education.

Now it is the turn of participant five, who is again the leader of the SMC association. I had interviewed her to cross-validate and triangulate the data/information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association, and he had informed me that he had no sincere opportunity to be engaged. Participant five shared:

We were not called formally. There was no correspondence. But we participated in some context by searching from ourselves. I think there is not much content in the document, except for the capacity building of SMC in some places. We were not included/ engaged in the processes of agenda setting or policy decisions. This, I think, this is the reform of the SSRP/SSDP. I understand, it is continuation of them, as I do not have any experience with the participation. (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

From the above sharing of my fifth participant, I come to understand that she also had no opportunity to be a part of the SESP process. She also said that by searching for opportunities, she participated in some of the events. She highlighted that there is not much content in the document besides a few words related to the capacity building of the SMC. Furthermore, she informed that she had no opportunity to be part of the process of agenda setting for the policy decision of the SESP. She also described the SESP as the reform of the SSRP/SSDP. As she did not have any opportunity to take part in the development process of it, she understood the SESP as the continuation of the SSRP/SSDP. This further informs me that the information of the second participant matches that of the fifth one, as they both said there was no engagement of the SMC association in the SESP process. This makes me think again about whether there is a required engagement of all the concerned stakeholders, like the SMC association in the school education policy process of Nepal, as the Policy Making Theory expects the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the policy-making, making them more owned and sustainable. From this, I come to realize that she had no opportunity to be part of the agenda-setting of the SESP, as she shared that they were not engaged in the processes of agenda setting for policy decisions in which the key stakeholders' engagement is highly expected. This is against of the ideas of the constitution of Nepal, which talks about the inclusiveness of all the citizens of Nepal in the policies, plans, and programs of the government.

Now comes the turn of the other participant, that is, the sixth one. Regarding her engagement in the SESP making processes, the sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, shared her perception as:

I was not in the central committee of the NARMIN, but was in the secretariat, when the SESP was formulated. So, I was not engaged well in this process. I did not get a chance to be part of the agenda setting, design, dialogue, and decisions in an actual manner. As I was there in the leadership of the Local Level from the previous election as well, I could indirectly provide some suggestions in this process. But I did not get much opportunity to work and contribute to that process. I was not specifically engaged in the development process, but am engaged in its implementation. (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

My sixth participant informed me that she was not engaged in the SESP formulation process, as she was not part of the central committee, but rather served in

the secretariat of the NARMIN during the SESP formulation process. Furthermore, she added that she did not have the opportunity to be part of its process, i.e., from agenda setting to policy decisions, in an actual manner. But, she added, as being in the leadership position at the local level, she got the opportunity to provide some feedback and suggestions in the process at a minimal level, with not much opportunity. In addition to this, she added, she was not specifically engaged in the development process of SESP, but was engaged in the implementation of it. Furthermore, from the above reflection of my sixth participant, I came to know that there was very little, almost null, engagement of her in the SESP process. In the same way, it can be said that, even as the leader of the NARMIN, she did not get a chance to be a part of it. But, even if she was active enough and was in the secretariat, she mentioned that she did not get the opportunity to be a part of the SESP formulation, which makes me understand that the SESP process was not that participatory, as the key stakeholders, like the NARMIN leader, did not have much opportunity to be a part of the SESP formulation. It resembles the engagement of even the leaders of the key stakeholders' community, i.e., NARMIN, which was very limited in the context of policy design as well as other aspects of the SESP process formulation. It aligns with the ideas of Sharma and Kumar (2023) and Hughes et al. (2025), who claim that, despite formal structures for stakeholder participation in education policymaking, crucial voices, particularly those of local communities, often remain underrepresented in the actual policy formulation process. It further links with the concept of Social Systems Theory, which indicates that in policy processes, certain systems sometimes leave key voices out of the decision-making or policy-making process.

My seventh participant, another leader of NARMIN, presented his experience as:

The Ministry remembered the NARMIN when the SESP was formulated. So, I was a little bit engaged in this process. I sat only in one or two sittings, not more than that. Um... the representation was a kind of formality maintenance from the side of the ministry in a program where there was an event seeking feedback in a larger forum, forming some groups within the interaction program rather than making local governments really engaged as the experienced or evidence-based entity. It was a formal program where paper was presented by some experts and some of our ideas were taken to form some groups. Um...in my opinion, a kind of formal engagement took place in the

case of NARMIN. Yes, as I remember, there was a letter to the NARMIN from the Ministry for an interaction program. The program was held in a hotel in the capital city of Kathmandu. Um... I forgot the name of the hotel. But yes, the letter was there and I got engaged. Um...as per my remembrance, there was the presence of experts in the concerned field. They had presented papers. I got the opportunity to put my matters in a general manner. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

The above sharing of my seventh participant gives me the idea that he was engaged in the SESP process in a formal manner, as the ministry i.e. the MoEST, as per his remembrance, asked him to be a part of it, sending the letter to NARMIN, which was for an interaction program which he took as the formal kind of engagement in the case of NARMIN. He reflected that he got the opportunity to be part of the SESP process as a workshop participant in one or two programs that was/were held in a hotel of Kathmandu, but he was unable to mention the name of the hotel where the program had taken place. He expressed his sorrow, saying that he was engaged not as an experienced or evidence-informed participant at the local level or as the genuine leader of the NARMIN, but rather that the ministry was only maintaining formality by asking him to participate in an interaction program. He added that, in the program, some experts presented their papers, and group work also took place after the presentations. The groups were then asked to present their reports, in which they could briefly share their ideas in a general manner. It informs me that the engagement was so minimal and the opportunity to put the ideas into practice was so limited. This further makes me understand that the representation of key stakeholders like the NARMIN leaders as well was quite less in the case of SESP formulation even if the NARMIN chair is the member of steering committee of the SESP which information is aligned with the concept of the Social Systems Theory that also highlights the dominance of elites and powerful ones in the policy processes hindering the representation of some specific/genuine stakeholders.

The sharing of his perception: *“The ministry had remembered the NARMIN when the SESP was formulated. So, I was a little bit engaged in this process.”* and his sharing in relation to policy agenda setting like: *“No. I was not engaged...”* of my participant seven indicate that he was not well engaged in the SESP agenda setting process. He also shared that the ministry had remembered the NARMIN, and so, he was a little bit engaged in that process. It informs me that the engagement of the

NARMIN people was so minimal and the opportunity to put their voices was so little in the SESP agenda setting process to design as well as dialogue of the SESP (Durrani, 2015).

He further shared: *“Um...as I have already mentioned, after the preparation of the concept note, the stakeholders were asked in a program to provide feedback, where we were also invited. As per my remembrance, I participated in that program.”* (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

The above quotes of participant seven give me the idea that he was a little bit engaged in the policy dialogue process of the SESP. His sharing makes me understand that he was asked by the ministry to take part in a program to provide feedback through which he contributed slightly to the policy dialogue of the SESP, which shows the engagement was not that effective.

From the above sharing of the perceptions of my participants and the interpretation of the sharing on their engagement in the SESP process of Nepal, it is understood that participant one (government official) had opportunity to be the part of SESP process in a detailed manner as he seems powerful with state authority and so he was engaged well in it whereas the third one (parents' association leader) had no opportunity for engagement as he was not that powerful to be engaged well. But the case of the fourth one (CNT leader) is also a well-engaged one, as he was made the thematic committee member of the SESP process. The fifth participant (leader of the SMC association) seems a non-engaged one in the SESP process because of the lack of a formal invitation to them. The seventh one (NARMIN leader) seems to have very few opportunities to be engaged as he was asked to be part of only one or two interaction programs. From this, I am convinced by the concept of Cairney (2020), who explores the concept of power and elitism in public policy, emphasizing its multiple dimensions and implications in the policy process. The sharing of my participants regarding their engagement in the SESP making process aligns with Cairney's idea that there are multiple dimensions of the engagement of the participants in the case of the SESP formulation process as well. Some of my participants expressed their perceptions of being engaged in the process, while others shared that they were not. This is again related to the highlights of Carney, who talks about the debate on measuring power, distinguishing between visible and hidden forms. It shows that the perspective is relevant to the SESP formulation process, where most stakeholders' engagement could be considered marginalized by dominant

actors. This can be linked with my first participant, who was a government official, who could contribute to the SESP process as a highly engaged participant. A similar situation was that of the leader of CNT, the fourth participant. But others had so little opportunity to be a part of the process. Here, I am also convinced by the ideas of Parsons (1991), who conceptualizes society as a structured system where human interactions are governed by mutually accepted norms and standards, guided by the influence of the powerful ones. His theory of action framework describes how individuals operate within societal structures shaped by environmental factors like resources, population, and communication. Parsons' work is important in understanding how power and agency function within social systems. This perspective is critical for analyzing the SESP formulation context of Nepal, where stakeholder voices are mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, influencing policy outcomes. Not only this, but also this perspective is critical in Nepal's education policy, where stakeholders' voices and their engagement are filtered through institutional structures and power dynamics, which is also reflected in the sharing of my participants in the case of SESP formulation. From their sharing, participant one seems powerful with state authority and was engaged in the formulation process of the SESP, the second, fifth and sixth ones seem to have almost no opportunity, whereas the third and seventh ones as well seem not engaged very well. But the case of the fourth one is also a well-engaged one, as he was the powerful leader of the CNT.

This makes me further understand that in the process of the SESP agenda setting, the first participant is engaged, expressing his voice/ideas and influencing the committee in this regard. However, other participants do not appear to be engaged during the initial stages, as evidenced by their contested ideas or occasional aggression in their later contributions (Ball, 1994; Gaventa, 2006; Sabatier, 2007). This is related to the Policy Making Theory particularly the Stages Model that highlights seven stages of policy process like: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal, provides a framework for understanding the sequential phases of policy development: agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation in which some of the powerful ones or the influencing people of state authority get better chance in the initial as well as other stages of policy formulation.

As we talk about the level of engagement of the participants in regard to SESP agenda setting, the first one's engagement seems quite substantive as he shared, he got the opportunity to be part of developing the agenda. Not only this, he expressed that he could suggest the team members and experts of the thematic team and committees as well as the contents to be kept in the concept paper. But others said they did not have any opportunity to be a part of it. So, as the document of SESP and other forums of the policy people say there is the engagement of the stakeholders in the SESP process, I found the stakeholders' engagement in it only as the engagement of form rather than substance, as only one participant among the seven participants reflected that he had a huge engagement in it. This is again related to the essence of Voice Theory of Hirschman, which shows the importance of engaging and empowering diverse stakeholders such as educators, students, guardians, and community members in the decision-making processes concerning education policies. But our context shows less engagement of stakeholders in the agenda-setting process of the SESP. To me, the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the SESP agenda setting is quite inadequate.

My research participants also provide different kinds of information on their engagement in the design of the SESP. The first participant, as per his sharing, had the opportunity of being part of the designing process of the SESP as he was engaged in the agenda-setting process. It is again related to the concept of Social Systems Theory that conceptualizes the role of power in the policy process. The first participant, being a powerful government official, had an influence on the design of the SESP. As per his reflection on him, I also can relate it to the Voice Theory of Hirschman that emphasizes voice as a mechanism for stakeholders to express ideas, concerns, as well as dissatisfactions and influence systemic change, as he could influence the process of designing the SESP. But the sharing of other participants makes me understand that they had almost no opportunity to be part of the designing process of the SESP, which is shared in the expression of my third participant, the leader of the parents' association, like "*...we just had a ceremonial representation.*" From this, it can be said that in the process of designing SESP as well, the first participant seems engaged in a heavy manner, but other participants do not appear to be engaged during the stage of SESP design, which is shared in their contested ideas or occasional aggression (Ball, 1994; Gaventa, 2006; Sabatier, 2007). So, in the case of designing SESP, the level of engagement of the participants is similar to that of agenda setting.

In the context of the policy dialogue of SESP, the first participant seems more engaged in influencing the committee regarding it. The fourth participant, as well, became influential in policy dialogue. However, other participants do not appear to be engaged in a visible manner. (Ball, 1994; Gaventa, 2006; Sabatier, 2007). As we talk about the level of engagement of the participants in the policy dialogue of SESP, the first and fourth one's engagement seems to be quite substantive as they share that they had the opportunity to be part of the policy dialogue process of it well. But others say that they did not have a specific opportunity to be part of the policy dialogue of SESP. This is again related to the essence of Voice Theory of Hirschman (1970), which shows the importance of engaging and empowering diverse stakeholders such as educators, students, guardians, and community members in the processes concerning education policies. But the sharing of my participants shows less engagement from them in the policy dialogue process of the SESP, as only two of them shared that they had that kind of opportunity. This makes me understand that the engagement of the concerned stakeholders during the context of policy dialogue of SESP is not as effective, as only two of my participants shared they had the opportunity of being engaged in the policy dialogue of the SESP.

Contribution to SESP Decision Making

As I have mentioned earlier, after the interviews with my participants, I developed three different sub-themes under the theme i.e. stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagement. Among those three sub-themes, the second, besides the previously discussed one, is contribution to SESP decision-making, as my participants were asked about their contribution to the SESP decision-making process and they shared their thoughts on it.

So far as the contribution to SESP decision making is concerned, my first participant, who is a government official under the MoEST, informed:

I was engaged in different kinds of policy-related dialogues and discussions. I got the chance to be engaged in various steps of the SESP development process. The ministry sent the formal invitation/request to be a part of the SESP development process. Then I got the opportunity to be a part of various events of the SESP decision process and put my voice forward. I have to say that I was engaged in the process through various means in the policy decision process of the SESP. I do remember that I got the opportunity to be part of different major themes of the SESP. I basically remember the

engagement in the non-formal education and lifelong learning theme of the SESP, in which I could contribute more. Besides this, I could contribute to the theme of basic education as well. I do have the experience of having meaningful involvement. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024).

From the above sharing of my first participant, I come to know that as a government official under the MoEST, he had the opportunity to contribute to the SESP process. He expressed that he got the chance of being engaged in various steps of the SESP process by receiving the formal invitation from the ministry. He reiterated that after the invitation of the ministry, he got the opportunity to be a part of various events of the SESP decision process. He further added that he had the opportunity to take part in many different events of the SESP where he could put his voice/ideas. In his sharing, he also added that he was engaged in the SESP theme of non-formal education and life-long learning, in which he could contribute more. He also informed that he had the opportunity to contribute to the theme of basic education as well. He interestingly said that he had the experience of a meaningful contribution, which indicates the influence of the state power of the first participant to have the opportunity to contribute to the SESP decision process.

He further highlighted:

Um... as I already mentioned, I was engaged in a formal process ...I could put my voice in my thematic committee that is non-formal education and lifelong learning. I could play a very effective role in many of the decision processes. For example, um...I could convince the committee to keep the CLCs in an improved manner.

In the case of his contribution to SESP policy decision, my first participant highlighted that he was engaged through a formal process adding that he could put his voices in the thematic committee that is non-formal education and lifelong learning where he played very effective role in many of the decision processes giving the example of the decision process debate that was for continuation or discontinuation of the CLCs. In that debate, he shared that he could convince the committee to keep the CLCs in an improved manner rather than discontinuing them. This can be linked with the concept of Voice Theory, which focuses on the voice of stakeholders in the policy process. His sharing makes me understand that he had no problem keeping his ideas in the policy decision of the SESP. It sometimes relates to the Social Systems Theory as well.

But the case of participant two, who is the central leader of the SMC association, is completely different as he said:

We got no opportunity to participate. No formal letter came from any structure/entity of the government. After the almost finalization of the document, one agency, as I remember, UNICEF, organized a discussion program where I participated in a formal manner. I think we were not asked to participate as we could say the real issue and pressure the policymakers to put our agenda in the policy/plan. Again, we were asked to participate at the end, but we rejected. (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

The second participant shared that he had no opportunity to participate in the SESP decision process, saying that there was no formal letter from any government. Furthermore, he informed that almost at the finalization of the document, as per his remembrance, UNICEF organized a discussion program where he participated in a formal manner. He expressed his aggression, saying that they were not asked to participate as they could say the real issue and pressurize the policymakers i.e. decision makers, to put their agenda in the policy/plan. And he also said that they were asked to participate at the end, but they rejected. From this sharing of the second participant, I came to know that he had very limited opportunity to contribute in the process, as he got only one general kind of chance to take part in an interaction program, which is a very limited opportunity to contribute to policy decisions. The policy-making dynamics of Nepal are reflected in the sharing of its ideas. It makes me understand that even the key stakeholders, like SMC association leaders, are left aside from the process, which is also linked with the Social Systems Theory and the Voice Theory, as they resemble that in the policy decision process, sometimes the key stakeholders are also kept aside because of societal structures and power dynamics of the society.

From the above interpretation of the sharing of my first and second participants, I come to understand that the first one as being the government official and having power got the opportunity to be the part of SESP decision process as one of the important contributor which also indicates that the people who are in power do get the opportunity to contribute, but the second one, even being the key stakeholder as the SMC association leader, did not get the chance to contribute in this process. It makes me think whether the necessary contribution of the concerned stakeholders is sought in the SESP decision process.

In the same way, my third participant, who is the leader of the parents' association, shared his contribution in the SESP process as:

Philosophically, we were engaged. We were linked as per the demands we had put to the government since 2051 B.S. We were engaged in a direct or indirect manner. We also provided feedback in the manifesto of the political parties, which is also linked with the policy dialogue of the SESP. But we were not engaged with the formal invitation/ correspondence. There was no formal engagement of the parents' association in the policy decision of the SESP. We were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the various meetings, discussions, and in the meetings/missions with development partners (DPs). I do not have any example/experience of getting engaged from the agenda setting to the policy decision in a formal manner. But I provided the institutional and personal feedback in the interaction programs, meetings, and missions with the DPs. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

The above experience shared by my third participant informs that he was engaged in the SESP in a philosophical manner, which means, in principle, there was the engagement of the parents' association in the decision process of the SESP. But he added that their engagement was not in that formal manner as invited by the concerned authority of the government. He satirically said they were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the missions or meetings where there were development partners (DPs) as well. He highlighted that after the initiation of the association in 2051 BS, the association had been providing feedback to the government, either informally or formally, not only in the policy processes but also in the manifestoes of the political parties. He also informed that he was not engaged in the agenda-setting for the policy decision process of the SESP. This sharing of my third participant makes me understand that, in principle, there was the contribution of the parents' association, but they did not get the opportunity to be part of it in a formal manner. Although the concerned stakeholders are supposed to be part of each and every policy from agenda setting to policy decision, his sharing shows there was no contribution from him to the SESP decision process. Here, I was a little bit confused that the chair of the parents' association is in the steering committee of the SESP, but the sharing of the participant shows there was no formal invitation to the association. I tried to verify this with rounds of interviews with him, but came up with similar information, which makes me link this with the ideas of the Voice Theory, where the powerful ones only

get the opportunity to contribute to the policy decision process, even leaving the key stakeholders aside. It is aligned with the concept of Social Systems Theory that says, because of certain social dynamics, all stakeholders do not get similar kinds of opportunities in societal or policy decision processes, which is also resembled in the sharing of the third participant.

He further shared as:

There was no formal engagement of the parents' association in the policy decision of the SESP. We were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the various meetings, discussions, and in the meetings/missions with development partners. I do not have any example/experience of getting engaged from the agenda setting to the policy decision in a formal manner. But I provided the institutional and personal feedback in the interaction programs, meetings, and missions with the DPs. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

In the second round of the interview with him, he shared:

Um...it was almost like zero. In my opinion, the administrative mechanism dominated it, or the direction/order of the then minister or administrative mechanism did the decision. I can assume that it was done in the direction of the then Minister or the administrative mechanism. We are not engaged in any of the decisions of this. (#Participant 3, Interview, 1 March 2025)

The above sharing of my third participant informs that he was engaged in the SESP process in a philosophical manner, which means, in principle, there was the engagement of the parents' association in the policy decision process of the SESP. But he added that their engagement was not in that formal manner, but was invited by the concerned authority of the government. He highlighted that he was engaged in only a few events of the SESP formulation. Although the concerned stakeholders are supposed to be part of each and every policy from agenda setting to the policy decision, his sharing shows there was no engagement in the policy decision of the SESP, as he reiterated, he had no remembrance of his engagement in the policy agenda setting to the decision process of the SESP. He further shared that his engagement was almost zero as he mentioned the administrative mechanism dominated, or the then minister ordered the administrative mechanism. His final sharing was that he was not engaged in any of the decisions. It is sufficient to make me understand that he had almost no opportunity to be part of the SESP decision process, which is related to the Voice Theory, which highlights that the powerful ones

suppress the voice of some of the key stakeholders, excluding them from the major events of the policy process. This is connected with ideas of Robertson et al. (2022), Wei and Ni (2023), Manansala (2024), and Pagsuguiron and Lantaka (2024), as they claimed that engagement of parents in education policy remained largely superficial due to structural exclusion, symbolic representation, as well as the socio-economic barriers.

The fourth participant is the leader of CNT. The following box details the sharing of his related information regarding his contribution to the SESP process:

The sharing of my fourth participant's contribution in SESP

Yes, I participated in the beginning meetings after I was assigned the theme/ in the team. I did not leave any meeting of the thematic group besides the beginning meetings of the agenda setting. I got engaged in all of them. I was in the key role of my federation while the SESP was developed. My organization formally deputed me to participate. So, on behalf of my professional organization, I took part in almost all meetings of the thematic group. Regarding the participation in the policy decision, I cannot ensure that we became very effective in influencing the decision. I mean, it is difficult for me to say I could effectively impact the decision process. Although not all of our concerns were included in the plan, I strongly put my ideas/voices. We put the voices in a strong manner, but not all concerns are incorporated. In the issue of teacher management, I said if we want to inspire the teachers, we need to have similar/same kind of terms, conditions, and services/incentives for all kinds of teachers. We should not discriminate. I said that if we keep different kinds of teachers, it brings discrimination among teachers, which ultimately makes a negative teaching learning environment, hindering the quality learning of students. But this is not well articulated in the document. We put the agenda, but the reflection in the document is not as we had planned. I said, the amount of the scholarship is so ineffective (NASUHAUDO). Getting 4-5 hundred annually is quite less in the present-day context. What can we afford from it? I also said the teacher posts are to be created. But neither the qualitative improvement in the scholarship nor the teacher posts are created except for the slight management of RAHAT quota. Nor did they take any effective measures to make equal kinds of teachers. I need to say the state recognized us, I mean, we became recognized on an institutional basis as a federation. We put our ideas into getting engaged in the concerned theme of the plan. We listened to a

little. The main agenda that brings liability is not addressed. I mean the major agenda that seeks financial expenditure is yet to be addressed. We need to take the opportunity of participation as a positive aspect. If there is no opportunity for participation, then we will be either zero or less informed. We do not even know about the agenda in this context. The serious agenda we had put forward as the professional organization, or the matters that we had pressured, are not being addressed well. Many areas regarding the teacher and the student are yet to be addressed.

(#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

The above sharing of my participant four informs that he participated in the beginning meetings after he was assigned the theme/in the team. He further shared he did not leave any meeting of the thematic group besides the beginning meetings of the agenda setting, as he was in the key role of CNT while the SESP was being developed. As per him, his organization formally deputed him to participate and so, on behalf of CNT, he took part in almost all meetings of the thematic team. In the context of the contribution to SESP decision-making, he could not ensure that he became very effective in influencing the decision. What he added is that although not all of his concerns were included in the plan, he strongly put his ideas/voices during the discussions of the thematic team. He further informed that he put the voices in a strong manner, but all concerns were not incorporated in the plan. His sharing also indicated that he tried to convince the team that if we wanted to inspire the teachers, we had to have similar/same kind of terms, conditions, and services/incentives for all kinds of teachers to give the message that the teachers are not discriminated. His saying informs me that if we keep different kinds of teachers, it brings discrimination among teachers, which ultimately makes a negative teaching learning environment, hindering the quality learning of students. But he expressed his sorrow that the subject was not well articulated in the document, adding that he put the agenda, but the reflection in the document was not as he had put. He also added that in the case of scholarship, he raised the issue in the discussion that the amount of the scholarship is not so ineffective that getting 4-5 hundred annually is quite less in the present-day context. He further questioned what we could afford from it. He aggressively highlighted that he raised the concern that the teacher posts are to be created, but he added that neither the qualitative improvement in the scholarship is done nor the teacher posts are created except for the slight management of the grant (RAHAT)

quota, nor any effective measures are taken to make equal kinds of teachers. As per his further sharing, it is informed that the state recognized them in an institutional basis as federation and made them to put ideas getting engaged in the concerned theme of the plan but he reacted by sharing that they were listened a little as the main agenda that brings liability were not addressed adding that the major agenda that seeks financial expenditure are yet to be addressed. He took the opportunity of engagement as a positive aspect, saying that if there was no opportunity for engagement, then they would be either zero or less informed. He shared his positivity, as they would not know about the agenda in this context if they were not allowed to be engaged. So, the opportunity for engagement was considered a positive aspect by him. Furthermore, his sharing of the serious agenda that he had put as the professional organization or the matters that he had pressurized were not addressed well adding that as many areas related to the teacher and the student are yet to be addressed indicates that the voices of the key stakeholders like the CNT are also not listened well during the process of the SESP development which is aligned with the Social Systems Theory, and Policy Making Theory that resemble in policy or decision processes some of the ideas of key stakeholders are also not included in the final decision because of the dominance of societal system or influence of the dominant elites. It is linked with the ideas of Dhakal (2019) and Khanal (2012), who also claimed that in the processes of policy formulation, in some of the cases, the highly engaged stakeholders are also not able to bring all of their ideas in the final policy document as there is the pressure of the DPs and other elites in the finalization of the policies.

He further shared:

I was in the key role of my association while the SESP was developed...I took part in almost all meetings of the thematic group. Regarding the participation of the policy decision, I cannot ensure that we became very effective in influencing the decision. I mean, it's difficult for me to say I could effectively impact the decision process. Although not all of our concerns were included in the plan, I strongly put my ideas/voices. We put the voices in a strong manner, but all concerns are not incorporated. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

From the above sharing of my fourth participant, who is the leader of CNT, I came to know that he had a limited opportunity to be part of the policy decision of

SESP, as he shared, he was engaged after the theme development. In relation to his engagement in the policy decision of the SESP, he shared that he could not ensure that he became effective in influencing the decision. He further elaborated that it was difficult for him to say that he could effectively impact the decision process.

However, he highlighted that he strongly put his ideas/voices, but all of his concerns were not incorporated in the document, which again is aligned with the concept of the Policy Making Theory, which underscores the influence of the final decision makers in the finalization of the policy, where the previously decided matters may sometimes be excluded because of their influence.

He added in the form of a story:

In the issue of teacher management, I said that if we want to inspire the teachers, we need to have similar/same kind of terms, conditions, and services/incentives for all kinds of teachers. We should not discriminate. I said that if we keep different kinds of teachers, it brings discrimination among teachers, which ultimately makes a negative teaching learning environment, hindering the quality learning of students. But this is not well articulated in the document. We put the agenda, but the reflection in the document is not as we had planned. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

The story resembles that he highlighted the issue of teacher management and focused on the need for similar/same kind of terms, conditions, and services/incentives to all kinds of teachers. Furthermore, he added that there should not be any discrimination that brings a negative impact on the teaching learning situation as well as the quality of education. However, he shared that his voice was not articulated in the document as he highlighted, he put the agenda of teachers in a serious manner, but all the ideas were incorporated well in the document. This makes me understand that he was engaged in the discussion process of the policy decision, but all his ideas have yet to be materialized in the document. This again makes me convinced of the Social Systems Theory, which talks about the interdependence of education sub-systems in education policy processes and expects the engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the policy processes till the development of the final policy product. He summarized that there was the engagement of the CNT leaders in the various themes of the SESP, as he was in the theme of TPD and teacher management. Like other colleagues, he contributed to the part of his theme and tried to make the effective incentivization of teachers' related content in the document. But

as he shared, all the contents did not resemble what was discussed in the document. This again is linked with the ideas of the Voice Theory, Social Systems Theory, and the Policy Making Theory, which all talk in brief about the need for stakeholders' engagement in the policy process, but are sometimes affected by various influencing factors of bureaucracy and other elites.

The sharing of my participants' three and four makes me understand that they had the opportunity to be part of the SESP process. Still, their contribution and the incorporation of their ideas in the final plan document are quite different as the third one shared they were engaged in a ceremonial manner. Still, the fourth one highlighted that he had a very good opportunity to be engaged after the basic framework development. But again, the fourth one also shared that many of his ideas were not there in the final document, which indicates the ideas of the Social Systems Theory that says there is the influence of the societal machinery in policy decisions, which may bring changes at the end level decision as well.

Now comes the turn of participant five, who again is the leader of the SMC association. I had interviewed her to validate the information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association. She shared her contribution to the SESP process as:

We were not called formally. There was no correspondence. But we participated in some context by searching for ourselves. I think there are not much content in the document except the subject of capacity building of SMC in some places. We were not included/ engaged in the processes of agenda setting or policy decisions. This, I think, is the reform of the SSRP/SSDP. I understand it is the continuation of them, as I do not have much experience in participation. (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

My fifth participant shared that she was not called formally and no correspondence was there. But she informed that she participated in some of the contexts searching by herself rather than being formally invited to be a part of it. She assumed that there was not much content in the document of the plan besides the capacity building of the SMC in some places. Her further sharing was that she was not included/engaged in the processes of agenda setting for policy decisions. She took the plan as the reform of the SSRP/SSDP as well as the continuation of them, as she did not have much experience with the formulation process.

From the sharing of my fifth participant, I come to understand that she had no opportunity to contribute in the SESP decision process, even if the SMC association is one of the key stakeholders of the school education sector. The sharing of her information informs me that the information of the second participant is also true, or the information of both of them matches, as they both said there was no opportunity for contribution or almost null engagement of the SMC association in the SESP decision process. This makes me further think whether there is required engagement and contribution of all the concerned stakeholders in education policy processes of Nepal, most specifically in formulating the SESP. Although the SESP final document takes it as the plan developed with the huge engagement of the concerned stakeholders, the sharing of the key stakeholders like SMC association leaders rejects the claim of the document, from which I come to think again of the ideas of the Voice Theory, which talks about the influence of powerful ones in the policy decision process. This can also be taken as against the provisions of the constitution of Nepal, the main law of the country, which highlights inclusiveness as the main essence of the policies and plans to be developed by the government, which as per the sharing of her is not maintained in the SESP decision process.

In connection with his contribution to the SESP decision process, the sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, shared her perception as:

I was not in the central committee, but was there in the secretariat of the NARMIN, when the SESP was formulated. So, I was not specifically engaged in this process. I did not get a chance to be part of the agenda setting, design, dialogue, and decisions in an actual manner. As I was there in the leadership of the Local Level from the previous election as well, I could indirectly provide some suggestions in this process. But I did not get many opportunities to work and contribute to that process. I was not specifically engaged in the development process, but I am engaged in its implementation. I only did the MOU with MoEST on behalf of the NARMIN after the election to implement SESP. (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

The sixth participant shared that she was not in the central committee of the NARMIN, but was in the secretariat of it during the period of the SESP formulation. Because of this, as she said, she did not get the opportunity to be part of the SESP decision process in a specific manner. She also informed that she did not get the opportunity to be engaged in agenda-setting for policy decisions of the SESP. Her

other sharing highlighted that even if she was not in the central committee of the NARMIN, she was in a leadership position at the local level during the SESP development period, so she could provide general suggestions in that process. Another important information was that though she was not engaged in the development process, she was engaged in its implementation. She added that she did MoU with the MoEST after the election at the local level for the implementation of the SESP.

From the above sharing of the sixth participant, I came to know that there is very less contribution of her in the SESP decision process. But she has given some information, like she was there in the secretariat of NARMIN and as being in the local level leadership, she provided a general kind of suggestion to its development and decision process. From this information, it can be said that even as the leader of the NARMIN, she had less chance to contribute to the SESP decision process, but she could do so as she was in the secretariat and the leadership position of one of the local levels of Nepal. It makes me think of the ideas of the Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory, and the Social Systems Theory, which talk about the interconnectedness of the social structures and the influence of the powerful ones in the policy processes.

After the interview of the sixth participant, I interviewed the next leader of the same association as my seventh participant, from which interview I wanted to cross-validate and triangulate the information provided by the sixth participant and seek whether there was the contribution of NARMIN leaders in the SESP decision process. The sharing of him is as in the box below.

Experience of my seventh participant (A sharing)

The ministry had remembered the NARMIN when the SESP was formulated. So, I was a little bit engaged in this process. I sat only in one or two sittings, not more than that. Um... the representation was a kind of formality maintenance from the side of the ministry in a program where there was an event seeking feedback in a larger forum, forming some groups within the interaction program rather than making local governments really engaged as experienced or evidence-based entities. It was a formal program where papers were presented by some experts and some of our ideas were taken to form some groups. Um...in my opinion um...longer a kind of formal engagement took place in the case of NARMIN. Yes, as I remember, there was a letter to the NARMIN from the Ministry for an interaction program. The program was held

in a hotel in the capital city. Um... I forgot the name of the hotel. But yes, the letter was there and I got engaged...as per my remembrance, there was the presence of experts in the concerned field. They had presented papers. I got the opportunity to put my matters in a general manner.

...No, not. I was not engaged in agenda setting. No, not. I was not engaged in the design, dialogue and decision of this plan. Um...as I have already mentioned, after the preparation of the concept note, the stakeholders were asked in a program to provide feedback, where we were also invited. As per my remembrance, I participated in only one program. In a humorous way.....Um....as I was engaged in only one feedback collection program, how can I say I was engaged in the policy decision of the SESP? I do remember that I was engaged in only one program that was organized to seek the stakeholders' feedback. The new thinking was not there in the policy developer, which made them make the plan without our involvement. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

The sharing of my seventh participant indicates that he was formally invited to be part of the SESP process in one or two workshops that was/were organized to seek feedback in a larger forum, forming some groups within the interaction program, rather than making local governments really engaged as the experienced or evidence-informed entity. He took it as the kind of formality maintenance from the side of the ministry where papers were presented by some experts and some of his ideas were taken to form some groups. He further added that the program was held in a hotel of in Kathmandu, where he got the opportunity to put his voice as the workshop participant in a group work in which he was a group member, not the group leader. He directly rejected, saying that he was not engaged in the agenda setting for policy decision of the SESP. In a humorous manner, he shared that as he was engaged in only one or two feedback collection programs, he could say he contributed to the policy decision of the SESP. He blamed the policy developers for the new thinking not being there in the policy developers, which made them make the plan without NARMIN's engagement.

The above sharing of my seventh participant summarizes that he was engaged in the SESP formulation process as he was asked by the MoEST to be a part of it in a formal manner. But the context is that he got the opportunity to be part of the SESP process as a workshop participant in one or two programs that was/were held in a

hotel of Kathmandu. So, his contribution again was so nominal, even if the NARMIN is taken as one of the key stakeholders of the SESP process, as the chair of the NARMIN is there in the steering committee of the SESP. It informed me that the representation i.e. engagement of the NARMIN leader was so minimal and the opportunity to contribute/put the ideas was so limited. The participant, interestingly and satirically, highlighted that he was a participant in one or two events, i.e., workshops, and then how he could declare that NARMIN contributed much to the SESP decision-making. It makes me understand that the stakeholders like NARMIN leaders, were left out of the SESP formulation process, even if the chair of that association is there in the main committee of the SESP, that is, the steering committee. This is aligned with the concept of the Social Systems Theory, which indicates that the policy decisions are influenced by the powerful ones of the society and sometimes even the key stakeholders are excluded from the process.

Furthermore, the sharing of participant seven gives me the idea that he was not explicitly engaged in the policy decision process of the SESP. His sharing highlighted that he was engaged in only one or two feedback collection programs; how he could say he was engaged in the policy decision of the SESP makes me understand that his engagement in the decision process was not so effective. This again makes me link this with the ideas of the Voice Theory, which highlights the influence of power in the policy decision process. In it as well, it seems that the experts and the powerful ones influenced the decision process of the SESP, as the NARMIN leaders did not get a specific opportunity to be part of it. It is related to the ideas of Sharma and Kumar (2023) and Hughes et al. (2025), who claimed that, despite formal structures for stakeholder participation in education policy-making, local communities are frequently marginalized as they often remain underrepresented in the actual policy formulation process. It is further linked with the concept of Social Systems Theory, which underscores the need to incorporate key stakeholders' voices in the policy or decision-making processes, which are sometimes excluded because of societal machinery.

From the above sharing of the perceptions of my seven participants in connection to their contribution to the SESP decision process, I come to understand that only a limited number of them had had the opportunity to contribute in a detailed manner. The first participant (government official) seems to have a good opportunity to contribute to the SESP decision process, as he was engaged in the various

discussions and events. The case of the third participant (Parents' association leader) is of having no opportunity, as he was not invited in a formal manner in most of the programs. The fourth participant, the central leader of CNT, made a significant contribution in the SESP decision process as a powerful stakeholder, as he was asked to be a part of it, making him a thematic committee member. But the seventh participant, NARMIN leader, did not have that kind of opportunity as he was invited to be part of only one or two interaction programs. From this, I am convinced by the concept of Cairney (2020), who explores the concept of power and elitism in public policy, emphasizing its multiple dimensions and implications in the policy process. The sharing of my participants regarding their contribution to the SESP decision aligns with Cairney's idea that there are multiple dimensions, including the dimension of the opportunity to contribute to the policies. This perspective is also relevant to the SESP formulation process, where stakeholders' engagement and voices were not taken on an equitable basis. The first participant seems to have a good opportunity of contributing to the SESP process as he was in a state authority and power as a government official. Almost similar is the context of the fourth participant who is also the central leader of CNT and had the opportunity to contribute as a powerful actor. But others did not have that kind of opportunity, even if they are the key stakeholders, as they were not taken as the essential ones in the process.

In the same way, from the ideas and sharing of the participants, I am also convinced by the perspectives of Parsons (1991), who conceptualizes society as a structured system and how power and agency function within social systems. This perspective is also crucial for analyzing Nepal's SESP making process, where stakeholders' contribution was mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, hindering the stakeholders from contributing to the SESP process, as stakeholders' engagement is limited through societal and institutional structures.

In the decision process of SESP, the first and fourth participant were engaged heavily, expressing their voices and influencing the concerned ones. The other participants do not appear to be engaged during the stage of the SESP decision process, which is reflected in their contested ideas or occasional aggression in their expression (Ball, 1994; Gaventa, 2006; Sabatier, 2007). However, the context of the first and fourth ones was also not satisfactory, as they shared that they could not come up with all the ideas they had presented during the dialogue and decision-making discussion process in the final document of the SESP.

Similarly, in the decision process of the SESP, my first participant informed me that he was engaged in all the processes of agenda setting to policy decisions by being invited through the letter or email of the MoEST. In the same way, the fourth one also shared that he was engaged after the initial frame development in a rigorous manner. But the context of other participants, as per their sharing, is quite different, as they did not have any kind of invitation, which again is related to the Policy Making Theory, particularly the Stages Model that highlights seven stages of policy process, like: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. It provides a framework for understanding the sequential phases of policy development: agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation, in which some of the powerful ones or the influential people get better opportunities in the initial as well as other phases of policy formulation.

As we talk about the level of engagement of the participants in connection to contribution to the decision of SESP, the first one's engagement seems to be quite substantive as he shared, he had the opportunity to be a part of the whole process. The fourth one also shared his engagement up to the discussion process of the SESP decision, but in the end, all his ideas that he had shared were not incorporated well into the final plan document. But others said they did not have any opportunity to be a part of the SESP decision process. So, as the document of SESP and other forums of the policy people say there is the huge engagement of the stakeholders in SESP decision process as well, I again found the stakeholders' engagement in it only in a form not in substantial manner as only the first and fourth participants among the seven reflected they had the opportunity of it in detailed manner but they both also could not bring all of their ideas in the final plan document. This is again related to the essence of Voice Theory, which shows the importance of engaging and empowering diverse stakeholders such as educators, students, guardians, and community members in the processes concerning education policies. But the sharing of my participants shows inadequate engagement of the stakeholders in the decision process of the SESP. It makes me think that there was quite limited engagement of the concerned stakeholders in the decision process of SESP, as only two of my seven participants shared that they contributed to the policy decision of the SESP, but again, could not bring all of their ideas into the final plan document.

Barriers to Engagement in SESP Process

As I have already mentioned, I developed three different sub-themes under the theme of stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagement, taking the formulation process of SESP as a case. The data generated from my participants on the first two sub-themes are already being presented and interpreted. During the research process, I sought to identify the third sub-theme as barriers to engagement in the SESP process, as my participants were asked about their engagement and the barriers to engagement in the SESP-making process, and they shared their views, experiences, and perceptions in connection to it.

So far as barriers to engagement in the SESP process are concerned, my first participant said:

Um...the not taken one is um...I had the view of developing the CLCs as a youth information center, um...then after developing them as the integral part of the local levels, and also developing them as a community BACHANALAYA, which I could not bring into the same consensus. In short, I could convince the thematic committee to make the decision on continuing the CLCs as the improved entity, but not on developing them as the youth information center, an integral part of local levels and community BACHANALAYA during the decision process of the SESP. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024)

While sharing about the barriers to engagement in the SESP process, my first participant shared that he had the view of developing the CLCs as a youth information center, developing them as an integral part of the local levels, and also developing them as a community library (BACHANALAYA), which he could not bring the committee into the same consensus. He further reiterated that he was able to convince the thematic committee to make the decision on continuing the CLCs as the improved entity, but not on developing them as the youth information center, an integral part of local levels and community library (BACHANALAYA) during the decision process of the SESP.

Furthermore, he highlighted some of the barriers to engagement in the SESP process as:

Um...for example, in the past, we converted the project-based activities into program-based ones, which created difficulty in achieving expected results. In project-based activities, we could see the quick results and make decisions and

responses quickly for the implementation of the designed activities. I tried to convince the committee to proceed with some of the subject matters in that kind of structure. I said um...in the part of teacher training during the period of Teacher Education Project (TPD), we had been able to give some positive results. After that, we put the TPD component, but only keeping it as the component of the plan, as we see it does not have the required importance (MAHATWA CHAHI NAPAUNE RAHEXA). While going in an overall or general way, that part is found in shadow. So, some of the specific subjects are there; in their case, I said it would be better to keep them in project-based modality. For example, I said, the teacher training, physical construction, ICT like subjects would be better to implement in the project-based modality. I further tried to convince the committee to formulate the units like Curriculum Unit, Education Materials Unit, as in the period of Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP), where there was the provision of a separate project director. But I could not convince to implement these activities in a project-based model. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024)

Regarding some of the barriers to engagement in the SESP process, my first participant further highlighted with examples that in the past, we converted the project-based activities into program-based ones, which created difficulty in achieving expected results, as in project-based activities, we could see the quick results and make decisions and responses quickly for the implementation of the designed activities. He added that he tried to convince the committee to proceed with some of the subject matters in that kind of structure and said that in the part of teacher training during the period of Teacher Education Project (TPD), we had been able to give some positive results. He mentioned that, as per his effort, the committee put the TPD component, but only keeping TPD as the component of the plan does not get the required importance (MAHATWA CHAHI NAPAUNE RAHEXA). He expressed that he requested the committee to keep some of the specific subjects in project-based modality giving example of the teacher training, physical construction, ICT like subjects which would be better to implement in the project-based modality formulating the units like Curriculum Unit, Education Materials Unit as in the period of Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) where there was the provision of separate project director. But he added that he could not convince the committee to

keep these activities in a project-based model. This indicates that even the powerful government official under the MoEST could not keep all his ideas in the policy decision of the SESP. This is linked with the ideas of Dhakal (2019) and Neupane (2019), who claimed that in the processes of policy formulation, sometimes the heavily engaged ones also are not able to bring all of their ideas in the final policy document because of the pressure and influence of some elites and DPs. It is also connected with the concept and ideas of Policy Making Theory, which highlights that in the policy process, some of the ideas of the most engaged stakeholders are not incorporated in the final policy products by the final decision makers.

The essence of the above sharing of the experiences, stories and ideas of my first participant in relation to barriers to engagement in SESP process is, in most of the cases by being a government official under the MoEST, he had the opportunity of using his power and influencing capacity in the SESP process, but in some cases he again face the barriers like not being able to make the team/thematic committee to recognize the role of CLCs as the youth learning centers, dedicated authorities of the Local Levels, and the community library (*BACHANALAYA*), and keeping some of the activities as the project-based ones rather than the program-based ones. This aligns with the Policy Making Theory, which states that in some cases of policy decisions, even the most powerful individuals may not have the opportunity to incorporate all their ideas into the final policy product.

As we go to the context of the second participant, who is the central leader of the SMC association, who has completely different ideas, as he said:

We got no opportunity to participate. No formal letter came from any structure/entity of the government. As I remember, UNICEF, organized a discussion program where I participated in a formal manner.” When he was asked why he was not made a part of it, he answered, *“I think we were not asked to participate as we may say the real issue and pressurize the policymakers to put our agenda in the policy/plan. We were asked to participate at the end, but we rejected.* (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

The second participant, in the context of barriers to engagement, shares that he had no opportunity to be part of the SESP process. He also informed that there was no formal letter to him from any structure/entity of the government. He further shared that, as per his remembrance, UNICEF organized a discussion program in which he

participated in a formal manner. He aggressively shared that he was not made to participate, assuming that he would raise the real issue and pressure the concerned policymakers i.e. decision makers, to put his agenda in the policy/plan. As per him, almost at the finalized stage, he was asked to participate in the process, but he rejected it.

From the interpretation of the sharing of my second participant, I came to know that he had very limited power to influence in the SESP process, as he shared various barriers like not being well-informed, being called once for a general kind of feedback, which hindered him from putting his ideas in this process. The presentation of his aggression for having almost zero opportunity to be part of the SESP process makes me further think that the stakeholders, like the central leaders of the SMC association, did not have opportunity to be the part of the SESP formulation process which is also linked with the concept of the Voice Theory which talks about the influence of powerful ones in decision processes.

In the same way, my third participant is the leader of the parents' association whose sharing about the barriers to engagement in the SESP process is as follows:

"... As per my memory, I was not asked to take part in SESP with the formal letter/invitation. No formal letter was sent from any authority of the government."

While sharing about the barriers to engagement in the SESP process, my third participant shared that, as per his memory, he was not asked to take part in the SESP process in a formal manner as a formal letter/invitation was not sent from any authority of the government to them.

In the setting process, he shared the barriers, such as:

... We were not linked in setting the agenda. We were only made to be a part of it in a general manner, not in a specific way. The agenda was not set involving us. I mean, there was no engagement of the parent association in the agenda setting of the SESP.

In the agenda-setting process, my third participant shared that they were sometimes asked to take part and were not linked in setting the agenda. He further added that they were only made to be a part of it in a general manner, not in a specific way. He further blamed that the agenda was not set involving them i.e. the parents' association.

His response to the concern about his engagement in the design process of SESP was, *"I do not have very good experience with the design process of the SESP."*

We were not engaged in the SESP design. In my understanding, we were not made engaged in it.” As asked to get clearer ideas on why he was not engaged in the designing process, he said:

The government only makes us engaged if there is movement (ANDOLAN). In my opinion, there is trend of making stakeholders engaged if they get into movement. I think it was designed as per the policy/program of the government, not as per the consultation of the stakeholders. Overall, I do say that our engagement is only a general kind of involvement. We did not get engaged in designing. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

Informing about his engagement in the designing process of the SESP, my third participant shared that he had no very good experience with the designing process of the SESP. He further expressed his aggression, saying that the government would only make them engaged if there was movement (ANDOLAN). His further argument was that, in his opinion, there is a trend of making stakeholders engaged if they get into movement (ANDOLAN). Furthermore, he expressed his thought that it was designed as per the policy/program of the government, not as per the consultation of the stakeholders, indicating that their engagement was only of a general kind, as they did not get the opportunity to be engaged in the design process of the SESP. This context makes me understand that the stakeholders, like the leaders of the parents’ association, did not have the required engagement in the SESP process i.e. there were different barriers as mentioned above in the designing process of the SESP.

In the case of his engagement in the policy dialogue process, he mentioned:

We got engaged as advocates of quality education in the form of institutional involvement. Philosophically, we were engaged. We were linked as per the demands we had put to the government since 2051 B.S. We were engaged in a direct or indirect manner. We also provided feedback in the manifesto of the political parties, which is also linked with the policy dialogue of the SESP. However, we were not engaged in the formal invitation/ correspondence.

In the policy dialogue process of the SESP, my third participant shared that they got engaged as advocator of quality education in the form of institutional engagement, and so, they were engaged philosophically. He linked the history of the parents’ association in the education policy process of Nepal, saying they were linked as per the demands they had put to the government since 2051 BS, which he took as the direct or indirect engagement in the policy process in a general manner. He also

remembered the moment of providing feedback to the manifestoes of political parties, which he linked with the policy dialogue of the SESP, but he shared that they were not engaged with the formal invitation/correspondence throughout the policy dialogue process of the SESP. It further makes me understand that there were not required opportunities for the leaders of the parents' association to be engaged in the SESP dialogue process, which indicates the barriers were there in that process.

In the context of his engagement in the SESP decision process, he informed, *“There was no formal engagement of the parents' association in the policy decision of the SESP. We were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the various meetings, discussions, and in the meetings/missions with development partners.”* While he was asked to share his experiences regarding the SESP formulation process with examples, he responded:

I do not have any experience of getting engaged from the agenda setting to the policy decision in a formal manner. But I provided the institutional and personal feedback in the interaction programs, meetings, and missions with the DPs. (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

In the context of his engagement in the decision process of the SESP, my third participant informed me that there was no formal engagement of the parents' association in the policy decision of the SESP. He satirically added that they were engaged in a ceremonial manner in the various meetings, discussions, and in the meetings/missions with development partners, highlighting that he did not have any experience of getting engaged from the agenda setting to the policy decision in a formal manner. But while sharing his experiences of him in the context of the decision process of the SESP, he further shared that he provided institutional and personal feedback in the interaction programs, meetings, and the missions with the DPs in a general manner, not in a specific manner.

The third participant, in the context of barriers to engagement in the SESP process, shared that he had the opportunity to be a ceremonial kind of participant rather than the influencing one, as he was not in a position of power, even if the chair of the parents' association is a member of the steering committee of the SESP. He showed his ignorance of being formally invited to the SESP agenda-setting for the policy decisions. But in some of the sharing, what he said is that he provided feedback in meetings and missions with the DPs. It raises the question of how he could become a participant in the meetings and the missions, as he shared, he was not formally

invited. In the second round of the interview, I came to know that he was not asked specifically in a formal manner, but as a general participant in the SESP formulation process. In brief, I came to know that my third participant, the leader of the parents' association, got limited opportunity to be engaged in the SESP formulation process because of influence of the DPs and people of government authority that hindered the influence of the real stakeholders in that process which situation is to be taken as the barriers to his engagement in the SESP process.

In relation to his engagement in the agenda-setting process, my fourth participant said:

Nodding the head... saying no, I was not engaged in the very beginning part of SESP. Um...I mean the concept paper and the agenda were already set. I mean, I did not get a chance to participate in the beginning-level agenda-setting process. There was the already set format/frame. Then the ministry organized the discussion programs, which I participated in, in which I was formally engaged, getting a formal invitation/letter. Then I sat for the discussion on that format/template. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

He further shared:

We get the opportunity to give our input if we are engaged in the beginning. But sitting only after framework/format development is for revising the frame, not to put our original ideas. So, it is a different thing. I do say I did not get the opportunity to be part of the agenda-setting.

In the query why the major stakeholders like him were not engaged, he said: *I think the concerned did not pay proper attention. They may have thought it would not make any difference if we are engaged after the development of the framework/ format. In my opinion, we were to be engaged in the process of agenda formulation. Whoever has pain in a specific place of his/her body knows the real pain. The experience is with the pain feeler (JUTTA LAUNELAI THAHA HUNXA KAHHA DUKHXA VANERA). We can only put the real problems/matters of the teacher and the student, not others. So, we had to have the opportunity to be part of it from the very beginning. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)*

While making him answer for more information on the engagement of the CNT leaders, he responded:

This is a very serious weakness on the part of the concerned authority. In my opinion, this weakness is a kind of weakness that should not be repeated. The major stakeholders would not be put aside during the agenda-setting process. In other words, key stakeholders like us should not be left out of the agenda-setting procedure. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

In the query of making him (CNT) like stakeholders more engaged in the policy process, he responded:

Yes, in the case of students and teachers, the main stakeholders are the professional organizations of teachers in the school context. How can the policy be more appropriate if they are not participating in the agenda-setting process? The ultimate goal of any education policy is the quality learning of the students. Without involving us, the real thoughts/feelings, needs and demands of the students cannot be reflected. How can we ensure the feelings of the students are reflected, even if we are not engaged in it? I think we cannot assume that they are incorporated without the engagement of the stakeholders like us. Ah...the engagement of us in my opinion, is strongly needed. We were to be engaged with a formal letter/ invitation in the agenda-setting process. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

In the context of barriers to his engagement in the SESP agenda setting, my fourth participant shared with nodding the head, saying no, that he was not engaged in the very beginning part of SESP, adding that the concept paper and the agenda were already set. So, he shared that he did not get a chance to participate in the beginning level agenda setting process it and there was already a set format/frame. It shows that he did not get an opportunity to be engaged in the initial process of the SESP agenda-setting process. He further shared that after the process of agenda setting and framework designing, the ministry organized discussion programs in which he participated and got engaged. But in the initial stage, he did not get the opportunity to be engaged, which can be taken as a barrier to his engagement. So, he requested the concerned authority to provide them with an opportunity to be the part of the policies sharing that they get opportunity to give their input if they are engaged in the beginning, but sitting only after framework/format development is for revising the frame, not to put the original ideas repeating that he did not get opportunity to be the part of agenda setting of the SESP. In the context of his non-engagement in the SESP agenda-setting process, he further shared that the concerned ones did not pay proper

attention, thinking that it would not make any difference if they were made engaged after the development of the framework/format. He further opined that they were to be engaged in the process of the agenda formulation, informing that whoever has pain in the specific place of his/her body, he/she knows the real pain, also saying the experience is with the pain feeler (JUTTA LAUNELAI THAHA HUNXA KAHA DUKHXA VANERA). Furthermore, he shared that they could only put the real problems/matters of the teacher and the student, not the others, adding that they had to have the opportunity to be part of it from the very beginning. He also blamed this on a very serious weakness on the side of the concerned authority, which should not be repeated again, focusing on the fact that the major stakeholders should not be put aside during the agenda-setting process of policies like the SESP. His additional sharing in connection to this was that in the case of students and teachers, the main stakeholders are the professional organizations of teachers in the school context and questions how the policy could be more appropriate if they (CNT like organizations) are not participated in the setting process. He further shared that the ultimate goal of any education policy is the quality learning of the students and focused that without making them, the real thoughts/feelings, needs and demands of the students cannot be reflected. His further question was how the reflection of the feelings of the students could be ensured if they were not engaged in it. He expressed his thought that the incorporation of the students' and teachers' perspectives could not be assumed to be ensured without the engagement of the stakeholders, like them, adding on the strong need of their engagement with a formal letter/ invitation in the agenda-setting process of the policies. This all picturizes the barriers of CNT leader to his engagement to the SESP process.

Similarly, his response about the barrier to his engagement in the design process of the SESP was:

In the case of design as well, it is very difficult for me to say I was engaged. I do say that I was not informed of it. I guess, I mean, I do say, MoEST, NPC, and DPs jointly designed it.

Furthermore, he informed about his engagement after agenda setting, like:
Yes, I mean, I became a part of a thematic group. I got engaged in a certain thematic group rather than in the whole designing process. As different colleagues of the association and other stakeholders were made to take part in various themes of the SESP, I also took part in the design process of the

contents and details of the respective themes. I was mostly engaged in the design of the content and details of the theme of the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) and teacher management. While discussing with the Development Partners (DPs) and other stakeholders and putting the ideas in a strong manner, I got the opportunity to get introduced with the DPs and the concerned stakeholders, to work collaboratively/co-work, and interact in the subject matters/concerns/issues of the teachers and students.

As far as the barrier to his engagement in the designing process of the SESP is concerned, my fourth participant responded that he was not engaged in the designing process, as adding that it was very difficult for him to say he was engaged. He further shared that he was not informed of it and guessed that the MoEST, NPC, and DPs jointly designed it. His further sharing was that he became a part of a thematic group and got engaged in a certain thematic group rather than in the whole design process. As different members of the CNT and other stakeholders were made to take part in various themes of the SESP, he also took part in the designing process of the contents and details of the respective theme (not the initial one, as the frame/design was already there, as per his sharing), not the overall designing of the SESP. He added that he was mostly engaged in the design of the contents and details of the theme of the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) and teacher management after the development of the framework, which is already the design of the plan. He further shared that while discussing with the Development Partners (DPs) and other stakeholders and putting the ideas in a strong manner, he got the opportunity to get introduced with the DPs and the concerned stakeholders, to work collaboratively/co-work, and interact in the subject matters/concerns/issues of the teachers and students. This informs me that the fourth participant had a slight opportunity to be engaged in the SESP designing process, as he was not invited in the initial stage of the agenda setting, as the framework/format was already developed before he was part of it. In the case of slight engagement as well, there was a designed format and framework in which he could make a little adjustment to his ideas. Furthermore, he was a part of the TPD thematic committee, where it seems he tried to adjust some of his ideas, as the frame was already developed before his engagement in the SESP process. It gives me the picture of his less engagement i.e. the barrier to his engagement in the SESP designing process as he had no opportunity to be the part of whole designing process, and he could do less in the case of TPD theme also as the framework/a designed

frame was already there hindering him to put his broader and open ideas which was also reflected in his sharing. It is also connected with the concept of Policy Making Theory, which states that in the context of the policy process, all stakeholders do not have the opportunity to be part of it in all the steps of it, as mentioned by my participant four, who did not get to be part of agenda setting and designing of the SESP.

The fifth participant of mine is again the leader of the SMC association. I had interviewed her to cross-validate and triangulate the information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association. Her perception in regard to barriers to engagement in the SESP process was:

We were not called formally. There was no correspondence. But we participated in some context by searching for ourselves. I think there is not much content in the document, except for the subject of capacity building of SMC in some places. We were not included/ engaged in the processes of agenda setting or policy decisions. This, I think, is the reform of the SSRP/SSDP. I understand it is the continuation of them, as I do not have any experience with the participation. (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

My fifth participant's sharing on barriers to engagement in the SESP process was that she was not formally invited, as there was no correspondence from the government entity. She shared that she participated in some of the events by searching herself rather than being formally invited. She further shared that there is not much content in the document other than the capacity building of the SMC in some places. She also reiterated that she was not engaged from the agenda setting to policy decisions. Furthermore, she also shared that the SESP is either a reform of the SSRP/SSDP or its continuation, as she had no experience with the engagement.

From the above sharing and interpretation of the ideas of my fifth participant, I come to understand that she had almost no opportunity to be engaged in the SESP process, even if the SMC association is one of the key stakeholders of the school education sector. From the power perspective, it can be said that she was much less powerful, which created a barrier to her engagement in it even if she is one of the key stakeholders as well. This informs me that the information of the second participant, for validating whose information I had interviewed my fifth participant, matches with the fifth one as they both said there was almost no engagement of SMC association

leaders in SESP process even if the association is of key value in the context of school education sector and was supposed to be well engaged in the policy processes like the SESP. This makes me further think whether there is a required engagement of all the concerned stakeholders in the SESP development processes of Nepal. This again is aligned with the concept of the Voice Theory, which talks about the influence of powerful ones in the policy formulation process, hindering the incorporation of the voices of even the key stakeholders like the SMC association leader, creating barriers to their engagement.

As I tried to see the perceptions of the sixth participant from the perspective of barriers to engagement in the SESP process, the sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, shared her perception as:

I was not in the central committee of the NARMIN i.e. I was only there in the secretariat when the SESP was formulated. So, I was not well-engaged in this process. I did not get a chance to be part of the agenda setting, design, dialogue, and decisions in an actual manner. But, as I was there in the leadership of the Local Level from the previous election as well, I could indirectly provide some suggestions in this process. But I did not get much opportunity to work and contribute to that process. Although I was not specifically engaged in the development process, I am engaged in its implementation. I did the MOU with MoEST on behalf of the NARMIN after the second election for implementing SESP. (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

The sixth participant of mine, who is the central leader of NARMIN, shared that she was not in the central committee but was in the secretariat of NARMIN, which is why she was not well engaged in the SESP formulation process. Her further sharing was that she did not get the opportunity to be part of the SESP agenda setting to policy decisions. But, on the other hand, she shared that she was in the leading position of the local level since the previous election and could indirectly provide suggestions to the SESP development process even if she did not have that much opportunity to be engaged in the process. She happily shared that although she was not specifically engaged in the development process of the SESP, she did MOU with MoEST on behalf of the NARMIN after the second election at the local level for the implementation of the SESP.

From the above sharing of my sixth participant, I came to know that there was very less/limited engagement of her in the SESP process, even if she was present in the secretariat of the NARMIN and the elected leader of the local level. This makes me further understand that because of the power dynamics there were barriers to the leader of the NARMIN to be engaged in the SESP process.

After the interview of the sixth participant, I interviewed the next leader of the same association as my seventh participant, from which I wanted to cross-validate and triangulate the sharing of the sixth participant and seek whether NARMIN leaders were engaged in the SESP process. As he was asked about his engagement from the perspective of the barriers to engagement in the SESP process, he presented his experience as:

The ministry remembered the NARMIN when the SESP was formulated. So, I was a little bit engaged in this process. I sat only in one or two sittings, not more than that. Um... the representation was a kind of formality maintenance from the side of the ministry in a program where there was an event seeking feedback in a larger forum, forming some groups within the interaction program rather than making local governments really engaged as experienced or evidence-based entities. It was a formal program where papers were presented by some experts and some of our ideas were taken to form some groups. Um...in my opinion um...(longer) a kind of formal engagement took place in the case of NARMIN. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

In regard to his engagement through formal procedure, he shared:

Yes, as I remember, there was a letter to the NARMIN from the Ministry for an interaction program. The program was held in a hotel in the capital city. Um... I forgot the name of the hotel. But yes, the letter was there and I got engaged.

The event in which he was engaged is shared as, *“Um...as per my remembrance, there was the presence of experts in the concerned field. They had presented papers. I got the opportunity to put my matters in a general manner.”* So far as his engagement in agenda setting is concerned, he responded, *“No, not. I was not engaged.”* Similarly, in the designing process as well, he said, *“No, not. I was not engaged.”* In regard to his engagement in policy dialogue of the SESP, he shared, *“Um...as I have already mentioned, after the preparation of the concept note, the stakeholders were asked in a program to provide feedback, where we were also*

invited. As per my remembrance, I participated in that program.” Similarly, in the case of his engagement in the decision process of SESP, he shared, “In a humorous way.....Um.....as I was engaged in only one feedback collection program, how can I say I was engaged in the policy decision of the SESP?” While he was asked to share his engagement in the SESP process with examples, he shared, “I do remember that I was engaged in only one program that was organized to seek the stakeholders’ feedback.” As he was asked why even the key stakeholder like NARMIN was not engaged throughout the SESP development process, he highlighted:

Um... (With laughing) in the beginning days you know they (the federal people) used to turn their head (MUNTO BATARTHE) when listening to our name and ignore us. It is because the full-fledged implementation of the constitution is still not happening. The conceptual clarity of the policy formulation is not matched (NIRMANKO DRISTIKON NAI MILENA). The policy is to be made by those who have the major responsibility. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

In it, he himself questioned, “Is it of any meaning taking only some general feedback?”

He was further asked why the NARMIN people were not provided the opportunity to be engaged in this process. He shared:

Um... yes, it is again the question of federalism. There was a unitary system of the government/state. Everything was handled by oneself at the central level authority. The functions/activities done by oneself were very difficult to hand over to others. There was unitary (EKATMAK) thinking and the rituals of providing directives to the lower level, which was developed as a kind of essential concept (PARIPATI). The personnel who were there at our local levels were also waiting for the direction of the upper level. Um...(laughing) executing local level activities through direction from the upper level (MATHILLO KO NIRDESHAN LE CHALAUNE PRABIRTI). Um... because of this kind of context and practices (YO CHIJBIIJKO KARANLE RA ABHYAS LE PANI), we did not become a part of it. It is not only a matter of anger, AGRAHA, PURBAGRAH, like a simple rural municipality, um... takes it as a separate state and formulates the act (YO GAUPALIKA YAR, AAFU XUTTAI RAJYA JASTO AIN BANAUCHHA VANNI TYO AGRAHA, PURBAGRAHA, RISH MATRAI THIENA). Laughter...it was not a matter of anger only. First

thing is the difficulty of giving one's task to others. Another thing is attitude (NIYAT). And the main thing is a matter of practice. The habit that is there is generally continued by all. For example, the person who rubs their eyes every morning after getting up always does the same (BIHANA UTHERA AAKHA MICHNE MANCHHELE BIHANA UTHNASATHAI AAKHA MICHCHHA). So, the thing was done in the past as usual, and because of this, we were not made a part of the plan development process. I mean, we were not basically made to be part of the plan process because it was started from the former concept (PURANO MANASIKTA). Yes, even today, the activities of policy and plan formulation are not being developed as per federalism, but we pressed through our work and now we have started the program without the engagement of the NARMIN.

As he was asked to say in brief, he said, *"In gist, unitary concept/ state system, regular tradition like of yesterday (HIJODEKHIKO NIYAMIT PARAMPARA, and um...not only that, but also different things like lack of doing new study, analyzing and searching the new methods for betterment."*

He further added, *"Um...The new thinking was not there in the policy developer, which made them make the plan without our engagement."*

(#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

As asked to share the barriers to engagement in the SESP process, my seventh participant informed that he was formally invited by the MoEST when the SESP was formulated and added that he was a little bit engaged in this process. He further shared that he sat only in one or two sittings, not more than that, indicating that the engagement was a kind of formality maintenance from the side of the ministry in a program where there was an event seeking feedback in a larger forum, forming some groups within the interaction program rather than making local governments really engaged as the experienced or evidence-informed entity. His further sharing was that it was a formal program where papers were presented by some experts and some of their ideas were taken to form some groups, which he took as a kind of formality in the case of NARMIN hindering them from engaging well.

In the context of his engagement, the seventh participant again shared that, as per his remembrance, there was a letter to the NARMIN from the ministry for an interaction program and added the program was there in a hotel of the capital city i.e. Kathmandu; the name of the hotel he could not remember. He, as per his

remembrance, shared that there was the presence of experts in the concerned field in the program who had presented the papers where he got the opportunity to put his ideas in a general manner, not in a detailed or specific manner. As asked about his engagement in the agenda setting and the design of the SESP, he directly rejected, saying no, indicating his non-engagement, i.e., the barrier for his engagement.

Again in the concern of his engagement in the SESP dialogue process, he shared that he was not engaged in the preparation process of concept note as he was only engaged in a program where stakeholders were asked to participate to provide feedback which was the only program he was invited and participated as per his remembrance that makes me understand that he also did not have so much opportunity to be the part of the policy dialogue of the SESP. Again, in regard to his engagement in the SESP decision process, my seventh participant satirically shared that, as he was engaged in only one feedback collection program at that time, how could he say he was engaged in the policy decision of the SESP adding that he remembered that he was engaged in just one program that was organized to seek the stakeholders' feedback.

He also shared the story that in the beginning days, the federal people used to turn their heads when listening to their (NARMIN's and local level's) names and ignore them. He took it as the reason for the non-full-fledged implementation of the constitution and the lack of conceptual clarity in the policy formulation of the present-day need. He also added that the policy was to be made by those who had the major responsibility and questioned whether it was of any meaning to take the general feedback only from the NARMIN while developing school education-related plans and policies like the SESP.

My seventh participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, shared that he was called upon by the ministry and became part of the SESP process in a formal manner. But he further shared that he was invited to take part in only one or two feedback collection events, where he was not made to contribute much as the experts presented the papers and asked the participants to provide feedback from the side of the group by dividing them into groups, where he provided his general feedback. He also shared that he did not become a part of agenda-setting for policy decisions, but only a general feedback provider. He highlighted with questions how the policies could bring the essence of the constitution, federalism and the ideas of the grassroots stakeholders without their proper engagement in the policy process. While sharing the whole idea

in brief, what he said was the unitary concept, the continuation of the tradition of yesterday, lack of doing new study, analyzing and searching for new methods for the betterment were some of the barriers to their engagement in the SESP process. He also satirically highlighted that we did have the tradition of doing what we had been doing regularly, but not turning the pages of the law and seeing the work and duties of the concerned ones, adding that the new thinking was not there in the policy developers, which made them make the plan without engagement of the NARMIN.

The above sharing of my seventh participant, who is the central leader of the NARMIN gives me the idea that he was slightly engaged as he was asked to be a part in a formal manner. But the case is that he got the opportunity to be part of the SESP process as a workshop participant in one or two programs that was/were held in a hotel in Kathmandu. So, from this, I come to know that his engagement again was so nominal, even if the NARMIN was taken as the key stakeholder of the SESP process, as the chair of the NARMIN is there in the steering committee of the SESP, which resembles that because of power dynamics, there were barriers to his engagement. This is aligned with the concepts of Voice Theory and Social Systems Theory as they indicate that there is the influence of powerful ones in the policy processes and the thinking of having knowledge of other stakeholders' issues or the pains of others in some of the policy developers as blamed by my seventh participant makes some key stakeholders aside of the policy process hindering to put their voices in the policies. This is also related to the ideas of Sharma and Kumar (2023), who also claimed about the underrepresentation of marginalized voices in the actual policy formulation process because of the influence of the policy elites.

From the above interpretation of the sharing of my participants on the barriers to their engagement in the SESP process, it can be initially said that only a limited number of participants had the opportunity to be part of the SESP process because of the matter of power and the different barriers to their engagement. Even the powerful first participant (government official) felt some sort of barriers to being engaged, as he could not convince his team and the final decision makers in some of the areas, like keeping some project-based modality of the activities, like curriculum, ICT, etc. The case of the second participant (SMC association leader) seems to have a lot of barriers, as he did not have any opportunity to be engaged, as he was not formally invited during the process. Influencing participants like the fourth participant (CNT leader), who felt some sort of barriers, i.e., he was not invited during the initial phases

of agenda setting and designing. His ideas, like making similar facilities available to all kinds of teachers and providing visible scholarships to students, were not incorporated in the final plan document because of the influence of the DPs and bureaucratic authority. The case of the seventh participant (NARMIN leader) seems almost non-engaged, as he got the opportunity to be part of only one or two interaction programs. From this, I am again convinced by the concept of Cairney (2020), who explores the concept of power in public policy, emphasizing its multiple dimensions and implications. Power is exercised through state authority, persuasion, and entrenched norms, shaping policy agendas and decision-making. Crucially, power determines what knowledge is considered valid in evidence-based policy making, influencing whose voices are heard. This perspective shows its relevance to the SESP making process, where stakeholders' engagement was limited and voices seem marginalized by dominant actors like government officials and teacher leaders.

I am further convinced by Parsons (1991), who conceptualizes society as a structured system where human interactions are governed by mutually accepted norms, values and standards. This perspective is also critical for analyzing Nepal's education policy, especially the SESP, where stakeholders' voices are mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, influencing policy outcomes that even the voices of the dominant stakeholders are not listened well because of the attitude as well as so-called knowledgeable ones who take themselves as the knowers of others' pains as well forgetting the shoes wearer has the knowledge of the specific point where pain occurs. The perspective of Parsons is also crucial in Nepal's education policy, i.e., the SESP, where stakeholder voices are filtered through institutional structures and power dynamics. As per the sharing of perceptions of my participants about the barriers to engagement in the SESP formulation process, I came to know that the voices of the participant one are most specifically legitimized as he was in the state power as a government official, that of participant four are also legitimized but not as of the participant one and the voices of others are less legitimized during the final decision and documentation process. So, this makes me understand that this perspective is critical in Nepal's education policy, especially in the case of SESP, where stakeholder voices are filtered and engagement is limited through institutional structures and power dynamics, where barriers are felt well.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I brought the perceptions, stories, and understanding of my research participants related to their engagement in education policy-making in Nepal, with the help of some related literature and theoretical perspectives, taking the case of SESP making. I started with the theme called stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagement, the sub-themes of which are: understanding engagement in the SESP making process, contribution to SESP decision making, and barriers to engagement in SESP process. The theme and sub-themes were developed after reflecting upon the experiences of all the participants and inducing the meaning out of similar and common views, which showed that they had a good conceptual understanding of the need for stakeholders' engagement in policy processes and most of them had a common voice that level of engagement was less i.e. there were many different barriers due to power dynamics and other socio-political aspects that come in the path of policy development which also had in the case of SESP development in Nepal. This challenged the universal modern philosophy of creating a positive and supportive environment for stakeholders to be the part of policy processes, enhancing policy ownership and making the policies implementable. Finally, the chapter ends with this chapter summary.

CHAPTER V

STAKEHOLDERS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR VOICES IN SESP FORMULATION PROCESS IN NEPAL

In this chapter, I have explored the reflections of my research participants related to their experiences of situating their voices in the SESP. I mean this chapter responds to my second research question: How do they (the stakeholders) reflect their experiences of situating their voices in SESP (2022/23-2031/32)? The studying context of mine brings out all their reflections, presenting their experiences, views and visions in connection with different theoretical underpinnings, scholars' ideas and existing knowledge to make meaning about the experiences of representation of their voices in the SESP formulation scenario of Nepal through reflection and retrospection following interpretive inquiry as my method of study. While doing so, I read, reread and reflect upon the views, ideas, as well as stories of my participants in detail and interpreted them with thorough discussion and argumentation. This has helped me to form the theme and sub-themes representing my participants' reflections, experiences, and understanding related to their engagement and representation of their voices in the SESP. I have then discussed the developed/emerged theme i.e. representation of stakeholders' voices and the sub-themes of which are: experiences of voice representation in SESP, moments of influence on SESP, and suggestions for engaging future education policies. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief summary of it.

Representation of Stakeholders' Voices

While studying the context of the voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, I explored the representation of their voices in the SESP and developed it as a theme, as they were asked to reflect it in the interview process. I divided this theme into three different sub-themes: experiences of voice representation in SESP, moments of influence on SESP, and suggestions for engaging future education policies as per the brought reflections, ideas, experiences, and stories of all of my participants, and linked them from the perspective of literature and theories.

Experiences of Voice Representation in SESP

As mentioned above, after the interviews with my participants, I have developed three different sub-themes under the theme i.e., representation of stakeholders' voices in SESP, and I tried to seek their experiences of voice

representation in SESP as the first sub-theme, as most of my participants reflected their experiences in this regard while responding to my queries during the interview process.

As the first participant, who is a government official, was asked to share his stories related to his engagement in the SESP process i.e., the experience of the voice representation in the SESP processes, he shared his story as follows:

Story of participant one on his voice representation in SESP

I was engaged by the authentic/formal letter of the ministry. My major engagement was in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. During my engagement process, as I remember, it happened as follows: There was a huge discussion about whether community learning centers (CLC) are to be kept as they were before. I presented my view/logic, saying that they should not be kept in the present status. I reiterated not to keep as of today. The thematic team members came to the same point. I mean, I could convince them to be on the same boat as the CLCs should not be kept as they were in the past. I played a major role in convincing them. We all got convinced that the CLCs are to be kept as the constitutional provision is to keep them. But there is a need to improve them. So, they should be improved and kept as improved entities. Um... (with smile) the team accepted my ideas and that came in the document. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024)

The above story of my first participant indicates that he was engaged in a formal manner in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. He reflected that he presented his view for keeping the CLCs not in the status quo as they were before, but to keep them as the improved ones. He also highlighted that he became able to convince the team to keep CLCs, as the constitutional provision expects them to keep them. Furthermore, he expressed his happiness that they were to be kept as the improved entities for which he could convince the team and that came in the document. It makes me understand that he could contribute to keep the CLCs in the status of improved entities, which indicates that he, as a powerful government official under the MoEST, was influencing stakeholders to put his voice in the SESP formulation process.

As he was questioned to highlight the component/aspect he had his opportunity to contribute, he mentioned:

I got the opportunity to be engaged/ engaged heavily and in a meaningful way in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. I also got the opportunity to be a part of basic education. In other areas, I got a chance to put my ideas.

As per the above reflection of my first participant about the area of his contribution, he mentioned that he was heavily as well as meaningfully engaged in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. Furthermore, he shared that he had the opportunity to be part of basic education as well. He also added that he had the opportunity to contribute slightly in other areas of the plan besides the non-formal education and lifelong learning, and the basic education.

In a query regarding the consideration of his voices in the SESP process, he reflected:

The ministry asked me to be a part of various meetings and sharing events. I mean, my voices were taken into consideration, making me engaged in the non-formal education and lifelong learning thematic committee, various interaction programs, workshops, and meetings where I could put my voices/ ideas. I (with a smile) also got the opportunity to put my voice/ideas in the agenda setting, design, policy dialogue, and policy decision events of the SESP. In other words, my voices were considered by providing me with the opportunity to put the voices in the agenda setting, design, policy dialogue, and policy decision activities of the SESP process.

The above reflection of participant one mentions that he was asked by the ministry to be part of different meetings and sharing events. He further highlighted that his voices were taken into consideration, making him engaged in the thematic committee of non-formal education and lifelong learning, involving him in various interaction programs, workshops, and meetings where he could put his ideas/voices. Furthermore, he happily shared that he got the opportunity to put his voice i.e. ideas, in the process of agenda setting, design, policy dialogue, as well as policy decision of the SESP, which can be taken as the consideration of his voice in the process. From this, I came to understand that the first participant, as a government official under the ministry, had a very good opportunity to incorporate his voice in the SESP process.

Similarly, as he was asked to specify the area he contributed much to, he specifies, *“As I have already mentioned, I got the opportunity to contribute in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning of the SESP. I also slightly contributed in the area of basic education.”*

From this quote as well, it can be understood that he had the opportunity to contribute to the SESP most specifically in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning, and slightly in the area of basic education as well, which makes me understand that he could contribute significantly in the sub-sector of non-formal education and lifelong learning.

As asked why only in those areas, not in others, he reflected:

There was a division of themes among different committees. I was assigned to participate in the thematic committee of non-formal education and lifelong learning. So, I have contributed much in this area. Similarly, as per my work experience and knowledge base, I was interested in the area of basic education. So, I asked the concerned team to make me participate in that team as well. They called me in various meetings and interaction-related events of the basic education thematic committee. Also, I contributed a little. I sometimes got engaged in the programs of the other areas, but could not contribute in a meaningful manner. In other words, the rigorous engagement was only in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. It was slight in the basic education area. In other areas, I could not do well as I was not a member of the other thematic committee and could give much time only to a defined area. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024)

The above sharing and reflection of my first participant make me understand why he was not engaged in all the areas of the SESP. He shared that, according to the themes, different committees were formed. He also shared that he was assigned to participate in the theme of non-formal education and lifelong learning. He further said that because of the aforesaid condition, he could contribute more to the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning. He also informed that, as per his experience and knowledge base, he got the opportunity to contribute to the theme of basic education too, as he asked the concerned team to make him participate in those thematic discussions also. Furthermore, he shared that he got the opportunity to participate in the programs of other thematic areas as well, but he reflected that he

could not contribute there in a meaningful manner. He summarized that his engagement was so rigorous in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning, a slight contribution he could make in the basic education, as well, but he could not make much of a contribution in other areas, as he was supposed to be heavily engaged in the assigned area, of which he was a member. This reflection makes me understand that he was a member of one designated thematic committee and was supposed to contribute to that theme, so he made his major contribution in those areas rather than in other areas.

From the above reflection on my first participant in connection to the representation of their voices, I came to know that most of their voices were incorporated into the SESP process. As he reflected, he was formally invited and made a part of the thematic committee that was for non-formal education and life-long learning and contributed heavily in those areas.

My second participant is the central leader of the SMC association, who reflected his voice representation in the SESP process as follows:

Second participant's reflection on his voice representation in SESP

We not only got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP development process, but also the document has not reflected the voices of the SMC association through its content, strategies and other aspects. We had expected to be engaged through the content of the document. But even the content of it could not connect and represent us at a minimal level as well. We did not get a chance to participate in the component, strategies, etc. of the SESP also. The document talks about the empowerment of the Local Levels, but that does not cover the real stakeholders like us. In a few places in the SESP document, the capacity building of SMC is written. Does this only mean the representation of our voices in it? In the community schools, as they are opened by the communities, the representative of the community is the SMC. But without involving the SMC association, the real representative of the community, in policy processes, can we imagine quality education? The real thinker of the subject matter of the children is the parent and their representation of them is through the SMC. The non-engagement of this representative of the children in the SESP process is a matter of regret. The SESP talks about the contribution of the development partners, but where is the recognition of the contribution of the community? Do not we have to think of it?

Is not it necessary to involve the community/SMC association to fulfill the goal of the government? As we go through history, the initiation of opening the community schools was done by the community. In the beginning, the government just permits to open of the community school where the major resources are to be managed by the community itself. After the establishment, minimal resources start to be provided by the government. This shows the greater contribution of the community to bringing the schools in operation. Could we see the present achievement of the education sector, like the status of NER, without the sincere effort of the community? The development of policy like SESP without involving the key stakeholder community and a lack of listening to the voices of the community is a very serious concern. There is neither the physical involvement/engagement nor the voices represented in the content of the document, as per my understanding. If the community and the government are separate in the need of being together, the result is the wastage of resources, hindering the quality of learning of the children. (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

About the representation of his voices in SESP, my second participant, the SMC association leader, aggressively shared that they not only got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP development process, but also that the document has not reflected the voices of the SMC association through its content, strategies and other aspects. He added they had expected to be engaged through the content of the document, but even the content of it could not connect and represent them at a minimal level as well. He further shared that they did not get a chance to participate in the component, strategies, etc., of the SESP. He blamed the fact that the document talks about the empowerment of the Local Levels, but that does not cover the real stakeholders like them. He questioned in a few places of the SESP document, the capacity building of SMC is written, whether that only meant the representation of their voices in it. He further added his aggression, saying that in the community schools, as they were opened by the communities, the representative of the community is the SMC, but without involving the SMC association, the real representative of the community, in policy processes, how can we imagine quality education? He highlighted that the real thinker of the subject matter of the children is the parent and the representation of them is through the SMC and added that the non-engagement of this representative of the children in the SESP process was a matter of

regret. He further questioned the SESP, which talked about the contribution of the development partners, but where is the recognition of the contribution of the community? He also asked whether we do not have to think of that context. He asked other questions like: whether it was not necessary to involve the community/SMC association to fulfill the goal of the government. He reminded the history saying as gone through the history, the initiation of opening the community schools was done by the community i.e. in the beginning, the government just permitted to open the community school where the major resources are to be managed by the community itself and added after the establishment minimal resources started to be provided by the government which showed the greater contribution of the community for bringing the schools in operation. He also asked whether we could see the present achievement of the education sector, like the status of NER, without the sincere effort of the community. He added that the development of policy like SESP without involving the key stakeholder community and a lack of listening to the voices of the community is a very serious concern. He also blamed that there was neither the physical engagement nor the voices represented in the content of the SESP document, as per his understanding. He finally highlighted that if the community and the government are separate in the need of being together, the result is the wastage of resources, hindering the quality of learning of the children.

From the reflection of the second participant, who was in the box, I came to know that he had almost no opportunity to have his voice represented in the SESP process. He aggressively questioned the concerned stakeholders whether it was not necessary to represent the voices of the real representatives of the community and parents like the SMC association in the policy and plan, like the SESP developed for quality education. He said this kind of non-representation is a matter of regret, which makes me understand that policy people often keep real stakeholders aside from the policy process and compel them not to own the policies, hindering the representation of their voices and decreasing the potential implementation of the policies and plans. This is linked with Kwibi-Gavhure (2023), Musodza et al.(2021), and Walker et al. (2024), who also claimed that in some of the cases of policy process, the key stakeholders were completely excluded from the policy processes. This is also aligned with the concept of Policy Making Theory, which resembles that in the policy processes, the key stakeholders are also influenced by the elites and bureaucratic structure of the policy authorities.

My third participant, who is the central leader of the parents' association, reflected his experiences on his voice representation in the SESP process as:

I do not have enough ideas to tell the story of the SESP formulation process. We raised issues like parents' awareness/education in many different meetings. But it is yet to be materialized. The awareness programs for the parents were only done by the I/NGOs. But I do not have any event that is appropriate to make a story/ remember as the story.

About his opportunity to contribute to the specific area/component of the SESP, he said, *"I do not have any specific idea. We only made the contribution in a ceremonial way. We did not get the opportunity to be engaged in a rigorous manner."* In response to the query why he did not get the opportunity, he reflected, *"In my opinion, they did not make me contribute, taking/thinking that I raise the issues of the children/students in a real manner and there will be a problem for the government to address."* In the context of consideration of his voices during the SESP process, he responded:

Beginning from the SRRP, SSDP, we also put our ideas in the contents of the SESP. I do not say there was zero consideration. But the level and the pace of the engagement are not that recognizable/countable. I cannot say that our voices were considered well.

As asked about his expectation and level of representation of his voices, he mentioned, *"I wanted to make our voices considered very well in the SESP process. In my opinion, we were not listened to well because there is the influence of the DPs, elites and the limited bureaucrats."* In regard to the specific area of his voice representation, he highlighted, *"We put the feedback in a general manner, not specifically in the component/area of the SESP. We got the opportunity to provide feedback/share slightly. I do not have that idea to inform/ share specifically."* (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

From the above reflections and sharing of my third participant, it can be said that he did not make much of a contribution to the SESP process. He shared that he put his ideas in various meetings in a general manner rather than in a specific manner, as he said he did not have any story to share. Furthermore, he reflected that he was made a part of the process in a ceremonial manner, not in a rigorous manner, as he satirically shared that he was not included in the process, thinking that he would raise the real issue of the children, which could be difficult for the government to address.

He also shared that it would be difficult for him to say there was zero consideration of his voices, but he highlighted that the level and pace of the engagement was not that countable. He blamed the fact that his voices were not listened to as there was the influence of the DPs, elites and limited bureaucrats. He further shared in brief that he put the feedback in a general manner, not in a specific component of the SESP, only a slight opportunity, so he did not have any idea how to share or inform specifically. These all ideas and sharing of the reflections of the third participant make me understand that the third participant had very limited representation of his voice in the SESP process, which is aligned with the Social Systems Theory and the Voice Theory as well. This further makes me know that my third participant, the leader of the parents' association, had very limited experience with the representation of his voice in the SESP processes, even if he is the central leader of the association. It makes me think that even though the chair of the parents' association is there in the steering committee of the SESP the level of voice representation of the central leader of that association seems quite less in the case of SESP, as per the reflection of my third participant.

My fourth participant is the central leader of CNT. While confirming his representation of his voices in the SESP processes, he responded:

The ministry formally invited our association to be a part of the SESP process. The thematic groups were formed. I chose the TPD theme and engaged with it. The slides were presented in the program. Other colleagues participated in other groups. There were prolonged discussions. We raised many different agenda/subject matters. We put our ideas by being part of the discussions, and reflection in the plan is another part. I mean, I put the voices of the teachers there, but whether that is reflected in the document is another concern.

The above reflection of my fourth participant resembles that he took part in the SESP process as the thematic committees/groups were formed. He shared that among them, he chose the TPD theme and engaged in it. He also shared that the slides were presented in the program, where there were detailed discussions in which he raised many different subject matters. He also mentioned that he incorporated his ideas into those discussion programs. He further shared in a satirical manner that he put the voices of the teachers, whether those are reflected in the document, is another matter which makes me understand that the key stakeholders like leaders of CNT also had

difficulty to bring all of their ideas in the final document of the SESP even if they had chance to be the part of the dialogue and decisions.

He further exemplified:

In the thematic group, what I said is that the facilities and incentives, including the terms and conditions of the teachers, are different. So, it should be the same for all kinds of teachers. I also said the scholarship amount of the students is to be more notable. The amount is not to be for the sake of giving. The student has to feel that s/he have received. There is a huge difference between giving and the feeling of receiving. If the student feels s/he have received well, it is meaningful; otherwise, it is meaningless. I strongly put these subjects in the meetings of the thematic groups. There were prolonged discussions on these contents. There were DPs as well. They listened to /our concerns attentively. There was a positive discussion in the thematic group, which I take as the positive part of my involvement.

His further sharing was that in the thematic group, he focused on creating the same kind of facilities and incentives, including the terms and conditions for teachers, and providing a notable scholarship amount to students. He also highlighted his focus as the amount of the scholarship should not be for the sake of giving rather the student has to feel s/he have received, where there is a huge difference between giving and having the feeling of receiving. He further reflected that if the student does not feel s/he have received well, then the scholarship becomes meaningless. He highlighted that he strongly put these ideas in the thematic committee meetings, where there were DPs as well who listened to him attentively, which he took as a positive discussion and the positive part of his involvement. From this sharing and reflection of my fourth participant, I come to understand that he had the opportunity to put his concerns related to facilities and conditions of the teachers and students which is also linked with the concept of Voice Theory that talks about the role of power in policy processes as the powerful ones do have opportunity to be the part of the process which is there in the context of my fourth participant as well.

As he was asked whether his concerns were included in the document he said:
There might be limitations of the nation/state to incorporating all the concerns of us. We cannot say there are no limitations. But we need to be little bit positive in going ahead, we need to have positiveness. I believe there is space for being positive so we can be positive is my opinion.

The above reflection of my fourth participant further clarified that he was conscious of the limitations of the nation to incorporate all the concerns and the agenda of the stakeholders, as he shared that they could not say there were no limitations. Furthermore, he focused on being positive if there is space. This reflection indicates the positivity of the nation to bring the concerns of the stakeholders into the policies to be developed by the authority, as participant four expressed that, in the case of having space, as well as the positivity of the state, it is yet to be materialized.

As the response to the query regarding his area of contribution, he mentioned, *“In my personal case, I got the opportunity to be engaged/ engaged heavily and in a meaningful way in the area of teacher professional development (TPD) and teacher management.”* As he was asked why only in that area, he said, *“Our association had mandated one member to participate in one theme. So other colleagues of the association participated in other themes and I participated in TPD.”* He was also probed whether it was because of not allowing him to be a part of other areas, he responded:

Um... No. Not that, is. Because of my interest, I chose this theme. The colleagues of the association managed to participate in other areas. Not allowing me to participate in other areas is not the subject. I mean, I was interested in being part of the area of TPD, and other colleagues were asked to take part in other areas. If I were interested, I could participate in other aspects as well.

He further added:

While sitting in a larger group as a whole, I put my ideas in other areas of SESP as well. Being basically part of the TPD theme, my major contribution was basically in it, not in others. Other colleagues of the association participated in other themes. They had reflected/provided feedback that they got the opportunity to put their ideas or contribute in the process.

From the above sharing and reflection of my fourth participant, it can be said that he was engaged heavily and meaningfully in the area of TPD and teacher management, as his association, i.e., CNT, had mandated him to participate in only one theme of his interest and experience and he had chosen that theme. He further shared that he chose that theme because it did not allow him to be in other themes, but because of his interest and experience, as other colleagues of the CNT were asked to take part in other areas and if he was interested in other areas, he could participate in

them as well. This makes me understand that he was formally asked to be a part of the theme of his interest and experience rather than being compelled to be in the specific area, which is also linked with the idea of Policy Making Theory, which talks about making stakeholders as per their interest and experience in the policy process. Here it can be understood that the fourth participant of mine was the effective leader of CNT, raising the issues and concerns of teachers and students. Because of this, he had an interest and experience in the area of TPD and teacher management and was asked to be a part of the concerned theme where he could contribute much.

So far as the consideration of his voices in the SESP formulation process was concerned, he mentioned:

I do not say I was not listened to or my voices are not allowed /SUNDAI SUNIENA VANNA CHAHI MILENA. There was no context, like you do not have the right to raise your voice. We were engaged and raised our voices. We promoted our agenda. But in the case of addressing our voices/agenda, the level (MATRA) of address is not at the appropriate/required level.

As asked for more clarification, he says, “*I think for it the factors like the interest (SONCH), capacity, limitation, etc. of the state influenced/functioned.*” As he was asked whether they pressurize to make the voices listened to, he says, “*Oh, yes. We need to do this and are doing as well.*” Regarding the query why the voice of the main stakeholders was not listened to well or at all, his answer was:

We can do it by two measures such as Convincing the ministry and the other related stakeholders through dialogue. The other thing is that the development partners have not understood our concerns. I mean, what sort of difficulties we have been facing is not well understood by them. They basically understand as per their context. But we are not in their context as theirs. As we talk about poverty, it is not similar in developed countries and less developed or underdeveloped countries. We are not being able to make them understand the real context of ours and so they are not understanding it well. In this situation, we can make our voice heard by making them understand the context in a real sense.

He further added:

There might be limitations of the state. We should not be biased in understanding as well as in putting the voices. The limitations are certainly there. I do not think the state is that much negative not to include our

concerns. In some of the cases, we see it is because of the limitations, but in certain cases, it looks like the state is not liberal enough in the context of possibility as well. I mean, even if there is a possibility to be liberal, the state is rigid, not showing liberal behavior. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

In the context of the incorporation of his voices my fourth participant diplomatically shared that he would not say they were not completely listened to or incorporated as he mentioned no restriction was there in raising the voices and promoting the agenda but the level of addressing those voices or agenda was not that much satisfactory as he highlighted the level of address was not in an appropriate or required level. He further clarified that it was because of the factors like the interest, capacity, limitation, etc. that influenced/functioned. He also added that they pressurized the concerned ones to put their agenda and are also doing so in a continuous manner. In the answer to the query regarding the measures to make the concerned authority listen to their voices, he reflected that there could be two measures, such as convincing the ministry and other stakeholders through dialogue, and making the DPs understand our situation. He further highlighted that the DPs have not understood our concerns as they take the cases as per their context, but our context is different from theirs. He exemplified that as we talk about poverty, ours is not similar to that of theirs. He further said we are not being able to make them understand, so they are not understanding us well, as he shared, we could make them listen to our voices, making them understand our context in the real sense. He also shared positively that there are certainly limitations of the state, but he blamed that even in the condition of no limitations, the state is being rigid in incorporating the voices or agenda of the CNT in the policies. It again makes me link this whole reflection of participant four with the Voice Theory, which resembles some limitations of the inclusion of the stakeholders' perspectives in the policies. It is aligned with Dhakal (2019) and Neupane (2019), who also claimed that in some policy-making contexts, heavily engaged stakeholders are unable to incorporate all their ideas into the final policy product due to the influence of some elites and DPs. It is also linked with the concept of Policy Making Theory which underscores that sometimes in the finalization process of the policies some of the ideas of most engaged stakeholders are also excluded in final policy product as mentioned by my participant four, the leader of CNT, that he strongly raised to make the same or

similar kind of facilities to all kinds of teachers and make the meaningful provision of scholarship to the related students during policy dialogues and decision process of the SESP, but could not bring it in the final plan document even if the concerned ones of the team were convinced with the idea.

The above reflection of my participant four who is the central leader of the CNT, I understand that he had the experience of the representation of his voices in the SESP process in most of the cases of the thematic area he was engaged, but again he reflected that many of his ideas were not documented in the final plan as they were to be incorporated to enhance the recognition of the teachers for quality education which indicate even for him as well there were challenges to make his voice recognized in this process. He further gave some impression on the less effective scholarship distribution, which could not motivate children as the amount was quite low, which also indicates the barriers in responding to the needs/voices of the related stakeholders. The reflection of him makes me understand that he had the opportunity to be part of the SESP process, but there are certain areas where his voice was interrupted and not represented/incorporated, which aligns with the concepts of Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory, and Social Systems Theory.

The fifth participant of mine is again the leader of the SMC association. I had interviewed her to validate the information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association. Her reflection on the representation of her voices in the SESP process was:

There is no context of participation. I mean, we did not participate. We tried to be engaged in some of the cases on our own initiative. I think we were not engaged, thinking that we would be informed, we put our concerns and we put concern (GUNASO). (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

From the above reflection of my fifth participant, I come to understand that she had almost no experience of the representation of her voice in the SESP process, even if the SMC association is the key stakeholder of the school education sector. From her perspective, it can be said that she was quite less able to include her voice in the SESP process, which indicates that the voices of the SMC association were not listened to well. This informs me that the information of the second participant matches that of the fifth one, as they both said there was almost no representation of the SMC association's voice in the SESP process, even if the association is of key value in the context of the school education sector. This makes me further think

whether there is representation of the voices of all the concerned stakeholders in the school education policy processes of Nepal.

The sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN reflected her experience in the query of the representation of her voice as, *“As I was not engaged in this process specifically, I cannot say anything specifically.”* She added why that happened, saying, *“As I was not in the central committee and was only in the secretariat of the NARMIN, I did not get the opportunity to be part of the process.”* (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

From the above reflection of my sixth participant again, I come to know that there was very little i.e. almost null representation of her voice in the SESP process. Furthermore, it can be said that even as the leader of the NARMIN, she did not get a chance to put her voice in the SESP process. I further mean that there were various obstacles to put the voices, even to the leader of the NARMIN, in the SESP process, although the chair of the NARMIN is a member of the steering committee of the SESP.

The seventh participant, who is also the leader of the NARMIN, was asked to reflect on his experiences with the representation of his voice in the SESP and he presented:

The story is, ..., I participated in one of the interaction programs organized by the Ministry in a hotel in Kathmandu and put some of my ideas in a group discussion where I was not the group leader.

In regard to the component of the SESP in which he got the opportunity to contribute more, he mentioned with laughter, *“... as I said, I was just engaged in an interaction and feedback collection program, I could not specifically contribute any of the aspects of SESP. I just gave some ideas in a general manner.”* As he was asked why they did not get opportunities to contribute to this important plan, even being the key stakeholder, he responded, *“Um... (With Smile) ...I repeated many times that it is a matter of realizing federalism and the essence of the constitution.”* While asking about their pressure for their participation, he informed, *“Yes, because of our pressure nowadays, we are called. But during that time, we were also new and could not influence well, as they had the nature of ignoring us, as I had mentioned earlier.”* In the query whether their voices were taken into consideration during the SESP formulation process, he responded:

With Laughter... I have to say yes as I was engaged in one program. But I myself would like to question: Is it good to involve the stakeholders like us in only one general program not from the very beginning of agenda setting?

In regard to specifying the area of his contribution he responded, “As I have already mentioned I got the opportunity to participate in only one interaction program then how can I specify the area. I put my general and overall ideas in the group work activity of that program.” In the concern why not in the whole process, he said, “Um... as I mentioned earlier because of the negligence and the nature of the center forgetting the essence of the constitution.” (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

My seventh participant reflected that he participated in an interaction program organized by the ministry in a hotel in Kathmandu and put some ideas in a general manner as a group member, not as a group leader. He shared with laughter that, in regard to his contribution area, he was only involved in one interaction program, and therefore, it was unclear how he could specify the area of contribution, as he provided general feedback. He satirically shared that it is a matter of realizing federalism and the essence of the Constitution. He further highlighted that they were not able to participate well because they were new at the time and could not effectively pressurize or influence, and, as he noted, the centre had a tendency to ignore them. He himself questioned whether their voices were taken into consideration, whether it was good to involve stakeholders like them in only one general program rather than keeping them from the very beginning of agenda setting. He further blamed this all on the negligence and nature of the centre, forgetting the essence of the constitution.

The above reflection and sharing of my participant's voice and its interpretation give me the idea that his voice was not represented well in the SESP process, as he had the opportunity to be part of the interaction programs only once or twice. As he got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP process as a workshop participant in one or two programs that was/were held in a hotel in Kathmandu, his representation of his voice was so nominal, even if the NARMIN is taken as the key stakeholder of the SESP process as the chair of the NARMIN is there in the steering committee of the SESP. It informs me that the representation of the voices of the NARMIN people is so minimal and the opportunity to put their voices is so little, which is linked with the concept of Voice Theory and Social Systems Theory.

From the above interpretation of the reflections of my seven participants, it can be concluded that most of the participants had only a limited opportunity to make their voices represented in the SESP process. The first participant (government official) made his voice represented in the SESP as a powerful stakeholder, being heavily involved/engaged in various events. The second participant (SMC association leader) shared that they had neither the physical engagement nor the document itself showed their presence, which means SMC association leaders had no opportunity to represent their voice. The third participant (Parents' association leader) had only a limited opportunity to make his voice heard in the SESP process, as he did not participate in a rigorous manner. The sharing of the fourth one (CNT leader) indicates that he became more influential as he was a member of the thematic committee. The case of the NARMIN leaders, as the sixth and seventh participants had very limited opportunity to make their voices heard in the SESP, as the seventh one shared, he provided general feedback in the SESP as a participant of interaction programs that was/were organized by the MoEST in a hotel in Kathmandu. From this, I am convinced by the concept of Cairney (2020), who explores the concept of power in public policy, emphasizing its multiple dimensions. It underscores how actors make voices represented in policy by framing issues as public or private concerns. Power is exercised through state authority, persuasion, and rooted norms, shaping policy agendas and decision-making. Most importantly, power determines what knowledge is considered valid in evidence-based policymaking, influencing whose voices are heard. This perspective is relevant to Nepal's education policy, especially in the context of SESP, where stakeholders' voices are seen as marginalized by dominant actors, which is reflected in the sharing of my participants as well. Social Systems Theory conceptualizes society as a structured system where human interactions are governed by commonly accepted norms and standards. His theory of action framework clarifies how individuals operate within social structures shaped by environmental factors like resources, population, and communication. The work of Parsons is significant in understanding how power and agency function within social systems, which is also the crux of the Social Systems Theory. This perspective is again critical for analyzing the context of SESP, where stakeholders' voices are mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, influencing policy outcomes. Parsons' (1991) concept of the social system provides a framework for understanding how societal structures function through roles, norms, and established

opportunities. His action approach also explains human behavior within a structured system, shaped by motivational and value orientations. Parsons introduces pattern variables—dichotomies that guide social action—and identifies four functional prerequisites: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (AGIL). These elements shape policy processes, influencing whose voices are legitimized and represented. This perspective is critical in Nepal's education policy, especially in the case of the SESP, where representation of the stakeholders' voices is filtered through institutional structures and power dynamics, as the powerful ones seem to make their voices more represented in the SESP document as the first and fourth participants became more influencing to represent their voices while others had difficulty to do so.

Moments of Influence on SESP

After the interviews with my participants, I have developed three different sub-themes under the theme of representation of stakeholders' voice in the SESP formulation process, and I tried to seek their moments of influence on SESP as the second sub-theme, as my participants' experiences in this regard were reflected while responding to my queries during the interview process.

As the first participant who is a government official asked to share his stories of the moments in which he could influence the SESP process, he responded as in the box below:

Story of my first participant regarding his influencing moments on SESP

The ministry asked me to be a part of various meetings and sharing events. I mean my voices were taken into consideration, making me engaged in the non-formal education and lifelong learning thematic committee, various interaction programs, workshops, and meetings where I could put my voices/ideas. I also got the opportunity to put my voice/ideas in the agenda-setting, design, policy dialogue, and policy decision events of the SESP. In other words, my voices were considered by providing me with the opportunity to put the voices on agenda setting, design, policy dialogue, and the policy decision activities of the SESP process.

... there was a huge discussion about whether the community learning center (CLC) is to be kept as it was before. I presented my view/logic, saying that it should not be kept in the present status. I reiterated not to keep as of today.

The thematic team members came to the same point. I mean, I could convince

them to be on the same boat as the CLCs should not be kept as they were in the past. I played a major role in convincing them. We all got convinced that the CLCs are to be kept as the constitutional provision is to keep them. But there is a need to improve them. So, they should be improved and kept as improved entities.

As I have already mentioned, I got the opportunity to contribute in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning of the SESP. I also slightly contributed to the area of basic education. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024).

The first participant regarding the influencing moments of SESP shared that he was asked by the ministry to be part of various meetings and sharing events. He also added that his voice was taken into consideration, making him engaged in the non-formal education and lifelong learning thematic committee, various interaction programs, workshops, and meetings where he could share his voice and ideas. He further added that he also had the opportunity to contribute his voice/ideas to the agenda-setting, design, policy dialogue, and policy decision-making process of the SESP. He also shared that there was a huge discussion whether community learning centers (CLCs) were to be kept as they were before, where he presented his view/logic, saying that they should not be kept in the present status, or they should not be kept as of that day. He added that the thematic team members came to the same point as he could convince them to be on the same boat as the CLCs should not be kept as they were in the past, for which he played a major role in convincing them. He happily shared that they all got convinced that the CLCs were to be kept as the constitutional provision was to keep them, but with improvement i.e., he could convince the team to keep the CLCs as improved entities. Furthermore, he highlighted that he got the opportunity to contribute in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning of the SESP as well as to contribute slightly to the area of basic education.

From the above reflection of my first participant, I came to know that the moments of influence on SESP of him were specifically in the area of non-formal education and lifelong learning, as he was asked by the ministry to be in the team of the aforesaid topic's thematic committee. Being in that committee, he participated in various programs and tried to convince the team in his areas of logic as an influential

participant. He specifically shared a story on the issue of whether the CLCs were to be kept or not, as the constitution expected keeping them. According to him, he could convince his team to keep the CLCs in a reformed manner rather than omitting their existence, which he took as one of his great achievements or a result of his engagement and contribution. Here, his influential engagement had a significant impact on the process of SESP, which again is aligned with the concept of the Voice Theory.

My second participant is the central leader of the SMC, who reflected his moments of influence on the SESP process as:

We not only got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP development process, but also the document has not reflected the voices of the SMC association through its content, strategies and other aspects. We had expected to be engaged through the content of the document. But even the content of it could not connect and represent us in a minimal way. We did not get a chance to participate in the component, strategies, etc. of the SESP. The document talks about the empowerment of the Local Levels, but that does not cover the real stakeholders. In a few places in the SESP document, the capacity building of SMC is written. Does this only mean the representation of our voices in it? In the schools opened by the communities, the representative of the community is the SMC. But without involving the SMC association, the real representative of the community, in policy processes, can we imagine quality education? The real thinker of the subject matter of the children is the parent and the representation of them is through the SMC, I mean the SMC association. The non-engagement of this representative of the children in the SESP process is a matter of regret. The SESP talks about the contribution of the development partners, but where is the recognition of the contribution of the community? Do not we have to think of it? (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

My second participant related to his moments of influence on the SESP process reflected that he not only got the opportunity to be a part of the SESP development process, but also expressed the sorrow that the document had not reflected the voices of the SMC association in its content, strategies and other aspects of it. He further shared that he had the expectation of being incorporated through the content of the document, but it could not connect and represent them in a minimal way. He expressed his anger that the document talked about the empowerment of the

local levels but did not cover the real stakeholders, like the SMC association. He questioned whether keeping the terminology capacity building of the SMC in some places of the document meant the representation of SMC association's voices. He further elaborated that the SMC i.e., the SMC association, is the representative of the community in the case of the schools opened by the community, but again questioned whether we could imagine quality education without involving the SMC association, the real representative of the community, in policy processes. Furthermore, he highlighted that the real thinkers of the subject matter of the children are the parents and their representation of them is through the SMC association and expressed that their engagement in it in the policy process is a matter of regret. He again satired through a question that the SESP talked about the contribution of the DPs, but the contribution of the community is not recognized and this is a matter to be thought about by the concerned ones.

From the above reflection of the second participant, I come to know that he had almost no moment of influence through his voices on SESP as he raised many questions and the concerns linking to their engagement in the process of SESP which further makes me understand that there was not influencing or impactful representation of the SMC association in the whole process of SESP development which is aligned with the concepts of Voice Theory and Social Systems Theory.

My third participant is the central leader of the parents' association. He reflected his experiences regarding the moment of influence on the SESP process as, *"I do not have any specific idea. We only made the contribution in a ceremonial way. We did not get the opportunity to be engaged in a rigorous manner."* In response to the query about why he did not get the opportunity, he reflected, *"In my opinion, they did not make me contribute, taking/thinking that I raise the issues of the children/students in a real manner and there will be a problem for the government to address."* In the case of the consideration of his voices on SESP, he responded:

Beginning from the SSRP, SSDP, we also put our ideas in the contents of the SESP. I do not say there was zero consideration. But the level and the pace of the engagement are not that recognizable/countable. I cannot say that our voices were considered well.

As asked about his expectation and level of representation of his voices, he mentioned, *"I wanted to make our voices considered very well in the SESP process. In my opinion, we were not listened to well because of the influence of the DPs, elites,*

and the limited bureaucrats.” As asked about the specific area of his voice representation, he highlighted, “We put the feedback in a general manner, not specifically in the component/area of the SESP. We got the opportunity to provide feedback/share slightly. I do not have that idea to inform/ share specifically.” (#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

About the moments of his influence on SESP, my third participant, who is the central leader of the parents’ association, reflected his experiences that he did not have any specific idea of it, as they were made to contribute in a ceremonial manner and did not get the opportunity to be engaged in a rigorous manner. He also satirized that, in his opinion, they did not get a chance to contribute, thinking that they would raise the issues of children, i.e., students, in a real manner, and there would be a problem for the government to address those issues. He further highlighted that the consideration of his voices during the SESP process was there from the beginning of the SSRP, SSDP, as they put their ideas in the contents of the SESP, and he shared he would not say there was zero consideration of them, but the level and the pace of the engagement was not that countable or considerable. He further blamed that he wanted to make their voices considered well, but the concerned did not listen to their voices because there was the influence of the DPs, elites and limited bureaucrats rather than that of the parents’ association.

From this, I came to know that my third participant, the leader of the parents’ association, had very limited experience of the moments of influence on SESP, even if he was the central leader of the association and the chair of that association is also a member of the steering committee of the SESP. This is aligned with the concept of the Voice Theory, which talks about the powerful ones’ influence in the policy process, hindering the voice representation of the key stakeholders as well.

My fourth participant is the central leader of the CNT. Reflecting his moments of influence on SESP, he shared the story as in the box below:

My fourth participant’s story

In the thematic group, what I said is the facilities and incentives, including the terms and conditions of them. I also said the scholarship amount for the students is to be more notable. The amount is not to be for the sake of giving. The student has to feel that s/he has received. There is a huge difference between giving and the feeling of receiving. If the student feels s/he have

received well, it is meaningful; otherwise, it is meaningless. I strongly put these subjects in the meetings of the thematic groups. There were prolonged discussions on these contents. There were DPs as well. They listened to /our concerns attentively. There was a positive discussion in the thematic group, which I take as the positive part of my involvement.

If I have to specify, I contributed to the theme Teacher Professional Development (TPD) and teacher management. I mean, I contributed mostly in TPD, teacher support and management-related areas of the SESP. In other areas, I could give some ideas in general discussions and feedback collection programs. (#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

The story of the above talks about the fourth participant, who was engaged in the thematic committee of teacher management and teacher professional development (TPD) where he raised his voice related to the facilities and incentives, including the terms and conditions of teachers. He further focused that he also highlighted the scholarship amount of the students is to be more notable as that should not be for the sake of giving rather the student has to feel s/he received as he reiterated there is the huge difference between giving and the feeling of receiving focusing that if the student feels s/he received well is of meaning; otherwise, it is meaningless. Furthermore, he stated that he strongly put these subjects in the meetings of the thematic group, where there were huge discussions on these contents in the presence of DPs as well. He interestingly reflected that they listened to his concerns attentively. He also summarized, saying that there was a positive discussion in the thematic group, which he took as the positive part of his involvement. Furthermore, he added that he contributed most specifically in the area of TPD, teacher support and management of the SESP and generally in other areas as well by being part of general discussions and feedback collection programs. This makes me understand that he had some influence on SESP, most specifically in the areas regarding the facilities to be provided to the teachers and students.

As he was asked whether his concerns were included in the document, he answered:

There might be limitations of the nation/state in incorporating all our concerns. We cannot say there are no limitations. But we need to be a little bit positive in going ahead; we need to have positivity. I believe if there is space for being positive, we can be positive.

Responding to the query related to the incorporation of his concerns or voices, my fourth participant elaborated that there might be some limitations of the nation to bring all the concerns into the policy document. He further highlighted that he could not say there was no limitation, but added the need for positivity from the side of the government, as there is space to be positive. Here, my fourth participant's reflection makes me understand that though there are limitations to incorporate all the concerns of the stakeholders, the possible flexibility is to be maintained from the side of the government in the context of policy making.

While responding to the query regarding his area of contribution, he mentioned:

While sitting in a larger group as a whole, I put my ideas in other areas of SESP as well. Being basically part of the TPD and teacher management theme, my major contribution was basically in it, not in others. Other colleagues of the association participated in other themes. They had reflected/ provided feedback that they got the opportunity to put their ideas or contribute in the process.

Regarding the area of his contribution, my fourth participant reflected that while in the discussion programs in the larger group, he put his ideas in other areas of the SESP as well, rather than his designated area of TPD. He further shared that, being most specifically the part of the theme of teacher management and TPD he could contribute basically to it rather than in others. This also makes me understand that in the designated area, he influenced a lot as being the powerful participant, which can be aligned with the concept of the Social Systems Theory.

In connection with the consideration of his voices in the SESP formulation process, he mentioned:

I do not say I was not listened to or my voices are not allowed /SUNDAI SUNIENA VANNA CHAHI MILENA. There was no context, like you do not have the right to raise your voice. We were engaged and raised our voices. We promoted our agenda. But in the case of addressing our voices/agenda, the level (MATRA) of address is not at the appropriate/required level.

My fourth participant, in relation to the consideration of his voices on SESP, reflected that he could not easily say his voices were not listened to, as he highlighted that there was no restriction to put his voices as he was engaged and raised his voices promoting his, i.e., teachers' and students' agenda. But he further shared that the case of addressing the agenda and the level of address was not so appropriate. This again makes me understand that even the powerful ones like the leaders of CNT could put their ideas but might not be able to bring them all in the final document which again has the alignment with Policy Making Theory which talks that while finalizing the policies most of the engaged one's ideas may also be omitted or may also not be incorporated because of the influence of the policy elites.

From the above reflection of my participant four who is the central leader of the CNT, I understand that he has the moments of influence on SESP through putting his voices in most of the cases of the thematic area he was engaged, but again he reflects that many of his ideas were not documented in the final plan as they were to be incorporated to enhance the recognition of the teachers for quality education which indicate even for him as well there were challenges to make his voice recognized in this process. He further gives an impression of the less effective scholarship distribution, in which he had strongly raised his voice but could not convince the concerned parties to make it happen. The reflection of him makes me understand that he had the opportunity to be a part of the SESP process in many different moments, but there are certain areas where the voices were interrupted to be incorporated, which is similar to the ideas of Voice Theory and Policy Making Theory.

The fifth participant of mine is again the leader of the SMC association. I interviewed her to cross-validate and triangulate the information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association. Her reflection in relation to the moments of influence on the SESP process was, *"There is a context of being participated. I mean, we did not participate. I think we were not engaged, thinking that we would be informed, we put our concerns and we put GUNASO."* She further questions, *"Will there be an effective school education policy by keeping the representative of the SMC association outside of the policy process? Do not we have to develop capacity?"*

She added:

In my opinion, SMC/ SMC Association is to be taken as the key stakeholder.

We go to school at least once every two months to seek assistance and support

from the school. So, we need to be taken as the backbone of the whole education process. We are to be called/invited through correspondence. Sectoral representation is to be ensured. Gender representation is also to be ensured. The accountability of the concerned must be ensured. Only saying three people in the committee is not enough. We need to get the opportunity for exposure and awareness. The representation is to be ensured through informing/awareness, empowerment, and incentivization. (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

Reflecting the moments of influence on the SESP process, my fifth participant shared that she had no context of being engaged in the process. She expressed this in a satirical way, suggesting that they were not engaged, thinking that they would be informed of the plan's process and would also have the opportunity to express their concerns and issues. She further questioned whether there would be an effective school education policy keeping the representative of the SMC association outside of the policy process and whether it was not necessary to develop their capacity. Furthermore, she opined and highlighted that they are to be taken as the backbone of the whole education process and the key stakeholder, as they go to school at least once every two months to see how the school activities are run and if the school requires any support and assistance. She aggressively added that they were to be called through formal correspondence to ensure sectoral representation. Her further expression was on the need to ensure gender representation as well as accountability. She also reflected that only keeping three people in the committee is not enough, but they need to have the opportunity for exposure and awareness. She summarized, expressing that the representation is to be ensured through awareness, empowerment, and incentivization.

From the above reflection of my fifth participant, I come to understand that she had almost no moments of influence on the SESP process, even if the SMC association is the key stakeholder of the school education sector. From her reflection, it can also be said that she was less able to influence or impact SESP through her voice, which indicates that the voices of the SMC association were not well listened to. This suggests that the information of the second participant aligns with that of the fifth one, as both stated that there was almost no representation of the SMC association's voice in the SESP process, despite the association being of key value in the context of the school education sector. This makes me further think whether there

is an influence of the voices of all the concerned stakeholders in SESP, which again is linked with the concept of the Voice Theory and the Policy Making Theory.

My sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, reflected on her experience of the moments of influence on SESP, saying, *“As I was not engaged in this process specifically, I cannot say anything specifically.”* She adds why that happened, saying, *“As I was not in the central committee of the NARMIN, but only in the secretariat, I did not get the opportunity to be part of the process in detail.”* (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

The sixth participant reflected that she had no specific opportunity to participate in the SESP process as an influencing participant. Furthermore, she clarified that she did not have the opportunity to be part of the process in detail, as she was not a member of the central committee of NARMIN, but rather served in the secretariat.

From the above reflection of my sixth participant, I also came to know that there was very little, i.e., almost null influence of her voice in the SESP process. Furthermore, it can be said that even as the leader of the NARMIN and in the secretariat, she did not get a chance to put her voice in the SESP process. It makes me link the ideas with the Policy Making Theory, which indicates in some of the cases the key stakeholders are also left aside from the process because of the influence of the limited elites.

After taking the reflection of the sixth participant, I interviewed the next leader of the same association as my seventh participant, from whom I wanted to validate the reflection of the sixth participant and seek NARMIN leaders' experience about the moments of influence on SESP processes. As he was asked about his influence in this regard, he presented his experience as, *“...I participated in one of the interaction programs organized by the ministry in a hotel in Kathmandu and put some of my ideas in a group discussion where I was not the group leader.”*

Asked to mention the component of the SESP in which he got the opportunity to contribute more, he mentioned, *“With laughter... as I said, I was just engaged in an interaction and feedback collection program, I could not specifically contribute any of the aspects of SESP. I just gave some ideas in a general manner.”* As he was asked why they did not get opportunities to contribute to this important plan, even being the key stakeholder, he responded, *“Um... (With Smile) ...I repeated many times, it is a matter of realizing federalism and the essence of the constitution.”* While asking

about their pressure for their engagement, he informed, *“Yes, because of our pressure nowadays, we are called. But during that time, we were also new and could not influence well, as they had the nature of ignoring us, as I had mentioned earlier.”* In the query whether their voices were taken into consideration during the SESP formulation process, he responded:

With Laughter... I have to say yes, as I was engaged in one program. But I myself would like to question: Is it good to involve the stakeholders like us in only one general program, not from the very beginning of agenda setting?

In the concern why not in the whole process he was involved, he said, *“Um... as I mentioned earlier because of the negligence and the nature of the center, forgetting the essence of the constitution. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)*

My seventh participant reflected that he participated in one or two of the interaction programs organized by the ministry in a hotel in Kathmandu and put some ideas in a group discussion where he was a group participant, not even the group leader. He further remarked with laughter that he could not contribute specifically to the SESP process as he was just engaged in interaction and feedback collection programs. He further expressed, in a smiling manner, that it was a matter of realizing federalism and the essence of the Constitution. As asked about the pressurization, he further reflected that because of the pressure nowadays they are called upon, but the aforesaid situation happened as they were new and could not influence and the central authority had the nature of ignoring the stakeholders like NARMIN. In the concern of why their voices were not taken into account, he shared that he was engaged in only one or two programs, and how he could say he had the opportunity to influence the policy process. But he himself asked the question, like whether it was good to involve the stakeholders like them in only one or two general programs, not from the very beginning of agenda setting. Relating to the area of his contribution, he reflected that he was engaged in only one or two interaction programs, so how could he specify the area of influence or contribution, as he put his ideas in a general manner in the group work activities. It was because of the negligence and the nature of forgetting the essence of the constitution on the side of the centre.

The above reflection of my seventh participant gives me the ideas that he did not have very good opportunity of influencing the process as he got the opportunity to be its part only once or twice in interaction programs. As he got the opportunity to be

the part of the SESP process as a workshop participant in one or two programs that was/were held in a hotel in Kathmandu, moments of influence were so nominal, even if NARMIN is taken as the key stakeholder of the SESP process, as the chair of NARMIN is there in the steering committee of the SESP. It informs me that the representation of the voices of the NARMIN people is so minimal and the opportunity to put their voices is so limited in SESP. This is also linked with the essence of Voice Theory and the Social Systems Theory, which indicate that in the process of policy formulation, there is the influence of powerful ones or the societal structures.

From the above interpretation of the reflections of my seven participants, it can be concluded that most participants had only a limited opportunities/moments of influence on the SESP process through including their voices. There was an effective influence of the first (government official) and fourth (CNT leader) participants in the process of the SESP formulation, as they shared that they were involved in many different events as meaningful participants. The third participant (Parents' association leader) shared that he had a ceremonial kind of opportunity to contribute, the fifth (SMC association leader) shared as having no opportunity, and the seventh (NARMIN leader) also shared as having only a limited opportunity/moment to influence in the SESP process as he was the participant of one or two interaction programs held in a hotel of Kathmandu. From this discussion, I am again convinced by the concept of Cairney (2020), who explores the concept of power in the public policy-making process, highlighting multiple dimensions and implications of it. He further emphasizes the debate on measuring power, distinguishing between visible and hidden forms. It underlines how actors i.e. stakeholders, impact policy by framing issues as public or private concerns during the course of policy formulation. Power is exercised through state authority, persuasion, and deep-rooted norms, shaping policy agendas, design and decision-making. Critically, power determines what knowledge is considered valid in evidence-based policy-making, influencing whose voices are heard or who have various opportunities of making their voices heard during policy processes. This perspective is relevant to Nepal's education policy, most specifically in the case of formulating the SESP, where stakeholders' voices are seen as marginalized by dominant actors. This idea is also connected with Parsons (1991), who conceptualizes society as a structured system where human relations are governed by mutually accepted norms, values, and standards. The theory of action framework describes how individuals operate within social structures shaped by

environmental factors, including resources, population, and communication. His work is momentous in understanding how power and agency function within social systems in the context of policy development. This perspective is vital for analyzing Nepal's education policy, most specifically school education policies like the SESP, where stakeholder voices are mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, influencing policy outcomes. Parsons' (1991) concept of the social system offers a framework for understanding how societal structures function through roles, norms, and institutionalized expectations. His action approach elaborates human behavior within a structured system, shaped by motivational and value orientations. Parsons presents pattern variables, dichotomies that guide social action, and categorizes four functional prerequisites: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (AGIL). These elements shape policy processes, highlighting the influential moments in which whose voices are heard and legitimized. In the process of the SESP formulation, it is seen that there was the influence or impact of the first and fourth participants more, whereas the influence was very little for the others which can be discussed as the voices of the two i.e. the first one and the fourth one, were legitimized because of their influential inputs, but others did not have that opportunity. This perspective is further critical in Nepal's education policy, in the case of SESP as well, where stakeholders' voices are seen filtered through institutional structures and power dynamics, which is also aligned with the concepts of the theories viz. Voice Theory, Policy-making Theory, and the Social Systems Theory that I had taken to back up my study and the essence of them is that there is the influence of the powerful ones in the policy process rather than that of all the concerned stakeholders.

Suggestions for Engaging Future Education Policies

After the interviews with my participants, I developed three different sub-themes under the theme that is representation of stakeholders' voices in SESP formulation process, and I tried to bring their suggestions for engaging future education policies as the sub-theme required to improve the representation of the voices of the concerned stakeholders as most of my participants' provided their feedback and suggestions in this regard reflecting their ideas while responding my queries during the interview process. They sometimes provided their feedback while responding to the interview queries and in some cases, they were also asked to suggest to make future education policies more engaging, as most of them reflected that the SESP process was not that participatory.

As the first participant who is a government official asked to suggest the measures for better incorporation and representation of the voices of key stakeholders in future education policies, as well as to provide suggestions to policymakers, he responded as follows:

Suggestions of my first participant for engaging future education policies

As a government official, the level of my engagement can be taken as okay. But as per my understanding, many of the related stakeholders have not had the chance to be part of the SESP formulation process. As policy formulation is a time-consuming task, it is supposed to be done involving as many key stakeholders as possible taking the necessary time. We know that in many cases, the real stakeholders do not get the information even if the documents are kept on the official websites. Sometimes they do not understand it. In my opinion, the problem of non-implementation of the policies of Nepal is due to the lack of awareness of the concerned stakeholders during the policy process. I think the real stakeholders are to be made aware, their feedback is to be taken, and the policies are to be validated by consulting them if we want to make the policies more valid and implementable. My final saying is that to incorporate the voices of the stakeholders and to represent the key stakeholders in the policy processes we need to focus on advocacy for creating awareness among them, we need to lobby, and have to develop feedback forums so that the concerned stakeholders feel they are the part of the policy process, take ownership, and the policies are well implemented as required.

Um... (longer and smile) for bringing the real voices of real stakeholders, we are supposed to/have to share the draft version of the framework, concept note, and other documents with them. Furthermore, um...sharing the draft version of the policies or other documents, we can request them to participate in a detailed study and ask them to provide feedback. And with some specific stakeholders who are the most important ones, ah... we can develop a communication channel um... a more effective communication channel can be used. The draft we sent via email or requested over the phone does not work well. We can ask them for their important time during which we are not supposed to interrupt. Then, as per their appropriate time, um...we can organize programs for collecting feedback and suggestions. And another thing is (CHAIN) in connection to the subject matter/ related to the policy to be developed um... (A longer breath and smile) ...there may be independent or government

agencies' research activities or the research might have taken place, HAINA...we have not been giving so much importance to the findings of those researches. If we consider them or if these things are taken into consideration, and then after, if policies are developed/formulated, they can be CHAIN um...evidence-based policies and um...realistic and implementable as well in my CHAIN opinion. (#Participant 1, Interview, 22 October 2024 and 24 December 2024).

To make engaging future policies, my first participant presented his suggestions as shown in the above box. He expressed that he had taken his engagement fine as a government official. He further shared that, to his understanding, many other stakeholders did not have the opportunity to participate in the SESP process. He also indicated that the policy formulation is a time-consuming task and is supposed to involve as many key stakeholders as possible, taking the necessary time. He added that in many cases, the real stakeholders do not receive the information, even if the documents are shared on websites, because they do not understand it. He also opined that the policies of Nepal seem-not to be implemented effectively, as the relevant stakeholders are not informed or made aware of them during the development process. His suggestions in this background were that the real stakeholders are to be made aware, their feedback is to be taken, and the policies are to be validated, consulting them to make the policies more valid and implementable. He further suggested that to incorporate the voices of the stakeholders and to represent the key stakeholders in the policy processes we need to focus on advocacy for creating awareness among them, we need to lobby, and to develop feedback forums so that the concerned stakeholders would feel they are the part of the policy process, take ownership, and the policies would be well implemented as required. His additional suggestions were that to bring the real voices of real stakeholders, we are supposed to share the draft version of the framework, concept note, and other documents with them. In the same way, he added measures to make engaging policies that share the draft version of the policies or other documents, we could request them to participate in a detailed study and ask them to provide feedback. He also suggested that with some specific stakeholders who are the most important ones, we can develop a communication channel and a more effective communication channel can be used. He critically shared that the draft we sent through email only or asking through phone only does not work well, so we could ask them their important time in which we are

not supposed to interrupt, and then, as per their appropriate time, we could organize programs for collecting feedback and suggestions. He further suggested to have independent or government agencies' research activities as the base for policies to be developed, which we have not been giving so much importance to the findings of those research. These, as per him, will be very helpful to make the evidence-based, realistic and implementable policies.

My first participant is a government official under MoEST. He presented during the interview that most of the key stakeholders are not aware of the policy process, even if they are asked to provide their feedback, as the documents on government websites and portals. He also expressed his concern that the policy-making process is a time-consuming one and needs greater stakeholder participation and engagement. He criticized, saying that our policies are almost lacking, making them not owned by the real stakeholders, which hinders their implementation. So, he suggested that the feedback is to be taken, maintaining their quality time, taking the consent of stakeholders, developing a feedback forum, and making evidence-based policies through the evidence of the research initiatives, which Nepali policy-making lacks. This picturizes that there is a huge need to take care of considering stakeholders' engagement and their voices in education policy processes of Nepal i.e., to make engaging future education policies.

My second participant, who is the central leader of the SMC association, also suggested making the future education policies better, incorporating and representing the voices of key stakeholders. His suggestions were as follows:

Suggestions of my second participant for engaging future education policies

Policies need to come with the wider consultation of all the stakeholders, and a mechanism to listen to the voices of the lower/grassroot level is to be developed and made strong enough. Only those who are high sounding (for example, the teachers) have the opportunity to put their voices or be listened to. But the voices of the voiceless are unheard/ neglected. Is not it necessary to develop a mechanism to listen to the voice of the voiceless? Where is that mechanism? To listen to the parents, the valid organization of the SMC association should be well included. Is not it? Let's make this association, the formal mechanism of the parents incorporating the heart and soul of the children, stronger and more functional in the context of developing education policies like SESP.

... If we consider the above-mentioned kind of things during the process of SESP implementation and in the process of developing education policies like the proposed education act, the formulated policies are implemented well and the children are also not penalized. ...The stakeholders are neither listened to nor are awareness created through skill and knowledge development schemes. The policies are to be brought with the concept of capacitating SMC and its association through the program and budget. (#Participant 2, Interview, 26 October 2024)

My second participant, who is the central leader of the SMC association, suggested that for future policies to be effective, they need to come with the wider consultation of all the stakeholders, and a mechanism to listen to the voices of the lower/grassroot level needs to be developed and made strong enough. He aggressively expressed that those who were high sounding (for example, the teachers) had the opportunity to put their voices forward or were listened to, but the voices of the voiceless were unheard/ neglected in the SESP process. Then he questioned whether it was not necessary to develop a mechanism to listen to the voiceless and further questioned the whereabouts of that mechanism. Furthermore, he suggested including a valid organization of parents, i.e., the SMC association, in the policy process of school education, adding to make this association the formal mechanism for parents, incorporating the heart and soul of the children, and making it stronger and more functional in the context of developing education policies, such as SESP. He also highlighted that if we considered the above-mentioned kind of things during the process of SESP implementation and in the process of developing education policies like the proposed education act, the formulated policies would be implemented well and the children would also not be penalized. He blamed that the real stakeholders are neither listened to nor awareness is created through skill and knowledge development schemes and suggested that the policies are to be brought with the concept of capacitating SMC and its association through the program and budget.

My second participant is the senior central committee representative of the SMC association. He was seriously worried about how we could develop the ownership and implementation modality without the engagement of the real stakeholders in the policy formulation process. He strongly demanded the representation of key stakeholders in the SESP and other education policies of Nepal. As our policies lack this, making the policies not owned by the real stakeholders, hindering the implementation of those policies, he focused on taking the SMC

association as the mechanism for feedback, making the future policies of school education more engaging and inclusive. From this, I have realized that there is a huge need to take care of considering stakeholders' engagement and their voices in education policy processes of Nepal so that we can enhance ownership and make the policies more implementable, which again is aligned with the concept of the Policy-making Theory.

My third participant is the central leader of the parents' association. As he was asked to suggest the measures for better incorporation and representation of the voices of key stakeholders, as well as to provide suggestions to policymakers for more engaging future education policies, he responded as follows:

Suggestions of my third participant for engaging future education policies

We are becoming like the ornaments that are kept secretly most of the time and are worn in some ceremonies. I mean, we have become like the ceremonial kind of stakeholders, mostly not listened to, but sometimes disclosed in certain ceremonies. The policymakers need to understand that the real advocates of the students are the parents. We are to be made a part of the policies, considering the participatory approach. We are not only to be used, but to be engaged and really utilized. We are to be engaged in all the processes of agenda setting and policy decisions. We are not making engagement only for the sake of involvement. We do not have to forget (CHUKNU VAENA) involving the real stakeholders, including PTA. Basically, the role is to be provided through the association/network of the parents, the policies are to be made through the parenting education and awareness/JAGARUKTA, and by creating awareness of the parents, the most loved of the children, through parenting education, the groups like parents' association and the PTA are to be mobilized to make policies.

... Can the government expect good results without involving/mobilizing the resource like the parents, or will there be positive/better results without the mobilization of the resource like parents? In the part of the policy/plan/program, all the concerned stakeholders should mobilize together. We are to be mobilized as a team.

... develop the ownership using the mechanism for the feedback system. Let's focus on engagement. Let's not only seek the appeal (MAGPATRA). Let's not make a situation where the mother feeds only when the child cries. We need to take care that the feeding is necessary from time to time. The community organization/ manpower that

is established completely for voluntary contribution is to be provided the opportunity/space. Most specifically, let us go forward through the parents' association as the collective team. Let's develop a feedback mechanism/ system. Let's use the formed mechanism rather than forming a new one. Let's provide the opportunity for engagement and ownership. Let's not make this association a matter to be used if liked or thrown if disliked, and let's make it obligatory to take it throughout the process rather than leaving it... Let us empower the mechanism that already exists to develop ownership through meaningful engagement. Empowering the existing mechanism lets us develop ownership through meaningful engagement.

(#Participant 3, Interview, 5 November 2024)

The third participant, who is the leader of the parents' association, reflected that they are becoming like ornaments that are kept secretly most of the time and are worn in some ceremonies. He meant that they became like the ceremonial kind of stakeholders, mostly not listened to, but sometimes acknowledged in certain ceremonies. He suggested that policymakers need to understand that the real advocates for students are their parents, and they should be included in the policies, considering a participatory approach. He further added that they are not only to be used but also to be engaged and truly utilized, and to be involved in all the processes, from agenda setting to policy decisions. Additionally, he reflected that they should not be engaged solely for involvement, and the real stakeholders, including the PTA, should not be forgotten during the policy process. His specific suggestion was that the role should be provided through the association/network of parents, policies should be developed through parenting education and awareness, and by creating awareness among parents, the most loved of the children. He added that through parenting education, groups like the parents' association and the PTA are to be mobilized to make policies. He also questioned whether the government can expect good results without involving/mobilizing the resources of the parents. He also suggested mobilizing all the stakeholders together as a team. He asked the concerned authority to develop and use a mechanism for a feedback system and ownership. He focused on not making a situation where the mother feeds only when the child cries and added to provide the opportunity/space to the community organization/ human resource that is established completely for voluntary contribution. Furthermore, he suggested to go forward through the parents' association as the collective team, develop one door

feedback mechanism/system, use the formed mechanism rather than forming the new one, provide the opportunity of the engagement and ownership, not make this association as the matter to be used if liked or thrown if disliked, and make it obligatory taking it throughout the process rather than leaving it. He summarized, saying that the mechanism that already exists is to be empowered to develop ownership through meaningful engagement.

From the above reflections of my third participant, who is the leader of the parents' association, I came to understand that he had very few opportunities to be a part of SESP. Only on a ceremonial basis, he got the opportunity to be part of it as he reflected that he was engaged in the ceremonial basis, as the ornament was disclosed in some of the ceremonies and kept hidden in other situations. It shows that there was less engagement of the concerned stakeholders in our policies, specifically in the SESP. So, he suggested creating awareness of the parents/association, and engaging the already built mechanism of the parents' association throughout the process, as they are the real bearers of the voices of school children. This scenario shows the inadequacy of the real stakeholders in the SESP process and he highlights the high demand for stakeholders' engagement in the processes and His suggestion seems valid to make future policies more engaging, which is also aligned with the essence of the Voice Theory, which expects the engagement of the real stakeholders in the policy processes.

My fourth participant is the central leader of the CNT. As he was asked to suggest the measures for better incorporation and representation of the voices of key stakeholders, as well as to provide suggestions to policymakers for more engaging future policies, he reflected as in the box below:

Suggestions of my fourth participant for engaging future education policies

In the context of policy formulation, we, in other words, the key stakeholders, are to be linked/engaged from the very beginning of primary framework development, that is, agenda setting. If that happens, we can link our agenda in the agenda setting. Only being engaged after the development of the framework, some essential aspects may be left to be included in the agenda of the policy. If we are engaged from the very beginning of the policy process, it will be meaningful as the appropriate recognition of this larger community of key stakeholders. I again say, it is a must to involve us from the very beginning of the agenda setting to design, policy dialogue, decision, and

the implementation of the policy. In my opinion, the total effort of education policy-making specifically is enabling teachers to deliver well, enhancing the learning achievement of students. All the other things are secondary ones. The responsible person for effective delivery, that is, the teacher and the student, who is the recipient of quality education, are the primary right holders to be part of the policy processes firsthand. I mean, it is a must to involve the teacher and student at first in the policy-making process. The teacher and student are to be listened to more. Their voices are to be listened to the most. Here, I see confusion about who to listen to. The school-level student is too small to put his/her voice. In one sense, we can say that s/he is almost voiceless. I am not devaluing/degrading them as the small ones. But the case is that they do not easily/rightly understand their problems, express themselves well, get an opportunity for it, or have space to do so. The children whom we teach are not even adolescents, I mean, they are small ones. The voices of those children and the presenter of the agenda of the teachers are the teachers/professional organization. While talking about teachers, I have been taking the school-level employees as well. In all the processes/steps of policy formulation, from the very beginning to decision as well as implementation, the main/key stakeholders are the teachers. They are to be more engaged and listened to. They are to be listened to with high priority.

First and foremost, the key stakeholders, the teachers and the students, are to be engaged from the beginning stage of the policy process. As I have already mentioned, the state is to be ready to listen to their voices with priority. The government is to be open enough and enhance its capacity to spend in the sector of education and the government should have an interest to spend with a bigger interest (MAN FUKAUNE MAN PANI HUNUPARYO). If there is capacity, but no interest (MAN), the process does not proceed effectively. In the same way, if there is interest (MAN), but no capacity, again that does not work. In my feeling there is no realization that the foundation/starting point of the development of all the sectors is education.

(#Participant 4, Interview, 8 November 2024)

My fourth participant, who is the central leader of the CNT, suggested that, in the context of policy formulation, key stakeholders should be linked/engaged from the very beginning of primary framework development, which is, agenda setting. He added that if this is done, they can link their agenda to the agenda setting, as some essential aspects may be overlooked if they are engaged after agenda setting. He

highlighted that if they are engaged from the very beginning of the policy process, it would be meaningful, as the appropriate recognition of this larger community of key stakeholders would take place. He reiterated that it is essential to involve them from the very beginning of the agenda-setting process to design, policy dialogue, decision-making, and the implementation of the policy. He further opined that total effort of education policy-making specifically is enabling teachers to deliver well, enhancing the learning achievement of students, as all the other things are secondary to them as he added the responsible person for effective delivery, that is teacher and the receiver of quality education that is student, are the primary right holder to be first-hand part of the policy processes. His focus was on involving the teacher and student at first in the policy-making process, as the teacher and student are supposed to be listened to more. He highlighted that the school level student is small to put his/her voice, or the case is that they do not easily/rightly understand their problems, express well, get an opportunity for it, or have space to do so, the children whom they (the school teachers) teach are not even adolescents i.e. they are small ones. As per him, the ventilator of the voices of those children and the presenter of the agenda of the teachers is a professional organization of the teachers i.e. the CNT. His highlight was that in all the processes/steps of policy formulation, from the very beginning to decision as well as implementation, the main/key stakeholder is the teacher, who is represented from the CNT, which is to be made a part of the policy process to represent the voices of the concerned stakeholders. He reiterated that they are to be more engaged and listened to with high priority.

For making more effective policies through the voices listened to my fourth participant reflected that first and foremost thing is the key stakeholders the teachers and the students are to be engaged from the beginning stage of the policy process adding that the state is to be ready to listen to their voices with priority, the government is to be open enough and enhance its capacity to spend in the sector of education and the government should have interest to spend with a bigger interest. Furthermore, he reflected that if there is capacity, but no interest, the process does not proceed effectively and in the same way, if there is interest, but no capacity, again that does not work. So, he added that the realization of education as the foundation/starting point of the development of all the sectors is to be taken into consideration.

My fourth participant is the leader of CNT. From his above reflections, I came to understand in brief that he had the opportunity to be a part of SESP not from the beginning, i.e., agenda setting, but from the dialogue to policy decisions. Many more, his concern was that in the policy-making process, the teachers and the students are to be kept at the center, as they are the key stakeholders in the case of the education policy process. He further suggested using the mechanism of teacher professional organizations i.e., CNT, to make informed policies with the voices of related stakeholders. This suggests that there is a huge need to take care of considering stakeholders' engagement and their voices in education policy processes of Nepal, which is aligned with the ideas of the Voice Theory, which expects involving real stakeholders to make engaging policies with ownership and also make the policies more implementable.

The fifth participant of mine is again the leader of the SMC association. I had interviewed her to validate the information of the second participant, who is also the leader of the same association. Her reflection on making engaging future education policies was as follows:

Suggestions of my fifth participant for engaging future education policies

Our saying is that the good doers are to be awarded. Our capacity is to be developed. We are to be engaged in each and every aspect of the policy process. Our success stories are to be highlighted. The contribution of the parents/community should be recognized well. Collaboration is to be there by bringing the new tools/ concepts. In the case of participation, it is to be meaningful. Do not we need the participation in the case of formulating this big plan? We should not be left out. (#Participant 5, Interview, 2 December 2024)

My fifth participant, in relation to make future education policies are more engaging, reflected that the good doors are to be awarded and their capacity is to be developed. She further highlighted that the SMC association should be engaged in every aspect of the policy process, recognizing the success stories and contributions of parents and the community. She also focused on the need for collaboration by bringing the new tools/concepts. Her further reflection was that the participation is to be made more meaningful, questioning whether the participation of the SMC association is not needed in the formulation of this big plan and that they should not be left out.

From the above reflection of my fifth participant, I come to understand that the policies are to be made involving the stakeholders, like the SMC association, with innovative tools and techniques. This makes me further link it with the concept of the Voice Theory, which seeks the need for the engagement of the real stakeholders in the process of policy development to make more engaging policies.

My sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, reflected her ideas regarding engaging future education policies as shown in the box below:

Suggestions of my sixth participant for engaging future education policies

We need to incorporate the experiences of NARMIN, MUAN, and CNT-like structures, as well as the ministries of the provinces and the center.

Furthermore, we have to incorporate the voices/experiences of the experts as well. The experiences of yesterday were not all bad. We need to work as per the spirit of the constitution, taking the advice of the concerned. The federal level is only supposed to develop the standards. The proposed education bill itself does not catch the spirit of the Constitution. The teachers are saying we don't obey the local levels. What's it?

We need to stay in the spirit of the Constitution. The present education bill, as well, is against the spirit of the Constitution. Is the federal level only supposed to develop the standards, or not? Local Levels/Governments are supposed to lead and improve the education. Um...if so, then they are compulsorily to be engaged in the policy formulation process. The base of education is school education, not higher education. The expertise of experience in policy formulation is really/originally there in the Local Governments, isn't it?

If a child is born with disability, we cannot say that he or she is not mine. So, of whatever quality, we do have the constitution. Now we need to take it as ours and move forward as per its spirit. Main measures could be: The accountability of all the local levels will be taken by NARMIN and MUAN. They also take accountability for students, teachers, parents, and SMC as well. As per the suggestions of other stakeholders, let us, the Local Government (MUAN, NARMIN) and MoEST/CEHRD, sit together for further tasks. Let's develop the education policies, taking the recommendations/feedback (RAY) of the grassroots and discussing at

CEHRD/MoEST. Who does what is not clear. Let's make it clear. Let's provide a leading role in education/policy at the local levels. Let's give them authority (JIMMA) to develop specific standards at the federal level. Also, involve them in developing the standards. Let's make the LGs different, making it a place that works for the people, not asking for facilities or personnel. Let's not dominate the local levels (STHANIYA TAHALAI NAHEPAU). Let's develop policies focusing on bringing the quality as well as localizing them. We do have different LGs inside and outside (BAHIRA HERDAKO LG RA VITRA HERDAKO LG FARAK XA). We need to give the responsibility/authority as per the principle of proximity. We have to understand that the nearest one knows better than the farthest one. We have to enhance the capacity of the Local Levels. Why do we need to go jumping from the center for everything? (KENDRA BATA HAMFALERA KIN JANA PARYO SABAI KURA KA LAGI?).

Everyone understands/feels his/her rights. Let's recognize the feelings (BHAWANA KO KADAR GARAU). Let's bring the policies within the stipulated timeline, catching the spirit of the time. Let's do coordination and co-work. Let's consider the diversity, recognition, and resources. Also, let's consider the policies as per the geography. Let's develop the policies that enhance the ownership of the concerned stakeholders. Let's bring the recognizable standards and develop the policies based on them. Let's develop the policies that consider good governance, development and service delivery. Let's bring the policies that support bringing the children to school and the quality education that the mid-day meals program has been providing. (#Participant 6, Interview, 23 December 2024)

As mentioned in the table above, my sixth participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, focused on making future education policies more engaging. This involved incorporating the experiences of NARMIN, MUAN, CNT-like structures, and the ministries of provinces and the center. Furthermore, she added that she would also incorporate the voices/experiences of the experts. Her saying was that the experiences of yesterday were not all bad, but there is a need to work in accordance with the spirit of the constitution, taking the advice of the relevant authorities. Her focus was that the federal level is only supposed to develop the standards and questioned the

development process of the proposed education bill itself, which, in her view, does not capture the spirit of the constitution, as teachers claim they do not obey local levels. She further questioned what that is. Her further reflection was that we are supposed to stay true to the spirit of the constitution, focusing on the lead role of local levels to improve school education, as the federal level is supposed to develop the standards only. Her further reflection was that to implement the essence of the constitution, local levels must be compulsorily engaged in the policy formulation process. She further questioned with the background that the base of education is the school education, not the higher education and the expertise of experience in policy formulation is there at the local levels. This highlights that her suggestions for making more engaging future policies, we need to involve the local levels, especially the MUAN/NARMIN, in a real sense.

For making the policies reflect the voices of the concerned stakeholders well, her further suggestion was that if a child is born with disability, we can not say that he or she is not mine and so is the case with the constitution, of whatever quality, we do have the constitution. She further added that we need to take it (the constitution) as ours and move forward as per its spirit. To make the future education policies more engaging, the main measures, as per her, could be the accountability of all the local levels. She added that the accountability would be taken by NARMIN and MUAN, and they also take the accountability of students, teachers, parents, and SMC as well. Her further saying was that as per the suggestions of other stakeholders let us i.e. Local Government (MUAN, NARMIN) and MoEST/CEHRD sit together for further tasks, develop the education policies taking the recommendations/feedback of grassroots and discussing at CEHRD/MoEST, provide leading role of the education/policy to the local levels, give them authority developing specific standards by the federal level, and also involve them in developing the standards, develop policies focusing on bringing the quality as well as localizing them, give the responsibility/authority as per the principle of proximity understanding that the nearest one knows better than the farthest one, and enhance the capacity of Local Levels not making the centre to jump for everything.

Another reflection to make future policies more engaging is that there is a need for coordination and collaboration, considering diversity, recognition, and resources, so that everyone feels included. Her further suggestion was to consider policies according to geography, enhancing stakeholder ownership by establishing

recognizable standards and developing policies based on them. She also focused on developing policies that consider good governance, development and service delivery. Furthermore, her focus was on formulating the policies that support bringing the children to school and providing quality education, as the mid-day meal program has been doing.

My sixth participant is the leader of NARMIN. Her concern to make engaging future policies was mostly focused on the representation of the NARMIN and related stakeholders in policy processes. She further strongly demanded the representation of key stakeholders in the SESP and other education policies of Nepal. From her, the NARMIN, one of the major stakeholders, was not represented in the SESP formulation process, which is unlikely to ensure stakeholder ownership of policies. From this, I have realized that the Nepalese policy process is less participatory, highlighting the significant need to consider stakeholders' engagement and their voices in education policy processes. I am now convinced by the ideas of the Voice Theory, which discusses the representation of key stakeholders in the policy process to enhance ownership and make policies more implementable.

My seventh participant, who is another leader of the same association, i.e., NARMIN, from whom I sought to validate the reflections of the sixth participant and obtained suggestions from NARMIN leaders for engaging in future education policies. As he was asked about his experiences in this regard, he reflected as in the box below.

Suggestions of my seventh participant for engaging future education policies

Yes, the success of the school-level education policies depends on the engagement of the Local Levels. So, we need to say them clearly that the policies are to be made by themselves. Uh... but the formulation of these policies will not be at individual local levels separately. In this context, for uniformity and equality, we can develop the mechanism of representation through a sampling method by making a cluster. With a smile...development of the policies is mainly the duty of the experts, but the policies are to be developed on the foundation of the experience of the Local Levels, developing a proper mechanism of their representation. Then, on the basis of the content and context, like National Education Policy, the need for human resource production, etc., the experts have to draft the policies putting their valid ideas and expertise. Doing as said above and making the policies as developed, involving our

voices with proper discussion. (YI CHIJBIB GARERA HAMILE BANA EKO VANERA JADA PO HUNXA MANTHAN GARERA).

The three levels (Local, Provincial and Federal), as per the essence of the constitution and the contextual need within the parameters of the national education policy, the mechanism is to be formulated with the help of MUAN, NARMIN, and teachers. Um...there may be the frame of the National Planning Commission (NPC). So, we need the inclusion of the NPC in the mechanism. With a simple smile or aggression....in this way, with the engagement of experts, NARMIN, MUAN, NPC, the federal ministry that looks after the education sector (MoEST), provincial government/ ministry, it would be better if the policy is made with experts in the inclusion of the NARMIN and MUAN. With a little bit of seriousness...if done as told, the policies can be taken as made by themselves who have to work using the policies (TESO GARDA JASLE KAM GARNE HO TESAILE BANA EKO JASTO BANXA HOLA). The policies are to be made by those who the policies are. (#Participant 7, Interview, 30 December 2024)

To make future education policies more engaging, my seventh participant reflected that the success of the school-level education policies depends on the engagement of the local levels. He further shared that the policies are to be made by themselves i.e., at the local levels, by informing them clearly. However, he added that the formulation of these policies would not be at the individual local level separately, as in this context, for the sake of uniformity and equality, we could develop a mechanism of representation through a sampling method by creating clusters. He also added, with a smile, that the development of policies is mainly the duty of experts, but these policies should be developed on the foundation of the experience of local levels, establishing a proper mechanism for their representation. He then added that, on the basis of the content and context, like the National Education Policy, the need for human resource production, etc., the experts have to draft the policies, putting their valid ideas and expertise. He further elaborated that the policies are to be developed by representation of the voices of the local levels i.e. NARMIN/MUAN, with proper discussion.

In the concern about the mechanism for making the voices listened to, he said that the three levels (Local, Provincial, and Federal), as per the essence of the constitution and the contextual need within the parameters of the national education

policy, the mechanism is to be formulated with the help of MUAN/NARMIN, and teachers. He further highlighted that there might be a framework of the National Planning Commission (NPC), and therefore, we need to include the NPC in the mechanism. He added, with a simple smile or aggression, that with the engagement of experts, including NARMIN, MUAN, NPC, the federal MoEST, and the provincial government/ministry, it would be better if the policy were made with the inclusion of experts from NARMIN and MUAN. He, with a little bit of seriousness, highlighted that if done as told, the policies could be taken as made by themselves who have to work using the policies, or as the policies are to be made by themselves for whom the policies are.

From the above reflections of my seventh participant, who is the leader of NARMIN, I have come to understand that, as the sixth participant, he focused on the need to utilize NARMIN/MUAN-like mechanisms to create more engaging future education policies, thereby enhancing their ownership and making the policies more implementable. He further strongly suggested the representation of key stakeholders in policies such as the SESP and other education policies in Nepal. From him, NARMIN, one of the major stakeholders, was not visibly represented in the SESP formulation process, which is unlikely to lead to stakeholder ownership of policies, suggesting that this approach should be avoided in future policies. From this, I have realized that Nepal's policy process is less participatory, highlighting the significant need to consider stakeholders' engagement and their voices in future education policy processes in Nepal through the use of mechanisms like the NARMIN/MUAN, as suggested by my seventh participant. I would also like to link this with the ideas of the Policy-making Theory, which indicates the need to involve key stakeholders in the policy processes for policy ownership.

From the interpretation of the reflections of my participants in connection to suggestions for making future education policies more engaging with the representation of the stakeholders' voices, it could be concluded that almost all of them are in agreement that certain mechanisms are to be developed and, using various instruments, the voices are to be captured. From this, I am convinced that each and every stakeholder expects to represent his/her voices in the policy documents. Regarding the representation of the voices of the stakeholders in policy processes, the participants suggest formulating the mechanisms, creating awareness through advocacy and capacity building, educating the concerned, and so on. They also

highlighted that bringing the voices of the stakeholders not only maintains the formality enough, but also the various measures like utilizing the media, organizing discussion forums, asking the representatives of the different stakeholders to be in the committees, and other mechanisms, mobilizing the governmental and non-governmental organizations, making the dedicated committees/other instruments more aware and proactive are required. The Participants, two (SMC association leader) and four (CNT leader), shared the common point that certain mechanisms are required for the voices of the stakeholders to be captured. The sixth and seventh participants (both of whom are the central leaders of NARMIN) suggested making a mechanism that resembles the presence of all three tiers of government. The sixth participant asked to sit with the local government and the MoEST/CEHRD together, whereas the seventh one suggested developing a mechanism involving representatives of three tiers of government and having the hold of MUAN/ NARMIN. It is again connected with the ideas of Parsons (1991), who conceptualizes society as a structured system where human interactions are governed by commonly accepted norms, values and standards. His theory of action framework clarifies how individuals function within societal structures shaped by environmental factors, such as resources, population, and communication. This perspective is also crucial for analyzing Nepal's education policy, such as the SESP, where stakeholder voices are mediated by institutional norms and systemic constraints, influencing policy outcomes that require certain mechanisms for making policies more informed and engaging regarding the inclusion of marginalized voices, i.e., grassroots stakeholders, in policy processes. Parsons' (1991) concept of the social system provides a framework for understanding how societal structures function through roles, norms, and institutionalized expectations. His action approach explains human behavior within a structured system, shaped by motivational and value orientations. This perspective is critical in Nepal's education policy, where stakeholders' voices are filtered through institutional structures and power dynamics, yet there is a need for instruments and mechanisms to represent the stakeholders' voices in the relevant policies. All the ideas of my seven participants are directly or indirectly aligned with the theories viz. Voice Theory, Policy-making Theory, and the Social Systems Theory that I have taken to back up my research, which are all supportive and instrumental to make engaging education policies, as all of my participants provide some measures as suggestions to make engaging future education policies. The suggestions I found were instrumental in making the future

education policies of Nepal more engaging, bringing in the voices of grassroots stakeholders.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I started with the theme called the representation of stakeholders' voices in the SESP formulation process in Nepal. Under this, I developed three different sub-themes: experience of voice representation in SESP, moments of influence on SESP, and suggestions for engaging future education policies. The theme and sub-themes were developed by bringing together the reflections and experiences of all participants and deriving meaning from the similar and common views. The stories, experiences and ideas of the participants under them (theme and sub-themes) reflected that the representation of their voices and influencing moments are quite less. So, they suggested many different insightful ideas for making future education policies more engaging to enhance the stakeholders' ownership and make them (the policies) more implementable. Finally, I have concluded this chapter with this summary.

CHAPTER VI

KEY INSIGHTS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND REFLECTION

This chapter begins by presenting the key insights of my study through the exploration of my research questions as new knowledge induced from theoretical references and scholastic discourse. Besides this, it discusses those key insights generated through my study, linking them with literature and theories, as well as highlighting my understanding in this regard. This supports me to draw the conclusion and articulate the knowledge about the engagement, understanding and the recommendations of the participants in regard to voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal taking the case of SESP, which is under implementation in recent years as the priority program of government for the school education sector and making the future education policies of Nepal more engaging and participatory. Furthermore, it presents the implications of this study to myself, policy-making, and grassroots stakeholders. It also discusses my reflection on envisioning my research journey, where I present my feelings about exploring the voices of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, especially in the context of SESP. It also captures my experiences of developing it as the topic or issue of the study, as well as the whole process of reflecting on and creating ideas about it, and traveling through the journey of drafting this dissertation. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Key Insights and Discussion

My research journey on navigating voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal enriched me with very basic yet most important facts and ideas related to the engagement of concerned stakeholders in education policy processes, particularly the SESP-making process in Nepal. This was well substantiated by the meanings drawn from the perceptions and reflections of all my research participants, as well as my own retrospection and induction of teaching experiences, and the experiences under the MoEST. Additionally, it was supported by the knowledge and ideology presented by different scholars working in this field, including various empirical studies conducted previously.

This section highlights the key insights drawn from my study, which are followed by a discussion linking them with scholarly insights and backing them

through the relevant theories i.e. the Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory and the Social Systems Theory that I had taken as the theoretical referents of my study.

In my study, I found stakeholders like government officials and CNT leaders were heavily engaged and actively participated in the SESP formulation process. This key insight of mine is aligned with the key insight of Sharma and Kumar (2023), Haldey et al. (2024), Sakata and Kwegyir-Aggrey (2024), Hadijah (2024), and Puri and Chhetri (2024). They also claimed that stakeholder engagement in education policy must move beyond tokenistic and formalistic approaches by ensuring iterative, empowered, and inclusive participation that respects local expertise, builds capacity, and enables genuine co-creation and influence in decision-making, for which all the concerned ones are to be made engaged, but in many of the policy processes, only a few stakeholders are made more engaged. If I fuse Policy-making Theory with this key insight, then I come to the point of understanding that the theory posits that the elite are made more engaged and their voices are included in the policies. This underlying value of the theory interacts with my understanding, as my study also states that the participants who are in government and leaders of CNT got a huge opportunity to be a part of the SESP process and most of their ideas are incorporated in the plan document.

During my study, I found that even the heavily engaged ones could not bring all of their ideas into the SESP final document. This key insight of mine is aligned with the key insight of Dhakal (2019), Neupane (2019), and Khanal (2012). They also claimed that in the processes of policy formulation, in some of the cases, the heavily engaged ones are also not able to bring all of their ideas into the final policy document, as the policies are finalized under pressure and influence of some elites and DPs. If I merge this key insight with Policy-making Theory, then I understand that the theory posits that sometimes, in the finalization process of the policies, some of the ideas of the most engaged stakeholders are also excluded by the final decision makers. The underlying value of this theory communicates with my understanding as my study also gives the picture that the participant one who is a government official under the MoEST got the opportunity to take part from agenda setting to policy decisions, even in the selection process of the experts and other members of the thematic team, but he did not become able to convince the team to keep CLCs as the youth information centre, integral part of the local levels, and community library (BACHANALAYA) during the decision process of the SESP. In the same way, the

participant four who is from the CNT also mentioned that he strongly raised to make the same or similar kind of facilities to all kinds of teachers and make the meaningful provision of scholarship to the related students during the dialogue as well as the decision process of the SESP as being the thematic team member, but that idea though the concerned ones were convinced with the idea, did not come in the final document of the SESP.

From my study, I also found that the perspectives of stakeholders like the leaders of the SMC association, the parents' association and the NARMIN were overlooked in the SESP process. This key insight of mine is aligned with the key insight of Dhakal (2021), who explored women's participation in school governance within a rural Nepali community, revealing systemic barriers that limit women's engagement in decision-making processes despite formal structures promoting inclusivity. The research highlighted the need for genuine empowerment and active engagement of women in educational leadership roles. This is further aligned with the key insight of Katel and Katel (2024), who identified barriers such as a lack of awareness, socio-economic limitations, and inadequate communication between schools and parents to foster active parental engagement in education policy processes, highlighting its importance in improving educational outcomes. Furthermore, it is also aligned with the key insight of Hadijah (2024) who also claimed the rationale behind stakeholder engagement in education policy, examining both the potential benefits and the challenges to effective participation focusing on the outcomes of various engagement strategies and emphasizing the adaptability required in stakeholder participation frameworks as well as the logistical, financial, and representational challenges, and also the benefits that include enhanced policy legitimacy, transparency, and community support in the context of policy formulation and execution. If I merge/fuse Voice Theory with this key insight, then I come to the point of understanding that the theory posits the voices of powerful ones are listened to and included in the policies, but the voices of powerless ones are left behind. This underlying value of the theory communicates to my understanding as my study also states that some of the participants' ideas i.e., that of participant one (government official) and four (leader of CNT), were listened to and those of others were not included in the SESP formulation process.

From my study, I further found that the engagement of the stakeholders, like parents' association leaders, in the policy process is found to have a tokenistic or

superficial or in form, rather than in a substantive manner. This key insight of mine is aligned with the key insight of Bhatta (2009). He also claimed that public participation in Nepalese education policy-making has often been symbolic, used more to legitimize pre-made decisions than to integrate citizen inputs meaningfully. It also aligned with the key insight of UNESCO and the Ministry of Education (2015), which also claimed stakeholders' engagement in policy review workshops often lacks follow-up mechanisms, reducing their influence to formality, or there is ineffective consultation of the stakeholders. If I merge/fuse Social Systems Theory to this key insight, then I come to the point of understanding that the theory posits the structure of the societies, leaving the marginalized ones to get engaged in the policy process, or sometimes their membership is only shown in form or a tokenistic manner and the voices are not allowed to be kept in the policies. This underlying value of the theory communicates to my understanding as my study also states that the chair of my third participant's association, i.e., the parents' association, is a member of the steering committee of the SESP, but his engagement was just of a ceremonial type rather than a substantive one in the process of SESP formulation context. If I fuse this key insight with the Social Systems Theory, I understand that the theory posits that societal systems make the marginalized ones represented in some of the mechanisms like committees, task forces, etc., but are not made to speak or put their voices. The underlying value of the theory interacts with my understanding, as my study also states that the engagement of the leader of the parents' association was just a formality or a ceremonial kind of representation rather than a substantive one in the SESP formulation process.

In my study, I also found that even the key stakeholders, like leaders of parents' association and NARMIN, were left aside or unheard in the SESP process. This key insight of mine is also aligned with the key insight of Robertson et al. (2022), Wei and Ni (2023), Manansala (2024), and Pagsuguiron and Lantaka (2024). They also claimed that even key stakeholders like parents and community representatives were often left out of meaningful policy engagement, despite formal recognition. In other words, they claimed that parental engagement in education policy remained largely superficial due to structural exclusion, symbolic representation, digital and socio-economic barriers, and the absence of trust-based, supportive systems that enable meaningful and empowered participation. If I fuse this key insight with the Voice Theory, then I come to understand that the theory posits that the powerful ones

suppress the voice of some of the key stakeholders, excluding them from the policy process. This theory interacts with my study as the engagement of the leaders of the parents' association was on a ceremonial basis i.e. was a very limited one, even if the chair of the association is a member-of the steering committee of the SESP.

^ In the course of my study, I also found that some of the key stakeholders, like the leaders of the SMC association, were left completely aside during the process of policy formulation. This key insight of mine is again aligned with the key insight of Kwibi-Gavhure (2023), Musodza et al. (2021), and Walker et al. (2024). They also claimed that the critical importance of involving all key stakeholders, like teachers, parents, students, and community members, in the policy formulation process to ensure the development of effective, inclusive, and sustainable educational policies was essential, but in some cases, these kinds of stakeholders were completely excluded from the policy processes. If I merge this key insight with Policy-making Theory, then I come to understand that the theory posits that in the policy processes, the key stakeholders are also left as the policy process is most specifically influenced by the elites and bureaucratic structure of the policy entities. The theory communicates with my study as the engagement of the leaders of the SMC association was completely left aside in the SESP formulation process, even if the SMC is the core part of school education and they lead that committee and represent the voice of parents, students, and the community.

From my study, I also found that even the most important specific stakeholders, like NARMIN leaders, were left almost unheard in the SESP process. This key insight is also aligned with the key insight of Sharma and Kumar (2023), OECD (2012) and Hughes et al. (2025). They, highlighting the need for more inclusive and effective engagement mechanisms, claimed that, despite formal structures for stakeholder participation in education policymaking, crucial voices, particularly those of parents, teachers, and local communities, were frequently marginalized as they often remained underrepresented in the actual policy formulation process. If I merge this key insight with Social Systems Theory, then I come to understand that the theory posits that in the policy processes, there is a certain system that sometimes leaves the key voices in the policy or decision-making processes. This theory interacts with my study as the key stakeholder i.e. NARMIN, which represents the voices of all the rural municipalities of Nepal, was almost left unheard during the SESP formulation

process, even if the chair of the NARMIN is a member of the steering committee of the SESP.

From my study, I also found that even the most important specific stakeholders like the leaders of SMC association were left unheard in the education policies as the policymakers were afraid of listening to them, thinking that they would bring grassroots issues in the real sense. This key insight is also aligned with the key insight of Gorni et al. (2024), who also claimed that despite efforts to involve stakeholders in Ghana's National Pre-Tertiary Education Curriculum (NPEC) reforms, there remained a disconnect between policy intentions and the actual inclusion of grassroots voices, often due to hierarchical structures and power dynamics. If I fuse this key insight with Social Systems Theory, then I come to understand that the theory posits that in the policy processes, there is a certain system that sometimes leaves the key voices in the policy or decision-making processes. The theory also communicates with my study well as the key stakeholder like the leaders of SMC association were left unheard because of the suspicion of the senior policy people that they as being the grassroots people would pressurize them for putting their agenda if they were engaged in the policy process as the SMC association related participants of mine reflected the same views in an aggressive manner forcefully requesting for their engagement.

In my study, proper/dedicated coordination, communication and feedback mechanisms were found to be essential for making more engaging policies. This key insight of mine is aligned with the key insight of Hadley et al. (2024), Shahi and Chaudhary (2023), Sharma and Kumar (2023), and Hadijah (2024). They also claimed that the development of dedicated coordination, communication, and feedback mechanisms was essential for creating more engaging and effective education policies, as they facilitated inclusive stakeholder participation, enhancing policy relevance, and strengthening community ownership. If I merge this key insight with Policy-making Theory, then I come to understand that the theory posits that in the policy processes to make the engagement of the key stakeholders, a dedicated mechanism is essential for coordination, communication and feedback to the policy drafts to be formulated. This theory interacts with my study as all of my participants recommended for the development of the mechanisms for engaging future education policies and to enhance the ownership of policies, as well as to make them more implementable.

From the above insights and discussion, I learnt contested versions and ideas regarding the engagement of the stakeholders in education policy processes i.e., in the SESP process. The illustrations and presentations of the various situations from the side of my participants further enhanced my knowledge. So, the exploration of the themes and sub-themes related to two of the research questions truly gave me the evidence-based insights into the perception, understanding and reflection of my participants related to the voice of stakeholders in education policy, especially the SESP making process in Nepal.

This interpretive inquiry on navigating voice of stakeholders in education policy-making in Nepal, taking the SESP formulation process as a case, further taught me how our culture of overlooking the engagement of the stakeholders in the concerned policies has negatively influenced the implementation and ownership of the policies. It also made me realize and appreciate the diverse needs and nature of the stakeholders in regard to policy engagement. All the key insights and their discussion in connection to the related studies and theories engaged me to reflect and question the philosophy and practices of our policy processes, which in way seemed less concerned with engaging the key stakeholders in the policy formulation and development processes. Those insights, I have taken, as a general and overall summation and findings of my study. In the same way, I have also enhanced my knowledge and understanding, as well as insights related to my research questions and themes I developed from the perceptions and reflections of my participants.

Conclusion

The present interpretive inquiry provided me with very good insights into the status, concerns and issues regarding the voice of stakeholders in education policy making in Nepal, seeking some suggestive measures to make the policies more engaging. I tried to bring the understanding, perceptions, stories, experiences, and reflections of the concerned stakeholders as my research participants, linking the ideas through the lens of the theories like Voice Theory, Policy Making Theory and the Social Systems Theory. Through my readings and review of policies and policy-related documents, I come to understand that most of the policies claim that they are developed based on the engagement and participation of the concerned stakeholders, but the reflections of my research participants give me diverse pictures. It makes me conclude that the vision of making engaging policies i.e., representing the voices of concerned stakeholders for policy ownership in

education policies of Nepal, especially in the context of SESP, has not been realized to the fullest. The scenario expects further research in this area and awareness, as well as dedication among policymakers to redesign the policy process through an innovative and well-structured system/mechanism of feedback as per the needs of the present-day global standards.

I also got very good wisdom and knowledge from the themes that emerged relating to the research questions I had developed. My first research question was for exploring/unpacking the perception and understanding of the engagement of my participants in the school education policy, especially SESP, the making process in Nepal. This made me go close to the participants and bring out their perceptions and understanding in this regard. From this, I learnt contested versions and ideas regarding the engagement of the stakeholders in SESP making processes. The illustrations and presentations of the various situations from the side of my participants further enhanced my knowledge. So, the exploration of the beginning theme viz., stakeholders' perceptions on policy engagement, the three sub-themes of which are understanding engagement in the SESP making process, contribution to SESP decision making, barriers to engagement in SESP process that emerged through the ideas, experiences, and understanding of my participants and were related to my first research question, truly gave me the evidence-based insights on the perceptions and understanding of my participants related to the voice of stakeholders in education policy, especially the SESP making process in Nepal.

My second research question was to explore the reflections of the experiences of my participants on situating their voices in the SESP. While reflecting upon the sharing of my research participants related to the representation of their voices in the SESP process, I gained insights to capture their views under the theme representation of stakeholders' voices and its three sub-themes, which are: experiences of voice representation in SESP, moments of influence on SESP, and suggestions for engaging future education policies in Nepal. This helped me to link the theories and explore more on the theme and sub-themes relating to the literature of this area. As the vignettes of most of the participants reflected so less of the representation of their voices in the SESP making process in Nepal, I got so much of valuable knowledge after linking it with theories and scholars' ideas on policy engagement which enhanced my understanding in relation to the engagement of the stakeholders in education policy process of Nepal, especially in the SESP making context which I

found quite diverse that only a few are mostly engaged in the policy processes and the engaged ones also have not been able to bring all of their ideas in the policy document i.e. the SESP document. These all taught me well in regard to engagement of the stakeholders in policy processes, as further insights were also drawn from the suggestive ideas of participants for better-engaged future education policies.

Implications of the Study

In this section, I have presented the implications of my study. This study has several implications for diverse stakeholders as well as for future research.

For Myself

Through this study, I have learned and been able to bring some extent of ideas on the voice of stakeholders in education policy, basically the SESP, making in Nepal as per the needs of the changing time. I have to acknowledge that I came to KU to study MPhil in Educational Leadership, because of the inspiration from some of my senior scholars in KU, with uncertain feelings about joining this course. But now, I have felt that I did the right thing as I got a chance to learn in the area of leadership as well as the education policy making of Nepal, which is directly and indirectly related to my professional career and will be helpful for the enhancement of my career path. This made me continue my studies, in a formal as well as informal manner, about the new trends and developments in the field of education policy making and educational leadership. I hope this will be very beneficial to enhance my capacities as one of the members of the government bureaucracy of the MoEST system in the days ahead.

For Policy Making

As this study focused on education policies and the policy-making process of Nepal and discovered some provisions that seemed to have problems and thus need improvement, there is an implication of it for policy as well (Lamsal, 2021). A policymaker may see the importance of the policy process and engage in a dialogue with concerned stakeholders to make policies that can be helpful in developing systems that foster engaging education policies and ensure the best opportunities for more and more stakeholders to put their voices in the upcoming education policies of Nepal.

Moreover, it may also be helpful to bring the grassroots level stakeholders' concerns and ideas into the process of policy decisions, enhancing the ownership of policies and making the policies more implementable, making them more practical to solve a number of related issues.

For Grassroots Stakeholders

This study will be useful for teachers, students, schools, and community people, as well as to the government officials, politicians and the concerned policymakers, as they go through it. The readers may also learn how stakeholders' engagement can be enhanced and fostered for the betterment of the education sector, especially the school education sector of Nepal.

Reflection of My Research Journey

I set out the journey of my research with the topic of navigating voice of stakeholders in education policymaking in Nepal: An interpretive inquiry. This was originated from my experiences as a school teacher in various private and public schools of Nepal, an employee under MoEST for more than two decades and the scholarly works that I went through during my coursework. As I was admitted to the KUSOED for MPhil in Educational Leadership, most of my friends, batch colleagues, and respected gurus inspired me to conduct research in the area of my experience, interest, and need for the day of study, which was in the area of education policy. I had a keen interest in looking after the formulation process of the education policies, especially the SESP formulation process, from the perspective of stakeholders' engagement and hearing their voices in the plan formulation process.

By the end of my research journey, I wanted to say more, but I am not fully able to do so. In the beginning, I wanted to reflect that I had no idea of completing the MPhil degree. I had thought completing a Master's Degree was enough for me. But having experienced as a school teacher of various private and public schools, and a member of government bureaucracy under MoEST for more than two decades, I was compelled to make learning and studying an integral part of my career so that I could be presented as one of the known ones in different events. Not only this, but also my colleagues in the bureaucracy asked me to go to the path of research so that I could contribute more to the ministry system. This made me join the MPhil in Educational Leadership at KUSOED. As I am a member of the government bureaucracy under the MoEST system, the courses on educational leadership and research on policy could be of much value to me.

At the beginning of my research journey, I wondered whether I could achieve the destination. Some of my colleagues and well-wishers suggested me not take this difficult task. With their suggestions, they informed me that it is not an easier path that could be handled and completed during my busy schedule. Even if they suggested it, I proceeded, but I have realized that they were really correct. In the journey, I faced many obstacles from selecting my topic, designing the research questions to methodology, as well as developing this dissertation. In my opinion, this is true for each and every researcher who is engaged in this sort of journey. But the inspiration, guidance and support of my respected course facilitators/gurus were instrumental in my research journey. Furthermore, the colleagues, family members, relatives, and other related persons encouraged me a lot to bring this dissertation to this shape. Arriving at this stage, I have been able to conclude my research journey with a deeper passion for beginning the PhD journey as soon as possible.

Being a member of government bureaucracy under MoEST and a student at the same time was a very difficult task for me, but learning is a never-ending process. So, I need to honor the inspiration and encouragement of my respected gurus and all concerned for my further study. I cannot confirm it as a faultless research journey, but I am sure that I have put my best effort into coming up with some fresh perspectives and insights in terms of engaging key stakeholders in the education policy-making process. No matter what it is, it is dearer than other works to me, as said earlier, I have invested much time and effort in it. As this research has been completed, I have taken it as a milestone, reminding me of traveling further.

Chapter Summary

The chapter reflects my key insights and findings with a discussion in the beginning. Then, it moves to present the conclusion of the interpretive inquiry I have gone through. The conclusion is followed by the implications of the study for me, for policy making, and for grassroots stakeholders. Then, I have presented the reflection of my research journey. And, it ends with this chapter summary.

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ANNEX-I
INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Research Questions	Possible Components to be Addressed	Interview Questions
How do stakeholders (bureaucrats, leaders of CNT, SMC association, Parents' association, and MUAN/NARMIN) perceive their engagements in the school education policy, specially SESP, making process in Nepal?	• policy agenda setting • policy design • policy dialogue • policy decision making • policy formulation	• Can you please share your experiences of your engagement in SESP process? • In regard to agenda setting of the SESP could you please tell me was the agenda set in your engagement or they were already set without your involvement? • In your opinion how the SESP was designed? Could you please share the experiences? • Were you engaged in the policy dialogue of the SESP? • How were you engaged in the policy decision of the SESP? • Could you please share your experiences in regard to SESP formulation process with examples?
How do they reflect their experiences of situating their voices in SESP (2022/23-2031/32)?	• The core components of the SESP focus on the following areas: • Early Childhood Education and Development, • Basic Education (Grades 1-8), • Secondary Education	• Can you please share the story of your engagement in the development of the SESP? How did it begin? • In which area of the SESP you got opportunity to

	(Grades 9-12), and • Literacy and Lifelong Learning. • Additionally, the plan incorporates Crosscutting and Cross-Sectoral Themes such as: • Curriculum and Evaluation • Teacher Management and Development • Equity and Inclusion • Cross-Sectoral Priorities in education, including Nutrition, Health, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), and Protection • Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Education • Education in Emergencies and Crisis Management • School Physical Infrastructure Development • School Safety Measures.	contribute? Can you mention? • Were your voices taken into consideration during the SESP formulation process? If so, how it proceeded? • Can you please specify in which area of SESP you have contributed much? Why in only that area, not in others? • Based on your experience, how can future education policies better incorporate and represent the voices of key stakeholders? What improvements would you suggest to policymakers?
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