STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATIONAL FABRIC: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES IN ENHANCING COMMUNITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN NEPAL

Bhushan Dahal
PhD Scholar
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Florida State University
2203 West Pensacola St. Apt I-4, Tallahassee, Florida, 32304
Email: bhushandahal7@gmail.com

Abstract

School-community partnerships play a critical role in fostering effective and sustainable education systems. This study investigates the School Management Committees (SMCs) as the sole legally mandated bridge between schools and communities in Nepal. Grounded in Epstein's parental involvement framework, the research examines the collaborative dynamics between SMC heads and key stakeholders across six model secondary schools in Bagmati Province.

Findings shows significant communication gaps, the pervasive influence of local politics, and structural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement. The study advocates for a distributed leadership approach, emphasizing the need for inclusive decision-making processes and stronger community participation in school governance. This research contributes to the broader discourse on educational management and policy reform in Nepal and comparable global contexts by offering a contextually relevant framework for strengthening school-community partnerships.

Keywords: *School-Community Partnerships, School Management Committees, Educational Governance, Distributed Leadership, Parental Involvement, Nepal.*

Introduction

Community engagement in public education has been increasingly recognized as vital for fostering inclusive and effective learning environments (Epstein, 2018; Sanders, 2003). This recognition aligns with emerging research, which suggests that schools that actively engage with and reflect the knowledge and cultural richness of their communities not only promote a sense of belonging and connectedness among diverse student populations but also enhance the democratic and supportive nature of educational settings (Hands, 2023; Bush & Sargsyan, 2020; Valli et al., 2014). Dynamic community-school partnerships are instrumental in achieving educational excellence, facilitating holistic student development, and bolstering community involvement on a global scale (Bush & Sargsyan, 2020; Valli et al., 2014). These collaborations leverage combined resources, expertise, and social networks to significantly boost academic achievement, increase student engagement, and foster favorable social outcomes (Taylor, 2017; Epstein, 2018).

In Nepal, where the public education system presents unique challenges and opportunities, the role of School Management Committees (SMCs) in shaping these community-school partnerships is particularly crucial. SMCs play a central role in the governance and strategic direction of schools, making their involvement key to the success of these partnerships. The global evidence supports that well-integrated community-school collaborations improve academic performance, enhance social cohesion, and bridge cultural and socioeconomic divides (Daniel et al., 2019; Sanders, 2003).

This paper explores the intricate ways in which SMC heads in Nepal collaborate with various stakeholders to cultivate strong and successful community-school partnerships. By examining these SMC heads' leadership practices, roles, and impacts, this study provides a deeper understanding of their contributory role in the Nepalese public education sector. Through a qualitative case study approach, I ask how SMC heads collaborate with stakeholders to build successful community-school partnerships. This exploration is pertinent for enhancing Nepal's educational landscape and contributes to the broader discourse on effective educational governance in diverse educational systems worldwide.

Literature Review

Community-School Partnerships

Community engagement in public education fosters belonging and connectedness among diverse student populations. This engagement enhances democratic, supportive, and effective learning environments, making education equitable and inclusive (Gross et al., 2015; Alsbury, 2004; Cunningham & Smith, 2020). Community-school partnerships, as frameworks for collaboration, align school agendas with community needs, enrich the educational environment, and engage parents and community members in decision-making processes (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001; Johnson, 2013).

Recent research emphasizes the increasing importance of these partnerships in facilitating collaborative decision-making and addressing educational challenges (Grissom et al., 2021). Such partnerships leverage diverse expertise and perspectives, leading to more informed and inclusive decision-making (Taylor & Adelman, 2000). These alliances also facilitate access to community resources that support educational programs and family services, thereby creating responsive educational environments (Sanders, 2005). Research indicates that well-structured community-school partnerships can significantly enhance academic achievement and student engagement, contributing positively to social outcomes by pooling resources, expertise, and social networks (Stefanski et al., 2016; Malone, 2020).

Globally, these partnerships manifest various benefits tailored to regional contexts. In the U.S., the focus is predominantly on academic achievement and student well-being (Yukl, 2008), while in Europe, the emphasis is on fostering social cohesion (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Robinson et al., 2008). In South Asia, such partnerships are crucial for bridging cultural and socioeconomic gaps (Azam & Kingdon, 2013; Grissom et al., 2021; Patricia McLean Hollingsworth et al., 2015; Rajbhandari & Rajbhandari, 2016). The versatility of these partnerships ranges from involving parents and local businesses in governance to sharing resources between schools and

community organizations and integrating service-learning models that celebrate cultural diversity (Cunningham & Smith, 2020).

School Management Committees and Legal Framework

In Nepal, School Management Committees (SMCs) play a crucial role in public schools' governance structure. These committees, established through democratic processes, involve several members: a chairperson selected by the parents, three additional parent members (including at least one woman), the Ward President of the local area, a local intellectual or educationalist, a representative from the school's founders, a donor who contributed resources to the school, a teacher elected by their peers, and the school headmaster, who serves as the member-secretary (Khanal, 2016). The seventh amendment in Nepal's Education Act of 2001 details the responsibilities of SMCs in school-level planning, internal and external management, and daily operations (MoE, 2016), facilitating a direct liaison between schools and communities (Pradhan et al., 2019). In the legislation, SMCs are expected to perform several key functions, rights, and duties. These include mobilizing resources for school operation, maintaining and protecting school property, keeping updated academic, physical, and financial data records, and approving the school's annual budget. The committee is also responsible for preventing political, religious, or communal influences that disrupt the academic environment, assigning duties to teachers, conducting annual audits, and acting on audit reports. Additionally, they follow the directives of the District Education Office, manage teacher remuneration, and establish a Teacher-Parent Association to improve academic standards. The members, who serve voluntarily and conduct meetings when required, are instrumental in influencing educational policies and practices, which is especially critical when government funding is primarily allocated for salaries, leaving little for developmental activities (Khanal et al., 2020; Neupane, 2019).

Nepal's educational landscape has been deeply influenced by its dynamic historical governance, transitioning from Malla dynasty rule to the Shah dynasty established by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768, which continued until the early 21st century (Sharma, 2001). Educational reforms during the Shah era were minimal and elitist. A shift towards a constitutional monarchy in 1951 initiated modern educational reforms, accelerated by a pro-democracy movement in 1990 that introduced a multi-party system. The 2001 royal massacre led to the monarchy's abolition in 2008, ushering in a federal democratic republic. The 2015 constitution significantly promoted federalism, enhancing local governance and enabling local governments to customize educational policies and procedures. This has resulted in diversifying educational practices to meet local needs and a variety of SMC structures reflecting localized educational approaches (Regmi, 2012; Khanal, 2016; McNeil, 2023).

Implications of Community-School Partnerships in Nepalese Context

The role of SMC heads in enhancing Community-school partnerships through effective communication, collaboration, and decision-making is pivotal. By fostering strong community-school links, SMCs can significantly influence the educational landscape, ensuring that schools serve as educational institutions and community hubs. This dual role is crucial for students' holistic development and integration of educational objectives with community needs, ultimately contributing to societal well-being and educational excellence.

The research suggests that strengthening community-school partnerships through the strategic involvement of SMCs could serve as a model for enhancing educational governance and community participation in Nepal and similar educational contexts globally. This comprehensive review establishes a foundation for exploring how SMC heads in Nepal collaborate with stakeholders to build successful community-school partnerships, addressing a significant gap in the current research landscape and suggesting pathways for future research to further explore and expand on these findings.

Research Question

How do SMC heads collaborate with different stakeholders to build successful community-school partnerships?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theoretical foundation provided by Epstein's widely recognized model of parental involvement in education, which categorizes the modes of involvement into six distinct components. Developed by Epstein (1995), this model has become essential for understanding the dynamics of family-school partnerships and is predicated on the logic/drawn from research that finds that active parental participation is crucial for enhancing educational outcomes. It emphasizes that such involvement reinforces the value of schooling through consistent interaction between home and school environments (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Parents' collective involvement forms the community's core, thereby framing the broader scope of community-school partnerships.
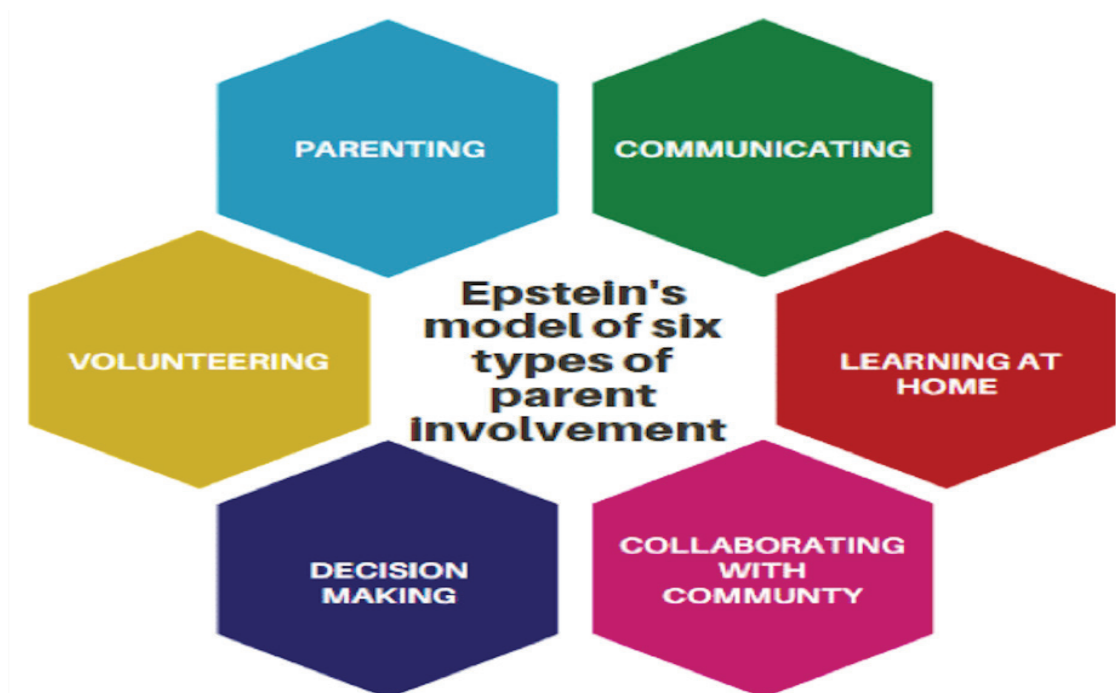

Figure 1: Epstein model of six types of parental involvement.

The first dimension, "parenting," involves providing foundational support that promotes a conducive learning environment at home. This includes ensuring children receive proper nutrition, safety, and health care. Following this, the "communication" aspect covers the regular and effective exchanges between parents and educational institutions concerning student progress and needs. These interactions may occur through various channels such as meetings, phone conversations, or written communications, facilitating transparent and continuous dialogue."Volunteering" constitutes the third type, where parents actively participate in school activities, directly contributing to the educational process and community spirit. The fourth element, "learning at home," involves parents in educational activities like homework assistance or discussions about school-related topics, further reinforcing academic skills. The "decision-making" component emphasizes the significant role of parents in governance within educational settings, including serving on committees or councils where they can influence school policies. Finally, "collaboration with the community" encompasses parental partnerships with local organizations and resources to enhance educational programs and support student learning, thereby broadening the impact of their involvement beyond the immediate school environment (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2018).

In the context of this paper, I draw specifically on three components of Epstein's model: Parenting, collaboration with the community, and decision-making. These components are examined through the lens of the School Management Committee (SMC) heads in Nepalese community schools, exploring how these leaders facilitate and enhance community involvement. This investigation aims to provide insights into the role of SMC heads in fostering effective community-school partnerships and improving educational outcomes through structured community engagement within the framework of Nepalese public education.

Methodology

I used a qualitative case study approach, ideal for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their authentic contexts, as it focuses on the roles and practices of School Management Committee (SMC) heads in Nepalese public schools (Starman, 2013). This research examines the interplay between school management and community involvement, grounding it in Epstein's framework of parental involvement (Epstein, 1995).

Participants and Sampling

Utilizing purposive sampling, six SMC heads from model public secondary schools in Bagmati Province, Nepal, were selected (Patton, 2002). The educational community recognizes these schools for their superior performance and management efficacy within the region, which includes Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. All participants are male, with an average age of 42.3 years and an average tenure of 7.6 years on their respective SMCs. I strategically selected these participants to understand leadership roles in maintaining educational quality within well-established schools and setting benchmarks for optimal educational practices across Nepal.

Characteristics	n
Sex	
Male	6
Female	0
Mean Age	42.3
Number of years served in SMC (mean)	7.6 years

Table 1: Participants Demographic.

Data Collection

I collected data through virtual semi-structured interviews in Nepali to ensure linguistic and cultural fidelity. I translated the interviews into English in two stages to maintain semantic integrity: initially through a word-for-word translation, followed by a contextual translation to capture the interviewees' intended meanings. All of this was done in Microsoft Excel. During all the interviews, notes were taken to identify recurring themes and concepts. I recorded each interview with participant consent, adhering to the ethical protocols approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I securely stored the digital recordings on a password-protected drive.

Data Analysis

I conducted the analytical process using NVivo software, which supported a two-phase coding procedure: initial inductive coding allowed for the natural emergence of key themes from the data, followed by deductive coding to align these themes with the predetermined components of the Epstein framework (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010; Maxwell, 2005). This rigorous method ensured that I systematically grounded the analysis was systematically grounded in both the data and relevant theoretical constructs.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of this study involved a series of meticulous checks to confirm the accuracy and believability of everything from the research question to the conclusions. I adhered to the recommendations of scholars in qualitative research, such as Koro-Ljungberg (2010), Maxwell (2005), Leung (2015), and Merriam (2009). After the interviews were coded, I shared my NVivo output with the participants to verify the accuracy of the discussion interpretations. I individually contacted each participant to discuss the coding and the results. Five of the six participants said they were satisfied with the findings, and one who initially questioned the conclusions was satisfied after a detailed review of the coding and analysis process. The extensive two-month data collection period contributed to the findings' depth and reliability.

Further validation came through peer reviews at various stages of the manuscript preparation. Initially, feedback was requested during the drafting phase up to the methodology section. After integrating this initial feedback and completing a full draft, the paper underwent another round of reviews. Contributions from professors specializing in qualitative research provided additional depth, leading to further revisions. This multifaceted approach to validating the research underscores my commitment to producing a rigorous and trustworthy study.

Ethical Considerations

I conducted the study with strict adherence to ethical standards, including securing informed consent from all participants and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in presenting the findings. The ethical protocols were rigorously followed per the guidelines provided by the IRB, underscoring the study's commitment to ethical research practices.

Findings

Through qualitative analysis of interviews with School Management Committee (SMC) heads in Nepalese public schools, significant insights emerged about the dynamics of community-school partnerships. These findings present three important central themes for understanding public school dynamics, detailed in Table 2. This table categorizes and shows the frequency of each code and subcode.

Codes and sub-codes	Frequency
Parenting	42
Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents	10
Positive personal qualities, habits, beliefs, and values, as taught by family	3
Balance between time spent on chores, on other activities, and homework	13
Good or improved attendance	2
Awareness of the importance of school	23
Collaborating with the community	39
Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences	8
Awareness of careers and options for future education and work	17
Specific benefits linked to programs, services, resources, and opportunities that connect students with community	13
Decision Making	27
Awareness of the representation of families in school decisions	12
Understanding that student rights are protected	15
Specific benefits linked to policies enacted by parent organizations and experienced by students	7

Table 2: Frequency of codes and sub-codes after the second coding round.

SMC and Parents' Relationship

Findings highlight the importance of communication between schools and families in improving educational outcomes in Nepal's public schools. Interviews with the SMC head reveal that regular, meaningful communication enhances parents' understanding of educational processes and their children's progress. However, the findings point to a substantial challenge in maintaining effective communication, with many parents perceiving their role as ending once they drop their children

at school, relying on the school to manage their child's education. Several factors shape this perception, such as the parents' education level, views on education, and deep-seated attitudes toward the educational process.

Additionally, the research shows that parents value academic results, particularly exam scores while showing less concern for their children's overall growth. Most parents believe that all educational responsibilities fall solely on the schools, creating a significant gap in expectations between parents and schools. The study indicates that parents see themselves as only marginally involved in the educational process, interacting with schools primarily during brief moments at exam result distributions or occasional significant events. This lack of effective communication underscores a suboptimal partnership between parents and schools. An interviewee highlighted the benefits of this interaction, stating,

ke garney(what to do)……I encourage parents to come into the school sometimes when they drop off their kids at the school gate. Talking to us occasionally helps them understand more about their children's education. This not only gives them confidence but also holds us accountable."

The findings underscore the urgent need for strategic interventions to enhance community engagement and bridge the communication gap between families and schools. Such efforts are essential for fostering a more integrated and cooperative educational environment to support students' diverse needs better.

Balancing Education and Community Needs

Findings emphasize the intricate balance schools and SMCs must maintain between educational objectives and community needs in Nepal. Public schools often function as community centers, hosting a range of activities that extend beyond traditional learning. This dual role as educational institutions and vibrant community hubs places schools at the heart of local civic engagement. However, balancing these presents significant challenges, as schools must navigate the complexities of community demands and political influences while striving to fulfill their educational missions.

Interviews reveal that schools are deeply embedded within their communities, actively participating in local events and initiatives. This involvement requires a respectful allocation of space and resources, ensuring community functions do not overshadow educational activities. One interviewee highlighted,

I am okay with good, productive community events where students can learn something. However, half the time, it is just political events. I want to say no right to their faces, tara Ke garne…….. I know the consequences that my school and I would have to endure. So, I am forced to agree whenever they demand the use of school premises. It's infuriating.

The dual function of schools necessitates adept management by school leadership and SMCs, who are central in mediating between educational priorities and community expectations. They must leverage local resources and manage external political pressures effectively, ensuring that schools can continue to serve as educational hubs without compromising their community roles. While complex, this integration offers substantial opportunities for collaboration and community development, underscoring the essential role of schools in educational and community landscapes.

Decision-Making Dynamics

SMC's head explained that strategic planning and leadership dynamics significantly influence the efficacy of school decision-making processes. The distributed leadership model, where responsibilities are shared among the School Management Committee (SMC), especially the SMC head, and school Administration, especially school principals, are identified as particularly effective. This model fosters a collective commitment to the school's strategic objectives, as illustrated by an interviewee's approach to problem-solving:

When we faced a problem with the third grade, we quickly contacted the teacher in charge of that grade. We did not just ask about what was happening; we also encouraged her to suggest a solution and asked how the school's leadership could help implement her plan."

However, the effectiveness of these decision-making processes often hinges on the robustness of communication and the alignment of management practices with school goals. Transparency and inclusivity in decision-making facilitate deliberation and consensus-building among all stakeholders. The SMC head plays a central role in supervising school operations, aligning activities with broader educational objectives, and fostering an environment of accountability and support. Challenges in decision-making also emerge, particularly in the dynamics between SMC members and school principals. For instance, Participants perceived a lack of proactive engagement, leading to tensions among some principals in resource acquisition, as one SMC head shared,

No matter how hard I try, I just cannot get enough support from the Principal, and I cannot do everything on my own, Ke Garne."

The interplay between parenting, community collaboration, and decision-making forms a complex matrix that shapes Nepal's public schools' operational success and educational quality. The findings emphasize the necessity of a multifaceted approach to engage community stakeholders actively, enhance communication strategies, and ensure inclusive decision-making processes. By addressing these core areas, schools can significantly improve their educational environments and outcomes, thereby contributing more effectively to the broader educational landscape in Nepal.

Discussion

The findings from this study explain the multifaceted dynamics of parenting, community collaboration, and decision-making within the School Management Committees (SMCs) framework in Nepal's public schools. These elements are instrumental in shaping the educational landscape and boosting the operational efficacy of regional schools (Johnson, 2013). A significant revelation from this research is the crucial role of robust communication between schools and parents, which is foundational for parental understanding and engagement in their children's educational journeys. Insights from SMC heads underscore that effective communication builds trust and enhances the educational system's accountability. Nevertheless, challenges persist; parents tend to disengage once their children are enrolled in school (Holt et al., 2013). This research highlights a critical communication gap, with parents often prioritizing academic performance and engaging with schools only occasionally, typically during events like exam

results. This occasional involvement points to an underutilized partnership potential, emphasizing the need for continuous dialogue and active involvement strategies (Cunningham & Smith, 2020). Targeted interventions that enhance community engagement and position education as a shared responsibility are essential. Regular parent-teacher interactions and transparent updates on student progress could foster a more cohesive educational environment, thereby strengthening relationships and improving student outcomes. Implementing such strategies addresses the communication shortfall and serves as a model for enhancing educational partnerships across South Asia (Taylor & Adelman, 2000).

Furthermore, the dual role of schools as educational institutions and community centers presents a complex balance of educational goals and community involvement. This study illuminates the necessity for schools to impart knowledge and function as central nodes for civic activities, navigating the challenges posed by the political landscape and community expectations (Grissom et al., 2021). To manage this duality effectively, a strategic framework that enhances the SMCs' capacity to advocate for educational priorities while fostering community collaboration is imperative. Enhanced dialogue and transparent negotiations with political entities and local stakeholders are critical to mitigating conflicts of interest, potentially fostering a harmonious integration of educational excellence and community vitality.

The dynamics of leadership and strategic planning significantly influence decision-making efficacy within schools. The findings advocate for a distributed leadership model involving both the SMC head and school administration, which has been shown to enhance decision-making processes. This model promotes a collective commitment to the school's strategic goals and a proactive approach to problem-solving (Sukhbaatar, 2014). However, challenges within this model often stem from perceived gaps in principals' proactive engagement, particularly in resource acquisition. This underscores the need for a well-defined structure within the distributed leadership model to clarify roles and responsibilities.   The pivotal role of the SMC head in decision-making processes is crucial for bridging operational gaps and aligning school activities with broader educational objectives. Transparent, inclusive decision-making practices are essential for fostering a supportive and accountable environment, addressing the challenges identified, and realizing the potential of a collaborative approach to school leadership that can significantly enhance educational outcomes (Azam & Kingdon, 2013).

Educational Policy and Practice

To enhance communication between schools and parents, educational policies must promote regular, meaningful interactions beyond the conventional. Schools should adopt structured communication protocols that include digital communication platforms, which can be critical in bridging communication gaps. For instance, implementing user-friendly parent portals and mobile apps can facilitate real-time updates on student progress, announcements, and access to educational resources, thus keeping parents engaged and informed. Schools should integrate training for parents and educators on how to utilize these platforms effectively into the school's operational strategies to maximize usage and benefits.

Additionally, regular parent-teacher meetings and community forums should be scheduled to ensure ongoing dialogue and foster community involvement. These interactions should be strategically planned to coincide with key phases of the academic cycle to ensure timely discussions of student performance and well-being. Policymakers should mandate the integration of these communication strategies into the operational guidelines of schools, ensuring a consistent approach across all educational institutions.

Moreover, addressing the dual role of schools as both educational and community centers, policies need to support schools in effectively balancing these functions. This can be achieved by empowering SMCs with the necessary resources and authority to negotiate and manage community and educational demands. Policy reforms should focus on providing SMCs the autonomy to spearhead community projects that align with educational goals, ensuring these initiatives complement rather than compete with educational objectives. Additionally, specialized training programs for SMC members on strategic planning and community relations can be pivotal. These programs should focus on equipping SMC members with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of community engagement and educational leadership, enhancing their ability to manage these roles adeptly.

Research Implications

This study highlights the critical role of distributed leadership in enhancing decision-making processes within schools, suggesting focused research on how different leadership styles affect educational outcomes. Specifically, future studies could explore the impact of gender diversity among School Management Committee (SMC) heads on school management effectiveness, offering insights into how gender perspectives influence policy implementation and community engagement.

Further Researchers should also assess the long-term impacts of community-school partnerships on student outcomes, particularly examining how sustained community involvement influences academic and social development across various cultural contexts. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions to improve communication between schools and parents, such as digital platforms and community liaison roles, could provide actionable recommendations for enhancing parental involvement.

By narrowing down these research avenues, future studies can build on the current findings to better understand how leadership dynamics and community engagement strategies impact educational settings, offering valuable guidance for policymakers and educators.

Conclusion

In conclusion, This study highlights the profound impact of effective school management practices, particularly those involving community engagement and decision-making, on the quality of education in Nepal's public schools. Educational stakeholders can significantly improve educational outcomes by adopting a comprehensive approach that involves enhancing communication, supporting dual functions of schools, and fostering a collaborative leadership environment. This study not only contributes to the academic discourse on educational management

but also offers practical guidelines for policymakers, educators, and community leaders aiming to foster an educational environment that is inclusive, engaging, and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders. As such, it serves as a blueprint for enhancing educational partnerships in Nepal and across similar contexts in South Asia and beyond.

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