Educational Leadership in Nepal: Past Experiences, Present Challenges, and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Leadership in the education sector plays a pivotal role in improving the quality, equity, and effectiveness of the education systems. However, in Nepal, there is still, much to do for the expansion of educational access and to increase literacy rates, and the quality of education. The study analyses perspectives on educational leadership in Nepal. It evaluates the educational situation and performance in terms of leadership, examines the leadership theories in corporations and educational frameworks on an international scale, and explores the leadership practices in the local Nepali context, specifically the rural and decentralized contexts. A qualitative, secondary-data-based research method is employed in this study. Nepal has an administrative and compliance-based educational leadership. There is a low level of instructional and distributed leadership practices, which are inconsistently used. The systems of governance in schools are neither continuous, nor clear, nor leadership-driven. Leadership training is not well institutionalized in the education system. There is underutilization of global leadership models, even though they are relevant to the Nepal context. The development of educational leadership should be officially incorporated into the national and provincial education reforms. Clear policies to institutionalize leadership

preparation and lifelong learning of head teachers and local education officials motivate and give pressure for the right output. The appointment, transfer, and evaluation of teachers' policies must focus on leadership competence, accountability, and instructional performance. Moreover, schools' management must establish well-structured roles and responsibilities for School Management Committees and Parent-Teacher Associations to ensure transparency and continuity. The study proposes the reforms in context sensitivity and emphasizes the fact that the professionals should be constantly developed, the administrative load should be minimalized, the ethical responsibility and the system coherence must be taken into consideration, and the school leaders should enhance the quality of education.

Keywords: Leadership practices, Professionalism, Accountability

Introduction

The practice of educational leadership in Nepal under the Rana regime (1846-1951) was extremely centralized, autocratic, and elitist. Education was not regarded as a means of national development and social empowerment; rather, it was regarded as a tool of political control to ensure the dominance of the ruling elites (Bista, 1991). The education power was put in the hands of the Rana prime ministers, and there was no independent educational establishment and no inclusion policy, and this led to the leadership style that did not encourage people to get involved and be innovative (Sharma, 2006).

The formal education was more of a preserve of the Rana family and the high-caste elites, as seen in institutions like Durbar High School, and the general population was actually denied any access to schooling, as it was feared that mass education would lead to political awareness and dissent (Mathema & Bista, 2006). Even though British India shaped it to an extent, especially by introducing English education selectively, educational leadership was isolated and was used to serve diplomatic and administrative functions instead of the modernization of the society at large (Stiller & Yadav, 1979). The lack of visionary and transformational leadership resulted in the lack of mass education, very low literacy rates, and long-term stagnation of the development of education, which left Nepal at the end of the Rana rule extremely underdeveloped (Wood, 1965).

The process of leadership in Nepal, as incorporated in the system of Panchayat (1960/611990) was marked by a high level of centralization of power held by the monarch, lack of political pluralism, and regulated participation on the ground. The king held a central position above all the political institutions, and the leadership should show its loyalty to the crown instead of representing the conflicting political ideas because political parties were prohibited (Whelpton, 2005). Despite the system being interpreted as a kind of grassroots democracy because it has a multi-level system of village, district, zonal, and national panchayats, the final decision-making power was left with the palace and senior bureaucrats, where the autonomy of the elected local leadership was minimized (Gaige, 1975). Local leadership tended to operate on the basis of patron-client relationships, with the panchayat leaders serving as the link between the citizens and the central state and distributing development resources and favors as a reward to those who supported them (Sharma, 2006). Leadership instruments that were adopted to mobilize the people included development-

based campaigns like the Back to the Village National Campaign, and at the same time enhanced the political control and legitimacy of the regime (Whelpton, 2005). With time, such limited and top-down leadership practices led to the discontent of even Panchayat elites, which caused internal fragmentation, which eventually resulted in the popular movement that removed the system in 1990 (Hachhethu, 2000).

The education system in Nepal has been changing drastically over the last few decades. Before the 1990s, the system was very centralized, and the leadership was restricted to administrative compliance and control in the system. Decision-making was, in a sense, centralized with central agencies, hence little room to take action or leadership in instruction.

The practices of educational leadership in Nepal following the abolishment of the Panchayat system in 1990 were influenced by the reestablishment of multiparty democracy, more decentralization, and the rising focus on participation and accountability in the management of schools. As education became democratized, educational leadership slowly began to transform the centrally managed, bureaucratic style of decision-making in favor of school and community based leadership through such policies as the National Education Commission (1992) and subsequent decentralization policies (MOES, 2003).

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) and School Management Committees (SMC) were empowered to give the head teachers and the local stakeholders more areas of work in planning, resource management, and decision making (Bista, & Carney, 2007). It was becoming more and more the expectation of educational leaders, particularly of head teachers, to be involved not just in the administration of a school, but also as instructional and transformational leaders capable of mobilizing the efforts of teachers, parents, and communities to enhance school quality (Bush & Glover, 2014). Nevertheless, in spite of these changes, the issues that plagued the field of educational leadership included political interference, lack of capacity at the local level, and lack of professional training, which in many cases curtailed good practice of leadership (Hachhethu, 2014).

In general, the post-Panchayat era was the shift to more participatory and decentralized educational leadership, even though the traditions of centralized control and politicization still played a significant role.

The practices of education leadership that took place in Nepal following the 2062/063 (2006) people movement were influenced by the reinstatement of democracy, the federal restructuring, and the orientation to inclusion, decentralization, and rights-based education. The educational leadership became more engaged and participatory with more powers devolved to local governments, School Management Committees (SMCs), and communities, especially by the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) and later the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) following the movement (Ministry of Education, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2016). Head teachers were supposed to leave their administrative position and prove their instructional and transformational leadership, which prioritizes the enhancement of the teaching-learning processes, access and equity, and the needs of diverse students in a post-conflict environment (Bush & Glover, 2014). The era also focused on the inclusive leadership, gender equity, social justice, and inclusion of the marginalized populations in the

school governance systems, which indicated the democratic goals of the movement (Carney & Bista, 2009). Nevertheless, educational leadership continued to struggle with the issues of politicization of teacher management, inadequate leadership training, and the uneven capacity at local levels that tended to limit successful implementation of the reforms (Hachhethu, 2014). Altogether, the period after 2062/063 was the time of serious change to the democratic, decentralized, and inclusive leadership in education, yet the structural and political limitations continued to play an important role.

However, according to Kellerman (2012), the success of leadership in expanding systems can obscure or hide underlying leadership deficiencies in accountability, ethics, and effectiveness. In Nepal, although access has improved, issues remain concerning learning outcomes, teacher professionalism, and governance capacity. These issues denote that leadership reform has concentrated more on the structural change rather than leadership practice and ability.

The paper mentions that in Nepal, the centralized power, hierarchical culture, political favor, and contemporary developments are increasingly oriented towards decentralization, professionalism, and group accountability. By critically examining the issue of leadership in the past, present, and future aspects, this study will contribute to the existing academic and policy debate on how leadership might contribute to the enhancement of the education system in Nepal.

Even though Nepal has achieved impressive developments in extending access to education, the standard of educational leadership is wanting, especially at the school and local government levels. The leadership functions have been limited to administrative conformity but not instructions, plan-setting, and professional growth. Moreover, school leaders are often poorly prepared for leadership in a systematic way, and the governance authorities are troubled by continuity, capacity, and role definition. The latter weaknesses are more critical in the rural and remote context, where the lack of resources and geographical segregation restricts the effectiveness of the leadership even further.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. To explore the educational context of leadership in Nepal,

2. To highlight local leadership practices in the context of Nepal,

3. To propose measures to address gaps in educational leadership in Nepal.

Literature Review

The literature always shows that leadership ranks second only to classroom instruction in terms of its effect on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). Good educational leaders provide an environment where teacher collaboration, instructional improvement, and desirable school culture thrive.

Instructional leadership is concerned with the quality of instruction, and alignment of curriculum and assessment practices, whereas transformational leadership is concerned with

vision, motivation, and organizational culture (Hallinger, 2003). Modern studies maintain that the best school leadership combines the two models.

Distributed leadership perceives leadership as a collective practice among the teachers, administrators, and the stakeholders (Spillane, 2006). This strategy is especially applicable in situations where schools experience leadership change and have capacity issues.

Trust, adaptability, and teamwork are highlighted in the corporate leadership theories of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and agile leadership (Rigby et al., 2016). Such principles have been integrated in the educational settings more and more to cope with complexity and change.

Educational leadership is very different from the leadership in the private sector because it aims at serving the community and having moral responsibility. According to Bottery (2004), the leaders of the education sector are expected to maintain a balance between managerial and ethical responsibility, democratic accountability, and long-term societal objectives. The view is especially applicable to the case of Nepal, where education is a constitutional right, a fundamental necessity, and a means of social inclusion.

Kellerman (2012) goes further to say that there is a leadership deficit in modern leadership, and it is not a deficit in the number of leaders, but the quality of leadership provided and how unsatisfactory, unethical, or disengaged the leadership is. Such shortfalls in education systems are played out in poor accountability, politicization, and glorifying of poor performance- many of them found in the developing contexts. According to Bedrule-Grigoruta (2016), there are major differences between public and private systems leadership. Whereas leadership by the private sector focuses on competitiveness, efficiency, and profitability, the leadership of a public sector, particularly in the education sector, should be focused on equality, transparency, and service delivery. Nonetheless, the author also states that performance management and strategic planning are also leadership practices that are borrowed within the public systems, which are increasingly borrowing them. Such convergence is observed in the education reforms in Nepal, in which managerial tools are imported without due alteration to the realities on the ground, and as a result, accountability imperatives are at odds with local conditions.

In the article, Foster (2014) presents a new concept of the open organization, claiming that the new leadership has to be participative, transparent, and collaborative. Open leadership embraces shared decision making, professional trust, and lifelong learning- values that are quite similar to distributed leadership in education.

In the same way, Mucharraz (2016) notes that twenty-first-century leadership demands flexibility, emotional intelligence, and the ability to cope with complexity. The competencies are particularly pertinent to education leaders who must work in uncertain and resource constrained contexts like rural Nepal.

Instructional leadership centers the teaching and learning as the core of the leadership practice (Hallinger, 2003) and transformational leadership is centered on the vision, motivation, and the organizational culture. These models are furthered by distributed

leadership, which acknowledges that leadership is a shared practice (Spillane, 2006). Modern literature indicates that effective educational leadership incorporates these methods and does not choose one of them separately.

Research Methodology

The research design employed in this study is qualitative and descriptive. The study has employed document analysis; that is, relevant written materials were reviewed and analyzed with great attention. National education policies and plans, governmental reports and statistical publications, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books, and reports by the international development agencies are the sources of information. These documents were discussed in terms of a theme to detect the major ideas, trends, and common concerns concerning the educational background, the leadership practices, the current challenges, and the approaches to the reform of leadership.

Results and Discussion

Educational context of leadership in Nepal

Nepal has achieved a lot in the last few decades in the state of extending access to education in both the enrollment and literacy indicators. According to the National Statistics Office (2023), net enrollment at the basic education level (grades 1 through 8) has already hit almost universal levels of more than 95 percent, meaning that nearly all children of school going age have now been enrolled in the basic level of education. Meanwhile, the literacy results have been steadily rising: the general level of literacy in Nepal grew to approximately 77.4 percent in 2022/23, compared to the level of 54 percent in 2001 and lower than 40 percent in the early 1990s. Gender gains are evident: female literacy has increased to approximately 70, indicating that historical gender gaps are gradually closing, although they still exist. Collectively, these statistics indicate a conclusion that long-term investments in education and basic level participation have resulted in almost universal access to basic levels of education in Nepal and long-term benefits in literacy rates in the country.

Regarding leadership, these achievements indicate effective leadership at the policy level, sound national planning, and political stability in regard to education as the social good. Major projects like the expansion of schools, scholarship opportunities among the marginalized groups, and the education based on community models show the ability of the leadership to mobilize resources and stakeholders to achieve shared national objectives.

Leadership initiatives have mostly focused on infrastructure building, enrollment campaigns, and adherence to centrally established indicators, usually at the cost of instruction quality, pedagogical creativity, and learner focused practices. This disproportion indicates that leadership in Nepal has in the past been based on administrative and managerial effectiveness instead of instructional transformation and results that are equity based (Hallinger, 2003).

In addition, inequalities also exist regionally, between social groups and types of schools. There is a great deal of variation in the effectiveness of leadership in urban and rural

schools, in the private and the public institutions, and even in available and remote districts. These differences reveal that the national successes, though admirable, are not well distributed and lack localized leadership capacity to promote them. Therefore, the educational environment in Nepal presents a significant leadership issue, which is to switch between access-based leadership and leadership that will actively enhance the achievement of learning outcomes, teacher professionalism, and inclusive education.

Local Leadership Practices: Problems and Loopholes

In the local Nepali context, particularly in government school education, the role of educational leadership remains predominantly administrative. School leaders tend to spend considerable time on basic duties such as record-keeping, reporting, and implementing administrative directives, leaving little time for instructional leadership and professional development.

Effective leadership in Nepal's schools is constrained by several systemic issues. Leadership development remains weak because head teachers and school leaders are frequently promoted on the basis of seniority rather than demonstrated leadership ability, with limited formal opportunities for systematic leadership training and capacity building (Mainali, 2024; Lamsal, 2025). In addition, teacher performance management is weak and inconsistent: schools lack robust mechanisms for instructional coaching, regular monitoring, constructive feedback, and accountability for teaching quality (CollegeNP, 2025). Political interference also affects leadership decisions—such as appointments and management committee formation—and undermines merit-based leadership and professional autonomy, often leading to the prioritization of political goals over educational outcomes (Puri & Chhetri, 2024; Edukhabar, 2026). Furthermore, high turnover in School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), partly resulting from politically influenced selection processes, undermines continuity, long-term strategic planning, and institutional responsibility (Puri & Chhetri, 2024; CollegeNP, 2025).

These issues are exacerbated in rural and remote regions, where geographic isolation, supervisory inadequacies, and resource shortages further constrain leadership. As such, leadership practices on the local level usually find it difficult to translate national policies and international best practices into fruitful improvement at the school level.

Gaps in educational leadership in Nepal

To overcome knowledge gaps in educational leadership in Nepal, the leadership preparation process needs to be reinforced with the help of pre-services and in-service training that is systematic in teaching the head teachers and educational leaders effective instructional leadership, inclusive practice, and school improvement planning. The appointment of leadership must be done in a transparent and merit-based manner to facilitate a lack of political interference into the appointment and to bring about professionalism in the management of schools. Decentralized and distributed leadership should be given more importance through the clear definition of the responsibilities of the local government, School Management Committees, and school leaders and training the capacity to make effective decisions.

The field of educational leadership must move away from an administrative-based approach to a learning-based approach that focuses on student achievement and the quality of teaching through the use of mentoring, supervision, and data-driven practices. Besides this, accountability systems should be enhanced by connecting the performance of leadership to school performance and involvement with the community. Inclusiveness learning can make the leadership more effective because it is possible to promote inclusive leadership by recruiting more women and minority groups into leadership and establishing professional learning communities among school leaders. In general, the coordination of leadership power with sufficient resources and consistent policy execution is essential to enhance educational leadership and the quality of the school in Nepal.

Conclusion

The history of educational leadership in Nepal has evolved in tandem with broader educational reforms and policy changes. Although national leadership initiatives have achieved access to more and better participation, not all of the systems have fully adopted instructional quality leadership models, equity, and organizational learning models. Administrative leadership tenacity, inadequate capacity building, and government management issues are limitations of the implementation of the educational objectives that have been expressed in the national policies. The future educational development and sustainability of Nepal can thus be seen through the strengthening of educational leadership, especially at the school level and the level of local governance. The fact that the effectiveness of leadership is not merely an issue of individual ability but a product that is exceedingly determined by structures of governance, accountability mechanisms, and institutional situations. Consequently, the enhancement of educational leadership in schools should be built on a systemic change, such as the increase of professional autonomy and responsibility and ensuring equity.

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