



Principals' Perceptions on Managing Private Schools in Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

This is an exploratory qualitative study. It explores the perspectives of principals towards their administrative practices especially in the private schools of Kathmandu Valley. The data collected from ten school principals using semi-structured interviews. The findings have been discussed under the themes like academic leadership, financial management, human resource practices, stakeholder involvement and strategic planning. The principals assert their principalship as a daunting task. The principalship in the private schools in Kathmandu was found to have faced a large range of expectations of the parents, students and teachers. Since there is a large number of private schools, the principalship has to meet highly competitive demands of the stakeholders. Additionally, they ensure a rational balance between affordability on the part of the parents and academic success. There are some key challenges such as allocating adequate resources, inviting professors to ensure expertly support on the part of the teachers and students and preserving a unique institutional character. They were found to have employed strategies to handle these challenges. Some key recommendations have been made in relation to policy, practice and future research.

Keywords: Financial management, Human resource practices, Leadership, Private schools, Perceptions

Introduction

In the present-day world, the need and importance of global education is mounting up. Such needs emerged due to technological advancements, economic liberalization, improved lifestyle, recognition of diversities, etc. It has been thus imperative for the

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principals to ensure their effective leadership especially in reshaping and rearticulating the mission, culture and operational effectiveness of the schools (Leithwood et al., 2008). The school principals are expected to be not only administrators but also a key actor to lead learning activities in the classroom maintaining learning environment in schools, enhancing quality of learning on the part of the students and achieving overall institutional success in defined time. The principals of the schools are also expected to play the role of change agents, community builders, financial managers and instructional leaders. In this context, it is important to understand how the school principals explain and manage their duties and responsibilities to ensure improved learning outcomes and its sustainability.

In the context of Nepal, there is a rapid growth of private schools especially after reintroduction of democracy in 1990. Since then, education in private schools has been an important area for employment and business. Education in private sector then has been complements or even outperforms public education systems (Sarangapani, 2013) in Nepal. It is widely accepted that private schools in Nepal cover a large number of socio-economic groups with excellent instruction and first-rate facilities. It has often been able to provide better academic results. Kathmandu has been a highly concentrated city for private schools in Nepal.

The extension of education in private sector reveals how important it is to comprehend the dynamics of their operations particularly the leadership that guides them. Compared to their counterparts in public schools, private school principals frequently have a different set of opportunities and problems. These include negotiating competitive markets, handling a range of parental expectations, maintaining financial sustainability, hiring and retaining competent employees in a cutthroat industry and frequently operating with more autonomy while also being more accountable to different stakeholders (Day & Leithwood, 2007). Their perceptions of these diverse responsibilities which include everything from curriculum development and academic oversight to financial management, human resource practices and external relations are not just subjective opinions but also significant factors that influence their leadership styles, decision-making and the eventual success of their institutions.

Even though private education is becoming more and more popular and school leadership is recognized as being important, there is still a significant gap in the literature about how private school principals specifically view management practices especially in culturally and geographically different contexts like Kathmandu Valley. Although there are many

general theories of educational leadership and some studies deal with school management in Nepal, there are few direct insights into how private school principals view their roles, the difficulties they face and the tactics they use to run their institutions. The insufficiency as such limits our understanding and competence to comprehend how these schools are run. It also shed lights on important areas for policy action on professional development as well.

This paper therefore aims to bridge the gap by interpreting the perspectives of private schools' principals especially in relation to administering private schools in Kathmandu Valley. It uncovers experiences and interpretations of private school principals especially in relation to managerial aspects of their schools including human resource, financial and academic management. It also focuses to highlight the practices of stakeholder engagement and strategic planning as handled by the private schools' principals in Kathmandu. In this way, this paper provides a rich and thick description of principals' perspectives especially from those who are actively engaged in mainstream leadership in private schools in Kathmandu. The findings of this study thus are supposed to benefit the school leaders, policymakers, educators and administrators who are engaging in private schools in Nepal

Literature Review

Managing and administering schools effectively is an important endeavor to ensure quality education. This endeavor significantly influences learning outcomes on the part of the students and capability of the schools as a whole (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). There are some research-based models on educational leadership such as instructional leadership which focuses on curriculum, teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008) and transformational leadership which emphasizes vision, motivation and organizational change (Bass & Avolio, 1994). These are some internationally established models in the field of school leadership. However, there can be some varied perspectives on their use in various educational and cultural contexts. This study therefore responds to this issue.

School Leadership and Management in Private Schools

Compared to public counterparts, private schools operate under distinct economic and regulatory frameworks which has a significant impact on their management goals and methods. Principals of private schools are frequently more accountable for marketing, competitive positioning and financial sustainability (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014). This calls for a more entrepreneurial style of leadership where stakeholder satisfaction, resource mobilization and strategic planning become critical (Mestry & Grobler, 2007).

According to studies, private school administrators frequently have more authority which can result in creative approaches but also raise performance standards (Coleman & Palmer, 2008). Therefore, these particular institutional requirements and the market-driven character of private education probably influence how they view management activities.

Challenges and Contextual Factors in Developing Countries

Private schools frequently arise to cover gaps in the public system in developing nations like Nepal frequently offering greater infrastructure and higher quality (Rose & Akyeampong, 2017). They do, however, also have particular difficulties, such as overseeing a variety of socioeconomic student populations, coping with little local resources, negotiating intricate government rules that might not be well-suited to private education and competing for skilled instructors (Bray & Kwok, 2003). In such situations, the principal's job becomes much more complicated requiring flexibility, fortitude and a thorough comprehension of local dynamics. Since these mental models direct their decision-making and problem-solving in these difficult circumstances, it is essential to comprehend their perspectives. Actually, prior studies on Nepalese education have addressed broad school management difficulties (e.g., Giri, 2018) but they have not examined private school administrators' perspectives, particularly with regard to their daily operational and strategic perceptions.

The Importance of Principal's Perceptions

Principals' perception is important as they affect how people interpret circumstances, make choices and act which are considered as important insights (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Principals' leadership styles are directly influenced by how they view their management duties, difficulties and accomplishments. Teacher development and retention will probably receive more attention from a principal who sees human resource management as a crucial strategic function than from one who sees it as merely an administrative duty. Consequently, examining these views provides a more thorough and in-depth comprehension of "leadership in action" than simply monitoring procedures or evaluating results. This study, therefore, is a response to address this gap by uncovering and interpreting the subjective experiences of private school principals in Kathmandu Valley.

Methods

Qualitative method was used to explore the perspectives of private school's principals especially in relation to administering and managing schools. This methodology was used to uncover a detailed understanding, the professional life experiences, views and interpretations of the participants in relation to their school management strategies which was not possible simply by using quantitative methodologies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Altogether ten principals were selected from the private schools of Kathmandu Valley. The participants were selected purposively. One of the basic criteria for selecting the participants was their work experiences. Only those principals were considered as the study participants who held the post of principals in the school at least for five years. The purpose of selecting such principals was to ensure that they would offer rich and thick descriptions of school management and administering process in their socio-cultural context. The schools were different in terms of size, number of students and other things and criteria. Informed consent, participants' privacy and anonymity were some key ethical considerations in the study.

Data Collection

Data from the participants was collected by using semi-structured interviews. Between March and August 2025, each interview took place at the principals' individual schools or at a neutral site that was mutually agreed upon. Each interview lasted between sixty to ninety minutes. Key aspects of school administration including academic leadership, financial management, human resource management, stakeholder engagement (parents, community, government) and strategic planning which were covered in an interview guide. Principals were encouraged to expound on their experiences, difficulties, achievements and general opinions by using open-ended questions. "How do you perceive your role in ensuring academic quality?" and "What are the biggest challenges you face in managing your school's finances?" were two examples of questions. With consent, all interviews were audio recorded and then verbatim transcribed.

Data Analysis

The six-phase method described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to evaluate the transcribed data using thematic analysis: getting acquainted with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining and labeling themes and creating the report. In order to find recurrent themes and important details, the

analysis required reviewing the transcripts several times. Text passages were coded and then sorted into more general themes. These topics reflected principals' fundamental beliefs about the administration of private schools in Kathmandu Valley. Peer debriefing with a fellow researcher was done to increase trustworthiness and member checking was done with a subset of participants to confirm the interpretations' accuracy.

Results and Discussion

The interview data were analyzed and interpreted thematically. A number of themes have been generated out of the field data. These themes are related to the perspectives of the principals in relation to managing and administering their schools in Kathmandu Valley. The themes are discussed and interpreted by supplying contextual evidences and relevant literature below:

Academic Leadership: Balancing Autonomy with External Pressures

The principals of private schools under the study accepted academic excellence on the part of the students as their duties. They valued their autonomy in developing curricula and methods of instruction. In this regard, Principal A stated, "We have the freedom to innovate, to introduce new teaching methods that we believe are best for our students without much bureaucratic red tape." But such claim of the principal seems to have been challenged by competitive academic context among the private schools and parents' expectations for comparatively better score on the part of the students in exams. This shows that principals are desirous to hold autonomy in curriculum development and pedagogic innovation. They asserted the importance of integrating local practices with global standard practices in education. For this reason, they affirmed their innovative roles in school leadership. Besides these, they also explained the importance of preparing teachers for ensuring quality education in their schools.

The other aspect of their school management as claimed by the participants was the fulfillment of parental expectations of higher score on the part of the students. As viewed by the principals, parental expectations of highest score in exam and curricular claims of holistic development on the part of students are two different poles; opposite to each other where one often challenges the other within the given set of learning environment. In the words of Principal G, "Parents judge us by grades so while we want all round development on the part of the students. We also must deliver good exam results."

Financial Management: The Constant Balancing Act

Financial management was claimed to be one of the difficult tasks. Some of them claimed it as an ongoing challenge on the way to operating a private school on daily basis. Principals who frequently lacked specialized financial knowledge were directly in charge of resource allocation, budgeting and fee collecting. 'Raising adequate fund' was accepted as one of the common themes in relation to financial management. For them, adequate fund for day-to-day operation of the schools becomes difficult if they focus on the affordability of tuition fee for the students.

As a part of their financial roles, they asserted to have allocated budget on teacher wages, infrastructure and technology management. In this regard, Principal C said, "Every cent matters. To maximize the educational value, we must be quite astute about where we invest,". The financial administration of the schools also focused on the fee structure. It was quite difficult to balance affordability among parents and daily operational costs of the schools. Some of them however claimed that they often remain under financial pressure as the parents in questions intent to pay lower fee but they demand for higher level of quality services.

Human Resource Management: Retention as a Key Challenge

The hiring, retaining and professional growth of competent educators were seen as critical yet extremely difficult. Principals emphasized the attractiveness of overseas prospects and the competitive market for qualified teachers in Kathmandu's private school sector. Principals stressed the value of hiring motivated and qualified teachers. To improve teaching quality, they made investments in professional development, frequently through internal seminars and outside training. One of the biggest obstacles was frequently found to be teacher retention. Principals admitted that even though they work hard to provide competitive pay and a happy workplace, they frequently lose experienced educators to foreign or better-paying schools. "We invest so much in our teachers, only for them to leave for a little more salary or an opportunity overseas," Principal D bemoaned. It's an ongoing loop. Additionally, principals saw themselves as key players in balancing the interests of many stakeholders especially parents, employees and to a lesser degree government regulators.

Engaging with parents was seen as critical for student success and school reputation but also as a source of considerable pressure. Parents were thought to be very involved and to have high standards for both the school's success and their children's education. Principals

discussed on handling inappropriate demands or disagreements even while positive parental engagement was valued.

Principals realized the importance of appropriate planning to ensure quality education for a long-time. For them, assurance of quality education as a part of their duty often helps them build up their school reputations. They were found to have advocated for their schools as one of the excellent educational institutions in the valley. They were found to have highly engaged in reshaping the school's vision and mission and goals which are comparatively distinct from the other private schools in surroundings. They were also found to have realized the extremities of competitions among the private schools and thus they often remain themselves engaging in creating new agenda and new proposition on the part of their schools to claim educational excellence in their schools. For example, sometimes they claim for excellence in extracurricular activities in schools and some other time they advocate for excellent instructional pedagogy in their schools. In this regard, Principal B clarified, "We can't just be 'another private school. We have to show what makes us special and why our parents choose us over other people."

Discussion

The findings reveal the management of private schools in Kathmandu Valley as the complex and dynamic in nature. Their perspectives go in line with some well-established educational leadership theories which provide particular contextual knowledge pertinent to Nepal's private school system. For example, their claim towards academic excellence and quality learning in the classroom go in line with instructional leadership theories (Robinson et al., 2008). This theory insists on principals' roles on improving learning outcomes on the part of the students. The parents in question, however, as reported by the principals, based on the score that the students achieve in exam. That is, for them, higher the score in exam, better the quality of education. Hence, theoretical claims for quality education appears to be in conflict with the parents' way of interpreting quality education in the context of this study.

The quality education as interpreted by the community members in the context of Nepal is often emphasized in the private schools. The principals in question thus work for social reputation and financial stability in the context of this study (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014). Financial stability, as claimed in (Mestry & Grobler, 2007) in private schools was claimed to have achieved only when it is considered as an entrepreneurial endeavor. In this context, the principals design to integrate entrepreneurial strategies in educational planning.

Private school principals in Kathmandu see an ongoing duty to strike a balance between affordability, quality and profitability in contrast to their public sector counterparts who frequently work under set government budgets. This calls for clever decision-making, a solid grasp of the local economy and a strong business sense all of which may not be specifically addressed in conventional training programs.

One of the most important perceived challenges in human resource management is teacher retention. This result is in line with more general problems that educational systems in developing nations where the "brain drain" of qualified professionals is frequent-face (Bray & Kwok, 2003). In spite of competing market forces, principals always look for creative ways to retain talent because they consider themselves not just as managers but also as guardians of staff morale and professional development. This points to the necessity of focused legislative changes and professional development initiatives that give principals cutting-edge HR tactics appropriate for these kinds of settings.

The distinct accountability systems seen in private education are made clear by the principals' opinions about stakeholder involvement particularly with parents. In addition to being beneficiaries, parents are frequently viewed as important clients and demanding stakeholders who call for prompt and aggressive communication. In comparison, parental involvement may be more passive in public systems (Coleman & Palmer, 2008). Because schools need to set themselves apart in order to draw in and keep students. These interactions have an impact on institutional identity and strategic planning.

Private school principals in Kathmandu Valley describe themselves as highly flexible, resilient and multi-skilled leaders. In addition to demonstrating great managerial and instructional leadership traits, they engage in transformational leadership by influencing institutional vision and culture (Leithwood et al., 2008). Their "leadership in action" is a continual balancing act between local sociocultural expectations, market realities and educational ideals.

Conclusion

School management for the principals of private schools in Kathmandu Valley is the integration of financial, academic and human resource management. The school leadership on the way to ensuring excellence in school management face various challenges such as tough competition among the private schools, non-alignment between theoretical claim on quality education and parental perception over it and resource constraints. The principals in private schools appear to be dynamic to address these challenges. They remain active agent in ensuring quality on the part of human resources,

excellent financial management, instructional leadership and stakeholder engagement in schools.

Although there are some established theories to explain roles and responsibilities of school leaderships to ensure quality education in schools, its actual applications are heavily contextualized in private schools in Nepal. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a thorough qualitative evaluation from the perspective of the principals; a viewpoint that is often underrepresented in regional educational research,

Limitations and Implications

The focus of this study was the private schools in Kathmandu. The views of the principals cover the specific time and space. So, the conclusions restrict the generalizability. Future research could elaborate on this study by comparing Nepalese private and public-school principals providing more comprehensive insights into leadership in several educational domains.

Furthermore, quantitative research might be used to provide statistical validity by determining how common the identified perceptions are among a wider sample of private school principals. To find out how these principal attitudes directly affect particular school management strategies and eventually student outcomes, more research is necessary. Lastly, analyzing how government policies affect the management attitudes and practices of private school administrators would provide important information for the creation and execution of policies. We can better support these principals' professional growth, influence educational policy and ultimately improve the quality of private schools in Kathmandu and other comparable urban areas throughout the world by learning more about their perspectives.

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