Leading Schools for Innovation and Change: A Case Study of Successful Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the role and leadership management practices of head teachers in public schools. In schools, the leadership goals are for developing innovative and excellent student outcomes. The data were collected from interviews with five head teachers or principals of five schools. The findings showed that the innovative head teachers adopted several leadership strategies to enhance the school's success and quality enhancement. An innovative model for innovative leadership was developed that provided a road map of the influence for their leadership. This study makes clear that head teachers have experienced noticeable success in school's quality enhancement through establishing innovative cultures. The findings of this study imply that leadership behavioral changes can lead to great positive impacts in improving school's teaching and learning quality.

Keywords: Innovative, culture, change, creativity, leadership, establishing

Introduction

Different schools of today are operating in rapidly changing social, cultural and technical contexts, increasingly assertive education policies amidst globalization that has been fueled by the advancement of science and technology (Caldwell, 2011; Christensen, et al., 2008). These scholars have emphasized a need for the revitalization of education systems more suited to the changing dynamics of the postmodern era. It is important for schools to respond to the society's needs for transformation. The schooling system in the 21st century needs to promote innovation, creativity, flexibility, free values,

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aspirations, thought and the opportunity for collaborative effort and progress in obtaining quality academic output.

Schools are social institutions framed to serve the needs and aspirations of society and people. These institutions are bound to operate within the social, cultural, and political contexts that pose challenges for them to update in terms of knowledge they impart to students. Decade-long education systems have failed to respond to the current needs of people and community expectations as communities are expecting their children learn new and innovative ideas to cope with the global challenges. To address these concerns how the current leadership works within the school institutions is very crucial for bringing in the expected reforms.

Today's education system is insufficient for preparing future citizens. International organizations, national governments, and business firms globally have put forth enough efforts and courage to improve quality of education for the children. In recent years, although schools are putting more pressure to do better in terms of quality and relevance of their education, the results are still inadequate. In this 21st century, schools and education systems continue to be challenged by the rate and intensity of change largely driven by technology and its impact on the teaching and learning environment. School leaders (e.g., principals) are expected to meet the increasing expectations of students, families, communities and governments for the provision of relevant and engaging learning experiences. "Effective school leaders are key to large scale sustainable education reform" (Fullan, 2002). Along with head teacher quality, teacher quality also impacts the student learning output.

Breadth of knowledge exists on successful school leadership and school's betterment strategies. Factors such as school context, leadership experience, leader style and capacity, organizational history and culture and school for change impact how school leaders head towards embracing change. Successful school leaders respond to their contextual requirements differently and with the use of their insights obtained from the working contexts and broader national policy conditions. They establish environments

for collaboration with outside world, i.e., the global community, to foster a smooth learning condition for all, irrespective of the differences among learners of several types.

A number of factors such as curricular, pedagogical and organizational come together to influence the way schools work and lead changes. This study aimed to understand how school leaders from successful schools lead change and innovation. Understanding their techniques, mindset, practices and life experiences allows making successful leadership more accessible for the improvement of leadership styles and quality of education. Hattie (2014) says that success of any institutions depends on how systematically the changes are adopted for a shared benefit. The findings of the present study also contribute to existing body of knowledge on leadership, especially about leading innovative and successful schools in the hope that it may add the knowledge about how to leverage educational innovation to transform schools' quality service.

Objectives of the Study

This study explores the specific leadership behavior and practices of leaders leading successful schools in Nepal for high-quality education and 21st century demands in the education market. It has the following research questions to meet its objectives:

1. What specific skills and knowledge of head teachers create innovative school?
2. What factors contribute to creating successful schools and how do they lead innovation and change?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods provided a means for exploring and understanding the meaning that different individuals and groups ascribe to the head teacher's leadership and each school's success and capacity for innovation, exploring participants' experiences, ideas, and feelings (Creswell, 2009). This approach allowed me to interact with teachers and build on the qualitative data to explore the innovative practices practiced in the respective schools. Five schools were purposively chosen for data collection. A case study is an intensive, a n d holistic description of a

single entity or unit bounded by time or place. Hence, the successful school cases and respective school leaders' leadership practices have been taken as units. This leads to what Stake (1995) claimed a case study being an in-depth exploration of a particular context using primarily qualitative methods within interpretative enquiry.

In this study, the head teachers gave the researcher with access to the individual interview and arranged for the leadership team to be interviewed. The head teachers were provided with an introductory letter for the parents and staff group participants, and it was agreed that head teachers or principals, in negotiation with the researcher, would seek volunteers from the staff and parent groups. Before conducting the interviews, a set of interview guidelines were prepared and piloted with 2 participants. After that, there were made some modification to the questions.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study have been reported and discussed thematically. The different views and opinions of the head teachers are thematized as elaborated below.

Creativity and change. Both creativity and change lead to school leaders' transformative actions. Ample literature supports vital need for improving schools' environment and outcomes of students by developing a positive school climate through a team-based learning community that promotes for enhancing a sense of creativity and change. School leaders must improve teaching and learning through their influence on motivation, commitment and working conditions. Day et al. (2011) claim that collective teacher efficacy and trust are two fundamental elements of school transformation. They describe these elements as "the level of confidence a group of teachers feel about their ability to organize and implement whatever educational initiatives are required for students to reach high levels" and "relational trust includes a belief or expectation on the part of most teachers that their colleagues, students and parents support the school's goals for student learning and will reliably work towards achieving those goals". Therefore, a sense of change through creativity and innovation on the part of leadership behavior would make the schools successful. The teachers interviewed in this study possessed these traits.

Teacher trust is seen as an elusive but critical factor to the success of schools. Organizational culture and building a collaborative learning community is inseparable from any discussion on school improvement and change. Trust is the lubricant that keeps school cultures running smoothly; however, it is unsettled by change, providing the potential for conflict and tension.

Innovation in schools. One of the important concerns of today's school education is to develop a good citizen. Young people need to develop a sense of belonging and well-being. They also need a wide range of capabilities to live, learn and contribute locally and globally (Kaiser & Halbert, 2009). Children will no longer live in isolated communities and thus, their context of learning and living should not be confined to a physical location anymore. They must become citizens of their local community, nation, and world (Zhao, 2009). It is highlighted that the role of collaboration, stating that creativity and innovation have always been highly collaborative.

The idea of innovation in schools has captured the attention of the public, seeing innovation as the way to break through historical patterns of schooling. We can say that thinking may be considered as the ultimate change management tool and developing collaborative mindsets as a new set of opportunities for business if it comes with an upgrade in thinking. Schools need to create organizational structures that will allow creative thinking. Without a constant flow of ideas, a business is condemned to obsolescence." The same could be said of schools and schooling system without ideas. The teachers' involved in this study reflected these trends saying,

> *I think we need to focus on how our children will be in the future. I take innovation as a part of schools' quality, and therefore focusing on this to establish this school as a model for innovation and creativity.*

This teacher's opinion about innovation was also repeated by many others. It seemed that all of them were focused on issues of enhancing the qualities of learning and teaching within the broader framework of globalization and the related innovations.

Aspirations regarding future of schooling. Schooling today requires meeting the expectations of current and future societies. In that, Zhao (2013) claims cultivation of creativity, entrepreneurship and global competencies is to be the focus of schools. West-Burnham (2009) offers some strong beliefs to challenge the thinking about the purpose of education being to develop the learning capacity of every individual. He says that schools today need to understand the aspirations of societies and expectations of future societies. Schools as community learning platforms primarily need to support and enrich learning environment to be accountable for their respective societies and communities.

All the participants of this case study agreed with this idea and said that they have tried best to address what is needed to be learnt for the children to be able to face in their career. One head teacher said,

> *We have tried to inform our students about the future we will be living, and for that we invite some motivators and technical experts to educate our children about the challenges in future and how to prepare from today. Beside our curriculum, we conduct several life skills workshops, field visits and so on. These have helped our students understand the reality of life.*

Head teachers agreed that successful schools are conducting such activities and have been very much impactful in changing quality and relevancy of education. While there are elements of this thinking in some schools today, the premise of the school as a community hub with responsibility for the learning of all community members remains unrealized due to the resource limitations. In developing the relevant, personalized and future-orientated education experience for all students, schools and communities should work together in collaboration. It is that while there is no single path to system improvement, there are commonalities in their goals and pathways.

The success approach. All the school leaders in this study revealed that they adopted a success approach towards schooling and school leadership. They said that the only goal for them was to ensure the success of any activity or program they launch as a part of education. One of the schools selected as a case study in this study from the

Kathmandu Valley was regarded as a successful and innovative school, providing a model of best practice for other schools. This school has a reputed profile and is recognized by several collaborators for its quality teaching and learning environment. The school received regular visitors from across Nepal and many other Asian Countries. The head teacher or principal expressed that one of the critical factors for the success of this school is the leadership and the cooperation of teachers and parents in realizing the goals of improving the quality of education for the education market and future world. Each school consulted in this study had formed a positive school culture and adopted a success strategy to embed innovation and creativity.

It was reported that school leaders or principals and staff continually examined their environments, reflecting on their implementation and they grabbed the best opportunities for their schools and quality improvement. While the degree of presence of the success elements varied given the range of school contexts, the population and community they served. One of the head teachers said, "*we adopt a culture of doing things differently and meticulously. I find that all my staff are doing well and following our motto for creating changes in traditional practices and adopting innovation*". The participating head teachers thought that their success was highly influenced by their actions guided by their long term visions and ambitious expectations.

Discussion

Looking at the works of five successful and innovative schools is the first step in developing the connections required to understand the leadership practices in public schools. This study demonstrates that head teachers have developed innovative system in schools from which other schools in the similar contexts can purpose to do so by learning from them. It will be the effective model to bring change and innovation in quality and education.

The practices of the head teachers showed that they no longer continue to maintain the traditional thinking, rather try to respond to the local and global developments through

their strategic actions to make schools successful. They promoted innovation and creativity to guide changes in school systems (Plucker et al., 2004). The schools created environment for trust and collaboration to ensure that every change the leadership wished to make were enacted smoothly and for the benefit of the schools. Trust was highly emphasized by the school leaders, which they thought is the key to success. It played vital role for them to influence their decision-making. One head-teacher said,

> *Behaving in a trustworthy manner is the central element for me as a head teacher in this school. If I don't trust my staff and if they do not trust me, there will be problem in maintaining good relationship and efficiency in work.*

Several studies have also proved the value of trust-building in school leadership for success. The participants reported that they tried to be inclusive, passionate, and collaborative professional educators and aimed at materializing the school-success agenda. They wanted to make a difference and inspired others to join them to achieve their common goals. The primary goal of their actions was to implement policies and relevant strategies for leading changes required in the respective school contexts.

The head teachers' thought that their influence on other teachers and school staff in terms of implementation of strategies for school success was very much grave. They inspired the teachers and staff to be responsive and creative while dealing with the changes that the school wished to have. Head teachers' leadership remained influential in administrative and academic affairs of the school. They created new ideas by linking their thinking with their behaviors. They encouraged self-reflection, encouragement and mutual support. While the context of the five schools varied significantly in terms of school size, type, locality, age, socioeconomic status of the students, multi-cultural base   and   years   of headship, there were large similarities across schools in terms of innovation they carried out. The leaders adopted a whole-school approach for success, as they addressed several micro level factors influencing school success. They tried to build a positive, professional, and highly trusting culture in which everyone felt safe in handling changes. They maintained smooth communication across several sections of the

school. Quality of teaching and learning was central, and there was a practice of shared as well as distributive leadership. All the head teachers believed that the quality of teaching and learning was the precondition for a school to be a successful school.

It was found that the innovative schools and their school leadership have a culture of high expectations. 'Doing things Differently' was their motto. All schools had improved student's outcomes and improved collaborators' perceptions regarding success and efficiency. Each school had undertaken significant strategic change over time. There was an understanding of the school's engagement in a continuous improvement cycle, and stakeholders took collective responsibility for this. The five successful schools demonstrated many familiar elements of success in identifying themselves as innovative and creative schools as a model schools and school systems.

Conclusion and Implications

The main aim of this study was to understand the innovative leadership behavior and practices of successful schools. Reflecting on the data that related to research questions, a n d the contexts of the seven schools, this study concluded that school heads' shared leadership practices enable the schools to make great success in their educational attainments. It was also found that leader's background, skills, innovative ideas and experiences collectively shaped their leadership practices for school success, and their actions were related with the school's context, history, culture and expectations.

With such effects, successful and innovative school leadership is often viewed to be rare. School leaders' individual characteristics also equally influenced the way they embraced changes. From the analysis of the schools' leadership practices, this study provides a model for innovation in public school leadership styles which demystifies successful and innovative leadership qualities to those concerned, to facilitated them design more personalized, applicable school leadership practices. An efficient leadership in schools provides opportunities for innovation and success so that with experience, reflection and self-awareness, they might push their schools, teacher staff, students, communities and the nation towards the goal of developing a quality education system.

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