EXPLORING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE INSTITUTIONAL SCHOOL OF KATHMANDU: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Principals of the schools are more focused on managerial works rather than supporting teaching and learning in the school. As a result, they spend most of their time behind the desk and in to the files. Principals of the schools are guided by the principles of making good grades in the examinations. As a result, they are more focused on rote learning than knowledge and skill based learning that add value in the life of students. However, the instructional leadership advocates that the principal should able to create school culture that support students' achievement. So, the main aim of the paper is to explore perception and practices of principals on their instructional leadership in addressing the 21st century skills. I applied narrative research approach in order to explore the perceptions and practices. For this, I interviewed two principals of two different schools of Kathmandu valley. The finding of the study reveals that setting direction, focusing in curriculum and monitoring the learners' progress are the perception and practices on instructional leadership.

KEYWORDS: *Instructional leadership, 21st century skills*

INTRODUCTION

It was in the year 1984 when my father, a non-academician, established a small school upon request from some of his friends who were teachers. The school did well and was quite popular in its area in terms of students' enrollment and their achievements. After 5 years, his friends demanded their share in the institution which my father refused. As a consequence, his friends left the school and established another school of their own. In the initial phase, their departure

didn't matter much but slowly their absence was felt as the school's management and academic achievements gradually started declining. However, he continued to run the school without giving up. Just to provide him a moral support, I would spend some time in the school every day after taking my college class. I was inspired by my college's ECA activities and tried to incorporate ECA activities in my father's school too. I was involved in the school as a part-time teacher of an English subject. But it was in the year 2000 AD that my father decided to handover the leadership role to me and declared me to be the new principal of the school. This reminds me of what Bush (2006) stated that the principal in developing countries are appointedbased on a successful record as teachers with the assumption that this provides a sufficient starting point for school leadership. This was shocking for me as I was just a 23- year old lad who had recently completed his Bachelor's degree, and who hardly knew anything about teaching and learning. I was new in the school without any clear vision, professional skills, attributes and knowledge (Bush, 2006).

Consequently, I followed my father's footsteps and started running the school just the way he did. I was more involved in the traditional structure of teaching and learning. As a school's success was determined by its SLC results during that time, I also believed that the success of my school lay in scoring high SLC/SEE marks. Moreover, I was also grown up studying in one of the reputed schools which gave utmost priority to SLC scores. The school where I studied was indeed the only school to score the top ten rank in the SLC examination almost every year and to continue its legacy of being in the top ten rank, the school would only focus on obtaining excellent SLC results. As obvious, I set the strategy the school focusing more on mark-oriented culture for almost 12 years on which Huber (2004) argued that

The school cannot any longer be regarded as simply imparting traditional knowledge within a fixed frame. Rather it is becoming an organisation which needs to renew itself continuously in order to take present and future needs into account.

Having worked as a principal of one of the institutional school for almost fifteen years, I have always kept myself busy as an administrator who struggled for the sustainability of my school and it is still continued even after its 23rd SEE batches and its history of three-decade. I didn't involve myself in teaching and learning. I was always behind the chair and into the files or financial statement. Over a period of time, I felt I haven't grown personally and professionally. In a mean time, my decision to join M.Ed. Leadership and Management Program of Kathmandu University has become an eye-opener for me as it has made me realize failure often correlates with inadequate school leadership (Leithhood et.al, 2006). In the same line Harris (2009) said effective school leadership determine school improvement. According to Bush (2007), there has been a great interest in educational leadership during the early part of the 21st century because of the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes. In many parts of the world, there is recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their leadership (Bush, 2007).Much of the available literature on school leadership effectiveness indicates that school leaders play an important role by exerting their influence over several factors, including, most importantly, teachers (Hallinger& Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Effective school leadership directly affects teacher capacity, motivation, and commitment and working conditions, all of which directly affects teaching practices linked to student learning

and achievement (Leithwood et al. 2008).According to Louis et al. (2010), school leaders influence student learning mainly through establishing appropriate school conditions by setting goals, influencing culture, setting parameters for classroom conditions through designing and managing curricular planning and resource allocations, and also by directly influencing teachers.The review of literature conducted by Hallinger and Heck (1998) on instructional leadership literature published between 1980 and 1995 suggests that school principals who employ an instructional leadership had an indirect effect on student reading achievement and direct effects on school climate changing in elementary schools.Additionally, Spiro (2013) affirms that instructional leaders establish clear goals, provide educators with direction and sense of mission. Furthermore, they motivate educators to enhance their performance. Teacher motivation was also highlighted as having a drive that leads to improved educational outcomes. This knowledge and awareness on leadership practices finally has given me the background of the study on issues like 'How do school principals practice and perceive instructional leadership in their schools? So, my research attempt to throw some light upon the instructional leadership practices in institutional school of Kathmandu.

Instructional leadership is not a new concept. Salo, Nylund and Stjernstrom (2014) said that the origin of instructional leadership is Anglo-American, developed intensely in the early 1980s mainly by school effective movement. However, Critics argued that instructional leadership as outdated and authoritative position of the principal (Sebastian &Allenswoth, 2012). In the same line Hallinger (2003) had a view that principals could not have capabilities of being curriculum experts in all the learning areas so they might be ineffective. However, Hallinger (2011) observed that instructional leadership has been reawakened as leadership for learning that aimed to achieve school goals. Adjectives such as collective, shared, transformational, and distributed are used with instructional leadership (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Thus. I find this issue needs to explore in institutional schools where the principals are teacher, administrator and leader as well (Bush, 2006).

Since this study focuses on leadership practices of institutional school, I will be taking McEwan model "7 steps to effective instructional leadership" as my theoretical lens. In step-1, instructional leader should aware of what is taught? And why it is taught? They are ultimately responsible for incorporating the designated state and district standards into the development and implementation of the local school's instructional programs, ensures that school wide and individual classroom instructional activities are consistent with state, district, and school standards and are articulated and coordinated with one another. Uses multiple sources of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to evaluate progress and plan for continuous improvement.

In step-II McEwan says effective instructional leader should discuss instruction and learning. Effective instructional leaders do all these things and more by utilizing the four Cs— collaboration, collegiality, cooperation, and creative problem solving. Effective instructional leaders are eager learners. They read a variety of publications, attend all kinds of workshops, go to national conferences, present staff development programs to their teachers, and are constantly on the lookout for potential resources for their buildings. Works with teachers to improve instructional programs in their classrooms consistent with student needs. Facilitates instructional program development based on trustworthy research and proven instructional practices. Uses appropriate formative-assessment procedures and informal data-collection methods for

evaluating the effectiveness of instructional programs in achieving state, district, and local standards.

In step-3 instructional leader should establish high expectations for student achievement that are directly communicated to students, teachers, and parents. They should establish clear standards, communicates expectations for the use of time allocated to instruction, and monitors the effective use of classroom time. Moreover, they should implement, and evaluate procedures and codes for handling and correcting behavior problems.

In step-4, instructional leaders should provide for systematic two-way communication with staff regarding the achievement standards and the improvement goals of the school. They should establish, support, and implement activities that communicate the value and meaning of learning to students. And finally develop and uses communication channels with parents to set forth school objectives.

In step-5, instructional leader should able to assist teachers yearly in setting and reaching personal and professional goals related to the improvement of instruction, student achievement, and professional development. They should make regular classroom observations in all classrooms, both informal (drop-in visits of varying length with no written or verbal feedback to teacher) and formal (visits where observation data are recorded and communicated to teacher) They must engage in planning of classroom observations, post observation conferences that focus on the improvement of instruction. Provides thorough, defensible, and insightful evaluations, making recommendations for personal- and professional-growth goals according to individual needs.

In step-6, instructional leaders should schedule, plans, or facilitates regular meetings of all types (planning, problem solving, decision making, or in-service and training) with and among teachers to address instructional issues. They should able to provides opportunities for, and training in, collaboration, shared decision making, coaching, mentoring, curriculum development, and presentations. Moreover, they should provide motivation and resources for faculty members to engage in professional growth activities

In step-7, instructional leader should serve as an advocate for students and communicates with them regarding their school life. They should encourage open communication among staff members and maintains respect for differences of opinion. Demonstrates concern and openness in the consideration of teacher, parent, and student problems and participates in the resolution of such problems where appropriate. Models appropriate human relations skills. Develops and maintains high morale. Systematically collects and responds to staff, parent, and student concerns. Acknowledges appropriately the meaningful accomplishments of others.

METHODOLOGY

Since the study tries to explore the practice and perception of instructional leadership in institutional school, I have employed qualitative approach to explore the personal experiences of principal. Principals' personal experience is of a central focus in this research. Therefore, I have used narrative inquiry as my research methodology that offers practical and specific insights for researches looking for personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2012). Clandinin& Connelly, (2004) also viewed that experience happens narratively, and therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively. I have purposefully chosen two participants from two different

institutional school. As stated by Punch (2005), purposive sampling involves the existence of some purpose in mind. This enabled the researcher to go directly to the point. I have taken in-depth interview with the 2 principals who have been working in the school for more than 10 years from the selected school. I interviewed each participant for second round. The first interview focused on knowing the participants of my study and understanding their view on instructional leadership. The second was a follow-up interview for further probing into the issues they shared previously. I have recorded the interview and also use field notes as a method of recollecting information. I have interpreted such information with generation of information. Coding was made in the diaries for some of the information obtained from interview and digital record was prepared for the interview. I adopted an elaborative process of coding, categorizing, and thematized (Creswell, 2007). Then the experiences shared by the participants were then analyzed through a theoretical lens.

Findings

During this research conduction, both two participants found to understand the instructional leadership very differently. Principal-1 limited his understanding to management skills whereas principal-2 emphasis in improving teaching and learning of the students along with management skills.

Perception and practice on instructional leadership

Setting direction

Upon asking them about instructional goal, principal-1 stated the vision of the school "*Creating an appropriate environment where all the stakeholders can excel the skills to adjust themselves in everyday world".* He said teachers integrate the element of child friendly activities based on the vision statement. He gave an example of teaching solar system in grade 2. He said teacher would bring the students out from the classroom and draw the solar system on the ground and name each one them according to the name of existing planets and let them revolve around the sun. It reminded me what Robinson (2011) said instructional leaders direct the work of teachers to develop clear and common goals. The Wallace Foundation (2013) also found that effective principals shape a vision of academic success for all students.

Whereas upon asking the vision of the school, principal-2 said, "*I haven't developed yet. I think our vision is reflected in our bulky report card since our school is mark oriented school and we emphasize in taking exams".*   She expressed her pride to associate the marks oriented culture of teaching and learning as their value. She strongly asserted that parents admit their children because they want their children to score good marks. Our parents want more number of exams because they think that keep children occupy at home and same time helps to bring good marks in the examination as well. In this case he sets direction to achieve marks which is indeed traditional. But according to him parents want their children grow with marks. This reminded me what Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) identified setting directions as one of the three critical components of school leaders. Setting directions in this case includes incorporating daily lesson plan and activities with the vision statement of the both schools.In the school of principal-1 teachers are encouraged to include child friendly activities to enhance learning whereas in the case of principal-2 teachers are encouraged to achieve marks. And he claimed that it is because of such instruction they have been able to achieve successful grades in

SEE result for more than a decade and awarded the best school by the ministry of education in 2067 B.S. This reminded me what OECD research (2009) supports the view that successful instructional leaders are actively involved in ensuring that schools' goals are achieved.

Focusing on curriculum

On questioning about curriculum,principal-1 said, although they followed national curriculum, they had a provision of sequential planning and teacher stayed after school for lesson plan and our supervisors and department heads support to maintain quality. He said, they had a sharing session and focused on team work. The supervisors would go to the classes with the teachers. They would see how it is operating and provided regular coaching and mentoring sessions. Based on the feedback teachers would work again. Sim (2011) had a similar view that the principals motivate and inspire the educators to plan and engage in classroom teaching in a way that is aligned with school vision. Mulford and Silins (2011) also said that successful principals involve others in the leadership process to increase and build capacity.

Whereas Principal-2 also viewed that they do follow national curriculum but they do not let teacher prepare daily plan. Rather she mentioned the learning objectives of the book should be covered and success of any students depend on score they get in the examinations. Upon asking why teachers are only limited to prescribed books? She said,

 "We have teachers who have been working for 20 years and above. It is very difficult to change them as we have three level of teachers. They are same level, growing level and old- aged teachers in the institution. Same level means such types of teachers who works at same level for many years. For example, the teachers of primary section or pre-primary who does not want to initiate the change. The old aged teachers have very few years in their service and very stubborn to accept change to improving teaching learning and there are few such growing level teacher who have helped sustain the quality of school".

So, she viewed despite of professional development practice in the school, they are reluctant to adopt new teaching and learning process. She referred the attitude of teachers with the famous quote. "*A dog tail will not be straight no matter how hard you try".* In the case of Principal-2, sheis found to be ineffective in making firm decisions regarding managing curriculum whereas principal-1 found to be exercising collaborative and collegial environment to enhance effective curriculum. In the same line, the literature on effective schools also shows that effective principals are more powerful over making decisions regarding curriculum and instruction than those in ineffective schools (Robinson, 2011).

Monitoring learners' progress

Regarding assessment, principal-1 said, they have formative evaluation system. Teacher is the final implementer. In the real practice if a teacher sees any new activity, he includes in remarks. There is a sharing. Book is just a supplement or a tool. What the student requires is given more emphasis. He gave an examples of the exam-

During the exams teachers set the indicators that students are supposed to learn in each grade. If students participate in activity based learning, can play the game of solar system and identify the different planets, we consider them that they got knowledge on the chapter solar system. Basically we focus on what all students must learn rather than they should learn.

He agreed that they also focused on core subjects like English, Nepali, math, social, science and computer. However, they emphasized teachers to focus on improving motor skills and 21st century skills.

Whereas principal-2 said

There are a lot of examinations and the teachers are always correcting copies and filling in their report cards. There is not time for teachers to go to training, develop their professional skill.

Upon asking why she has kept such a busy schedule to the teachers. She replied that keeping teachers busy help occupy their mind and they don't have time to think against school management. She strongly affirmed that school is known for achieving good grades and parents admits their children because they appreciate the value created by the school. That isthe reason we have six exams annually and parents are satisfied as well.

Whether it is formative or summative the data indicate that both the school had organized practice to help the parents understand how their children are performing (Kruger, 2003). In the same line Katterfeld (2011) viewed instructional leaders focus on students' work and build systems for teacher accountability to ensure that the all the learners are progressing.

DISCUSSIONS

The above data revealed that both the principal does not seem have in-depth knowledge of instructional leadership. However, they found to ensure the effective learning and teaching by setting direction, setting expectation in curriculum and monitoring learners' progress. The theme "setting direction" is aligned with step-4 of McEwan's "7 steps to effective instructional leadership". In the step-4, according to McEwan (2003) instructional leader should able to communicate vision and mission of the school. He must have a clear vision for what the school should be and can become at some time in the future. In the case of principal-1, he has a well-defined vision and seem to encourage teachers to align lesson plan based on the vision of the school. It is aligned with what Harris et al (2008) claimed that goal setting is considered one of the key dimensions of success for a successful school leader This shows he is following the step-4 as McEwan claims the instructional leader should do. Whereas principal-2 found to be chameleon leader who has no vision, no definition, no limits and no parameters (McEwan, 2003). She is not clear about the vision of the school. She is so sure that the parents admit the children because they expect good grades in the exam and the school has been satisfying both the parents and students by helping them achieve good grades.

Similarly, the theme "focusing on curriculum" align withstep-5 that emphasizes the instructional leader should able to set high expectation to the staff and oneself. According to McEwan (2003) principal should engage in planning of classroom observations, post observation conferences that focus on the improvement of instruction. In the case of principal-1 he is found to be supporting and mentoring teachers in designing daily lesson plans and providing constructive feedback to make sure every lesson plans incorporate the activities that help achieve the vision of the school. But in the case of principal-2. she expresses her negative experiences with existing teachers. Teachers' negative attitude on her effort to check students' copies and conflicting meeting among teachers show that there is a resistance to change in the school. Since there is no vision in the school of principal-2, the whole effort is to secure good grades in the examination.

The theme "monitoring the learners progress" align with step-7 that strongly advocates the instructional leader should show their concern and prioritized the development of students at first. Effective instructional leaders don't just talk about how much they care about students. They show how much they care by their actions. On a daily basis, they work to change practices in the areas of discipline and grading. With this reference in the case of principal-1, he is found to be practicing formative assessment. Teachers are given full responsibility and the progress of the students are being measured in terms of acquiring skills. Whereas in the case of principal-2, he is found to be practicing summative assessment and students' progress are being measured in terms of obtaining grades.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above data and discussion, it is concluded both the principals are perceiving and practicing instructional leadership as setting direction, focusing on curriculum and monitoring learners' progress. Principal-1 has a vision to engage students so he seems to be focusing every activities and progress of the students to achieve the set goals. Whereas in the case of principal-2 every activity is directed to achieve good grades. It gives me insight that they are aware of few steps of effective instructional leadership as claimed by McEwan. However, they seem to be missing knowledge and skills in developing teacher leader, be an instructional source, create a school culture and most importantly establishing and maintaining positive relation with students and parents.

This study had several limitations including the limited time and resource. As only two head teacher was selected as a participant, the conclusion of this study can hardly be generalized. Another limitation is that this study was carried out selecting only two secondary school head teacher of Kathmandu district, so similar studies need to be carried out covering wide area and more number of such schools so that the results of studies could be generalized. The third limitation is that this study is carried out only to explore the perception and practice of instructional leadership of principal but not of other teachers, non-teaching staffs, students, parents and school management committee members. If such study includes them, the findings again may vary. Finally, I also realize that it would be better to follow multimethod to collect the data from informants and to triangulate the data for reliability and validity of the data. In this connection, use of other methods such as observation, focus group discussion, collection of artifacts, etc. would be further relevant. Multiple interviews as well as multimethod data collection procedure would have been ideal for the saturation of the research themes. However, I realize that the data provided by both the principal and my analysis of them provided a strong foundation for more indepth examination of the existing practices of instructional leadership.

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