Managing Schools with Instructional Leadership: Headteachers' Perspective, Practice and Problem in Nuwakot District

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Abstract

The growing international literature on instructional leadership (IL) shows that its practice changes with cultural and local factors. Previous studies have shown that while head teachers (HTs) in Nepal's community schools are expected to lead teaching and learning, they often focus on administrative tasks instead of key IL parts like teacher development, goal setting, curriculum guidance, and classroom checks. This study used qualitative methods, including interviews with 12 head teachers and observations in Nuwakot district, to find and understand the main barriers stopping IL in rural basic schools. Factors such as no clear recruitment policy, teacher shortages, lack of resources, political interference, low community support, and heavy workload are key problems affecting IL practice and success in Nepal. The findings help understand IL better in different local settings.

Keywords: instructional leadership; head teachers; rural schools; barriers; decentralization

Introduction

Instructional leadership (IL) is widely regarded as one of the most effective approaches for school principals to improve education quality (Kaparou & Bush, 2016). It serves as a key foundation for successful school management by directly shaping curriculum, supporting teachers, and enhancing student learning outcomes and overall school growth (Glickman et al., 2017; Neumerski et al., 2018; Shaked, 2023). IL can be defined as leadership practices that prioritize curriculum delivery, teacher development, and building a collaborative school environment, with the head teacher (HT) playing a central role in establishing a shared vision for teaching and learning (Hendriks & Scheerens, 2013). International studies consistently linked IL to higher student achievement and sustained

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school improvement (Blase & Blase, 1999). However, in resource-limited contexts such as Nepal's community schools, significant gaps in IL implementation persist, undermining policy aims for equitable and high-quality education despite formal mandates positioning HTs as pedagogical leaders (Khanal et al., 2020).

Nepal's transition to a federal education system was intended to promote democratic school governance by empowering local entities, including School Management Committees (SMCs) and municipal governments (Daly et al., 2020). Policy documents advocate for participatory decision-making and local accountability. But a clear mismatch exists between these decentralized structures and the actual leadership capacities at the school level. Several HTs have followed traditional, top-down administrative practices focused on rules and compliance rather than creative teaching improvements (Bhattarai, 2022; Khanal et al., 2020). This is especially evident in rural areas like Nuwakot district, the site of this study, where such approaches prevent the creation of inclusive, student-focused learning environments.

Structural challenges in Nepal's public education system further limit effective IL. Community schools often face shortages of qualified teachers, poor facilities, and limited teaching materials. Leadership training is irregular, and there are no clear standards to measure IL performance, resulting in uneven leadership quality between schools (Khanal et al., 2020).These problems are worsened by local politics, where SMCs, lacking expertise in education, either interfere excessively or remain uninvolved, forcing HTs into reactive crisis handling instead of proactive instructional guidance (Lamsal & Bajracharya, 2023).

A key issue in IL discussions is the uncritical adoption of foreign models, such as distributed leadership, which shares responsibilities among staff (Spillane, 2009), or transformational leadership, which inspires change through vision (Leithwood et al., 2020). These contrast with Nepal's dominant hierarchical style but are rarely adapted to local realities. Studies indicate that HTs in Nepali community schools lack autonomy and support, burdened by paperwork that diverts time from classroom oversight, a pattern seen in other low-resource countries (Lamsal, 2022; Dutta & Sahney, 2022; Anderson & Mundy, 2014). While several studies examine policy flaws and external barriers, less attention is given to HTs' and other stakeholders' views, daily practices, and strategies for overcoming obstacles in applying IL within Nepal's unique basic education settings. This study fills that gap by exploring two research questions:

How do head teachers in basic community schools in Nepal understand their instructional leadership roles under the decentralized governance system?

What local factors limit their ability to carry out instructional leadership practices in rural basic schools?

Head Teachers, Instructional Leadership and School Management

Instructional leadership (IL) provides a powerful framework for understanding how head teachers (HTs) can improve teaching and learning, especially in rural community schools of Nepal. First developed in early educational studies (Gray, 1934), IL centers on three core functions: defining a clear school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger et al., 2020). In Nepal's federalized education system, HTs are expected to connect national goals with daily classroom practice despite limited resources and rural difficulties (Yukl & Becker, 2006). The success of IL depends on how HTs perceive their roles and overcome local barriers in decentralized governance (Kaparou & Bush, 2016).

Several studies concluded that strong IL directly raises teaching quality and student results (Daly et al., 2016; Goddard et al., 2021). In Nepal's rural schools, HTs often go beyond paperwork to support teachers' emotional and social needs (James et al., 2001, as cited in Camidge et al., 2023; Argyriou & Iordanidis, 2014). IL also builds teamwork and fresh ideas, which help schools handle complex changes under local governance (Shore & Chung, 2022; Gupton, 2010). These strengths make IL a useful tool for examining leadership in resource-poor settings.

Despite its value, putting IL into practice remains difficult. Short appointment periods, weak training, and low decision-making power stop HTs from creating a strong teaching vision (Draper et al., 2003; Francois, 2014). Lack of books, classrooms, and materials—plus uneven policy support—makes it hard to guide curriculum and lessons (Goldring et al., 2015; Cobb et al., 2018). Moreover, most studies on IL come from wealthy countries; few explore Nepal's unique rural realities (Liu & Society, 2018; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Unequal resources and weak local structures further reduce HTs' ability to lead instruction effectively (Thapa et al., 2013; Cherkowski, 2016).

Effective IL must fit the daily routines and systems of rural schools (Murphy et al., 2007; Spillane, 2009). One promising idea is to combine IL with distributed leadership, where teachers and staff share duties (Goldring et al., 2015). However, such models need careful adaptation to Nepal's federal system. Critical comment: Although global research highlights IL benefits and barriers, it rarely examines how Nepali HTs understand their instructional roles or which local factors block their work in basic rural schools. This gap

leaves policymakers and trainers without clear, context-based guidance.

Policy Frameworks of Instructional Leadership for Head Teachers in Nepal

Nepal's education policies clearly define head teachers (HTs) as instructional leaders responsible for improving teaching and learning in schools. The Education Regulations 2059 (amended in 2071) under the Education Act, 2028 list detailed duties for HTs, including maintaining school quality, discipline, and teamwork among teachers, students, and parents. Although these policies support instructional leadership (IL) by requiring HTs to plan lessons, monitor teaching, and follow the national curriculum, they often fail in rural areas like Nuwakot due to limited resources, heavy administrative work, and weak training (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Khanal et al., 2020; Shaked, 2023).

The regulations direct HTs to prepare a yearly school plan, supervise classroom teaching, organize extra activities, and ensure curriculum standards are met. These tasks match global IL models that focus on curriculum guidance and teacher support (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). In theory, such rules help HTs build learner-centered schools. However, in rural community schools, shortages of books, rooms, and trained staff make these goals hard to achieve (Lamsal & Bajracharya, 2023).

Policies also load HTs with non-teaching jobs, such as handling money, issuing certificates, and sending reports to district offices. These duties take time away from classroom visits and teacher coaching, a common problem in poor countries (Dutta & Sahney, 2022; Anderson & Mundy, 2014). Nepal's federal system gives power to School Management Committees (SMCs), but many HTs must wait for SMC approval to train teachers or buy materials (Bhattarai, 2022). This delay blocks quick improvements in teaching.

The rules punish teachers with low student results by stopping salary increases. This aims to raise standards but can create fear instead of teamwork (Leithwood et al., 2020; Shore & Chung, 2022). Rural HTs often lack skills to fairly judge performance or solve conflicts, leading to stress among staff (Lamsal, 2022). International studies show that IL works best when leaders balance checks with training and support (Goddard et al., 2021). Nepal's policies focus more on punishment than on building HT skills.

Experts suggest sharing leadership tasks with teachers and SMCs to reduce HT workload (Spillane, 2009). Nepal's rules already call for monthly teacher meetings and professional growth (Government of Nepal, 2071). Yet success needs better training, less SMC interference, and more freedom for HTs to focus on teaching (Camidge et al.,

2023; Thapa et al., 2013). While policies list strong IL duties, they rarely ask how HTs understand these roles in daily practice under local limits.

Conceptual Framework

This study utilized Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) Instructional Leadership Framework as its main guide (see Table 1). This model helped to explore and explain how head teachers (HTs) in Nepal's rural community schools understand and carry out their instructional leadership (IL) roles under the decentralized education system.

Table 1: Instructional Leadership Framework

Dimension	Function
Defining the school mission	1. Drafting school aims 2. Dissimilating School aims
Managing curriculum and Instructions	1. Supervising and evaluating teachers' classroom instructions 2. Coordinating curriculum 3. Monitoring students' progress
Promoting school learning climate	1. Protecting teaching and learning time 2. Enriching professional development 3. Maintaining high visibility 4. Provides incentives for teachers 5. Provides incentives for learning

(Source: Hallinger & Murphy, 1985)

Research Method

This study explores head teachers' perspectives on instructional leadership (IL) practices and the contextual factors influencing them in community schools of Nuwakot district, Nepal. The study employs a qualitative case study methodology to collect detailed information about varying leadership experiences, institutional challenges, and in-depth explanations of those practices (Creswell, 2013).

Study Context and Participant Selection

This study was conducted in Nuwakot district, Bagmati Province, Nepal, encompassing both urban and rural municipalities. Nuwakot is a hilly district with a mix of agricultural livelihoods, limited industrial growth, and growing tourism potential near the Langtang region. The district headquarters, Bidur, serves as the urban centre, while remote

rural municipalities face challenges such as poor road connectivity, seasonal migration, and resource constraints in public schools. Community schools in Nuwakot typically operate with government funding, local School Management Committee (SMC) oversight, and teacher appointments under the Teachers Service Commission. Enrolment rates are higher in urban areas, but rural schools often struggle with student retention due to household labour demands and early marriage practices, particularly among girls. Socioeconomic diversity is evident, with urban schools serving more middle-income families and rural ones catering to subsistence farmers and marginalised Janajati communities.

We used purposive sampling to select a single embedded case comprising two contrasting community schools, six in Bidur Municipality (urban) and the other six in a remote rural municipality of Nuwakot, to capture diverse IL dynamics. Within this case, participants were chosen for their direct roles in or exposure to instructional leadership. Priority was given to participants with substantive knowledge of daily school operations and policy implementation. Table 2 shows the composition of the sample.

When determining sample size, we targeted at least 10–12 participants to gain multiple viewpoints on IL enactment. Recruitment continued until informational redundancy emerged through repeating patterns in leadership challenges and strategies (Creswell, 2013). Finally, 12 participants were involved: six headteachers from municipality located schools and six others from rural municipality located schools. Head teachers' experience ranged from 7 to 15 years (average 10.8 years). The limited number of female head teachers mirrors the national trend of gender imbalance in school leadership positions in Nepal.

Table 2: Participants' Information

Participant	Institution	Location	Sex	Experience
HT-1	School- A	Municipality	Female	10 yrs.
HT -2	School- B	Municipality	Male	7 yrs.
HT -3	School- C	Municipality	Male	3 yrs.
HT -4	School- D	Municipality	Male	5 yrs
HT -5	School- E	Municipality	Female	4 yrs
HT -6	School- F	Municipality	Male	3 yrs
HT -7	School- G	Rural Municipality	Male	15 yrs.
HT -8	School- H	Rural Municipality	Female	11 yrs.
HT -9	School - I	Rural Municipality	Male	4 yrs.

HT -10	School - J	Rural Municipality	Male	5 yrs
HT -11	School - K	Rural Municipality	Female	6 yrs
HT -12	School- L	Rural Municipality	Male	5 yrs.

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. We drew interview questions from established IL frameworks but adapted them to Nepal's community school context. Questions were organized around key IL dimensions: defining learning goals, managing teaching processes, promoting school climate, and monitoring progress. Sample questions included: 'As head teacher, how do you support teachers in improving classroom instruction?' 'What daily challenges prevent you from focusing on curriculum supervision?' 'How do local policies or community expectations shape your leadership role?' and 'Can you give examples of teacher professional development activities you organise?'

Eleven interviews were conducted face-to-face at school premises and municipality office where as one interview was conducted over the telephone due to monsoon-related access issues. Interviews lasted 20–40 minutes (average 32 minutes) and were audio-recorded with consent. Observations captured head teachers' routine interactions, teacher meetings, and classroom oversight during regular school hours, providing a lived context to verbal accounts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Data analysis

We followed a thematic analysis process guided by established qualitative steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Transcripts and observation notes were first read multiple times for familiarization. Initial deductive codes were derived from IL literature (e.g., vision-setting, resource allocation, community engagement), while inductive codes emerged from context-specific issues. We independently coded segments, then met to resolve discrepancies and form categories. Final themes integrated theoretical constructs with grounded insights.

To ensure trustworthiness, we obtained verbal informed consent and assured anonymity through pseudonyms and locked data storage. Member checking involved sharing summarized themes with six key participants (four head teachers, one SMC chair, and one coordinator); five provided confirmatory feedback.

Findings

Head teachers in basic community schools in Nepal described multiple barriers to enacting instructional leadership (IL) under the decentralized governance system. These were grouped under two main themes: overloaded administrative and managerial roles and limited autonomy and support for instructional practices. Both themes emerged consistently across urban and rural schools in Nuwakot district, reflecting a tension between policy expectations for IL and the practical realities of resource-constrained, centrally influenced school operations.

Overloaded Administrative and Managerial Roles

Data revealed that head teachers primarily understood their role through the lens of general management rather than instructional improvement. Bureaucratic directives, infrastructure demands, and stakeholder coordination consumed most of their time and energy, leaving IL as a peripheral concern. This aligns with pre-decentralization norms where head teachers were promoted based on seniority rather than leadership capacity, and schools operated under tight central oversight despite formal decentralization.

A dominant subtheme was the challenge of juggling operational responsibilities with academic oversight. Head teachers positioned themselves as coordinators of the entire school ecosystem—discipline, infrastructure, cleanliness, and community relations—while struggling to prioritize teaching and learning. One head teacher illustrated this tension:

As an HT, my role is to look after the overall aspects of the school. For example, teacher's regularity and punctuality, the conditions of physical assets such as buildings and walls, cleanliness and proper functioning of all the staff. However, to maintain balance between academic and administrative works is really challenging for me. (HT-1, School-A)

Another emphasized the broader scope:

The smooth functioning of a school hinges upon the ability of its head teacher to navigate the delicate balance between academic excellence and administrative efficiency. (HT-3, School-C)

These statements frame the head teacher as an 'orchestra conductor', where failure in any domain risks overall school dysfunction. Yet the data showed that administrative burdens consistently eclipsed instructional ones.

Head teachers avoided direct classroom supervision to respect teacher autonomy

and due to their own teaching loads. This created a culture where classrooms remained private domains. One head teacher explained:

I do not watch classes in person because the teachers become anxious and dejected if I do, and they don't want me to come into their classrooms. I just occasionally peep through the doors and windows as a result. I don't have enough time to observe their entire class walk into the room. I have attended my own classes as well. (HT-5, School-E)

This practice underscores a gap in feedback loops essential for IL, with head teachers defaulting to informal glimpses rather than systematic monitoring.

Limited Autonomy and Support for Instructional Practices

Despite decentralization rhetoric, head teachers reported constrained decision-making power, inadequate professional development follow-up, and absent incentives or external guidance. Teacher development was outsourced to government training, while school-level mentoring was negligible. Head teachers viewed their role as ensuring attendance at External Training Centre (ETC) modules rather than internalizing or applying the content. One stated:

We are getting training from Educational Training centre on regular basis which is important for the improvement of quality of educational leadership. (HT-4, School-D)

Another added:

We are trained on the content of educational administration and supervision that is important for the development of our career. (HT-3, School-C)

However, no mechanisms existed for school-based reinforcement, revealing a disconnect between centralized training and localized IL.

Monetary and motivational gaps further undermined initiative. Head teachers noted: There are not the incentives for the tasks assigned to us. ((HT-9, School-I)

No teachers are motivated to generate innovative ideas in school due to the lack of monetary incentives. (HT-12, School-L)

External supervision focused on administrative compliance rather than pedagogical improvement: school supervisors prioritized "physical layout and statistics" over educational initiatives. Stakeholder engagement was similarly misaligned:

There is no support for the improvement of the leadership in our school by the stakeholder. They only discuss about the political matter in the school. (HT-8, School-H)

Resource shortages and staffing constraints. Acute teacher shortages forced overloads (some handling seven periods daily) and prevented hiring, further diverting

head teachers from IL:

I have not enough teachers to run the class smoothly now-a-days. Some stakeholder keeps the interest to promote the school but other people are not interested to support the school. (HT-11, School-K)

This theme suggests that head teachers understood IL as theoretically encompassing planning, supervision, and feedback but practically subordinated it to survival-oriented management. Decentralization had not translated into genuine instructional autonomy, leaving head teachers as implementers of central directives within under-resourced environments.

Local Factors Limiting Instructional Leadership

Head teachers (HTs) in rural basic schools in Nuwakot, Nepal, shared many local problems that stop them from doing instructional leadership (IL) well. IL means guiding teachers, checking classes, and helping students learn better. But these HTs face big challenges every day. We grouped the problems into six main themes: policy and recruitment issues, teacher shortages and workload, lack of resources, political interference, low community and parent support, and poor school management practices. These themes came from interviews with 12 head teachers in one municipality and one rural municipality. The problems are common in rural areas and make IL hard to do.

Policy and Recruitment Issues

There is no clear rule for choosing HTs. Often, politics decides who becomes HT, not teaching skill or leadership training. HTs are picked from teachers by the School Management Committee (SMC) and District Education Office, but without proper tests. This makes many HTs weak in leading for better teaching. One HT said:

There is not any policy for the recruitment of the head teacher. (HT-2, School-B)

Another explained how politics hurts:

From the political point of view, municipality has not supported for the resource development of community school. (HT-6, School-F)

Because of this, HTs start the job without knowing much about IL. They feel like normal teachers, not leaders.

Teacher Shortage and Workload

Rural schools do not have enough teachers. The government says one teacher for 45–55 students, but in reality, one teacher handles many grades or subjects. HTs also teach

full time—up to seven periods a day. This leaves no time for checking classes or helping teachers. One HT shared:

In my school, teachers are not taking classes. I am not managing grade teaching here due to the lack of sufficient teachers according to specific subjects. (HT-1, School-A)

Another said:

There are limited teachers for running the class in my school. So, I am taking it seriously for the managing class. (HT-12, School-L)

Teachers get tired and cannot plan good lessons. HTs cannot supervise because they are busy teaching. Some teachers skip classes or refuse hard subjects like English and Math.

Lack of Resource

Schools have very little money, books, or teaching tools. No budget for maps, science kits, or even pens. HTs try to collect from forest or parents, but it is not enough. One HT noted:

I have collected some resource from the local forest which is nearest from our school but it is not sufficient for us. (HT-6, School-F)

Another added:

I have not any resources to collect and for further improvement, only municipality gives salary for the teachers. (HT-11, School-K)

Without tools, teachers use only chalk and blackboard. Students lose interest, and IL cannot grow. HTs say:

Due to the lack of resources, I cannot use different innovative materials that can enhance the achievement to the learner. (HT-7, School-G)

Political Interference

Politics controls everything—teacher hiring, SMC work, and school money. Some teachers use political friends to avoid duty. HTs cannot punish late or lazy teachers. An HT complained:

Sometimes, I faced problems of teachers who are showing the political power in school. (HT-3, School-C)

SMC members fight over politics, not school improvement. This stops teamwork and makes HTs feel weak.

School Management Practice

HTs have no time for IL because of daily problems. Supervisors from district

office come only for papers, not teaching help. SMC does not discuss lessons or student progress. HTs feel alone. One HT said:

I have been facing other problem like there is no collaborative to each other for the improvement to the leadership in my school. (HT-10, School-J)

Teachers do not talk about subject problems. No one shares ideas. HTs teach most of the day, then do admin work at night. A headteacher noted:

In my school, there is not discussion between colleagues to each other's in the subject matter in office room. (HT-2, School-B)

In short, rural HTs want to lead for better teaching, but local problems block them. No good policy, few teachers, no money, politics, unsupportive parents, and bad management keep IL only on paper. To fix this, Nepal needs clear HT selection rules, more teachers and funds, less politics, and stronger community links. Only then can HTs focus on classrooms and student learning.

Discussion

This study adds to the growing body of research on instructional leadership (IL) in developing contexts by highlighting the persistent gaps between policy intentions and ground-level realities in Nepal's rural community schools (Hallinger et al., 2020; Khanal et al., 2020). The following sections interpret the key findings in relation to existing literature, acknowledge study limitations, and outline practical implications for policy and practice.

The results show that head teachers (HTs) in Nuwakot district primarily view their roles through an administrative lens, with IL relegated to a secondary, often theoretical, function. This pattern echoes findings from other centralized or transitioning systems where principals prioritize compliance and operations over pedagogical guidance (Oplatka, 2004; Kaparou & Bush, 2015). Despite Nepal's federal decentralization, which aims to empower local governance (Daly et al., 2020), HTs remain constrained by pre-federal norms of seniority-based promotion and top-down directives, limiting their capacity to enact IL dimensions such as curriculum coordination or teacher supervision (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Bhattarai, 2022).

First, overloaded managerial duties emerge as a core barrier, consuming time that could support instructional improvement. HTs describe themselves as "orchestra conductors" balancing discipline, infrastructure, and stakeholder relations, yet administrative burdens consistently overshadow classroom oversight (Camburn et al.,

2010; Goldring et al., 2019). This aligns with international evidence from resource-scarce settings, where principals spend minimal time on instruction due to crisis management and paperwork (Murphy et al., 2016; Dutta & Sahney, 2022). In Nepal, HTs' dual role as full-time teachers—often handling seven periods daily—further erodes opportunities for systematic monitoring, reinforcing classrooms as private domains and perpetuating feedback gaps (Cuban, 1988; Shaked, 2021).

Second, limited autonomy and support undermine IL enactment. Although policies mandate HTs to lead curriculum and professional development, decentralized structures fail to deliver genuine decision-making power. Teacher training is outsourced to centralized ETC modules without school-level follow-up, creating a disconnect between policy rhetoric and localized application (Lamsal & Bajracharya, 2023). Absent incentives, political interference in SMC decisions, and external supervision focused on compliance rather than pedagogy mirror challenges in hierarchical systems like Thailand and Greece, where principals implement rather than innovate (Hallinger & Lee, 2014; Kaparou & Bush, 2015).

Local factors in rural Nuwakot amplify these issues. Policy voids in HT recruitment favor political affiliations over leadership competence, producing underprepared leaders. Acute teacher shortages violate mandated ratios, forcing multi-grade teaching and workload imbalances that exhaust staff and divert HTs from IL (Spork, 1992; Thapa et al., 2013). Resource scarcity—no budgets for materials or innovations—stifles creative pedagogy, while political capture of SMCs and low parental engagement erode community ownership, contrasting with successful IL in supportive contexts (Goddard et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2022). These intertwined barriers highlight how federalism's promise remains unfulfilled in rural Nepal, leaving HTs as survival-oriented managers rather than instructional visionaries (Anderson & Mundy, 2014).

Implications

Although global IL research emphasizes its role in raising achievement (Day et al., 2016; Neumerski et al., 2018), the Nepali case reveals that uncritical policy borrowing from decentralized models risks failure without addressing contextual constraints (Spillane, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2020). Simply mandating IL duties ignores rural realities like teacher shortages and political interference, which demand tailored reforms rather than top-down replication.

For policy, Nepal's Ministry of Education should establish clear HT selection

criteria emphasizing IL competencies, including mandatory pre-appointment training in supervision and pedagogy Decentralization requires genuine fiscal autonomy—allocating school-specific budgets for materials and professional development—to enable curriculum adaptation and incentives (Mason, 2013; Goldring et al., 2015). Reducing HT teaching loads through targeted hiring in rural areas would free time for classroom observations, framed as collaborative rather than evaluative to respect norms of teacher autonomy (Glickman et al., 2017; Shaked, 2023).

At the school level, formalizing distributed leadership by empowering teachers in planning and peer mentoring could alleviate workload while building collective responsibility (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2007). SMCs need orientation on educational roles, minimizing political bias through transparent processes (Munakarmi, 2016). Community campaigns could counter free-education apathy by linking parental involvement to child outcomes, fostering ownership.

Critically, while IL frameworks like Hallinger and Murphy (1985) provide useful benchmarks, their application in Nepal must integrate local sociocultural elements—high-power distance, resource inequities, and federal transitions—to avoid normative imposition (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Liu & Society, 2018). Future reforms should prioritize HT competence in general pedagogy over subject expertise, with ongoing in-service modules on feedback and goal-setting (Brandon et al., 2018; Cansoy et al., 2024). IL will remain aspirational without these context-sensitive shifts, perpetuating inequities in rural basic education.

Study limitations include the small sample from one district, potentially limiting generalizability, though thematic saturation was achieved (Guetterman, 2015). Reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, which is mitigated partly by observations and triangulation. Larger, longitudinal studies could track IL evolution post-federal reforms.

Conclusions

Overall, our study supports the findings of several previous studies from different countries about the possible barriers to instructional leadership (IL) (Oplatka, 2004; Kaparou & Bush, 2015; Hallinger & Lee, 2014) as well as gives some special aspects, such as political interference in HT selection, teacher shortages, and low community support, coming from the sociocultural context and federal education system of Nepal.

Our findings make stronger the theoretical ideas that say IL is affected by local

factors (Hallinger, 2018; Khanal et al., 2020) with clear evidence from rural Nuwakot. However, we know that only finding the barriers may not help real practices and policies. In future research, it would be good to look at possible ways and successful examples that can solve these barriers and make leadership stronger to improve teaching and learning for all students. Again, the role of local context needs special care when finding such ways or practices.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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