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Leadership as a challenging opportunity: Nepali secondary principals' contextual understandings and perception of their roles

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of three Nepali secondary principals regarding their leadership roles, behaviors, and experiences. By employing semi-structured interviews in both physical and virtual school contexts, it emphasizes the importance of understanding the specific contexts, critically evaluating global leadership trends, and adopting approaches that enhance student wellbeing. The study highlights the influence of sociocultural structures shaped by societal values and beliefs. Spiritual attributes like humility, compassion, and connectedness are identified as contextual knowledge for Nepali principals. The research identifies a gap in Nepali school leadership literature, providing practical insights for their future career pathways.

Introduction

School leadership is crucial for shaping education quality globally (Berkovich & Bogler, 2020; Bush, 2021; Gurr et al., 2020). Principals' multidimensional roles influence student outcomes, necessitating a deep understanding of contextual nuances and the school environment to establish a socially just climate (Bogotch, 2002; Brown, 2004). Awareness of their roles, contextual realities, and leadership dimensions underpin school practices (González-Falcón et al., 2020). Nepal, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse educational landscape, faces challenges shared by other developing countries, including limited resources, natural disasters, and lack of leadership development opportunities amidst global demands, political interference, and high stakeholder expectations.

In Nepal, upholding spiritual dimensions like humility, ethics of care, compassion, connectedness, and mindfulness has grown increasingly vital for principals. These dimensions enhance leadership capabilities, enabling ethical decision-making and providing deeper meaning to their roles (Riaz & Normore, 2008; Stockinger, 2019; Watson et al., 2014), aligning with ethical leadership frameworks (Starratt, 2010). Moreover, Nepal's educational system has transitioned from centralized to decentralized governance, creating a dynamic climate for school leadership with opportunities and challenges for improving outcomes. However,

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comprehensive studies exploring principals' understanding of their roles, opportunities, and challenges within specific contexts are lacking. This study addresses this gap by examining the contextual understandings and experiences of three secondary principals, illuminating how their understanding of the context shapes their perceptions. By focusing on leadership dimensions within Nepal's socio-political, economic, and educational landscape, this research informs leadership practices.

The diverse dynamics of Nepal make it an intriguing context for exploring leadership, particularly with the recent shift to a decentralized federal system. This research contributes to a broader understanding of leadership in diverse international contexts, which is currently underrepresented in literature (Bush, 2018). Principals' contextual understanding and perceptions significantly impact their leadership performance and school outcomes. Therefore, investigating how Nepali secondary principals perceive their contextual roles and leadership responsibilities generates new knowledge.

The findings of this study have implications for leadership practices particularly in developing and underdeveloped countries. The case study data can guide other Nepali schools in developing sustainable cultures of collaboration and improving student academic and wellbeing outcomes. Moreover, it offers insights for principals in similar countries to identify areas for leadership improvement. This research can contribute to policy reforms and leadership development initiatives by promoting context-sensitive approaches and implementing relevant pedagogies based on contextual findings.

The purpose of this study was to explore the contextual understandings and perceptions of three secondary principals regarding their leadership roles in their specific context.

The research question was:

How do Nepali secondary principals perceive their context and leadership roles in their specific schooling situations?

Literature review

This section provides an overview of the roles of principals, the importance of understanding context, and the significance of spiritual dimensions in leadership.

Defining school leadership

Leadership involves the administration and management of schools, aligning vision with resources, developing educational programs, and creating supportive environments (Ainley & Carstens, 2018; Connolly et al., 2017). Effective leadership requires understanding education, adopting a visionary style, and considering stakeholder perspectives (Connolly et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). It involves managing school operations, budgeting, human resources, and community relations (Ainley & Carstens, 2018).

Multidimensional roles of principals

Principals play various roles, motivating teachers and students, establishing school visions, improving teaching standards, and managing resources (Browne-Ferrigno,

2016; Grissom et al., 2021). Effective leaders have a vision, support teachers, and foster a positive learning culture (Bush & Glover, 2014). Collaboration and collegial relationships enhance staff dedication and school efficacy (Robinson & Gray, 2019; Szeto, 2021). Leaders connect with stakeholders, build learning communities, and assess professional development needs (Goddard & Kim, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2019). Principals hire qualified staff, coordinate resources, address responsibilities, and monitor outcomes (Connolly et al., 2017). These multifaceted engagements create a sustainable learning environment (Szeto et al., 2016).

Contextual leadership

Contextual leadership initiates strategies to suit unique cultural contexts (Bogotch, 2002; Brauckmann et al., 2023; Fullan, 2019). Successful principals understand community needs, collaborate with stakeholders, and prioritize continuous improvement (Azorin et al., 2020; Bush, 2019). They leverage resources, adapt collaboration for diverse student needs, and align strategies with local realities (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Fullan, 2019).

Context-specific leadership recognizes the importance of tailoring strategies to suit the unique needs and demands of the school's cultural context (Bogotch, 2002; Brauckmann et al., 2023; Fullan, 2019). As Fullan (2019) maintains, successful principals understand their community's needs, fine-tuning their leadership to factors such as student diversity, sociocultural backgrounds, and resources. Contextual leadership involves collaborating with stakeholders, and integrating diverse perspectives in decision-making processes (Azorin et al., 2020), negotiating local cultural sensitivities, and contributing to the development of school policies and practices (Fullan, 2019). Principals prioritize continuous school improvement through data analysis on student achievement, teacher performance, and resource utilization (Bernhardt, 2018; Bush, 2019).

Spiritual dimensions and leadership

Research (Gidley, 2016; Starratt, 2010) claims spirituality plays a major cultural role in leadership by promoting ethical values and virtues, (i.e. compassion, care, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, and respect). Across diverse sociocultural and religious backgrounds, spirituality contributes to positive outcomes, including professional development, job satisfaction, and school identity (Abbas et al., 2021). Spiritual leadership fosters holistic and humanistic behaviors in schools (Sahu, 2021). Principals operating in a culturally tacit dimension are expected to inspire and motivate through spiritual dimensions fostering connectedness (Stockinger, 2019). Ethical and moral leadership reflects a commitment to social justice and equity by fostering overall school development (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Walton & Vialle, 2021). Spiritual leadership is linked to resilience and positive student outcomes (Lambert, 2016), leading to a sense of responsibility, wellbeing, and academic performance (Abbas et al., 2021).

The interconnectedness of leadership roles and spirituality contributes to understanding contextual nuances and formulating strategies that align with government and community goals. Leadership practices rooted in spiritual values such as kindness, compassion, connectedness, and care play a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive learning environment (Gidley, 2016; Watson et al., 2014). In the multifaceted

landscape of schooling, successful principals are orientated to the socioeconomic, and political systems within their community (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Fullan, 2019). These interconnected facets ultimately contribute to the wellbeing and academic success of students (Meyer et al., 2020; Szeto, 2021). Hence, the interplay of spiritual dimensions and leadership within a specific socio-cultural and educational context of schooling emerges as an integral part of holistic development and the overall success of schools.

Study context: Nepal

Nepal is a developing nation with circa 30 million people and lies between India and China. Its small Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 36.29 billion US dollars in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). Nepal's diversity identified 123 languages (Geography of Nepal, 2023). Nepal has 27,813 public schools funded and managed by the government, while 6,732 private schools accommodate government regulations (Government of Nepal, 2021). In 2015, the constitution mandated free education in public schools up to grade 10. Some public schools use English instruction, and most use the Nepali language. In Nepal, secondary schools run instructional programs up to grade 10, offering a range of subjects, including Nepali, English, mathematics, science, social studies, and vocational courses. The Government of Nepal has recently restructured the levels by changing grades 1–8 as a basic level and grades 8–12 as a secondary level education which is yet to be implemented. However, in this research study, secondary schools are the ones which run educational programs from grades 1–10. The government prioritizes students' academic achievement over holistic wellbeing; however, concerns exist regarding the uneven quality of education outcomes. Many schools underperform due to limited resources and a shortage of qualified teachers (Khanal et al., 2020); however, the government is committed to enhancing the quality of secondary education through increased funding and policies to enhance access and equity.

Methodology and processes

This qualitative case study (Yin, 2018), investigated the leadership perceptions of three secondary principals through a series of semi-structured interviews (Forsey, 2010), conducted virtually and within school settings between mid-2018 and early-2022 to gather rich data (Morris, 2015). The interviews, lasting 45–90 minutes, were conducted in the participants' chosen locations and languages, with one interview conducted in English and two in Nepali.

Data analysis involved transcribing, translating, categorizing, and interpreting interview excerpts using a grounded theory interpretive approach (Saldaña, 2016). The software NVivo was used to organize the data, and themes were generated and analyzed iteratively (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), as further interviews were conducted with the principals depending on the need of the research. The resulting themes framed the discussion, supported by pertinent literature (Atkinson, 2015).

Table 1 below elucidates the interview protocol in conjunction with the subsequent probes for open-ended semi-structured interviews, as outlined earlier.

Table 1. Interview protocol for open-ended semi-structured interviews.**Interview Questions:**

- How do you perceive your leadership roles in your specific school contexts?
- What are the specific characteristics of your leadership responsibilities in your school?
- What are the essential responsibilities and tasks you perceive as a principal?

Follow-up prompts:

- Overview of the educational background and professional journey.
- Understanding leadership roles and styles.
- Carrying out responsibilities and duties.
- Possible hindrances and navigating complexities.
- Fulfilling demands of the contextual roles.
- Personal values, beliefs, and background that influence leadership practices.
- Balancing roles, responsibilities, and student achievement.

Location, participants, and ethics

The selected secondary principals, as detailed in Table 2, were purposefully chosen from Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts. They represented diverse cultural and social backgrounds, including one female, which is uncommon in Nepal. The study aimed to prioritize depth over breadth, adopting an in-depth approach to explore their contextual understandings and perceptions. Authentic voices and rich information were sought, and participants were individually approached, provided informed consent, and briefed about the study. Anonymity of the case study principals and their schools was ensured by concealing school identities and using pseudonyms.

Table 2. A brief description of case study principals and their schools, and data generation methods.

Pseudonyms of Case Study Principals	Principal Profile	Educational Background	School Context	Data Generation Methods
Case Study One: Adarsha	Early-career male, Devout Hindu, Brahmin, in his early forties, a teacher for nearly two decades and about nine years as a principal.	M.Ed., M.Phil., and PhD in Educational Leadership.	High school with approximately 300 students, 25 teachers, diverse populations.	One face-to-face and three virtual interviews, and several follow-up discussions between interviews.
Case Study Two: Bhawana	Early-career principal and a late-career teacher in her fifties, Hindu, Brahmin, and female principal with seven years as a principal.	M.A. in Sociology, M. Ed. in Education.	One of the oldest public high schools in Kathmandu, with approximately 450 students, and 32 teachers, diverse populations.	One face-to-face and three virtual interviews, and several follow-up discussions between interviews.
Case Study Three: Chanakya	Late career teacher and mid-career male principal with nine years of principalship, in his early fifties, Hindu, from a lower-caste and underprivileged background.	M.Ed. in English Language Teaching, M. Phil. in Educational Leadership.	High school in the suburb of the capital city, with approximately 730 students, 55% female, 24 teachers.	One face-to-face and three virtual interviews, and several follow-up discussions between interviews.

Case findings

The principals outlined authentic experiences and perceptions of their leadership, and how they negotiated strategies to find contextually appropriate solutions in their schools.

Case study one: adarsha, principal of Aditi school

Adarsha, an early-career male principal in his early forties, belongs to the highest ethnic class, Brahmin, and speaks Nepali. As a devout Hindu, he participates in religious rituals, drawing inspiration from texts that shape his personal values. Despite his beliefs, he opposes caste-based discrimination. Adarsha completed his secondary education in a rural village in South-eastern Nepal. He achieved a Master of Education and a Master of Philosophy in Teaching English and recently obtained a PhD in educational leadership from Kathmandu University. With 15 years of teaching experience at various levels, he has served as a secondary principal for nine years. Adarsha leads a diverse student body of 300 students ranging from grades 1–12, with 25 teaching staff. The student population comprises individuals from different ethnicities, languages, and religions, from families who relocated to the city for economic opportunities.

Contextual understandings

Adarsha perceives the role of a principal as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a substantial achievement despite the challenges. With an understanding of the challenges faced by other principals, he advises leaders to remain calm and cautious during difficult times and to focus on responsibilities or lose their job. He maintained:

... being in the leadership position is a life-changing experience for me ... however, it is an acid test and a failure may be a huge problem. I am in the position for years, which may or may not be renewed based on my performance.

Adarsha stresses the need for hard work, and a strong sense of responsibility in serving multidimensional tasks. He claimed effective leadership requires thoughtful decision-making when navigating difficulties. *'While everyone appears to be clapping for our efforts and achievements, some people may engage in trivial matters to pinpoint the shortcomings ... there is neither a friend nor an enemy in the organization'*. Claiming the principal's role is to make decisions to achieve school goals and student achievement aligning with government expectations.

Adarsha considers that the principal's diversified roles play a critical role in a school's overall development as a metaphorical *'Queen Bee'*, the central pillar of the school where its success equates to the principal's efforts. Therefore, ineffective leadership can negatively affect student outcomes. Like a well-tuned Guitar, good leadership is balanced within contextual attitude promoting the wellbeing of the school community:

... principals must not carry out their various responsibilities in ways that will be detrimental to the school and the future of the innocent students who could lead the nation in future ... if a principal does not discharge the responsibility well, many will suffer. For me, it is a crime.

Adarsha's life as a principal appears professionally rewarding, but often school matters require careful negotiation.

Adarsha views spirituality as a source of learning in his leadership career, inspiring him to promote various leadership values to develop an inclusive vision and improved wellbeing. His spirituality since his childhood strengthened his leadership, allowing him to inspire and motivate others, during challenging circumstances:

I learned the essence of being human and learned values such as empathy, compassion, and kindness from spirituality. From my immersion in spirituality, I learned to be humble, calm, amiable, caring, and optimistic even in challenging circumstances . . . as a leader, stakeholders always seek devotion, care, and support. Spirituality has allowed me to develop these values.

He says meditative practices had generated a sense of inner peace with his spiritual disposition crucial in his drive for leadership transformation, to enhance his school's performance:

When I return home from school, I meditate and reflect on what happened during the day. Then the next day, I modify practices, liberate my leadership ability, and foster my feelings of collectiveness. Spirituality has supported me in facing work pressures that would otherwise lead to confronting situations, jeopardizing my position, and creating long-term impacts on the organization.

For Adarsha, *'Every human being is spiritual by nature. Spirituality is our root. It is not connected to any religion but instead to the virtue of treating everyone as they are'*. After realizing the positive impact of spiritual values, Adarsha initiated meditative practices for his students to deal with disciplinary issues.

Perceived leadership roles

Adarsha emphasized the importance of diversified roles and responsibilities for leaders, stressing the need to accommodate the contextual elements and incorporate local socio-cultural realities: *'Leaders should be multidimensional with sound academic, administrative, and managerial skills. . . . [they] should have a proper vision and work as catalysts to bring about educational changes that can transform schools'*. He said principals are not solely leaders but must also possess effective managerial skill sets, encompassing academic, administrative, and managerial capabilities, to cultivate a school culture that enables every student to realize their potential. He advocates the recruitment of highly competent individuals for public leadership, as the catalyst for transformative education.

Adarsha acknowledged the benefits of global perspectives in educational leadership literature, while recognizing the challenges of transferring borrowed strategies to the complex multilingual Nepal. He emphasized the need to become *' . . . context-sensitive, giving priority to the local sentiments, norms, values, and realities, the local cosmology as a whole'*. This approach entails thinking globally and acting locally, with principals expected to align with the community's aspirations, and traditions.

Case study two: Bhawana, principal of Bhawani school

Bhawana is in her early fifties, from north-eastern Nepal, employed as a secondary teacher for over 15 years before becoming a principal, a coveted position for women,

which has limited leadership opportunities (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). She belongs to the Brahmin community, the highest ethnic group in Nepal. Her Hindu upbringing, education, principalship, and aspirations are models for other women. Bhawana's parents valued education, and she received a formal education despite cultural norms that prioritize males. After finishing high school, Bhawana migrated from her village to Kathmandu. She followed her English teacher uncle and completed a master's in education and sociology at Tribhuvan University. Bhawana became a principal at Bhawani High School leading 450 diverse students from grades 1–12, with 32 teachers.

Contextual understanding

Despite the gender biases and sociocultural stereotypes, in her home and workplace settings, Bhawana pushed the boundaries of the reluctance of teachers, stakeholders, and government officials to become a principal. Her appointment faced mistrust:

... when I was about to assume my leadership role, none of the District Education Office staff supported me ... despite SMC's decision and Government legislation, they denied to appoint me ... they were gender-biased and didn't trust my professional abilities to manage this principal role regardless of my experience, skills, and qualifications ... there was great reluctance to appoint me, seemingly influenced by an entrenched educational mindset that only men could manage effectively in leadership positions.

Bhawana's optimism and leadership approach challenged these antiquated mind-sets, leading to a positive shift in perceptions and recognition of her leadership. Despite the gender-based obstacles, she eventually gained the trust and support of government authorities, and feels rewarded to be a principal:

Leading a secondary school in the Nepali context is more challenging than people assume due to multiple hurdles and constraints associated with resource management and various pressures while consistently promoting student achievement. However, I am proud to be a leader despite challenges.

Bhawana reinforced the point that under these circumstances with multiple problems and pressures, *'If principals cannot perform well, sometimes they may have to leave the position'*.

Bhawana revealed that despite the prejudice, government officials and others later believed that: *'... [women] principals are less likely to be corrupt or to become dishonest in leadership positions and that they are morally sound compared to their male counterparts'*. She takes pride in being viewed as a more trustworthy leader. A school survey also revealed that most female students responded positively to having a woman principal. She emphasized the existence of a more democratic environment under her leadership role, noting: *'... to date, there has been little dissatisfaction with my principal performance among all key stakeholder groups'*.

For Bhawana, a leader requires several skills to succeed and sometimes family culture also serves as a significant source of learning, shaping her caring, humble, and respectful behavior, which aligns with the spiritual dimensions of humility, ethics of care, and compassion also motivate her staff to establish a fair and compassionate environment. She claims an effective leadership involves creating an atmosphere where everyone feels valued and supported.

Perceived leadership roles

Bhawana highlights the necessity to embrace an innovative approach to multi-roles to set a, ‘... *clear vision and dream*’ for the future, working diligently to realize her educational goals, and being ‘... *dynamic and active*’ in leadership. She advocated networking opportunities and collaborations with external organizations to improve her school by engaging: ‘... *with higher education authorities, managing staff, students, and resources within the school environment*’. She collaborated with several external organizations as part of improving school outcomes: ‘*Collaboration with the US Embassy in Nepal and conducting school programs that catered for the all-round development of the students*’. Bhawana believes that principals should be constantly seeking opportunities for the benefit of students and teachers. She generated benefits in terms of global ‘... *exposure and participation*’ for all teachers and students. Bhawana claimed principals must look for opportunities for the students and teachers whenever and wherever they arise, focusing on holistic development with global exposure, and fostering a comprehensive educational experience.

Bhawana critically assessed the applicability of leadership literature, emphasizing that the school systems should be guided by the local context to determine the effectiveness of any strategy, stressing leaders need to be knowledgeable about sociocultural realities. This includes ensuring approaches are aligned with and incorporated into factors such as sociocultural, linguistic, religious, and economic diversity:

Practices that worked well in other contexts may not work in our situations. In the Nepali school systems, the local context should determine what strategies are useful and what are not ... school leaders need to be mindful of their unique sociocultural realities and decide how different approaches can be incorporated into our educational practices.

Bhawana viewed contextual leadership as one that integrates the local context, situational factors, geography, and societal structures, while also respecting and acknowledging diverse backgrounds.

Case study three: Chanakya, principal of Chamunda school

Chanakya, a mid-career principal in his early fifties, has an extraordinary background as he was raised in a conservative lower-caste compound family in the western hills of Nepal, where his family endured discrimination and subjugation from higher castes. Despite being Hindu for generations, they were barred from entering temples and practicing their faith. Chanakya’s journey from an underprivileged group to becoming a principal is a rarity. Despite facing poverty, Chanakya had the opportunity to attend a school and completed grades 1–8. After finishing high school in his village, he pursued a teaching degree. Chanakya obtained a master’s degree in English language teaching and a Master of Philosophy in educational leadership from Kathmandu University. Despite cultural prejudices, Chanakya’s resilience and determination secured him a permanent teaching position in 1993. Since 2012, he has been leading a high school in the suburbs of the capital city. The Chamunda school, serves approximately 730 students from grades 1–12, with 55 percent being female. He supports 24 teachers, with the majority being in the later stage.

Contextual understanding

Chanakya claims leadership is a major responsibility, and that effective principals work hard, coordinating with key stakeholders to fulfill duties: *'The hardworking principal gets support[ed] from all associated people who encourage and inspire them to carry out the responsibilities towards achieving school goals and fostering student achievement'*. He recognizes that understanding the context where principals work is essential given the multiple constraints associated with resource management and the pressures of consistently promoting student achievement. He said it is essential to remain optimistic about the leadership journey by demonstrating patience and perseverance. Chanakya, claims it is important to understand the context and devise leadership practices for diversity on multiple levels:

We have students from almost all the districts, from East Mechi to West Mahakali. This richness in diversity includes different language groups, cultures, and religions. Our teaching staff also come from distinct sociocultural backgrounds. Our role must be to respect and treat everyone equitably, creating supportive educational environments where staff and students can flourish.

Chanakya emphasizes establishing a fair and compassionate environment in schools, believing that schools can function and perform more effectively when their leaders create a compassionate atmosphere. Chanakya engages stakeholder support by encouraging and inspiring other leaders to carry out their responsibilities toward achieving school goals and student achievement.

Despite promoting an equitable school culture, he maintains that historically, the ruling elites and dominant communities have exerted an excessive influence on schools. He believed that: *'... these people always attempt to exercise their power in schools. Even the teachers from these groups try to exert social control, tending to be less responsible in their duties and more concerned with their institutional power and influence'*. Chanakya maintained that for these teachers: *'... teaching is not their passion, that their professional involvement is an unwilling one in which they are typically unsupportive regarding leadership initiatives'*. Chanakya believes government policies have further worsened the educational situation because principals *'... have no authority to hire and fire teachers based on their teaching performance and their lack of professional attitudes and behaviour'*. Those long-standing social discrimination and lack of authority and empowerment in decision-making processes have impacted equity in schools, as there are relatively fewer teachers from underprivileged communities.

Chanakya maintained that many parents are tempted to enroll their children on English medium private schools, irrespective of educational quality, which is a common practice driven by socioeconomic status: *'Even though some families may struggle financially, they do so as a way to demonstrate their economic and social standing'*. He acknowledges the barriers of inadequate infrastructure and outdated management practices in public schools, suggesting this needs support to address the enrollment challenges.

Perceived leadership roles

Chanakya accepted the view that principals have diversified roles and responsibilities. In pointing out the ongoing influences of globalization, he considers that: *'... in the*

contemporary world, school leaders are not merely leaders ... they must also be good managers. He claimed leaders must have multiple skills and qualities to develop a school culture where every child, regardless of their background, can achieve their academic potential. However, while some essential qualities may be ‘*inborn*’, he indicates the need for principals to develop ‘... *sound managerial skills*’ that are underpinned by Nepali Government initiatives designed to ‘... *encourage and support principals’ continuous improvement and a multidimensional approach to lifting school performance, involving them in the capacity-building programs and workshops*’. Chanakya indicated the need for government authorities to ‘... *recruit highly competent staff in public-leadership roles who are committed to improving the educational standing of its secondary schools*’.

Reflecting upon a perceived lack of motivation among many principals and teachers in public secondary schools, Chanakya emphasized the necessity to establish conducive work environments that recognize and incentivize innovative practices. He argued for the implementation of a rewards system to acknowledge high-performing principals and provide support to those striving to achieve success, while highlighting the crucial role of the Nepali Government in identifying and addressing the strengths and weaknesses of principals through targeted professional development:

... the school system provides no incentives and recognition to teachers and school leaders. Therefore, it is difficult for many to maintain motivation in the teaching profession ... rewards should be given to those leaders who are performing well and support those who are trying to bring about change but haven’t yet been successful.

Chanakya posited that these endeavors would enhance teaching and learning environments, and outcomes for teachers and students. Chanakya presented three impactful strategies to enhance the leadership attributes of principals including: establishing transformational strategies to support prospective leaders; facilitating networking and training programs for teachers and principals to enhance their motivation; and cultivating a professional leadership environment. Key to this transformation is recruiting individuals with excellent scholarly, administrative, and managerial skills.

Analysis and discussion

The case findings revealed the principals’ deep awareness of contextual elements, forged in leadership experiences, and associated multidimensional roles, as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Leadership as a vital professional opportunity

The cases demonstrated that leadership, despite being a professional opportunity, presents challenges, in diverse contexts (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Frick et al., 2013), and failure in leadership marginalizes school progress and limits career aspirations. Fullan (2006) emphasizes that leaders’ actions impact the entire system, shifting confidence and proactive engagement. Therefore, it is essential that leaders carefully consider their roles and responsibilities in a school’s development.

The findings highlight the importance of sincerity, a positive attitude, and maintaining momentum in seizing opportunities. Leithwood and Louis (2012) further explain that

displaying self-confidence and determination can positively influence professional careers and institutional improvement. Participants recognized context-related challenges; however, professional achievement remains an aspiration for success. Often a lack of motivation among principals serves as a barrier to improving school outcomes, leading to increased stress. Participants identified the lack of support from government authorities as a major hindrance to improving academic standards in schools (Mathema, 2007). Overall, the findings confirmed that leadership presents both challenges and opportunities to transform.

Contextual leadership for school improvement

Leadership strategies in schools are influenced by contextual factors such as community, culture, economy, and politics, and reshaping leadership practices requires considering variations within a given context (Hallinger, 2018). Effective leadership guides school practices, implementing situationally-specific strategies for sociocultural contexts (Bogotch, 2002; Brauckmann et al., 2023); however, this approach presents challenges and requires significant effort and persistence (Barth, 2006).

Findings supported context-based leadership approaches rather than relying solely on prescriptive literature. The influence of studies conducted in highly developed nations on the educational systems of developing countries like Nepal can lead to the imposition of Western policies and practices that disregard local-cultural traditions and exacerbate social stratification (Sah 2021). While global knowledge can be beneficial in understanding Nepali leadership, it must be critically evaluated and integrated with local traditions to address specific leadership issues while maintaining social harmony (Phyak & Bui, 2014).

The principals defined contextual leadership as one that aligns with local contexts, meeting the aspirations and expectations of stakeholders on multiple levels (Gurr et al., 2019; Noman & Gurr, 2020). Promoting homegrown and contextual leadership research is crucial for transforming existing education foundations that are centered on the diversity of Nepal (Sharma, 2020).

Finally, the case studies highlighted the importance of a deep understanding of the leading context and critical evaluation before devising leadership approaches within their unique school settings. They emphasized the influence of context, geography, and socio-cultural structures driven by traditional societal values and belief systems. Hence, contextually tailored leadership practices play a pivotal role in the success of school principals by enabling them to effectively navigate the specific sensitive challenges and opportunities presented by their unique contexts. By aligning their leadership approaches with local cultures, customs, and traditions, principals can foster a harmonious and inclusive educational environment that resonates with the diverse realities of their school settings.

Multidimensional leadership roles for school development

The findings found leadership roles that are multidimensional, require a pragmatic and sustainable insight to achieve targeted goals (Bush & Glover, 2014). Singh's study (2016) concludes that high-performing Nepali principals are proactive, continuously striving for better academic achievements in competitive teaching and learning environments.

Burbank (2012) emphasizes the need for leaders to be innovative, using various strategies to respond to diverse educational demands and drivers (Browne-Ferrigno, 2016; Eacott, 2010). Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018, p. 485) introduce the term 'edupreneurial leadership', highlighting the need for contemporary principals to consider both entrepreneurial and educational undertakings in changing academic situations. The expectation is extremely high, asking principals to accommodate multiple roles as leaders beyond improving students academically (Grissom et al., 2021).

The three cases revealed the plural dimensions of leadership, emphasizing the role as compassionate, caring, and empathetic. Successful leaders achieve their goals by being less ego-driven, adopting humility, and acknowledging other contributors when school goals are realized. They create respectful and encouraging school cultures that prioritize progressive collegial relationships with key stakeholders (Leithwood, 2012; Yavuz et al., 2017). Another dimension is the creation of a positive school culture, which promotes school efficacy (Kalkan et al., 2020). Effective leaders provide considerable support to students and teachers, fostering teaching and learning activities that transform the educational systems (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, leaders need to have clear and achievable goals, and visions, supported by detailed planning (Bush & Glover, 2014).

Findings also focused on the role of leaders in effectively managing available financial, human, and infrastructure resources. Principals act as academic leaders and managers with the qualities of leadership as value (Sharma, 2009). The findings highlight the need for sustained school development through cooperative and collaborative initiatives (Leithwood, 2012). Cultivating leadership qualities in teachers and preparing them to be future principals, requires nurturing creative approaches, for continuous improvement (Pineda-Báez et al., 2020). These are the dimensionality of effective contextual leadership (Robinson, 2011).

Spirituality and leadership

The findings reported humility in workplaces minimizes tension and fosters amicable relationships by acknowledging and valuing diversity within schools (Hughes et al., 2009). Spirituality was seen to influence connections through respectful attitudes and behaviors, including having faith in the ideas and performances of other school members as of cultural importance in Nepal. A compassionate school environment respects, trusts, and values all, regardless of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, social, and religious backgrounds, and this promotes a sustainable school transformation (Yukl et al., 2002). The empathetic behavior of principals empowers and motivates teachers, enhancing their workplace performance (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). Humility and empathetic behaviors help principals address challenges associated with diversity and traditions (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018).

Additionally, principals' appreciation of the strength of other school members and their willingness to learn from them contribute to school achievement (Amedome, 2018; Donkor, 2015). Principals can cultivate these behaviors through traditional and progressive spiritual practices (Sahu, 2021), such as meditation and mindfulness exercises. These leadership traits like empathy, compassion, and the ethics of care translate into emotional intelligence (Shields, 2005; Starratt, 2010; Stockinger, 2019; Watson et al., 2014). Spirituality in this context does not impose any form of religious beliefs but instead focuses on the spiritual dimensions of connectedness and compassion in reflective behavior, learning, and living.

Conclusion and implications

This study examined the contextual understandings of three secondary principals regarding their leadership roles and perceptions in unique Nepali schools. The findings highlighted the challenges and opportunities within their contexts, emphasizing the importance of leadership despite complexities. The data emphasized the significance of contextually-attuned leadership philosophies, spiritual dimensions, and holistic student development for effective leadership (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2021; Fullan, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021). The principals emphasized the need to interpret school contexts, move away from traditional approaches, adapt global educational research critically, and enhance stakeholder participation in decision-making processes (Oord, 2013).

This study informs policymakers in Nepal about the importance of considering contextual insights in educational policies. It advocates for better leadership preparation opportunities and the integration of contextual sensitivities into curricula. It challenges assumptions about principals as authoritarian leaders, highlighting their multidimensional roles that embrace diverse sociocultural realities. The study addresses the gap in Nepali school leadership literature, providing practical knowledge for career pathways and informing leadership practices in similar sociocultural settings beyond Nepal.

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