

**Leadership of Private School Head Teachers for 21st Century:
A Narrative Inquiry**

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Abstract

The twenty-first century has brought many challenges in the education sector along with entire other sectors. The issue of accelerating globalization and digitalization has influenced the educational sector a lot. The stakeholders have faced many challenges in implementing the issue in their organization. The particular study has focused on the perceptions and role of school leadership in 21st-century schools. The study has tried to explore school leaders' views. The particular research is based on the narratives of the school leaders based on their experiences, feelings, and expectations. Three school principals from private schools in Kathmandu were purposively chosen based on their execution of new practices in the school. They were interviewed physically and virtually and a conclusion was drawn from the process of coding, categorizing, thematizing, and meaning-making process. The school leaders have focused on organizational leadership, teamwork, and increased use of ICT as the major concern of schools and their leaders and they are found ready for every unpredictable situation that the school will be facing very soon in the complex, globalized, and culturally blended world making the educational organization service oriented. Still, there is room for development despite the great effort of head teachers.

Keywords: Twenty-first-century school, school leaders, complex world, ICT

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Introduction

The first century has come with many challenges and issues in every sector along with the education sector. The concept of globalization and digitalization have drastically changed the education system of today's world (Nawi et al., 2012). Students in this century are seeking an environment that helps them to learn rather than memorize. They want to enhance themselves to be part of the learning process and develop connections that inspire them "learn to learn". Today is the era of digitalization. Young people of this time are the digital generation. People of their previous generations may be amazed looking at their ability to perform multi-task and the easy use of technology that is changing faster with the speed. In addition to that the students are compelled to develop skills that are needed to survive in this 21st century.

Implementing twenty-first-century skills in a school setting is found to be more challenging but essential. Students need to develop the skills; of effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Mutohhari et al., 2021) and digital literacy and leadership (Benek & Akcay, 2021), for the twenty-first century. Developing those skills in students and making the students able to deliver and express such skills is the responsibility of teachers and school leaders. But most of the teachers we have today have come from conventional teaching backgrounds. Their teaching style is also based on the traditional lecture methods. Teacher teacher-centered conventional method might be less supportive of developing such skills in students though it is an essential skill for life (Weeks et al., 2020). The teachers who came from the traditional method couldn't convert them into a new form of teaching-learning approach either. They are having difficulty developing those skills in students and supporting them for the same. On the other hand, parents of the same background of learning, are not habitual for a progressive pedagogical approach that supports twenty-first-century skills. Mutohhari et al., (2021) emphasize the need for transformation in the attitude and skills of teachers to implement those skills.

Like the global scenario, Nepali school also has to transform to the 21st century from this existing condition. In such a conventional condition, how the Nepalese schools can transform? It is a big question. It simply raises questions about leadership and who is the only authoritative person in a school setting as guided by the education act and education regulation (Rai, 2019). It is the role of school leaders to transform their schools. They have to think positively and adequately which can

lead their organizations toward the modern era. Leaders in the 21st century need to develop the skills that are necessary to thrive in the digital age, not just to survive (Mucharraz, 2016). The school leader must be able to transform those skills into students through teachers.

School leader plays a significant role in developing schools. A leader guides, governs, manages, and operates the organization based on its vision and mission. School leaders should be curious learners to develop leadership qualities for creating new prospects for enhancing school performance (Kin & Kareem, 2019). The head teacher, the leader, of the school, should have a clear vision for leading the school ahead and fulfilling its goals (Koirala, 2019). According to The Wallace Foundation (2013), the school leader must possess five key responsibilities; visionary, collaboration in the team for a better environment, developing leadership qualities in subordinates, supporting professional development programs, and updating generating data and processing it well for decision making and developing a healthy environment in the school organization. These are the requirements to be a transformative leader and leader of 21st-century schools.

The role of leadership is undoubtedly important in leading the school to the 21st century. We know that children of this generation use the internet daily for studying, playing games, communicating with friends, and so on. Now there is a rising issue of how school teaches this digital generation. Agreeing with the idea of Mucharraz (2016) educational leaders at all levels must acquire the skills and knowledge to lead the stakeholders to adopt 21st-century teaching and learning methods to empower students (future leaders). With 21st-century knowledge and skills, school leaders of this generation should be able to cope with all the complexities that arise along with the changing times. They should be very visionary, multi-dimensional, friendly, and technology-friendly, respect every individual's idea, and work together (Tian, 2009).

Students of this generation are smarter than the existing adult generation. Sometimes they can easily cope with the world of technology compared to us. There can be situations where we have to think, do we have students using computers easily? Are our teachers facing problems with technology where our students may have to assist them? Are there students talking about Artificial Intelligence (AI)? 21st-century school leaders have to realize such things that it is the quality that they

should possess. The pupils of this century are more focused on information and communication technology (ICT) which has become an integral part and powerful change agent in the educational world (Davies & Ellison, 2003). Those pupils are the learners of the schools and they are to be guided by school leaders.

The information on the role of leadership in twenty-first-century schools is not explained well by the previous research. The previous scholars have focused on behavior, attitude, academic gaps and recovery, relationships, and harmony among the students. Bayar (2016) has focused on attitudinal and behavioral lacking and challenges to handle by school principals. In addition to that, Bush (2022) has focused on the academic gaps faced by students after COVID-19. Lani and Pauzi (2023) focused on building character and harmony among the students. So, the limited reviews could not gather enough information regarding the role of school head teachers in the area of ICT skills, knowledge management, and pedagogical content.

This study concluded that how private school head teachers of Kathmandu express their roles and responsibilities in 21st-century schools. It also tries to explain how private school head teachers visualize school in the 21st century. Being all of us, first, second, and third authors, and educational practitioners in different educational institutions, this issue has come to our mind. Similarly, the issue is emerging and raised in many of the discussions and public forums. This issue was to be studied and explored to collect real ideas from school leaders. The findings will help the leaders to analyze their role and evaluate themselves in the new context.

The study was guided by these research questions

1. What key characteristics and responsibilities do private school head teachers associate with leading a 21st-century school?
2. How do private school leaders articulate and explain their unique role in shaping the educational experience for students in the context of the 21st century?

Methods

This study was conducted to find the subjective reality (Antwi & Hamza, 2015) related to the perception of school leaders toward their role in twenty-first-century schools. The views collected might have been influenced by participants'

values, feelings, norms, and the researcher's values. The place, ambiance, and environment from where information was gathered might have some impacts on the data and in meaning-making.

Three school leaders, and school principals, from private schools in Kathmandu were interviewed selecting them purposively. Those participants represented three different schools; a normal secondary-level institutional school, a progressive secondary-level school, and a normal basic-level school. The accessibility to school and closeness with the school leaders made it easy for regular visits, thick discussions, and collecting authentic data. The main objective of selecting those participants is to gather the views from different perspectives as they represent different grounds and environments. The participants were contacted through telephone and email first and the appointment was fixed. Their views and ideas were collected with the help of open-ended questions followed by probing questions in virtual meetings and physical meetings. Three meetings were done with each of them to collect their views on reaching their schools. The responses of those participants were narrated and explained from their perspectives. For that, the researcher has applied narrative inquiry as research methodology so that we could interrogate values, assumptions, and perceptions making the research qualitative and interpretive. The collected stories were recorded and transcribed and meanings were generated through the rigorous process of coding, categorizing (Subedi, 2014), and thematizing. The anonymity and confidentiality were maintained and the participants were left with full authority over their perceptions and feelings (Subedi, 2014). The researchers have tried to avoid biases and partiality as well as influences on the participants. However, the researcher's educational background, space, and positionality might have affected the interpretation of the study.

Results and Discussion

Leadership for VUCA World

Many issues are to be addressed by the school head at this time. The major issues of 21st-century schools can be written in the form of an acronym VUCA. That means vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in the world (Mucharraz, 2016). Again, the challenges of the recent world and the accelerated evolution of technology have been accompanied by it. The school leaders have expressed that

the students are found more advanced and have more information regarding the worldwide context. They are well-updated and know about the present context of technological development and changes each day. To guide and facilitate them, the leaders must be hardworking and prepare all the supporting content required for new teaching and learning strategies. The leaders are found serious on that matter and they have realized that the teachers are not at the level for guiding their learners in achieving twenty-first-century skills. The teachers are not reading the curriculum and have not focused on its content, activities, and expected outcomes.

Teachers should be trained for the use of curriculum and the soft skills development to students that have mentioned and focused on it. The curriculum development center must be responsible for empowering teachers for making them ready. Teachers should be ready to learn all those things regarding collaboration, critical thinking, etc. The 21st century needs leaders that have knowledge of curriculum, hardworking, role models, must know the worldwide issue, are exemplary, focused on teamwork, and collaborative. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

School leaders explained that the curriculum designed by the government of Nepal is more focused on the changing world. The content they have offered is more relevant to 21st-century skills. They are designed to enhance the quality of education and to address the needs of future generations. Despite those good aspects of the curriculum, the teachers and schools are found just focusing on textbooks. The objectives of the curriculum are not well addressed by the school and teachers. That is all due to the lack of reading habits of teachers. The reading culture of teachers is one of the required skills that help teachers to identify newer developments in the developing context and also helps in adopting the required approaches in the classroom. All the school leaders have identified the issue that developing the reading habits of teachers is one of the basic roles of school leaders.

I know the twenty-first-century skills and their importance in students' lives very well. When I heard about it for the first time, I didn't take it seriously. Now I realize it is an integral part of life. Designing activities and projects, based on it, is so challenging task for teachers. But we are having a problem in grooming teachers for that. They came from the traditional approach of teaching and they feel difficulty in internalizing and implementing it. (Principal, Basic Level School)

Some schools have invested in teachers' professional development and making them capable of achieving the skills for guiding the students. The major focus comes in implementing and utilizing twenty-first-century skills. But still, there is difficulty in implementing critical thinking and creativity. It is also on the top level of learning explained by Bloom's Taxonomy.

The teachers prepare work design, plan to address 21st-century skills and other required skills and they implement them in class. When we talk about twenty-first-century skills we are very much back in the case of developing critical thinking and creativity skills. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

Predicting the future and planning it today has become very uncertain. The fastest-changing technological development, social phenomenon, and the changing attitude of students have made the future vaguer. All the head teachers are aware of the conditions that the teachers have to face in their classrooms very soon (Wallace Foundation, 2013). On the other hand, the challenges that the children will be facing soon are also unpredictable and uncertain. For that, the teacher has to be more advanced and skillful about 21st-century skills and the ways of implementing those in the classroom to make it lifelong learning for learners. The curriculum has mentioned and emphasized those skills. We must prepare our teachers to transform them in our classroom (Mutohhari et al., 2021). In this regard, proper implementation of policy and their proper monitoring have needed to be improved in the context of the Nepali school. Conducting training, creating awareness for teachers about the need, and motivating the teachers for the same should be prioritized by the policymakers side.

Facilitating Techno-Native Generation

The role of the school head is challenging (Bottery, 2004). We feel that the world will be dominated shortly by techno-native generations who will have the whole world in their palm. We have that generation in our classroom right now and guiding them is a challenge for all of us. The school head teachers in Kathmandu perceive it as one of the major challenges and gaps between learners and facilitators. Most of the facilitators that the schools have, are from the traditional education system and are less aware and less habitual about technology. In contrast it, the students of this techno generation are found smarter and more aware of the changing status of the world. The study has found that school leaders and teachers

are struggling with the operation of technology for classroom purposes. The school leaders have realized that the pandemic of COVID-19 created a good opportunity for learning and practicing ICT in school programs. And now, after the normal situation, the trend of using ICT has stopped and returned to a traditional teaching approach.

..... It is the most necessary skill. Some teachers are avoiding ICT. Though some are using they are just using it for only making slides and presenting. There is no proper and optimum use of it in the classroom. Some schools might have practiced but we are not doing it properly. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

One of the school heads clearly understands the use of ICT in the classroom and its implications in the future. The head teachers have given priority and have focused on ICT integration in the classroom. The practices of implementing regular classes, and the plan of integrating ICT into other subjects give a clear image of the understanding of leaders regarding ICT uses and their importance (Davies & Ellison, 2003). Despite regular follow-up, guidance, motivation and support the teachers are not interested in ICT integration. Especially the teacher who came from the traditional school setting has felt more difficulty in implementation. Ferri et al., (2020) elaborates that teachers' interests, learning attitudes, family circumstances, and social backgrounds also have played roles in implementing and preparing teachers for techno-techno-friendly era. The school has tried to modify classroom teaching to screen teaching in school. Still, school leaders are having challenges in preparing teachers for ICT-based materials.

..... Some courses have integrated the part of ICT but that has been left and they are demanding an extra teacher for that particular course. Subject integration through ICT is a major challenge faced by our teachers. (Principal, Basic level School)

Implementing ICT-based pedagogy has become a challenge for school leaders in Kathmandu. Experienced and senior teachers are found less interested in learning and implementing ICT in the classroom (Junaidi, et.al. 2020) due to a lack of confidence, time consumption, and a traditional teaching mindset. The attitude of experienced teachers is more challenging for school leaders. Teaching and motivating them to change the world is a difficult task for school leaders. They are not accepting the changes happily and the change became a burden to those teachers. In addition, creating pressure for learning is unproductive and humiliating from the teachers' side, creating issues of teachers' retention.

.....Old teachers felt burdened on using such technology. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

Still, the head teachers are compelled to balance experienced traditionally trained teachers, today's conditions, the student's expectations, and future of the society. Olmedo (2012) explained that the world has become complex and leadership has great challenges in managing this situation as it is characterized by non-linear, supported by chaos theory and adaption and evolution. It has visualized that the world is unpredictable and forecasting is not possible which has made the world complex. In this complex world, the school leadership must be ready to cope and overcome such challenges.

Knowledge Management; the Emerging Issue

Knowledge management skills involve creating knowledge from the interaction among colleagues (Nonaka et al., 1996), managing experiences (Ocolla, 2011), and managing the information from intellectual assets (Edosio, 2014). The school leaders have expressed that managing knowledge is one of the greater issues in the 21st-century school and the leaders must work on it. The school leaders are aware of the personal specialty and individualized expertise. Focusing on the inherent quality of each person is another challenge for the head teacher. Leaders must be ready to accept and internalize the knowledge of every student and facilitator. The leaders have to be informed about the advantages of knowledge management. Edosio (2014) clarifies that this can help in faster decision-making, innovation, and competitive advantage. It also helps in supporting parents' satisfaction and proper utilization of resources. The major ways to achieve knowledge management skills are collaborating with teachers and staff, integrating subjects, exploring the skills of teachers, and utilizing them. This will help in building new leaders from the group who are well-informed and well-adapted to the organization. For this, the knowledge management will be one easy strategy.

We should be ready to prepare new leaders behind the leaders and should focus on knowledge management. We should develop an intersubjective teaching approach to supporting each other. We are not focusing on the lower-level staff. We must upgrade our coworkers and make them ready for new situations. The present leaders should focus on soft skills. We have to focus on the inherent quality of individual and their skills. We must focus on

learning by doing not on learning by reading. We must be ready to learn new things from our staff as well as learners. (Principal, Progressive Secondary School)

School head teachers have realized that the teachers are with their peculiar skills and characters. The major issue is they are not well addressed and well supported in our school setting. Moreover, the school has focused on senior-level staff and their performances only. That has created a kind of glass ceiling for the lower-level staff though they have skills. The data explains that some of the head teachers are well known about the future scarcity of academic manpower that can be solved through knowledge management. The application of progressive pedagogy and the approach are also made easier through knowledge management.

Many schools are trying to implement progressive pedagogy. It is the need of time. That is a common understanding of all the participants. And the lack of skillful staff has come up with a major challenge. Mahdi, et.al, (2019) explain, knowledge management skills might be one of the proper ways of fulfilling the need. My experience says that education is the least preferred sector for a profession in Nepal. Attracting new generations in this field is a serious issue. So, the skills of knowledge management have become one of the good practices for fulfilling the needs of competent teachers in the 21st century.

We need to be progressive in every aspect. Now, we have to focus on knowledge management. Every individual has inherent skills and inborn qualities. The leaders must be able to recognize them and use them for organizational use. The lack of human resources can be managed and addressed by these knowledge management techniques. (Principal, Progressive Secondary School)

Experienced knowledge is also an equally important and guiding tool for all of us. I believe that the knowledge developed from the experience is long-lasting and sustainable. Most of the school leaders also believe the same. However, some school leaders express a different view on it. They have realized the experience as outdated knowledge concerning this time. Investing time and money in them is a waste rather than appointing new people as teachers. This technique is adapted widely being new people are more advanced, and technology friendly. They are groomed almost in the transitional time of change and they have somehow visualized the 21st century and can prepare students for the same.

The experience does not work. It is outdated in the case of education. We have to re-polish the experience through new knowledge.” New people, a new strategy, and new techniques should be prioritized for preparing 21st-century people. We seek new knowledge from new people rather than old experiences. The new teachers are more aware of the recent trend and concepts and they are found ready to change themselves and implement a new approach for working in a new way. (Principal, Basic Level School)

Another participant adds:

(As we are from the traditional method of teacher-centered approach, we could not reform ourselves to the new approach. In this regard and in implementing the new strategies and curriculum and for enhancing students’ skills, the experienced teachers are left behind than the new teachers. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

All of the school leaders seemed focused on fresher candidates to appoint them as teachers. The knowledge they have gained, their learning attitude, their awareness of the changing world, and their new perception to visualize the world are good assets for developing 21st-century people. The experiences of the teachers are another important part (De Chenne-Peters & Scheuermann, 2022) that must be revitalized and re-energized to address 21st-century skills rather than wasting them. These views might be different based on resources, challenges, and benefits.

Van den Bossche, et.al, (2006) states the school head believes in teamwork and collaborative work to achieve a common goal in the school setting. Own feelings and ownership of each staff play a vital role in organizational growth. They have focused on a shared vision. The activities like self-motivation, encouragement, and mutual understanding can do better in building a team for organizational growth. In addition to it, this collaborative work also helps in the personal growth of individuals.

In this era, we must believe in team and teamwork. The “we” feeling is so important for organizational growth. I have felt the importance of teamwork and its positive results rather than single-man leadership. Staff motivation, encouragement, and creating friendship are most needed in this time for organizational and personal growth. (Principal, Secondary Level School)

In the same way, another participant also focused on a shared vision and organizational leadership for the development of schools in the twenty-first century.

In this time, each person from gate to the top should have the same voice and vision for the growth and progress of an organization. The gate should reflect the same notion that the topmost chairs explain. (Principal, Progressive Secondary School)

The responses reflect that the school head teachers are aware of the importance of teamwork rather than one person working. As we say, the first impression is the last impression, all school members have to work as a single unit. De Matthews, et.al (2021) suggest that school heads must focus on their staff, and making them ready for a changing world is a must. The preparation of innovative kids in the twenty-first century is not an easy task when visualized through leaders' eyes. That has to be accomplished by the collaboration of every individual.

Conclusion

The research among the three participants reveals the roles and responsibilities that school leaders in the 21st century should possess to cope with this competitive global world. The findings of the study emphasize that school leadership's team building, capacity enhancement, and organizational leadership strengthening are the key issues that need to be addressed. Furthermore, focusing on knowledge management and being ready to deal with complex situations at all times are also crucial areas that leaders should focus on. The use of ICT and its increasing use is also addressed by school leaders for the school to improvise over time. This world is changing and unpredictable, and leaders have to be well prepared to walk on with this changing digital world along with the transformation.

Though head teachers of each school have focused on organizational leadership, teamwork, and increased use of ICT as the major concern for the school's educational development, they are still struggling to uplift the organization because of the lack of shared vision, dedication, and passion of teachers (co-workers) towards reading and updating themselves with the globalized world. This research result might help all the school leaders in figuring out the issues they are having and their role in overcoming those issues. This finding will help community school leaders also for doing better in their organization but the situation may be different due to different organizational setting and structures.

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