ANALYZING CURRENT CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN KATHMANDU METROPOLITAN CITY

Bhawani Prasad Mainali

Mahendra Ratna Campus,TU, Kathmandu
Corresponding author: bhawaniprasad.mainali@mrc.tu.edu.np

ABSTRACT

School leadership initiates and influences the school community towards shared educational goals and fosters a positive teaching-learning environment there. This study aims to explore the current challenges faced by school leadership in community schools. The data were collected from the headteachers, assistant headteachers and teachers from three community schools, three participants from each school by employing interviews under interpretive epistemology. The data from the informants were transcribed, coded, and thematisized. The reliability and validity were established by triangulation and multiple interviews. The result found that divergent challenges facing the community schools' leadership such as excessive workloads, improper handling of rewards, socio-economic and diversity challenges of students, etc. Furthermore, the school leaders are required to focus on the strategies for addressing the current challenges such as, headteachers need more authority, staff equity, stakeholder meetings, legal reforms, and staffing solutions. The study highlights the challenges faced by leaders in balancing administrative responsibilities and pedagogical leadership, affecting school performance and leadership practices. Community school leaders require professional development to improve the quality of education. It offers insights into strategies to improve leadership effectiveness and school outcomes. The result of the study would be beneficial to the leadership of community schools across Nepal.

Keywords: challenges, community schools, Kathmandu Metropolitan City, school leadership, school strategy

INTRODUCTION

Nepal's overall development relies on improved school education, however, student achievement remains unsatisfactory, as indicated by the results of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and class twelve examinations. Effective school leadership is needed to adapt to societal changes and challenges. School leadership problems are important because they have an immediate influence on student learning environments, staff well-being, and educational quality. Educational leadership and management are crucial for defining education quality, influencing students, teachers, and communities (Groenewald *et al.*, 2024). School leaders play a crucial role in enhancing teaching and learning quality (Wolfenden *et al.*, 2022). Effective school leadership is widely recognized as crucial for successful schools. Effective leadership involves grasping school concepts, embracing a visionary approach, and valuing stakeholder perspectives (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). Principals are crucial in creating a supportive environment that fosters learning and success in schools (Sideridis & Alghamdi, 2024). Education is a cornerstone of society, and effective school leadership is essential in shaping students' learning experiences (Culduz, 2024). School leadership is essential for guiding goals, providing direction, supporting teachers, creating a positive environment, managing resources, building relationships, and addressing challenges.

The decisions made by school leaders have a significant influence on school management and policy, which in turn shapes learning systems. Effective leadership is crucial for the advancement of an institution since poor management can have an influence on larger systems (Taufik & Istiarsono, 2020). The effective school leadership is linked to improved student achievement. Principals are crucial in fostering a collaborative teaching environment and setting high expectations, which helps bridge the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Their ability to unify efforts prevents isolation among staff (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Effective school leaders are crucial to schools and the school system, influencing the experiences and outcomes of both students and teachers. While leading a school can be rewarding, research highlights that school leaders face significant challenges (Pont, 2020). School leadership and management are crucial in defining the quality of education, and influencing students, teachers, and school communities. The focus has shifted from traditional school administration to modern concepts of school management and school leadership, reflecting evolving approaches and practices in the field (Groenewald *et al.*, 2024).

Leadership is crucial for school effectiveness, particularly with the rise of school-based management. In multicultural Nepal, where 44.6% speak Nepali and only 18% live in urban areas, recent constitutional changes have decentralized school education to provincial and local governments (Khanal *et al.*, 2023). School leaders are crucial for setting direction and fostering a positive culture. However, effective leadership alone is not enough for school improvement. It primarily influences school organization, culture, and teaching, with impacts on student outcomes being indirect (Christopher Day, 2018). School leadership effectiveness is influenced by factors such as leadership competencies, socio-economic conditions, technological advancements, and school culture. Leading in the digital age requires strong, visionary leaders who turn challenges into opportunities for innovation and growth and it is not an easy job but rather a more challenging one (Phuc *et al.*, 2020).

Instructional leaders are essential for improving school quality and creating an optimal learning environment, shaping students' futures. They support effective pedagogy, student creativity, flexibility, and collaboration to unlock full potential (Danai, 2021). School leaders manage the operation and overall welfare of the school (Coleman & Dickerson, 2017, as cited in Bajracharya *et al.*, 2023). Effective school leadership is crucial for a positive environment, improved teacher performance, and student outcomes, and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in education. However, challenges like resource shortages and inadequate training persist (Pant, 2023). Nepal faces severe socioeconomic issues like extreme poverty, unstable political systems, poor infrastructure, and joblessness. Despite optimism for foreign assistance, ongoing conflicts and corruption in Nepali politics hinder significant improvements (Bhattacharya, 2022).

Headteachers in Nepal face dilemmas influenced by political ideologies, which impact their decision-making and school leadership. This bias affects the quality of education. To improve, the Ministry of Education should implement policies to reduce political interference, ensure commitment to teaching, and provide school leaders with autonomy to enhance school quality (Muktan & Bhattarai, 2023). The role of secondary school principals is complex and multifaceted, involving challenges across the school, administrative, economic, physical, humanitarian, and teacher training domains (Gopilalparihar & Advani, 2024). Infrastructural developments and smart school policies are major effects. Developing

the capabilities of principals is crucial to the successful growth of smart schools. (Hoang Yen *et al.*, 2021).

Many Nepalese students attend community schools, yet the academic results of these institutions are unsatisfactory (Parajuli & Das, 2013). This indicates that a quarter of the nation's school children have suffered due to the poor academic performance of community schools (Koirala, 2015). Among the 464,785 students who appeared for the SEE in 2080, 52.13 percent were not eligible to advance to class 11 (Kainee, 2024). These types of problems are directly or indirectly related to the schools' headteachers. Students have struggled to achieve even the minimum required level of learning. Less than 50% of the curriculum in each subject has been completed by the majority of students. In grade ten, most students were unable to complete higher order thinking tasks. (MOEST, 2020). To solve the present challenges facing school leadership in community schools, cooperative effort is crucial (Mainali, 2024b). Thus, this study emphasizes addressing such issues related to school leadership and fostering an amicable teaching-learning environment.

Frugence and Mukadi (2022) highlighted challenges faced by school leadership in improving student academic performance, including inadequate resources, and lack of motivation, and suggested government support for increased motivation and cooperation. Gopilalparihar and Advani (2024) found secondary school principals face multifaceted challenges in administration, including curriculum implementation, student performance gaps, staff management, budget constraints, and crisis support. They also work to promote equity, policy compliance, stakeholder engagement, and teacher professional development. Kim *et al.,* (2024) highlighted challenges faced by school leaders, including roles, finances, relationships, teaching, and location, and suggested inclusive leadership, relationship-building, support, and school improvements for improved teacher effectiveness. Public school leadership challenges can be transformed by crises like COVID-19, promoting distributed leadership where responsibility is shared across employees and different stakeholders in the school environment. Moreover, school leadership needs to choose digital technology to keep pedagogical balance during the time of crisis (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Effective school leadership is becoming more complicated and calls on a variety of contributions. Research now demonstrates that leadership has a greater impact on student and school results than previously believed (Gurr, 2023). Leadership practices in schools involve providing guidance,

inspiring and empowering, fostering collaboration, and using a service-oriented approach to enhance crisis handling, stakeholder involvement, and effective institutional guidance (Saiful Azlan *et al.*, 2024). Persisting challenges include limited autonomy, excessive bureaucracy, unclear principal training and promotion models, and non-contextualized accountability systems, all of which hinder decentralized models and genuine pedagogical leadership (Camarero-Figuerola *et al.*, 2022).

Principals implemented diverse leadership strategies, focusing on collaboration, avoiding school politics, promoting parent accessibility, hiring quality teachers, and implementing innovative programs to transform low-performing schools into high-performing ones (Khanal *et al.*, 2020). Headteachers prioritize inclusion but face challenges like inadequate infrastructure, resources, support staff, policy knowledge, need for School Management Committee approval, and political interference in decision-making (Bajracharya *et al.*, 2023). School heads face numerous challenges, including time constraints, financial insufficiency, and academic issues, which require effective time management, financial planning, and stakeholder engagement (Taniza, 2024). Strategy is crucial for an organization to achieve its goals. A leader must be responsible and adopt effective leadership strategies to execute plans and address challenges in the school environment (Fatimah & Syahrani, 2022). Despite challenges like parental trust, poor student outcomes, financial management, and facilities deterioration, effective headteachers' decisions improved school quality and national recognition (Khanal *et al.*, 2023). Current school leadership is essential to innovation, change, and efficacy, however it has shortcomings in crisis management. There is little empirical study on crisis management in educational leadership, despite theoretical advancements (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

Dhakal *et al.* (2023) highlighted the importance of spiritual qualities like humility, compassion, and connectedness for Nepali principals, emphasizing the influence of sociocultural structures and providing valuable advice for professional growth. Educational leadership faces challenges like diverse views, socioeconomic pressures, insufficient authority, staff shortages, and heavy workloads. Poor reward systems, facilities, and promotion processes hinder progress (Mainali, 2024a). Khanal (2018) found that teachers in high-performing schools consistently viewed their headteachers' behavior more favorably than their counterparts in low-

performing schools. High-achieving school principals show influence on teachers. Ryan (2016) claimed that putting equity and inclusivity first might put a strain on other administrative areas by taking resources and focus away from curriculum creation, faculty support, infrastructure, and academic success, potentially jeopardizing institutional efficiency.

Park and Ham (2016) asserted when a measure of principal-teacher perceptual disagreement regarding the principal's instructional leadership was included, the significant effect either vanished or was lessened. Perceptual disagreement between principals and teachers. Pherali (2016) found that school principals were traumatized by frequent pressures, as manifested in the form of financial threats, physical threats, and abductions by different social groups. Muktan and Bhattarai (2023) claim that the head-teachers address the ethical dilemmas by emphasizing on their leadership global views neglecting local specific context, responsibility as an ethics, and ethics of organization, and they strive to improve the quality of education in their schools. Despite different views on school leadership and challenges faced by community schools, the leadership plays an important role in the smooth functioning of schools by integrating different stakeholders in society and focusing on students' achievement in learning. Therefore, this study tries to address the challenges faced by community schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan City.

Theories of School Leadership

This study employs transformational and distributed leadership theories to analyze effective leadership practices.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership theory is more focused on the collaborative and interconnected practice of leadership than it is on the duties and responsibilities of those holding official leadership positions (Sol, 2021). Distributed leadership is defined as a type of collective, shared leadership practice involving every member of the school, in contrast to traditional ideas of school leadership predicated upon the principal as an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures (Harris *et al.*, 2007).

Distributed leadership is known as a collective social process arising via the interactions of various actors that gained popularity in the field of educational leadership. Moreover, it is more or less likely

when certain structural, cultural, and agential factors are coordinated by successful principals (Shava, 2018). Distributed leadership facilitates the leadership to effectively negotiate the shortcomings in both formal and informal leadership practice, they must give up their positions of power and authority, move from leadership as a position to leadership as interaction, and develop a high degree of mutual trust (Harris, 2011).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory explains a leadership style where leaders inspire and motivate followers to enhance expectations and accomplish extraordinary results by encompassing innovation, trust, and individual development. Furthermore, they focus on vision, inspiration, and challenging the existing state, enabling significant institutional change (Bass, 1985). The new leadership paradigm includes transformational leadership and places greater emphasis on the emotive and charismatic aspects of leadership. Moreover, the success of transformational leadership focuses on followers' development and intrinsic motivation, which meets the needs of modern workplaces that need to be equipped to succeed in uncertain times (Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership, emphasizing empowerment, collaboration, communication, and transparency is crucial. Moreover, ethical, adaptive leadership positively impacts student outcomes and addresses evolving educational needs. Furthermore, cultural nuances shape perceptions, highlighting the importance of innovation and diversity in education (Dholkawala, 2023).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions served as the study's guide:

- What are the key challenges faced by school leaders in community schools within the Kathmandu Metropolitan City?

- What strategies are school leaders implementing to address these challenges in community schools?

RESEARCH METHODS

The main objective of this study is to explore the current challenges faced by school leaders in community schools within the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The study used a qualitative approach and a case study design to perform an empirical study of the issue through the participation

of headteachers (HTs), assistant headteachers (AHTs), and teachers from community schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC). The case study approach was used in this study to gain concrete, contextual and in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world phenomena. There were 87 schools and 2055 teachers working in the community schools in the Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC, 2024), served as the study's population. Nine informants participated in the interview as a sample, comprising three headteachers, three assistant headteachers and three teachers from two high-performing schools and one average performing school. More than five teachers participated in the interview as sample (Creswell, 2013).The three schools were selected on the basis of students' progress report in the preceding years. Data were collected through open-ended questions by using scheduled interview separately with each category of informants. All the participants involved in school leadership were interviewed and observed during the data collection process. The researcher also used memos while interviewing the participants and incorporated the information into the research. A purposive sampling method was applied to obtain precise and comprehensive information from the participants. The data from informants were transcribe, coded, and thematized. The reliability and validity were established by triangulation and multiple interviews. The process of analyzing qualitative data is linear rather than step-by-step, with data collection and analysis by occurring at the same time (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). To identify the major themes, analyze them, and create a final report, the study employed thematic analysis of the data. The data were coded, condensed, and provided for analysis by the researcher.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

During the interviews, headteachers and assistant headteachers were asked about the current challenges they face in school leadership within community schools. Their responses were as follows:

> Divergent opinions and poor stakeholder collaboration, problems with ICT integration, a lack of resources, socioeconomic and cultural barriers, political meddling, ineffective government policies, a lack of community support, inadequate government supervision, and low levels of professionalism and motivation among teachers were among the main challenges that were noted. While everyone acknowledged these difficulties, opinions on how serious they were varied. Divergent viewpoints among interested parties exacerbate challenges for school administrators and staff. Difficulties are made worse by socioeconomic

limitations, particularly in metropolitan public schools that serve lower-class households. There have been reports of problems with government funding, hiring, and evaluating teachers. Higher-performing schools have also been found to have insufficient teacher supply, even with increased government spending. Teachers are still expected to be ICT proficient, and seniority matters influence the appointment of more skilled but younger leaders.

Participants stated that low government funding and resources were interfering with school operations, especially in developing countries. Community schools are negatively impacted by ongoing underfunding; higher-performing schools struggle with infrastructure and recruiting teachers, while lower-performing schools prioritize upkeep. The management of resources is made more difficult by growing student enrollment and space constraints. Learning results are impacted by socioeconomic factors, such as kids from lower-income backgrounds. Public education is badly impacted by political pressures, especially those stemming from the political connections of instructors. School performance is hampered by the government's top-down strategy, lack of collaboration with educators, lax oversight, and ineffectual School Management Committees (SMCs). To raise the standard of education and solve systemic issues, more structured policies, performance-based promotions, and improved supervision are required. Headteachers in community schools face numerous challenges such as gaining parental trust, improving student outcomes, managing financial support, maintaining physical environments, monitoring attendance, and maintaining discipline.

During the interviews, all participants were asked about the strategies for school leaders to address the current challenges in community schools. Their responses were as follows:

Head Teachers (HTs) are entitled to more legal authority and staff equity. Good stakeholder engagement is crucial, requiring frequent gatherings to coordinate objectives and settle disputes. Legislative changes ought to enhance the authority of HTs and foster their professional growth. To solve staffing shortages and help educators and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, more resources and programs are required. Schools should use resources as efficiently as possible, look into outside partnerships, and create a healthy culture with just reward and discipline procedures in addition to having a clear vision. A clear vision, active pedagogy, and effective leadership are essential for creating a positive learning environment and conquering obstacles.

Involve parents, educators, and members of the community in decision-making to take into account different points of view. Provide staff with continuing professional development opportunities through team meetings, seminars, and peer observations. Utilize information on attendance, conduct, and academic performance of students to guide decisions and design successful interventions. Make the most of school resources, look for extra financing or collaborations where necessary, and cultivate connections with other organization and groups to get assistance. Encourage a polite, inclusive school environment and routinely communicate a clear vision to all parties involved. These techniques will support school administrators in efficiently addressing and resolving community school issues. Effective school leadership involves promoting distributed and transformational leadership, balancing pedagogy and technology, building stakeholder partnerships, fostering collaboration, avoiding politics, encouraging parent accessibility, hiring high-quality teachers, and implementing innovative programs.

School leadership faces challenges such as divergent viewpoints, insufficient authority for headteachers, socioeconomic and diversity issues, staff shortages, heavy workloads, inadequate facilities, and ineffective rewards and punishments, along with the need to manage work-life balance and address varied student needs through remedial classes and extended class times. Headteachers need increased authority and staff equity. Regular meetings with parents, teachers, and management are crucial for alignment and resolving conflicts. Advocate for legal reforms and professional development. Provide resources and funding for low-income students, address staffing shortages, and optimize resources. Build external partnerships and develop a clear school vision. Foster a positive school culture with fair rewards and discipline, and involve the community in decision-making. Offer continuous professional development, use data for informed decisions, and build strong community ties.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the current challenges of school leadership in community schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The findings of the first research question suggest that the school leaders of the community schools have faced struggles with divergent viewpoints, insufficient authority, socioeconomic and diversity challenges, staff shortages, inadequate facilities, and ineffective rewards and punishments, along with the need to manage work-life balance and address varied student needs through remedial classes and extended class times. Some perceptual

differences between headteachers and other teachers were precisely seen in the schools. This result is in line with the study by Gopilalparihar and Advani (2024), Bajracharya *et al.* (2023), Frugene and Mukadi (2022), Kim *et al.* (2024), Taniza (2024). However, the result contradicts with the studies by Dhakal *et al.* (2023), Khanal (2018) and Ryan (2016).

The findings of the second research question suggest that the school leaders of the community schools focus on the strategies for addressing the current challenges headteachers need more authority, staff equity, stakeholder meetings, legal reforms, staffing solutions, optimized resources, promoting distributed and transformational leadership, keep pedagogy and technology in balance, strong partnerships with major stakeholders, fostering collaboration, implementing innovative programs, a clear vision, a positive culture with fair rewards and discipline, ongoing professional development, community involvement, and data-driven decisions. This result aligns with the study by Fatimah and Syahrani (2022), Saiful Azlan *et al.* (2024, Camarer-Figuerola *et al.* (2022), Khanal *et al.* (2020), Koh *et al.* (2023), Dhakal *et al.* (2023), Harris and Jones (2020). However, the results contradict the study by Park and Ham (2016), Pherai (2016) and Muktan and Bhattarai (2023).

The study highlights that community schools' difficulties are very tough for headteachers to handle on their own. All parties involved in the teaching and learning process must work together to ensure effectiveness. The domination of bureaucratic challenges has posed threats, ultimately pushing participants to advocate for distributed and transformational leadership, along with increased responsibility, flexibility, and resource allocation. The headteacher should take appropriate initiatives to foster cooperation among stakeholders to address the challenges facing community school leadership and establish a favorable teaching-learning environment. This strategy aligns with principles of transformational and distributed leadership, with emphasize team work in resolving contemporary leadership issues. When asked abbot addressing the current leadership challenges in community schools, headteachers and associate headteachers often highlighting the significance of teamwork and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to analyze the challenges of school leadership. There are divergent challenges faced by school leadership in

Nepal. Challenges such as excessive workloads, ineffective authority responses, improper handling of rewards and penalties, shortage of teaching and non-teaching staff, low learning achievement of students in average performing schools, socioeconomic and diversity challenges Other challenges include inadequate facilities, haphazard advertising, and assistance for pupils from underprivileged backgrounds High performing schools implemented the teamwork to make conducive teaching-learning environment whereas average performing school could not incorporate proper teamwork among stakeholders.

These were emerging concerns for school leadership from underperforming schools. Political, facility, and resource constraints affected all schools; higher-performing schools handled these issues in a better way. Improving accountability, community support, and teacher motivation are essential for raising student achievement and school system improvement. Furthermore, the school leaders are required to focus on the strategies for addressing the current challenges headteachers need more authority, staff equity, stakeholder meetings, legal reforms and staffing solutions. The results are in line with the transformational and distributed theories of educational leadership. The study emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including school leaders, to create a conducive teaching-learning environment.

IMPLICATIONS

This study looks at the problems with school leadership in the Kathmandu Metropolitan Area and emphasizes the need to change the rules to give headteachers greater power and deal with systemic problems. It emphasizes how important it is for teachers to have ongoing professional development to adjust to the demands of the classroom and to effectively allocate resources. It emphasizes how crucial it is for parents, community members, and schools to work together more closely to accomplish objectives and raise student performance. Other educational sectors can also benefit from the study's findings. It offers insightful information to educators and politicians in underdeveloped countries.

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