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## **Exploring Insights and Perspectives of Stakeholders toward the Midday Meal Program at Community Schools of Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

The midday meal program, one of the assertive programs, which is initiated by the government to ensure free and compulsory school education in Nepal. The retention rate of children from marginalized, disadvantaged communities has been increased with the effective implementation of midday meal program. This paper aims to explore the insight and perspective of stakeholders on the practice of midday meal program for ensuring free and compulsory education. Qualitative research design, along with interpretative phenomenology, was employed for this study. Two community schools located in Koshi Province were purposively selected and 12 participants including head teachers, teachers, and parents were taken for in-depth interview. The participants were interviewed via semi-structured guidelines in their convenient location, and their responses were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis techniques were employed for data analysis. The report revealed that the practice of mid day meal is essential for implementing free and compulsory education. Monitoring and supervision of program is also the mechanism for effectiveness. The mid day meal program drew the attention of stakeholders and enabled learners to participate in the classroom discourse for effective learning outcomes. Findings contribute to the advancement of holistic policy ranging from pre school intervention to post school to ensure fundamental the rights of children. Free and Compulsory Education Policy and its effective implementation bring students toward sustainable growth and positive change in learning.

**Keywords:** Free and Compulsory Education, Midday Meal, Monitoring and Inspection, Student Enrollment Rate, Local Government

### Introduction

In some extent, I had the opportunity to visit different community schools located in a hilly district of Koshi province for a performance audit as authorized by the Education Review Office, Ministry of Science and Technology, Nepal. At that time, I observed the several practices adopted by school for promoting students' attendance and retention for achieving better academic outcomes. In over viewing academic and non-academic activities, I observed the status of day meal program as initiaand by government and found to be low nutrientional status. The sanitation was unsatisfactory. In this context, I was really shocked and questioned about how the day meal program supports the retention of children at school and reduces drop out as well. The existing practice adopted by community school made me in sighted to study about what opportunity and challenges are approaching to ensure quality education. Indeed, the children of today are the greatest asset that can lead to the illumination of the future of the nation. Adequate nutrients play crucial role in the knowledge gaining process. Sound mind always appears in the sound body which is the consequent of nutrients. Compulsory Education is the act of making school-age children attend school and providing education, while providing lunch to students during school hours is a mid-day meal. The Constitution of Nepal has clearly mentioned that Free and Compulsory Education needs to be provided to each child up to the Basic level, and there should be free education up to the secondary level. Reviewing the global context and as that of Nepal, it is found that midday meal programs have a positive impact. For ensuring Compulsory Education is recognized as a human right by the United Nations Human Rights Council. After being included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), it has had an impact on the world, and it is gradually increasing day by day. There have been some leftist movements in education in Nepal since the Rana period. It is also found that radical changes have been taking place in education only after 2007 BS. After the declaration of free primary education in Nepal 2031 B.S., Nepal's education, which gained further momentum, had to face a lot of disruptions and confusion during the 1991 movement and the second people's movement in 2006 AD. With the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the Education Act has been amended several times and is being implemented to bring further reforms and modernisation in education, while a new Education Act is in the process of being promulgated. In the meantime, the Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2018, has been promulgated and implemented, while the Midday Meal Standards and Program Facilitation Manual for Community Schools, 2019AD, is also being implemented. Midday meal is provided in various forms in Nepal, and currently it is being provided in all community schools up to grade five.

The School Lunch Program in Nepal was initiated in 1967 to improve the health and nutritional status of girls by improving school enrollment and learning standards. Initially, it was implemented in selected schools in 37 food-insecure districts to improve the health, nutrition, and educational status of poor, marginalised and underprivileged girls. Applicable Done. Currently, it is being continuously revised. Since 1996, the Ministry of Education has implemented the midday meal program in primary schools in 16 districts of the far and mid-west, and has helped increase children's school attendance and continuity. It has now been implemented in all primary schools in all districts.

According to the research report of Oblong Edem Effing, Nigerian Free and Compulsory Education, it has increased enrollment rates, increased school completion rates and played a significant role in National Development. Section 25 of the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2015 makes provisions for midday meals. In that section, the Government of Nepal may provide midday meals or midday meal expenses as prescribed at the local level. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have expressed a national commitment to reduce poverty, eradicate hunger, and ensure quality basic education for all. The economically disadvantaged, the underprivileged, and the communities lagging in the Human Development Index (HDI) have benefitted from the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2018, which has made provision for providing free education to children, including midday meals (Lundborg et al., 2022). Government of Nepal has increased mid day meal budget every fiscal year both in the form of cash grants assistance for food supply. It is imperative to make more effective and systematic mid day meal program for schoolchildren in integrated form (Mansukhlal, 2012). Midday meal program has increased student achievement, attendance rate, participation and socialisation of students in the education sector of Gujarat State (Patel & Pancholi, 2019). A healthy body and a hunger-free environment are the basic conditions for children's learning. Recognising this fact, mid-day meal programs are being implemented in most countries to increase children's educational access, participation and learning level and to keep them healthy (Patel & Pancholi, 2019). According to the Economic Survey 2017, the midday meal program had implemented for all students from pre-primary to grade 5 in all districts of Nepal. In regard of government education, it is justifiable that midday meal program plays vital role for reducing children's hunger and improving their health status, thereby increasing educational access, participation, continuity and retention at school level (Adamson et al., 2013). In this context, this study seeks to explore the practice of free and compulsory education, which is complemented by the midday meal program. In this context, this study aims to explore the perception of stakeholders towards existing practice of the midday meal program and its key relation with Free and Compulsory Education at basic schools of Nepal.

### **Literature Review**

I reviewed some of the research articles and made me insightful about the research gap, methodology and conceptual clarity about the day meal program. It also provided perception about the key relationship with the practice of free and compulsory education.

In the research article entitled the implementation and effects of free and compulsory education in Nigeria, to analyze data from the Federal Ministry of Education covering the periods of 1997-2008 and 2009-2018, alongside data from the National Statistics Division and UBE Digest? The study addresses three key questions regarding the program's impact on the development of Akwa Ibom State, school dropout rates, and school completion rates and testing the Null Hypothesis that there is no significant effect. Utilizing a t-test, the author concludes that Free and Compulsory Education is crucial for national development and has positively affected school completion rates, although its impact on dropout rates is significant primarily at the junior secondary level, rather than at the primary level. The author advocates for sustainable implementation of the program to enhance its benefits.

Sujan K. Patel and Deepak Pancholi (2020) investigate how India's literacy rates are affected by free and mandatory schooling as well as midday meal availability. In 1951, the literacy rate was just 18.32%, and schooling and lunch provisions were not given enough attention. In 1937, Mahatma Gandhi highlighted the value of a university education, signaling a change in the direction of better education. The Compulsory Education Act of 1870 and Gopal Krishna Gokhale's 1906 Bill for free compulsory education, which was turned down in 1910, served as the legal underpinnings.

Compulsory Education Act, which Vithalbhai introduced in 1917, was gradually put into effect, and by 2011, India's literacy rate had risen from 18.32% to 74.04%. The Constitution's Part 3 guarantees that children are not charged fees for basic education, despite obstacles like a lack of resources and insufficient law enforcement. Bibi (2018) addresses these advancements using two main research questions.

Article 25(A) of the 18th Amendment, which requires free and compulsory education, is one of the provisions of the Pakistani Constitution that the author examines in this article. The author emphasizes that since the provincial government took over implementation in April 2010, the program has not been successfully realized at the grassroots level through a survey of twenty randomly chosen Punjabi citizens. Inadequate physical facilities, a lack of regulation and guidance, a lack of qualified teachers, and parental financial burdens for necessities like textbooks and transportation are all factors that contribute to this ineffectiveness and undermine the constitutional guarantee of free education.

According to the research report of Sujan Kumar Kanubhai Patel, Deepak Pancholi, in 2018, there is positive impact of the midday meal program launched by the government in the Indian state of Gujarat for the sustainable development of students. The report further revealed that the program has improved student achievement, attendance, participation, and socialisation in the education sector of Gujarat.

Tan (2010) discusses the establishment of compulsory education in Singapore's Constitution in 2000, lasting approximately 6 years. The article examines the influence of education on Singapore's social and economic growth, referencing a UNESCO report from 1998 that noted 16 out of 186 countries, including Singapore, had implemented compulsory education. Human rights organizations advocate for compulsory education, emphasizing the universal right to education, with UNESCO encouraging mandatory elementary education.

In Singapore, the implementation of compulsory education starting in 2000 significantly increased school enrollment and improved pass rates, aligning with national economic and social objectives. The system's success is attributed to its dual goals of promoting economic progress and social tolerance, which, combined with government responsibilities and parental involvement, has heightened awareness and engagement in education.

In an explanatory article on education in Singapore, the author utilizes data from government agencies and historical context. However, the article lacks perspectives from parents, students, and school administration, which could have enhanced its credibility.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a constructivist paradigm, which sought the information from insight and perception of the social setting (Creswell & Zhang, 2009). The qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach was the methodological orientation for underpinning the study (Groenewald, 2004). To accomplish this study, several national and international documents were studied by using Google search engine and websites that published online.

Two basic schools from the Koshi Province were purposively selected. 12 participants including head teachers, parents and school management committee member were taken from the research site by the purposive techniques. After a couple of days of continuous communication, the participants were interviewed at the time provided by them in the convenient location. The interviews were confined in the periphery of midday meal and compulsory education. The interview was conducted for about 30-35 minutes. The interview responses were transcribed as the data in copy. The transcription was made in Nepali and then translated into English. After translating the details obtained in the copy, the data were read carefully and collected codes from each sentence. The codes were collected from each sentences in the transcription and written them on page. After reading the codes written in this way several times, they were categorised and created groups from them. The global themes were extracted from organized theme and the main themes were discussed by linking with theories adopted and literature. The main themes were described as main findings of the study. In this way, the results of the study were analyzed and the conclusions were drawn.

### **Findings and Discussion**

After conducting a study, the practices and challenges of free and compulsory education was explored from the existing situation and the conclusion have been made from the lived experience of stakeholder in the community schools. The essence of the study is to analyse the data obtained by the researcher and prepare a report that everyone can understand. The result obtained from the interpretation of the data were discussed along with policy and legislative provision under the following headings.

#### **Ease in Implementing Compulsory Education**

Midday meals program is an excellent concept in the implementation of compulsory education. Mid-day meals have been found to have made a major contribution to making students regular in school. After the launch of mid day meal program, the parents who are busy with agricultural work are free from the burden of Tiffin and seemed parents sending students to school regularly without any hesitation (Kantawala, 2015). Most of parents expressed that they do not have to spend money on lunch, they have also felt that the financial burden has decreased where as they can spend Tiffin money for students' uniforms, notebooks, and pens. During the interview, the principal of a school said, " whenever there is a festival for Dalits, they stay at home, and when something happens, they stay there and eat. However, the number of Dalits is high over here, which made it a little difficult. Now, when lunch comes, they are relaxed. Learning has become easier.

Midday meal has been found to have a positive impact on the implementation of compulsory education. Absenteeism rates have decreased. Student regularity has increased. Retention rates have increased (Gyawali, 2024). Due to student attendance, there has been a positive impact on teaching and learning activities. There has been a difference in academic activities before and after providing the midday meal (Kaushal, 2009). Students who used to come irregularly have now become regular. Regularity has also been found to help teachers teach and students understand and learn.

The Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2018 AD, provides for the Mid-Day Meal Act. In order to implement the Act, the government has been allocating funds under the Mid-Day Meal heading through the annual budget. So, it seems that implementation of the program has been facilitated through the allocated funds. The automatic Implementation of the Bara Act is also being practised.

It seems that the midday meal concept is being implemented in Nepal with the overall intention of the school's reformation. Midday meal leads to sustainable growth of students, an increase in attendance, and happiness among parents. Since it also facilitates learning, its impact is positive and needs to be continued.

### **Food Quantity and Quality**

It refers to the quantity of food provided to the children for midday meal and healthy food. Low quality and less amount of food cannot cover the calorie intake for the metabolism of human body. In this context head teacher of one school says,

Each child eats 100 grams of lunch. Even then, local children can more than 200 grams. They are fed even less today; they complain that they are not satisfied. Thus, when the amount under the lunch heading is not enough for lunch, schools have tried to maintain the quality of lunch by raising funds from internal sources. But they feel financial burden because the financial situation of all schools are not equal.

In the above concern the midday meal amount is sent to the local level. In the budget of the fiscal year 2018, it has been announced that students received a lunch amount of Rs. 15 per day for attendance and the solution has been implemented. Every child has the right to eat quality lunch (Pant, 2025). The government has issued a midday meal policy and guidelines, published a lunch schedule and sent it to the relevant schools, stating that quality lunch should be served at the rate of Rs. 100 per student. It has been found that there is a complete mismatch between the amount provided by the government, the policies and guidelines issued, and the local environment (Chakraborty & Jayaraman, 2019). The government has been providing lunch expenses for only 180 days per year, saying that schools should be open for at least 180 days, but most schools in Nepal have been open for 210 days. There is no decision on who will bear the expenses for the remaining 20 days. This has created inefficiency in lunch management. It is an unfortunate situation in itself that the amount distributed as lunch expenses cannot be used to provide lunch. There is a growing concern that the quality of lunch will also affect the health of students due to the government's unscientific thinking. It seems that the government should be aware of this issue promptly.

Mid-day meals have helped parents dependent on agriculture to reduce the hassle of collecting and preparing lunch money and sending it every day. The practice of busy parents not sending their children to school due to the hassle of lunch has ended. Schools serving lunch according to their own lunch schedule also had a positive impact on the health of students (Jayalakshmi & Jissa, 2017). It has helped in the displacement of preschoolers. Since all schools do not have the capacity to meet the lunch deficit from internal resources, there is a need to make some money for the lunch expenses provided by the government. The chairman of a school's says, "*The current amount is very low , it is not enough , it requires to increase the amount in the budget by at least 50-70%. So, I think I can find the idea of lunch , but it seems to be expensive*". In this regard, the task of finding quality in food seems very challenges in between the excellent idea of midday meal and the government's budget. The government is trying to mitigate such type of challenges to make the program effective (Acham et al., 2012). The government needs to allocate sufficient budget for midday meal to ensure the adequate nutrient required for psychological well being and mental health.

### **Local Dishes and Socializing at Lunch**

Local food refers to food available at the local level and the lunch dishes prepared from it. The availability and use of local food helps in protecting the local environment and also in the health of students. In this context, teacher says,

Due to market influence, local foods like dhindo are seldom consumed, even in traditional settings. There is a shift towards common dishes, like pulao, which undermines the diversity of local cuisine. To combat this trend, efforts from government, local authorities, and schools are necessary to enhance appreciation for local foods and address the inferiority complex towards traditional dishes.

In the above concern, by the effects of urban culture, it is also found that students and parents have neglected local snacks, but local snacks have been used. Schools that have not been able to implement the government lunch schedule due to financial constraint (Acham et al., 2012). They have been using local snacks such as corn, Suzy, Vegetables bitten rice has been used. The low use of pesticides in local dishes has also helped the health of students. Another participant said, According to Suryakumar Khanu's article on the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Program in Gujarat, which was written by Bhai Patel and Deepak Pancholi, students' achievement, attendance, participation, and sociability have all improved because of midday meals that feature regional cuisine. In Nepal, where there are many different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, this effect is also seen; students' relationships are strengthened and sociability is encouraged through shared meals.

### **Monitoring and Supervision**

Monitoring and supervision play crucial role in the success of any program. While assessing the progress made in making the program successful, it is also necessary to be concerned about the future direction. The concept of midday meal, the budget required for it, the initiative of the local level, the proactivity of the school and the interest and activity of parents and students affect the overall midday meal schedule (Ramachandran, 2019). In this context

Section 25 of the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2018AD requires management attention regarding midday meals. The concept of midday meals , the budget required for it , the initiative of the local level , the proactivity of the school and the interest and activity of parents and students affect the overall midday meal schedule. However, in many schools, there have been acts of neglecting to prepare lunch , denying that the amount received for lunch is not enough to prepare lunch , and distributing money

Concerning to above, the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2018AD provides provisions of midday meal program for ensuring equity in education. For this purpose, Government of Nepal is providing lunch expenses as prescribed through the local level. The government has also issued a midday meal guideline. This has been affecting the government's operation regarding midday meals. The midday meal policy mentions serving lunch up to the basic level, but the budget has provided funds to provide lunch only up to grade six. From which it is seen that there is a mismatch between the policy and the budget (Ghimire et al., 2024). If anything has affected the implementation of midday meals, it is necessary to monitor it. The government has a policy of serving lunch only to 100 children, but local children try to eat at least 200 and they are not satisfied with less than that, so it is necessary to monitor it in a timely manner(Gyawali, 2024). The policy needs to be revised to ensure fundamental rights of children to be educated. The government has appointed an additional one person to the Midday Meal Management Committee. In this regard, a community school head teacher says ,

The local level is necessary to make active and manage it well in schools for the succession of program. The midday meal program will be meaningful with the active participation of all parties. Local schools have high expectations from the local level and some seem disappointed when they do not receive a response from there. The government's midday meal policy has been found to provide relief to the daily lives of students and parents. If special attention is paid to the management aspect, midday meal will have a very positive impact on compulsory education.

Concerning to the above, the local government need to play vital role for succession of midday meal program. Legally, the local community can observe the food status and quality of nutrient required for children (Ghimire et al., 2024). The retention and engagement of children for learning is impacted by midday in the rural areas (Ratala et al., 2023). By the imbalanced economic condition of people, some of the children are left behind the school. So the government mid day meal program is seemed to be milestone for increase educational access of children.

Similarly, the SMC chairperson says,

It is necessary to further educate the local level on the aspect of monitoring in order for it to play a more effective role. We have not felt that we have achieved the same amount as the Government of Nepal has invested in it. Because in order to achieve the results on the basis of the investment, if the concerned part of our local body takes the path of mandatory and strong monitoring and implements it strictly, it will definitely support the objectives of the Government of Nepal.

Providing midday meals is not just about making a policy and allocating a budget . As much enthusiasm as there is in its implementation. The more the relevant bodies are kept active and efficient, the more successful the program will be (Sharma, 2015). If the local level makes local



education effective, prioritizes the education sector and provides monitoring, inspection and suggestions, the local level will be more active(Pant & Scholar, 2020). School education will also improve. If midday meal program is effective and , managing , reward and punishment for effective implementation it will make a special contribution to the excellent implementation of compulsory education.

It is found that local governments are trying to develop as a mechanism that places special emphasis on midday meal management and the implementation of compulsory education. If the identity of local dishes can be ensured in midday meals through the successful mobilization of local governments, it will be easy to identify every class of society and bring them into the mainstream of education through the compulsory education program (Tripathi, 2024).

### **Awareness and Training for Guardians**

The work of local governments should be efficient and effective. To some extent, local governments have been doing good work. However, it is necessary to make such work more effective and to make the local level more aware and to displace public grievances(Pokhrel et al., 2025). In this context, the chairman of a school says,

Initially, there was more activity in making parents and teachers aware by providing orientation training, but after the local level camp, it has become very serious. It would have been good if training and seminars were held for parents and teachers from time to time. It is necessary to be active in every body to keep them agile, and in some cases, the state would have helped to reach that goal by orienting the parents, state, and teachers. If that were done in the education sector, a good breakthrough could have been made.

In the above concern, the parents and guardians need to aware for the implementation of midday meal program. What quality of food are provided by the school should be supervised by the parents for the sanitary condition of food (D. D. Ghimire, 2024). The guardians have the power to play a special role in running and managing the school and to understand the feelings of local students and parent. The teacher of the same school says by linking compulsory education and the midday meal program as

We have to keep the same staff in the lunchroom for organizing the management. I think , now it is given to the local level and everything that used to be done from above . Some people were kept there , they were monitored. It seemed like that was not the case. But I felt like it was a minus , or something. I don't like to call it a plus.

While there should be optimism towards the local level, the head teachers and staffs revealed that the local level government did not appoint any one. However, it is rare that the local level has not been able to play a special role in resolving the demands, complaints, and problems of the schools in their ground level( Ghimire, 2024). Although the local level allocates the midday meal amount, there is no monitoring about the condition of midday practices provided by the school(Rai et al., 2024). This needs to be taken into account. If the local level were particularly aware of such matters, it would have helped to improve school education if there were fewer public complaints.in this context one participants said,

A minimum of 15% of the total national budget will be allocated to the education budget.

However, according to this plan, the government has not allocated any amount under the

education heading in the annual estimated budget. This has had a direct impact on the implementation of the midday meal program. At the primary level, the local government is currently providing Rs 15 per student per day from the grant sent by the association. Schools have been complaining further to the local level, citing that this amount is not enough to provide midday meal.

In the above concern, Section 25 of the Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2018 states that the Government of Nepal may provide midday meal or midday meal expenses as prescribed through the local level. According to that act, the federal government has been showing various vehicles and problems to the local level schools and the problem is that local schools are distributing money to students without providing them with lunch (Sarma et al., 1995). If midday meal could be arranged instead of midday meal expenses, it would help in fulfilling the purpose of midday meal (Dubey, 2010). The local level should give special emphasis on its monitoring, inspection, vigilance and problem solving.

The local level has proven to be a special tool for raising the standard of school education, effectively implementing the midday meal program, bringing all children under the purpose of compulsory education, increasing the school attendance rate of students, and improving the educational standard (Ahmadi & Laei, 2012). Since the overall quality of education depends on the effectiveness of the local level, it seems that the local level should be aware of it and work objectively.

### **Conclusion**

Everyone has the right to education, which is necessary for both personal growth and the production of skilled human resources. The midday meal program is essential for increasing educational access, boosting children's nutrition and health and raising academic standards. Children from low-income communities are successfully included in this program along with free and compulsory education. By incorporating financial grants and food supplies, expanding these programs can enhance overall educational outcomes and school attendance while also making them more systematic. Enrollment has increased, absenteeism has decreased, student retention has improved, health and nutrition have improved, and learning outcomes have improved since the implementation of the midday meal program and mandatory education policy. Along with an improvement in pass rates, the literacy rate among participants has increased, helping to achieve national education goals and integrate previously underrepresented communities into mainstream education.

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