

School governance in Nepal: A perspective of new public management theory

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Abstract

School Management Committees have the tasks to maintain good governance of public schools in Nepal. The School Management Committees are driven by the New Public Management theory. The theory advocates for the transformation of public administration into public management which began in Nepal in 1990 A.D. and has continued thereafter. The purpose of this article is to identify the changes in the application of New Public Management theory in school governance through the perspective of power-sharing between communities and local governments. In this study, I have applied the narrative policy review method to gather evidences and enrich the discussion. I have presented some discussion notes to show that the School Management Committee model was practiced with the engagements of parents and communities from 2003 to 2016 A.D. After 2015, the active role of the parents and communities in school governance was shifted to the jurisdiction of local governments, which I have concluded as an alteration in the New Public Management model. I recommend that the core and leading engagement of parents and communities in school governance should be ensured for the good governance of schools in Nepal, in which local governments can act as a watchdog. The study, carried out based on New Public Management theoretical referent, is helpful to scholars to understand the change in the application of New Public Management theory through the perspective of school governance in Nepal.

Keywords: Community, local governments, new public management, public-school governance

School governance in Nepal

In Nepal, there was an autocratic Rana rule for 104 years until 1951 A.D and the Panchayat system, under the Shah dynasty, remained for 30 years until 1991. Education was in low priority and poorly developed during these periods (National Planning Commission, 1992, 2017), as the rulers were fearful that educated citizens would pose a threat to their regimes (Bhatta & Mehendale, 2019). Schools were in low priority of the then rulers until the 1990s. However, in Nepal, the history is evident that our past generations made voluntary contributions and worked hard to establish schools in their respective places. In some places, communities were active to establish schools voluntarily for which they contributed money, land, physical labor, and also advocated for this noble cause. It is the value system of Nepali communities to work collaboratively for schools (Dhungel et al., 2013; Nepal Research Center for Educational Innovation and Development, 2009; Pradhan et al., 2019; Shrestha, 2014). There was a time in our local governance system that primarily engaged parents and communities in the holistic management of school education. These parents and communities worked hard to bring positive changes in their society and even in personal lives through the positive impact of education.

After 1971 A.D., education was nationalised and the schools came under the responsibility of the government (Ministry of Education, 1971; Poudyal, 2013). This created a distance in the relationship between the schools and communities. Nonetheless, the educational outcomes were not achieved as expected; and again it identified the need for community engagement in school education (National Education Commission, 1992). The democratic government after 1990 A.D. realized a need for parental and community engagement in school governance; and created a conducive environment for the engagement and mobilization of the parents and communities in school governance. As a result, the seventh amendment of the 1971 Education Act was brought into effect in 2001 A.D. to engage and mobilize local stakeholders in School Management Committees (SMC). The SMC model began to function in all public schools across the country and since then it has a crucial role to operate, care and manage schools in Nepal (Ministry of Law, 2017). The responsibilities of the SMCs show that their roles are not limited to school management only but also they have a role to maintain the entire school governance. School governance is a macro concept related to the making of school plans, exploring resources, defining quality indicators of education and achieving these, and providing quality education to all children. School management is a smaller component that transforms the policies into practice and has a dedicated inclusive team with head teacher, teachers, palika representatives, educationists, women representative and staff (Ministry of Education, 2009). The past practice evidences, as discussed, imply that local strengths are instrumental and are always necessary for school establishment and management, and those important roles have now been transferred to SMCs. SMCs have the tasks for effective and efficient management of schools locally to ensure quality education and learning outcomes. A nine-member School Management Committee is represented by locals, parents, elected representatives, local intellectuals, school founders, donors, educationists, teachers, and head teachers with at least three female members (Ministry of Law, 2017). The managerial roles of SMCs are scholarly aligned with the New Public Management theory (Rajbhandari, 2016).

New public management theory in Nepali education

NPM theory emerged in capitalistic nations during the late 1970s which adopted neoliberal reforms. It basically emerged and came into practice to reform and transform the welfare-oriented bureaucracy to market-friendly, competitive, and outcome-based bureaucracy. Traditional bureaucracy lacked managerial efficiency and people did not have easy access to it, which gave rise to the NPM (Haque, 2004). NPM is also termed as 'reinventing the government' (Kearney & Hays, 1998). It includes making public service delivery efficient. It stresses on decentralising the decision-making authorities (Kearney & Hays, 1998). It is based on reforming public administration through economic and managerial lenses. These interventions are expected to make public administration output-oriented and competitive, and the sub-national governments have autonomy from central governments to perform their tasks efficiently (Gautam, 2008). Local stakeholders can team up to explore different supports for schools that cannot be afforded by higher governments (World Bank, 1988, as cited in Weiler, 1990). Hood (1991) proposed seven doctrines in NPM. These include.

- Hands-on professional management in the public sector
- Explicit standard and measure of performance
- Greater emphasis on output control
- Shifts to disaggregation of units in the public sector
- Shifts to greater competition in the public sector
- Stress on private sector style of management practice
- Stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use

Above mentioned academic discussions on NPM focus on the efficiency and the effective management of public institutions. It is a paradigm shift from public administration to public management, which is also helpful in reforming school education. Based on the above theoretical discussions (Gautam, 2008; Haque, 2004; Hood, 1991; Kearney & Hays, 1998; Weiler, 1990), I focus only on effective managerial aspect of the NPM which stresses on the power devolution from the centre to the implementation level for an effective outcome. School systems can be better managed through power devolution to local levels. NPM model is well situated in Nepali school governance from the perspective of decentralisation and the reforms achieved through it. In early 2000 A.D., the SMC model was begun with the support of the World Bank to improve the quality and access to primary education (Sharma, 2008). The nationalisation of education in 1971 A.D. limited the roles of communities in schools (Pradhan et al., 2019), but the SMC model again brought back the communities for effective school management (Dhungel et al., 2013). "State from manager to facilitator of schooling" was the core slogan (*mantra*) of decentralising school management authorities to SMCs in 2003 (Carney et al., 2007, p. 611).

There are several educational reforms in the managerial efficiencies of the public schools in Nepal brought about by the implementation of the NPM model. Local leadership is acknowledged by educational policies and is mobilised to enhance good governance practices in schools (Rajbhandari, 2016). Teachers have become more accountable to schools and students (World Bank, 2010). The increased enrolment rate, the provision of lifelong teaching, and the reduction of gender disparities at schools have been made possible through decentralised governance of school education (National Planning Commission, 2016). Unfortunately, there were no elected

representatives at the local level from 2002 to 2016 (Chetri, 2017), but the devotional and voluntary engagement of parents and communities helped manage the public schools effectively and efficiently. After the election of local governments in 2017 A.D., local education is brought under the jurisdiction of these governments (Ministry of Law, 2015, 2017). This power (re)centralisation to the governments is the alteration of the erstwhile version of the NPM model of the SMC which had parents and communities in the leading positions. I have discussed this below.

Study methods

I have applied narrative review of policies as a research method (Lessa et al., 2015). A review of policies helps to delve into certain policy implementations by states and what implications they have in the real world (Browne et al., 2019). I have reviewed the national and local education policies of Nepal which include: the 1971 Education Act and its amendments, the 2002 Education Regulation and its amendments, the 2015 Constitution, the 2017 Local Self Government Operation Act, the 2019 National Education Policy, and the Local Education Acts. The implementation of these policies in different political contexts in Nepal indicates how school governance was practiced. My review is limited to the perspective of decentralisation of school governance authority. I have interpreted the reviews to identify the changes in the theoretical approach of the New Public Management in school governance in Nepal. The findings are presented below.

Policy reviews on school governance

The presentation of the following findings and discussions explains the intentions of different policy interventions in school governance in Nepal. I focus to explore how school-related powers have been (re)centralised to governments in Federal Nepal. I have thematised the discussions and findings in separate themes: National Constitution and policies, educational development plans, and local education acts.

National constitution, act and plans

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal restructured the country into a central, seven federal, and 753 local governments. This new decentralised model has delegated the rights of school management to local governments (Ministry of Law, 2015). Local governments are represented by elected representatives for a five-year term. The 2017 Local Government Operation Act has further outlined the roles of local governments in managing school education (Ministry of Law, 2017a). Aligning with the constitution and the act, the 2019 National Education Policy and the 2019 Report of the High-level Education Commission have stated that SMCs in public schools have to be reformed as a supportive body to local governments in school management works (Ministry of Education, 2019a, 2019b).

The 1971 Education Act of Nepal has been amended at least nine times until 2017. In 2001, the Seventh Amendment of the Act provisioned the formation of SMCs in public schools across the country. In the act, it is mentioned that an SMC Chairperson shall be "a person selected by parents from among themselves" (Nepal Law Commission, 2001, p. 27). As a major shift, the Eighth Amendment of the Act in 2017 includes that any member of the SMC can be nominated as the SMC Chair (Ministry of Law, 2017b). The SMC Chair now can be anyone among parents, elected representatives, donors, founders, educationists, and locals. The 2016 School Sector Development

Plan also advocates the major roles of local governments in school education (Ministry of Education, 2016). These provisions in the national education act and inclusion in education development plans have recommended that a capable person should chair the SMC. These persons can be non-parents or non-community members and local government representatives.

Local governments

There is an absence of the Federal Education Act until the sixth year of the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution (Ministry of Education, 2021). Amid this, local governments in Nepal are busy with preparing their local education acts. There are dilemmas regarding the formation of SMCs such as who will represent the SMC Chair, and how the SMC will be formed. It seems that each local government has its own ideas for SMC formation. I present examples of three local governments of Lalitpur district to support my argument. In the Lalitpur Metropolitan City schools, the SMCs shall be chaired either by Ward Chair or any Ward Committee Member (Lalitpur Metropolitan City, 2020). In the Mahankal Rural Municipality schools, the SMC Chair shall be selected amongst the Ward Chair, Ward Committee members, parents, or educationists. The right to select the SMC Chair remains with the Ward Committee and the Committee has to hold a prior consultation with the Rural Municipality office (Mahankal Rural Municipality, 2018). In Mahalaxmi Municipality's schools, there is a search team to recommend the SMC Chair which comprises Head Teacher, Education Officer, and Ward Chair. This team recommends the name list of three potential persons for the SMC Chair. Based on the recommendation, the Municipality Office selects the SMC Chair (Mahalaxmi Municipality, 2019). One common aspect in these three local governments is that the elected representatives want their share or participation in the SMCs which probably would limit the leadership roles of parents and communities.

Power recentralisation from parents and communities to the local governments

The availability of locally elected representatives in the SMCs is helpful to bridge the efficient service deliveries from the government to the people (Bhattarai & Pasa, 2021). The local governments have initiated to take management responsibilities for school education. The prevailing education acts, policies, and plans developed after 2015 consider the community as a support institution to the local governments for the effective management of schools. In many schools, the ward chairs are now the SMC chairs. This right of the local government has been constitutionally established in Schedule 8 of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal. It is a major change from the earlier version of the NPM model in school governance which had parents and communities at the decisive positions in the SMCs. These advancements in Nepali education system indicate that school management authority has shifted from parents and community to local governments. The lead roles of local governments in school education are perceived as localising and strengthening the NPM in school education. Equally, there is a risk that the elected representatives may impose their political agenda on school management which may result in the party-isation of education (Dhungana et al., 2021).

Despite these, there lie several constraints for local governments to promote school education. Education decentralisation in Nepal is not principally applied and still, the power is accumulated and held at the centre (Hamal, 2020). There is less budgetary support for schools to transform plans and policies into activities (Bhattarai, 2022). Education officers in local governments have low political authority and access. There are issues of having insufficient teachers and low funding

for school infrastructures (Dhungana et al., 2021). The politicisation of school education is another possible fear. Pherali (2012) mentioned, "school as a power centre, school management committees are political entities" (p. 63). However, there are no options for local governments to be accountable to schools and parents to ensure the success of education decentralization (Sabarwala et al., 2021). In these scenarios, the stand-alone approach of local governments might not be helpful to develop school education. Therefore, the local governments have to reaffirm communities as crucial partners in school management. Parents and communities should have the leading role in school management and local governments can play the role of a watchdog.

I found that there has been a paradigm-shift in the NPM model in school governance in Nepal. The country practiced the public management of school education from 2003 to 2016 through the SMCs. This NPM-influenced public management was brought into practice because the traditional bureaucratic practices were unable to bring positive reforms in school education. The seventh amendment of the 1971 Education Act in 2001 initiated the SMCs in public schools. There were no elected representatives at the local level governments from 2002 to 2016; and parents and communities were at the forefront to develop school education. The NPM model in school governance was heavily influenced by the roles of parents and communities. The 2015 Constitution, the 2017 Local Government Operation Act, and the 2019 National Education Policy of Nepal have changed the roles of communities as supportive institutions to local governments in managing public education. In many schools, the elected ward representatives are now the chairs of the SMCs. This indicates that the managerial aspect of the NPM model in school education in Nepal has shifted towards the political strength of local governments. This power exercise of the governments could pose a risk to distance parents and communities from school governance roles.

Conclusion

In earlier Nepali societies, schools were opened, managed, and operated by parents and communities. From 1971 to 1990 there was a domination of bureaucratic governance in school education in the name of nationalisation of education. This practice could not help the education system of Nepal to flourish. After the 1990s, the political transformation in the country brought several educational reforms. The SMC model which was started in 2003 brought communities back to schools. This model adapted the NPM theoretical framework that supported the local management of public institutions for their effective roles. It was the responsibility of parents and communities to take care of the schools through the SMCs until 2016 A.D. So, the NPM model in school governance was heavily influenced by the roles of parents and communities. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal and the 2017 Local Government Operation Act authorised local governments as the major caretakers of the public schools in Nepal. SMCs now play a role of supportive institutions to local governments in school management. The local governments are preparing the local education acts to seek their share and show political strength in school education. In many cases, the local government representatives themselves chair the SMCs. This is a paradigm-shift in power (re) centralisation from parents and communities to the local governments. This transformation is the alteration to the erstwhile version of the NPM model which had the decisive and leading roles in school governance through the SMCs. In this context, the community's value of participation, togetherness, and leadership should equally be considered while devising school governance policies.

Recommendation

The local elected governments have a service term of only five years and these are replaced in most cases. After newly elected representatives take office, their policies and political visions change accordingly. However, there is a risk that the engagement of politically motivated persons could keep locals away from the schools. It is granted if these political persons work for the noble cause of school development and management as per the prevailing educational laws as they are locally elected and thus have to bear the people's mandate. If they impose their partisan ideologies on school governance, it will be disastrous. However, the community is always there at the forefront to support a school. Community is a permanent structure whereas elected representatives and bureaucrats in local governments are for fixed terms. It is unique to the Nepali context that schools are well taken care of and supported through mutual efforts at the community level. Nepali values embody mutual trust, collectivism, and community (Hamal, 2022; Laurent-Olive & Bourn, 2020; Sapkota & Tharu, 2016). "In a collectivism society, the risk is distributed amongst and between the members" (Rajbhandari, 2016b, p. 7). These socio-cultural values of parents and communities have been institutionalised in the governance of schools in Nepal. Therefore, the new educational policies in Federal Nepal should acknowledge the roles of parents and communities at the core of school governance and also be cautious that these policies do not keep them away from bearing the responsibility of school governance. I suggest that the local governments play the role of a watchdog to SMCs to ensure the meaningful and inclusive engagements of all local stakeholders, comply with the implementation of legal provisions in schools, and networking of all schools to help them grow together.

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