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Who Governs the Classroom? Citizen Perceptions of Federal, Provincial, and Local Roles in Education Governance After Decentralization in Nepal

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Abstract

Currently, many decentralizing states have devolved to the national, regional and local levels of government responsibilities for basic education, but there is little evidence from surveys as to how these responsibilities are being experienced in the day to day lives of ordinary citizens. Based on a 375 respondents household survey conducted in a newly federalized educational system, this study looks at how the public is assessing performance of the federal, provincial and local governments on 20 questions pertaining to awareness, service delivery, transparency and accountability. Characterization of the three dimensions of governance and correlate with the demographic data were conducted using reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha = .62-.67), Pearson correlation, chi-square tests of association, one-way ANOVA, and independent-samples t-tests. There was a moderate, positive correlation between perceptions at the federal-, provincial-, and local-level ($r = .54$ to $.58$, $p < .01$) indicating a general tendency towards government and not sharply distinguishing between the three levels. There was a significant difference in the ratings of local government performance among people with different levels of formal education ($F(3,371) = 5.55$, $p = .001$), with respondents without any formal education rating their local government performance least favorably, and a significant difference in the ratings of support of local government and budget transparency among the various school types (chi-square = 19.90, $p = .011$ and chi-square = 24.16, $p < .001$ respectively). Knowledge of federal education policy was low (29%) and reports on budget transparency at the local level was rated low with only 8% reporting that local budgets were "very transparent. The results are in line with a growing body of literature which argues that there is a lag between the formal transfer of authority to subnational governments and its actual delegation of capacities, information and trust

to subnational governments, and the results highlight direct, low-cost policies disclosure of budgets and targeted outreach to less-educated households that may close some of the gaps between the promise and practice of multi-level education governance.

Key Words: Collaborative Governance, Education Decentralization, Fiscal Federalism, Local Government, School Governance, Citizen Perception Survey.

1. Introduction

One of the components of the constitutional transformation of a unitary nation to a federal one is a bet on distance: the officials who are physically and politically closest to the classroom are going to do a better job of it than can officials in a national ministry. Only recently, however, have a few of the states taken this gamble on their education system(s), de-vesting the central ministries and assigning the responsibilities for basic and secondary education to the provinces and municipalities while reserving for the central authorities a coordinating, standard-setting and financing role (Schaffner et al., 2024). The reform is not usually just presented in the fiscal federalism jargon of the two levels of government, but is also, implicitly or explicitly, described as an act of collaborative governance, in which federal, provincial, and local governments are supposed to participate in a cooperative process of decision-making with parents, teachers, and School Management Committees, with whom these governments have daily contact in the lives of schools. (Ansell & Gash, 2008)

The question of three-tier education governance is empirical; it is a question which is surprisingly difficult to come up with a concrete answer about, only on the basis of the official education records. Administrative information does not necessarily reveal if citizens are aware of transfers of funds or if a committee is formed, nor does it necessarily reflect citizens' perceptions of the competency and honesty of the tier responsible, nor does it necessarily reflect whether citizens can accurately identify which tier of government is responsible for a given problem at their child's school. Those perceptual questions are relevant because collaborative governance, as theorized, is more than just an institutionalized distribution of legal rights and powers; it requires trust and legitimacy, and a willingness of non-state actors to be active actors, not passive subjects (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In an important way, a reform which, while valid in theory, is not or not yet visible or transparent to the beneficiary households has not yet come.

The study focuses on survey respondents, the majority of whom were a parent or guardian of a child in primary or secondary school, to provide insights on how they view the performance of the federal, provincial and local governments in a shared set of education-governance domains: policy awareness, quality improvement, resource availability, plan implementation, responsiveness to local needs, budget transparency, community involvement, and inter-governmental coordination. Twenty Likert-type items are organised into three conceptual blocks of items reflecting the three levels of government and there are two items asking respondents to determine the largest problem in their school and the largest challenge in their local government. The study is based on four related questions. First, what is the internal consistency of the citizens' sense of each governance level and whether there are three composite indices that can be made meaningful from it? Second, are perceptions of the three tiers related to each other do people perceive differences between the performance at the federal, provincial, and local levels, or do they assess "government" as a whole? Third, is there a systematic variation of perceptions based on level of education, gender and school type? Fourth, what are respondents' perceptions of the key problems that hinder quality service provision and how does this differ from the pattern of responses from the quantitative data?

Multi-level governance of education needs to be balanced to ensure coherence at the national level while also being responsive to local needs. Supporting the decentralized education system is effective in enhancing local responsiveness and autonomy, provided that there are clearly defined responsibilities, accountability arrangements, institutional capacity and coordination across levels of government (Burns et al., 2016; OECD, 2018). This challenge is especially significant in Nepal as responsibilities are split across the three tiers of government and policy coherence is dependent on good intergovernmental relations (Government of Nepal, 2015).

1.1 Literature Review

It places the study in the context of the fiscal federalism, collaborative governance and decentralization of education literature.

Fiscal Federalism and the Logic of Decentralized Public Goods

The economic argument for decentralizing public services has been anchored on a lasting thought expressed by Oates (1972). If the economies of scale (EOS) and cross-jurisdictional spillovers (CJS) of a public service are not significant, then the optimal output of the public service to be offered by each jurisdiction is the level at which each jurisdiction's residents would value the service most highly, not the uniform level chosen by the central authority. A municipality that has a high proportion of first- generation learners might not be as concerned as

another municipality with infrastructure development, and might focus more resources on teacher recruitment, and vice versa, a central ministry that is not sensitive to this diversity is likely to under-serv the two municipalities. Recent “second generation” fiscal federalism research has qualified the theorem significantly, in noting that decentralization's efficiency benefits depend on the fiscal capacity, technical capacity and local accountability of subnational governments factors that are not guaranteed to exist in the absence of central government. Subsequent “second-generation” fiscal federalism scholarship has qualified the theorem significantly, in that decentralization's efficiency benefits depend on the fiscal capacity, technical capacity and local accountability of subnational governments – factors that are not guaranteed in the absence of central government (Bahl et al., 2022). But, empirical evidence indicates that the benefits of decentralization are not uniform in education. Based on cross-country studies, administrative and fiscal decentralization and school autonomy are found to have a positive relationship with educational outcomes, depending on institutional and contextual factors (Lastra-Anadón & Mukherjee, 2019). Other comparative evidence points to a possible tension between the scope of access and educational quality in the context of decentralizing responsibilities while not getting the same resources back in return for the new responsibilities (Guerra & Lastra-Anadón, 2019). This study once again confirms that citizens' perception of not only service delivery but also the accountability and capacity of decentralized authorities is also crucial. The present study directly addresses this conditionality. It does not examine whether decentralization would have a positive impact on learning outcomes, but rather the extent to which citizens believe that the new levels of decentralized governance local and provincial – are competent, transparent, and responsive.

Collaborative Governance as a Normative and Empirical Frame

While the fiscal federalism literature inquires about the best way to allocate authority between levels of government to maximize welfare, the collaborative governance literature focuses on how policymaking and implementation is coordinated across a number of actors at multiple levels of government and across the state/non-state boundary. In a meta-analysis of 137 cases, Ansell and Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a “governing arrangement” that calls for “one or more public agencies to actively involve non-state actors in a formal, consensus-seeking, deliberative process for making or implementing public policy.” Their contingency model sees trust-building, face-to-face dialogue and problem understanding as the necessary prerequisites to the success of collaboration, and prior history of conflict and power imbalance between collaborators and low institutional commitment as the key barriers to collaboration. While the model was designed to support cross-sectoral partnerships, it is reasonable to equate the three tiers of government and at the school level, the parents and School Management Committees as the ‘stakeholders’ of the reform and its implementation who need to develop trust and a sense of role and function if they are to be effective in jointly managing the system rather than operate independently as three distinct principals who give opposing instructions to the same school.

Modern education governance is an education system that is both vertically accountable (accountability across government) and horizontally accountable (accountability among the stakeholders, including parents and communities, school governing bodies, teachers and government). In decentralized education systems, several models of accountability are required to address the potential for accountability gaps between central, local, school and community levels that can be caused by increased autonomy (Hooge et al., 2012). Citizen awareness and participation, as such, should be seen not only as desirable democratic outcomes, but as tools to make decentralized education systems publicly accountable.

This is often the right role clarity that is lacking in the early years of a federal transition. The research from case-study and interview on the newly devolved education systems repeatedly shows the lack of clarity and not the clean separation of responsibilities between the three tier after devolution. A lack of common understanding of the policy and the continued practice of centralized habits among both national and local actors hinder its effective implementation, creating what Thapa et al. (2026) call an "illusion of autonomy": local managers in rural municipalities with formal authority to act do not have the resources, guidance or confidence to exercise their power. Key-informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in five municipalities by Acharya and Zafarullah (2020) also revealed that the process of operationalizing the power of local government tends to remain hierarchical and conventional, as the local government bodies are constricted by formalities of the process, and citizens do not have much room to influence the process of planning and budgeting. The qualitative findings predict two of the quantitative findings in the present study: (1) that ordinary citizens have little knowledge of education policies at the federal level, and (2) that they do not feel that education budgeting at the local level is very transparent.

Community and Parental Participation in School Governance

There is an extensive school-level literature on the issue of inter-governmental decentralization, dealing with the transfer of managerial authority to School Management Committees (SMCs), Parent-Teacher Associations and other community-based organizations. This reading of participatory reform is a cautionary one and not a celebratory one; it is a hermeneutics of suffering. This is a reading of participatory reform that is not celebratory, but rather cautionary, and it is a hermeneutics of suffering. The benefits of community involvement in the school are much more consistent in increasing awareness and local involvement in school than in increasing any indicators

of learning outcomes and the effects are highly dependent on the extent to which community members are given a degree of actual (not symbolic) influence on decisions made, including teacher recruitment (Okitsu & Edwards, 2017), in a systematic review of decentralization and school-based management across developing-country contexts.

The study finds that although a multi-faceted governance intervention to bolster SMCs had a positive impact on their frequency, plan completion, and hiring of locally-available teachers, the effects on these indicators represent a small, though statistically significant, proportion of the program's overall student learning impact (Cantet et al., 2026), consistent with the broader literature that suggests procedural participation does not equate with substantive influence or improved outcomes. In the Nepali context in particular, Joshi (2018) examines the country's student achievement data after decentralization of school management, and finds that while access has improved significantly, student achievement has not; he thus concludes that decentralization reform is more likely to improve access and local "ownership" of schools than to on its own have a strong impact on student achievement. This separation between awareness/engagement gains and service-quality gains is also directly testable in the current data, as the survey asks questions separately on awareness of policy, satisfaction with resources and confidence that recent reform has made an impact on educational quality.

Education Federalism in Recently Decentralized Systems

The findings indicate that decentralization is a still incomplete institutional process in Nepal as well. Shrestha (2024) mentions that policy implementation, coordination, and the implementation at the local level of the national policy vision to local practice remains a challenge. UNESCO's recent report on local education planning also highlights the increased opportunities for local planning in Nepal resulting from the federal transition, and the ongoing challenges in coordination, capacity and implementation at intergovernmental levels (UNESCO, 2023). Also, more recent studies highlight the need for improved institutional capacity, roles and resources predictability at the local government level to ensure that decentralized governance of education can achieve equitable service delivery (Timilsena et al., 2026).

The best available evidence on the impact of devolved school governance to new, local governments comes from a small number of countries that have recently transitioned to this new form of governance over the last ten years. Based on two nationally representative surveys of School Management Committee members, head teachers, and teachers shortly after such a transition, Schaffner et al. (2024) conclude that newly empowered local governments are more likely to respond to more visible and less complex tasks like school infrastructure and enrollment than to the more challenging and less visible task of monitoring and improving teaching quality, and that even highly motivated local governments are limited by low education-management capacity within schools. Several years after the devolution of a new constitution, the institutionalization of local governance in school education was slow, and it was an external shock, the COVID-19 pandemic, that pushed the management of the school education system towards the local level through a cascade of emergency plans and guidelines (Adhikari et al., 2023).

At the fiscal level, Bahl et al. (2022) outline a subnational government system in which already about a third of the total government expenditure is financed by intergovernmental transfers, with the vast majority of this transfer coming from the federal and provincial governments, meaning that local accountability for government spending is only partially local, as citizens are likely to hold transferring (federal or provincial) government at least partly responsible for how transferred funds are spent. In an article on the first full term of local government under such a constitution, Bhusal and Acharya (2024) document mixed results on the ability of local democratic institutions to materialize their new constitutional powers and resources into responsive governance and to deliver on participatory governance mechanisms like public hearings as real avenues for citizens to exercise influence. All these lead to the three expectations that are tested directly in the present study: (1) that the level of awareness of higher tier policy (federal/provincial) will be lower than the level of awareness of visible activities at the local level; (2) that perceptions of local government will be uneven across service domains, lower for more demanding activities such as budget transparency and performance monitoring, and higher for more tangible activities such as teacher placement and infrastructure; and (3) that while conceptually distinct, perceptions of the three tiers are likely to be positively correlated with one another if the general disposition toward "government" as measured across the three tied to education level, trust, and general civic engagement has a common effect across the three tiers.

2. Methodology

It describes the instrument, sample, data-cleaning procedure, and analytic strategy.

Instrument and Sample

Data are obtained from a structured household survey (N = 375) of community, institution and mixed-model school communities. The questionnaire included six demographic questions (gender, age, highest level of education, occupation, number of children in the school-going age band in the household, and whether the children attend a private or public school) and 20 questions related to governance (Likert scale), which were grouped into three blocks: federal government (7 items), provincial government (4 items), and local government (9 items). Item

response scales varied from two categories (e.g., binary yes/no awareness items) to five categories (e.g., satisfaction or agreement items with four response categories) depending on the item. The scales of item response ranged from 2 to 5 ordered categories depending on the item; with 1 representing the most favorable or affirmative response for a given item. Three further multiple choice questions were used to elicit their responses to a closed question asking them which was the greatest problem in their schools, the greatest challenge for local government in providing quality education and a general question on governance issues. The final sample was 68.5% male (n = 257), 29.9% female (n = 112), and 1.6% another gender category (n = 6), with a mean age of 40.4 years (SD = 8.3, range 14-71). There was a fairly even distribution across four categories of educational attainment (no formal schooling, basic, secondary, and higher education); and the majority (62.6%) said their children were attending community managed schools, with 21.8% at institutional (privately managed) schools and 15.6% at both types of schools.

Data Cleaning

All data handling and statistical analyses for this study were performed directly on the binary structure of the source data and their value-labels as an SPSS system file, using the scientific computing stack of Python (SciPy, pandas), and following the same descriptive, reliability and inferential procedures that would be performed on a standard SPSS or R workflow. Each of the items that were rated on a Likert-type scale was checked for the set of valid response codes on which it is documented. This screening found 86 of 7,500 item-level cells (1.1%) whose codes were not located within the code range on the item (e.g., a response of "42" on an item that has a range of 1-4; or a response of "11" or "12" on an item that has a range of 1-2; these are indicators of double-keystroke data-entry errors rather than additional response categories). Raw values are retained in the item-level frequency tables, and these 86 cells were recoded to missing for the following analyses: reliability, composite-index, correlation, and inferential analyses. This was a cleaning step which had a material impact on the internal consistency of all three governance blocks (see Section 4.3) and is reported here for the sake of transparency and for the purpose of being reproduced.

Analytic Strategy

Four analytic steps were carried out; they were as follows: The internal consistency of each of the three governance blocks (federal, provincial, local) was first verified by Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), which is the standard measure for the degree of internal consistency of items within a scale, as they are expected to co-vary as would be expected if they were sampling from a common underlying construct. Second, three composite indexes were created for each block by calculating the mean of the items for each block using the responses of each case, thus handling missing values in each block separately, and Pearson correlations were computed to determine how closely the perceptions of the three levels of governance were associated. Third, where a cross-tabulation was more natural unit of analysis than a composite score (e.g., gender by federal policy awareness; school type by type of local government support; education attainment by federal program implementation awareness), chi square tests of independence were used to test the association between the selected demographic variables and the individual governance items, with the standardized effect-size measure being Cramer's V. Fourth, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and independent-samples t-tests (Welch's correction for unequal variances) were employed to compare mean composite-index scores by education level, school type (for the local governance index) and by gender (for the federal governance index) and to determine demographic subgroups. All tests were conducted using a conventional .05 level of significance and effect sizes are reported in the text with p-values throughout.

3. Results

It presents demographics, block-level response distributions, reliability and inter-tier correlation, and group comparisons.

Respondent Profile

It provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were male (68.5%), middle-aged (mean age 40.4 years), with the majority holding no formal schooling (29.1%), basic education (29.3%) or secondary education (27.5%), while 14.1% had completed higher education. The predominant occupation reported was farming (47.7%) as would be expected for a sample largely taken from rural and peri-urban areas. The majority of schools were community managed (62.6%), while there were institutional/private schools, accounting for 21.8% of the households, and those which had access to both types of schools, 15.6% of the households. The mean number of children per household reported to be in school was 2.5 (SD = 1.4).

Perceptions by Governance Tier

Response to the federal tier was mixed and, on the federal awareness item, low – 29% of respondents were aware of federal education policy, while 71% were not – but a majority (63%) noted a change in teaching or curriculum since then. Opinions were more evenly split on federal policy's effectiveness in improving the quality of education, with 14% saying it was “very effective,” 45% saying it was “somewhat effective,” 7% saying it was “not effective,”

and 34% saying they were “don't know” -- which in and of itself is a sign of poor awareness of the federal level's visibility in the household. Satisfaction with the availability of teachers and teaching materials was slightly positive, but not strong (14% very satisfied, 60% satisfied, 24% dissatisfied, 2% very dissatisfied), and the perception of the implementation of federal plans was that they were partially implemented much more often than fully implemented (65% partially implemented, 4% fully implemented).

Perceptions at the provincial level showed a similar trend, with qualified, moderate approval but a significant degree of uncertainty. For 5% of respondents, their understanding of the federal-provincial division of responsibility for education was "very clear," while 52% reported it was "somewhat clear," and 43% reported they had no understanding of the division of responsibility at all ("don't know"). Almost half (51%) thought that provincial education programs had been put into place in their region, while almost a third (30%) was unsure. Overall, perceived cross-level coordination among federal, provincial and local governments was rated as "somewhat good" by 55% of the respondents and "very good" by 19%, while 17% found that there was "not at all" good coordination, the single best rated governance dimension (despite the fact that a significant minority believed there was failure in coordination).

The most common (nine) local-tier items showed the greatest variation in evaluations subdomain-wise. The most frequently reported type of local government support received consisted of assistance in teacher management (47% of respondents who reported receiving local government support), while infrastructure support was received by 27% and 9% reported no local government support. The local education budget didn't achieve the best score in terms of being budget transparent either: a quarter of respondents (29%) answered that they did not know, and 18% said it was "not transparent" (leaving only 45% at "fairly transparent" and 8% at "very transparent"). Only 47% of households reported that family members were involved in decision-making at the school level and the largest share of respondents (48%) said that parent/community involvement with the local government body happens only ‘sometimes’. There was moderate satisfaction with local government accountability (9% very satisfied, 60% satisfied, 23% dissatisfied, 8% very dissatisfied) and perceived alignment of local government practice with federal and provincial policy (15% very aligned, 49% some degree, 18% rarely, 18% not at all).

The relatively low perception of budget transparency is significant because transparency is not just an administrative trait, but is closely related to citizens' capacity to supervise and hold education authorities accountable. Transparency, access to information, participation and accountability are linked aspects of effective governance in education, as described in the literature of UNESCO (Hallak & Poisson, 2006). Later research in open government in the educational sector also highlights transparency and participatory mechanisms as avenues for public oversight of the implementation of policies and the use of public resources (Huss & Keudel, 2020).

Reliability, Composite Indices, and Inter-Tier Correlation

The seven items federal block's Cronbach's alpha was .644 (n = 358 valid cases), the four items provincial block's Cronbach's alpha was .671 (n = 353), and the nine items local block's Cronbach's alpha was .620 (n = 340). Reliability values of this type are generally considered to be at the margin-to-acceptable range for attitude scales appropriate for multiple domains in exploratory situations, and the current values are significantly higher than the pre-cleaning values (around .32-.47) that are associated with any reliability-based analysis.

These scores were computed as mean scores of the respondents at the federal, provincial and local levels (1 = most favorable response), and averaged 2.08 (SD = 0.41), 2.33 (SD = 0.65) and 2.22 (SD = 0.44) respectively, indicating generally favorable-to-neutral evaluations at all three levels, with provincial government rated somewhat less favorably than federal or local government, but with the three means not being dramatically different. The federal-provincial and federal-local indices were positively and significantly correlated with each other ($r = .535$, $p < .01$ and $r = .560$, $p < .01$, respectively) as were the provincial-local and federal-local indices ($r = .581$, $p < .01$). The correlations are fairly high, but not close to unity, so the respondents make moderately distinct judgments among the three levels. The common variance that is suggested by an r of approximately .55 is about 30% of the variance, and the remainder of the variance is within each index tier-specific -- that is, a general predisposition toward government performance runs through all three of the evaluations, plausibly related to respondent characteristics like education, general civic trust and exposure to any level of government activity.

Demographic and School-Type Associations

The local governance composite index was significantly related to educational attainment, as determined by a one-way ANOVA, $F(3, 371) = 5.55$, $p = .001$. The respondents with no formal schooling reported a mean local-governance index of 2.36 (SD = 0.40), which was significantly lower compared to the respondents with basic education (M = 2.16, SD = 0.41), secondary education (M = 2.16, SD = 0.46), or higher education (M = 2.16, SD = 0.47), which were almost identical among one another. Put another way, the difference in local government perception performance between those with no schooling and any schooling is virtually all the gradient, with no significant incremental increase in local government perception performance between any level of schooling. School type was not significantly associated with the overall local governance item examined using a chi-square, $F(2, 369) = 1.45$, $p = .237$, but it was significantly associated with two specific local governance items examined

via chi-square: the type of support received from local government (chi-square(8, N = 372) = 19.90, p = .011, Cramer's V = .164, with households using both community and institutional schools somewhat more likely to report receiving infrastructure support and somewhat less likely to report receiving scholarship support than community-only households); and perceived budget transparency (chi-square(6, N = 370) = 24.16, p < .001, Cramer's V = .181, with community-school households more likely than institutional-school households to rate local budgets as "very transparent. Further, regardless of the composite-index result above, education level was also significantly associated with the specific item asking about whether provincial programs were implemented (chi-square(6, N = 355) = 31.68, p < .001, Cramer's V = .211): respondents with no formal schooling were disproportionately likely to answer "don't know" (38.5% of that sub-group, versus approximately a quarter or less for respondents with any formal schooling), reinforcing the reading that lower formal education was associated with not being able to see provincial-level action versus actively not seeing these programs. In contrast, gender did not have a significant association with federal education policy awareness, chi-square(2, N = 362) = 0.55, p = .758, and there was not a significant difference in mean federal-governance index scores between male (M = 2.10, SD = 0.40) and female (M = 2.03, SD = 0.42) respondents, Welch's t = 1.43, p = .155 one of the relatively few governance domains in this survey where a significant difference did not exist.

Reported Challenges

The major problem that the respondents identified in their school was inadequate budget, followed by lack of teachers, low-quality teaching, and poor infrastructure. The next most frequently mentioned challenge to providing quality education was weak inter-governmental coordination, with 42% of respondents answering the question separately. Limited funds (31%), limited staff capacity (13%) and policy confusion (11%) were the other responses to the question about the biggest challenge local government face in delivering quality education. A third, more general challenges item yielded a similar ranking: Again, the top two answers were weak coordination (39%) and lack of funds (26%). The importance of "weak coordination" as perceived to be a major constraint on poor local performance is noteworthy in the context of the above quantitative finding that coordination was the most positively rated governance dimension in the survey as a whole, as the two findings are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a moderate majority rating coordination as "somewhat good" is consistent with a plurality of respondents identifying coordination failures, not funding or staffing, as the major constraint on poor performance.

4. Discussion

Three patterns in these results are worthy of further discussion in connection with literature studied in Section 2. To begin with, the moderate positive coefficients for the federal, provincial and local composite indices (r = .54-.58) remain within the range that would be expected if citizen evaluations of multi-level government contained a component based on how they evaluate the performance of government at each level, plus another that evaluates their overall disposition toward the performance of government. If trust in government is a stable individual-level personality characteristic, influenced by education, past experience, and civic involvement, then it should be surmised that this characteristic will influence perceptions of government performance at the federal, provincial, and local levels at the same time, just as has been observed here. In the same way, the correlations are far from perfect, and the important, tiered effects of education level and school type on these correlations described in Section 4.4 indicate that "government" is not being rated as a monolithic unit, but rather as one that implies a direct correspondence with the tiered and documented qualitative evidence of different effects of these variables. For example, the lack of action at the provincial level reflects the federal-provincial division of labor noted by Acharya and Zafarullah (2020) and Bahl et al. (2022).

Second, the finding that there is a significant difference between respondents with no formal schooling and those with any formal schooling at the boundary between the two categories, and that this difference is not evenly distributed across the schooling continuum, agrees with an information/visibility mechanism rather than with a satisfaction mechanism per se. A significant fraction of "don't know" answers are paired with the substantive positive/negative split across a number of individual items and also these "don't know" answers are more prevalent among less-educated respondents. This is similar to Joshi's (2018) conclusion that decentralization reforms in Nepal in the past have been more successful in increasing formal access and local “ownership” of schools than in ensuring those who are formally excluded, or less well informed, are actually sufficiently informed to be meaningfully included in the school's governance. It is also consistent with the broader literature on community-participation-based education that shows that procedural devolution does not necessarily lead to substantive and informed involvement, especially among the most formally excluded households and, plausibly, those with the least prior experience of such processes (Cantet et al., 2026; Okitsu & Edwards, 2017).

Analytically speaking, the results of the "don't know" are significant because they are more concentrated among respondents with less education. It posits that, while formal opportunities for participation may emerge through decentralization, so too may the informational capacity to utilize those opportunities. Open government approaches focus on the need for information that is accessible and comprehensible for meaningful participation and monitoring, especially in cases of complex institutional processes (Huss & Keudel, 2020). This understanding is also in line with the general rule that decentralization must not only transfer power but also provide ways for

citizens to understand who is responsible for what, and to request information and explanations from public institutions (OECD, 2016).

Third, the low reported rate of family involvement in school level decision-making (47%) and low reported frequency of collaboration with parents/community and local government (9% report that it happens “always”) don't sit so well with the moderately positive overall ratings of local government support and accountability. One explanation is that local governments in newly federalized systems might be seen as fairly effective facilitators of tangible, transactional services (teacher placement, physical facilities) but ineffective at more complex, collaborative services (regular, two-way interactions with parents and communities in decision-making), which is what local governments in this sample were found to be doing (Schaffner et al., 2024). The single worst rating in the survey is the lack of budget transparency, and this lack of transparency is a likely proximate cause of this pattern; that is, a public that has little knowledge of how local education money is spent has little basis for doing so as informed co-managers of the system as there is on paper.

Last but by no means least, the qualitative challenge items provide texture which is not provided by the composite indices. The high share of the "inadequate budget" as the primary school-level problem and "lack of funds" as the second most frequently mentioned problem among them mirrors Bahl et al.'s (2022) depiction of the subnational financing system being highly dependent on intergovernmental transfers and not much on local revenues, which would inevitably lead to constant budget constraints at the school level, even with good performance on other school-level problems. The over-arching theme of "weak coordination" as the largest perceived local-government problem, however, supports the evidence from the case studies of "confusing, overlapping, or unclear" role allocation among the three tiers of government in the early years of the transition to federalism (Thapa et al., 2026; Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020), and suggests that open-ended "biggest problem" questions and closed-ended satisfaction ratings can yield complementary rather than contradictory insights into the same underlying phenomenon.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study aimed to uncover citizens' perceptions of the federal, provincial, and local authorities involved in their public schools, utilizing a 375-respondent survey which was analyzed using reliability, correlation, and group-comparison statistical methods that are similar to those in SPSS or R statistical workflows. There are 4 findings to highlight. The three governance level scores are moderately positively correlated with each other, indicating not only a general attitude toward government, but important differences between the levels. The levels of awareness of federal and provincial levels of policy are also significantly lower than satisfaction with the tangible and visible local government support, indicating a longtime Information or visibility gap between higher levels of government and the households who are directly impacted by its actions. The greatest and most consistent association with more positive perceptions of local governance is with educational attainment as a demographic factor, rather than either gender or type of school. But the level of collaboration and co-management for which decentralization reform was intended – the ideal of working together – is only somewhat achieved at the interface between local government and the local community, as budget transparency is the most poorly rated of the items in the survey, and family involvement in school decision-making is weak.

These findings imply some specific, low cost interventions. Simplified and non-technical local education budget reporting, posted on the school website, public meetings, or in the School Management Committee distribution system, could directly respond to the lowest rated result on the survey and likely lead to an increase in perceived transparency and the substantive quality of community oversight. Consistent with an information gap, rather than an education-level-blind general communication campaign, outreach and civic-education efforts would target the segment of the population that responded "don't know" to the poll question and who provided the least favorable substantive assessment of the information. Finally, because coordination ranked as the most commonly reported local-government challenge even as the general coordination scale was fairly high, it might be useful to make clear, with the aid of simple, accessible graphics and messages, that it is the federal government that is responsible for which specific local-government failures one experiences (a point which recent qualitative research shows is often missing even several years into federal transitions), a relatively low-cost action that is recommended as a way to improve coordination. Finally, because even though the general coordination scale was fairly high, coordination was the most commonly reported local-government challenge, it might be useful to make clear (with simple public-facing materials) that it is the federal government which is responsible for which specific local-government failures one experiences a relatively low-cost action which a certain element of the recent qualitative research suggests is often missing even several years into federal transitions.

There are some drawbacks to these conclusions. The sample was sufficient for the analyses of reliability and for comparing the group data here, but it is only one cross-section from one set of communities and should not be used to draw inferences about the effects of decentralization reform, nor is it assumed to be representative of the national population without additional details on the sampling frame. All three governance blocks have acceptable internal-consistency reliabilities for exploratory research, although they were not as high as the .80 level generally considered acceptable for high-stakes or confirmatory measurement, and these reliabilities may be further

improved in future rounds of the survey by piloting items more carefully for uniform response-scale structure across each of the blocks. Although small, this 1.1% of out-of-range response codes is a reminder that valid codes are only identified and cleaned within a sample before this kind of data can be used for measuring internal consistency or making inferences, and that this process would have lowered the internal consistency of the sample by approximately 50%. Finally, since the survey instrument did not explicitly differentiate between the two 'don't know' response alternatives, the 'don't know' responses presented throughout this analysis as a proxy for low visibility, may in some instances represent true ambivalence or mixed feelings about the situation; a more useful distinction in future survey instrument design would be between 'don't know' and 'mixed feelings'. In light of these shortcomings, the pattern of results presented here moderate cross-tier correlation, an education-focused gap between citizens' expectations of local governance quality, and a significant transparency shortfall, provide a reasonably clear, and reasonably actionable, empirical sense of the current state of a collaborative, multi-level education governance reform midway through its journey.

The proposal to streamline the disclosure of public budgets is in line with international evidence on education-governance. Transparency mechanisms work best when they make information that would be a challenge for citizens or school stakeholders to comprehend into something they can understand and apply. UNESCO says that there is need to build management capacity, regulation, participation and ownership in parallel and not just deal with transparency as an administrative task (Hallak & Poisson, 2006). Likewise, in OECD countries, there is evidence that decentralized education systems need clear responsibilities and accountability arrangements and local autonomy (OECD, 2018).

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