

## **Sustaining School Improvement Through an External and Internal Focus: A Case Study of a High-Need Secondary School in Nepal**

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A study of a high-need school in Nepal was conducted by members of the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) using the interview protocol developed by members of the high-need school strand of ISLDN. The International School Leadership Development Network is sponsored by the University Council for Educational Administration and the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society in order to study important leadership practices and processes. The network includes two strands consisting of studies of high-need schools and studies of leaders for social justice.

This qualitative study was conducted to further understand the ways in which an urban high-need school in Nepal, which served a majority of students from low-income families, achieved sustained academic success through the transition of head teachers. The study identified the beliefs and actions that contributed to sustained school improvement as well as contextual constraints that were faced.

### **Introduction**

High-need schools have been identified as sharing many characteristics including a diverse student body, a high percentage of students from low-income families, frequent teacher and student turnover, limited resources, and low academic student performance (Duke, 2012). However, some high-need schools in national and international contexts (who share many of these characteristics) have achieved strong academic results (Chenoweth, 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Murakani, Garza, & Merchant, 2010).

This study identified a successful high-need urban school in Nepal that has sustained success for 21 years. Particularly, the study focused on the period of transition from the leadership of a highly successful head teacher of 19 years to a new head teacher, and identified ways a learning culture was sustained through continual improvement processes with both an internal and external focus. The leadership position of head teacher in Nepal is interchangeable with the position of a school principal in other contexts. The public schools in Nepal are also known as community schools, and they receive government funding for teachers' salaries and other physical needs of the school. The head teacher is both an academic and administrative head of the independent school in the community. A past study in Nepal found that head teachers are expected to manage the schools utilizing the available resources although the funding is often inadequate to meet existing needs (Amatya, Ghimari, Khadka, Pradhan, & Shrestha, 2004). In

addition, head teachers also assume the role of the secretary of the school board, which is known as the school management committee, and provide leadership in meeting academic goals for students.

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research is useful in describing complex issues that are influenced by local contexts. Ishimaru (2013) identified, “Educational leadership is key to addressing the persistent inequities in low-income, urban schools” (p. 3). Stone-Johnson (2013) argued, “Further research is also needed to understand better what happens when leadership structures change and how the webs that exist shift as new leaders enter the work” (p. 671). The purpose of this study was to determine how educators sustained a learning culture in a high-need school in Nepal in a time of transition of head teacher leadership. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. What sustained student learning in a high-need school during a change in head teachers?
2. How do head teachers and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in a high-need school at a time of transition of leadership?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in a high-need school in a time of transition of leadership?

### **Review of the Literature**

The review of the literature includes a discussion of the educational processes and challenges in Nepal as well as important practices and processes in school improvement, particularly in sustaining educational changes in a school that strengthened a learning culture.

#### **Educational Processes and Challenges in Nepal**

Nepal is ranked as one of the poorest countries throughout the world (Harris, 2013). Located in South Asia between India and China with a per capita income of US \$730 and an estimated population of more than 28 million in 2013 (World Bank, 2013), the country’s public schools face many challenges. According to the United Nations Development Programs, the proportion of the population living in multidimensional poverty is 44% (UNDP, 2013). This situation increases the complexity of the challenges of public school leadership.

Additionally, Nepal was ruled by a monarchy until 1990. In 1990, widespread protests led to the curbing of the king’s powers and the establishment of a multiparty democracy. The Maoist insurgency started in 1996 and ended in 2006 with a peace settlement among different political forces. The People’s War, a civil war conflict of 14 years, caused a loss of more than 13,000 human lives (Do & Iyer, 2010). The popular movement of Nepal in 2006 abolished the monarchy, and the writing of a new constitution commenced. Political uncertainty, economic hardship, and geographical and sociocultural complexities influenced educational practices and processes found in Nepal, with leaders of the public schools often facing the challenges of insufficient resources, limited use of engaging instructional strategies, and low teacher expectations for student performance (Amatya et al., 2004).

However, despite physical, human resource, technological, political, and socioeconomic challenges, the modeling of dedication and hard work by the head teachers was identified as a key factor in the success of nine high-need schools in Nepal (Amatya et al., 2014). In another study of two highly successful high-need secondary schools in Nepal, each head teacher’s

commitment to ensuring students' academic success and personal well-being (observable through a sustained focus on promoting learning, engaging the community as partners, and demonstrating transparent shared decision-making) was instrumental in the school gaining national recognition for the students' high academic performance (Alford & Gautam, 2014). Although some characteristics of successful public schools in Nepal have been identified, knowledge is limited in terms of how exemplary head teachers sustain high academic performance for students in high-need settings in Nepal at the time of head teacher transition.

### **Important Practices and Processes in School Improvement for Increased Learning**

Across international contexts, the principal's influence in establishing the conditions by which student acquisition of knowledge is increased was identified as second only to the teachers themselves in directly influencing student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Through the practices and processes of school leadership, the principal establishes conditions that foster increased student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). In addition, when setting the direction for the school, the leader models the beliefs and actions that promote enhanced learning for all through moral, transformative processes (Dantley, 2005).

In high-poverty schools in which student achievement is high, administrators and teachers set high expectations for students to achieve success in a nurturing environment (Desinone, Smith, & Phillips, 2007; Klar and Brewer, 2013). They understand the students' cultural background and build on students' experiences; they build positive relationships with students that nurture growth; they collectively believe that they have the knowledge and skills to foster increased student learning; and they are passionately committed to the goal of enhancing learning for all (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). However, Klar and Brewer (2013) pointed out the question of "how principal leadership is influenced by context remains understudied" (p. 770).

### **Sustaining the Improvement of Education**

In schools that sustain educational improvement, a schoolwide culture of learning that is fostered by teachers and administrators prevails (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). A schoolwide culture of learning includes an emphasis on adult learning as well as student learning with both administrators and teachers engaging in learning activities in a process of ongoing growth and development (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Learning in schools depends upon leaders' and teachers' actions to serve as advocates for change as well as upon their willingness and dedication to continue advancement of their own learning (Papa & English, 2011). O'Donoghue and Clarke (2010) suggest "the agenda for student learning is primarily concerned with building the academic and social capacity of all students in the school" when the school improvement process maintains a consistent focus on strengthening student learning (p. 5). For the emphasis on student learning to permeate the school, development of collective efficacy and a shared vision are important as administrators and teachers engage together in learning processes to improve instructional practices (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). O'Donoghue and Clarke (2010) emphasize "the need for teachers to engage in a number of activities to create opportunities for the kind of powerful learning that has the potential to improve teacher capability and performance" (p. 8). Fancera and Bliss (2011) stressed,

Communicating the school's goals, increasing the availability of professional development opportunities and workshops, supervising and evaluating instruction followed by constructive feedback of instructional methods, monitoring student progress, and maintaining high levels of visibility in the school are examples of leadership tasks that principals can use as forms of verbal persuasion to improve school collective efficacy. (p. 353)

Opportunities to engage in learning for teachers and administrators are essential in the school improvement process (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The process of learning is multifaceted, reciprocal, influenced by context, and occurs over time (NSDC, 2001). Two important considerations in leading efforts for enhanced school improvement include consideration of contextual factors that impact the change efforts and consideration of ways the change efforts will be sustained (Fullan, 2010). Fostering a shared vision for school improvement and organizational learning is important in sustaining school improvement efforts (O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). As DuFour and Fullan (2013) reported,

In each case, district leaders maintained a commitment to and focus on guiding the individual and collective capacity of educators throughout the district. In each case, the district provided educators with the ongoing clarity and support to help them succeed at what they were being asked to do. (p. 6)

In short, in improvement efforts that are sustained, multiple school leaders support the process through a consistent, ongoing focus (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

### **Methodology**

A void exists in the research literature concerning learning cultures in successful Nepalese high-need schools in times of leadership transition. This single case study attempted to answer the questions related to sustained student learning, sustained organizational performance, and the impact of internal and external school contexts in a high-need school in Nepal in a time of leadership transition. Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative inquiry "focuses on meaning in context" (p. 2). The school was highly successful in terms of student achievement, organizational performance, and physical management for 19 years through the leadership of one head teacher. Even with the transition to a new head teacher, the students sustained high academic performance. For these reasons, the school was selected as an "information rich" (Patton, 2015, p.276) case for in-depth analysis of the transition process.

The research was conducted as part of the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) established in 2010 and sponsored by the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society and the University Council of Educational Administration. The ISLDN has two strands of research with one strand focusing on social justice school leadership practice and development and the other strand focusing on leadership and development in high-need schools. The present study was conducted as part of the high-need schools research strand.

## Setting and Participants

This single case study explored educators' successful school leadership practices and processes in an urban high-need school in Kathmandu, Nepal, that has consistently ranked high in student achievement on both the national examinations and college admissions. The school was established over thirty years ago in an impoverished area of Kathmandu serving predominately students from low-income families. Of 98 students, only 2 students passed the School Leaving Exam in 1983. By 1993, the school had grown to over 600 students with a student passing rate of 36% on the School Leaving Exam. In 1994, at the end of Rajendra's first year of leadership in this role, the percentage of students passing the School Leaving Exam rose to 97%. During the next 19 years of his leadership as head teacher, the percentage of students passing the School Leaving Exam never dropped below a 95% passing rate. It is important to note that Rajendra had worked as a teacher in the school for two years and as assistant head teacher for six years prior to becoming the head teacher. As he assumed the head teacher's role, Rajendra attributed students' success on the School Leaving Exams to the increased emphasis on early childhood education that these students had experienced as a result of the school implementing this reform (Alford & Gautam, 2014).

The school was selected for this study after reviewing the government reports of school rankings in Nepal and after talking with individuals who worked in positions of leadership at the Ministry of Education in Nepal. The school is one of the public schools of Nepal funded by the Ministry of Education and subject to the policies of the government. Rajendra provided stable leadership for 19 years until he retired in 2012, and he consistently demonstrated his skills as a community mobilizer, an open communicator, an authentic caregiver, and a politically savvy leader.

Drawing on his experiences in the military and his experiences as a skilled teacher, Rajendra was identified as the head teacher who fostered the school's outstanding results. Key features of his effectiveness in leading the school included his ability to engage the community members (including local businesses and non-governmental organizations) as partners, and his commitment to ongoing improvement (Alford & Gautam, 2014). Kishan, the assistant head teacher, assumed the head teacher's role for eight months following Rajendra's retirement. However, since Kishan was nearing retirement, he decided not to continue as the new head teacher. Narayan, a 23-year veteran teacher and assistant head teacher, who served under Kishan for eight months, was named as the new head teacher. Narayan brought a rich educational background to the position, after having attained two master's degrees (one of which was in school administration and leadership) and a reputation as one of the most hardworking and loyal teachers in the school.

## Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources included interviews with Narayan, the new head teacher; Dipak, the assistant head teacher; and Kishan, the former interim head teacher, as well as onsite observations in Nepal, and document reviews. Interviews were conducted in Nepali through a computer software known as Skype and using the research protocol developed by ISLDN members. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English before themes were discerned. Themes were identified from the data sources of interviews, field notes, document review, and observations through both open and axial coding in response to the three research questions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of establishing trustworthiness of the data. Although one of the researchers was a native of Nepal with

experience in school leadership within the Nepalese school system, care was taken to ensure bias would not influence the coding of the data. Member checks, peer debriefing, and an audit trail were ways that trustworthiness of the data was maintained. Pseudonyms were used for the persons interviewed to maintain confidentiality.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The case study illuminated the practices and processes of successful school leadership in one successful school in Nepal at the time of head teacher transition. As an individual case study in one challenging high-need context, the results are not generalizable to all high-need contexts (Merriam, 2009). In addition, the study was conducted in the new head teacher's second year in this role, and performance results were limited to two years of data. However, a case study can provide useful insights for increasing understanding although it does not provide a recipe for success (Merriam, 2009). Case study findings can be used for comparison by other school leaders facing similar issues but are not prescriptive (Lichtman, 2014).

### **Findings**

The findings that emerged from the data will be discussed in relationship to the three research questions provided below:

#### **1. What sustained student learning in a high-need school in Nepal during a time of transition of head teacher leadership?**

In this high-need school in Nepal, most of the students were from low-income homes, and the school had many external restraints such as government policies of teacher transfer that impacted instruction, centralized policies that were applied to rural and urban contexts irrespective of unique needs, and inadequate financial support. However, the school had maintained recognized status as one of the highest ranked schools in Nepal irrespective of the constraints that were faced.

For over two decades, this school sustained student learning with high ratings on national examinations and high acceptance rates for college admissions for graduates. In 2012, Rajendra, the highly respected head teacher of 19 years, retired. His legacy included his efforts to lead the school to achieve high acclaim. Kishan commented that when Rajendra came to the school, "All [Rajendra] had was hope." From his vision of providing a quality education for all students, community partnerships were formed that resulted in money raised for additional teachers and technological resources. Rajendra's passion to provide an education that would lay a successful foundation throughout life included emphases on both academic and socioemotional student developments. Each student's development as a productive citizen was viewed as just as important as each student's intellectual development. As Kishan, the person who had served as assistant head teacher under Rajendra, commented,

When the school was started, we had nothing. We had few students, few physical structures, no teachers, no money, and no hope. We found a leader who only had hope. He shared everything. Most importantly, he shared the dream of creating best practices in public education where learning occurs. We became a team and started to dream together. In four to six years, we started to see real results, and in five more years, we were the best school in the country.

In the transition of leadership to a new head teacher, Kishan assumed the role of head teacher for eight months when Rajendra retired. However, since he was also near retirement, Kishan decided to return to the classroom, and Narayan was selected as head teacher. Narayan had taught at the school for 23 years and served as assistant head teacher for eight months. Narayan differed from Rajendra in that he had a master's degree in education as well as a practical understanding of the school and community. Each of these leaders, however, shared a commitment to meeting the needs of the whole child. As Narayan stressed, "We are focused on improving both the academic performance and the emotional aspect of our school."

In fostering learning, Narayan shifted the primary emphasis from an external focus in building partnerships with the community to both external and internal foci:

What I dream as a leader is to strengthen or shine as a school from the inside and outside both. My focus is not only a high school final result. My focus is the growth of every child of the school from preschool to secondary. My question is, "How do I understand and provide support to reach each child to achieve his or her ultimate capacity?"

Because the school had achieved strong external recognition for the positive results it had attained, the desire to build the school's reputation was not a pressing need. However, although successes had been achieved in the past, Narayan emphasized, "We are improving the academic aspect day by day. Even previous leaders were not satisfied. Improvement of in-class activities is the business of students and the teachers."

The importance of the parents' involvement was not being ignored even while the internal focus was being strengthened. Narayan said,

We should try to orient parents to the types of activities that will encourage students to become successful humans. It is our job to improve our capacity of meeting those needs and also to help parents to know how they can fulfil the social and emotional needs of these children. We also learn from the parents if students have some special requirements.... We are learning, and we are encouraging our parents to learn how to become a real trusting friend of the child to make them socially and emotionally active and healthy. I feel that our society needs good parenting training. Schools cannot prescribe, but a school can be a motivating factor. Schools should play an advocacy role in identifying and fulfilling students' needs. We are gradually moving towards that direction.

**A commitment to fostering learning for all.** Learning was fostered for teachers through teacher leadership in providing professional development. Narayan described ways he worked to build the internal capacity of teachers by drawing on the internal strengths:

The newly-trained teachers bring newly found knowledge and confidence. The more experienced teachers have various problem-solving skills. My job is to make sure that experience-sharing happens in the school. Experienced teachers learn from new ones, and the new teachers understand the culture from the older teachers and also feel welcomed and valued. If we can bridge the old and new workforce well, I do not think we need specific training or professional development from the outside.

Narayan viewed his role as “to model that I am always learning as a head teacher and also as a teacher.” He stressed, “We are still learning how we can encourage our students to learn.” Even though the school had achieved strong national and local recognition for its success in attaining high academic achievement by multiple indicators, Narayan still expressed a higher goal for the school of becoming a learning culture that truly fosters advanced learning. As he said, “In the case of making the school a learning friendly organization, we have long way to go. I think we have achieved only 25% of our goals when it comes to a learning culture. There is 75% more to do. I have that expectation.”

This growth mindset was evidenced by Kishan, the former interim head teacher, and Dipak, the current assistant head teacher. They reinforced that an internal focus on learning was being fostered through attention to the improvement of teaching practices, an emphasis on increasing technological skills, and the development of additional elective classes of art and music as well as increased extracurricular activities. Hard work characterized the actions of leaders at this school. Teachers offered additional practice sessions for students for the national assessments; leaders modeled active, project-based instructional practices; and experience-sharing by teachers was fostered as well as teacher leadership. As Kishan commented, “Leaders are everywhere in the school.” The interview and observational data supported the importance of a shared vision based on meeting student needs, a focus on the internal changes needed to strengthen a culture of learning, and a focus on instructional strategies that promote deep learning.

Narayan acknowledged the role of mentoring and coaching to his development. Rajendra, the former long-term head teacher, served as a coach for the new head teacher. In addition, Kishan, the teacher who served as assistant head teacher for 19 years under the previous head teacher and as head teacher for eight months, also provided coaching to the new head teacher. These individuals provided support for the leader’s ongoing development as head teacher.

## **2. How do head teachers and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in a high-need school in Nepal during a time of transition of head teacher leadership?**

Narayan's actions in sustaining and strengthening student achievement and organizational performance were grounded in the knowledge of the community, the rich history of the school, the important practices in promoting teaching and learning, and in the belief of the importance of shared leadership and a positive school culture. From these understandings, Narayan and other school leaders sustained and strengthened performance in this high-need, urban school in Nepal.

**Knowledge of the community and the school's rich history.** Narayan described the strength of the community in supporting this school and drew upon this asset in his leadership. He credited Rajendra as being instrumental in the positive relationships with the community that had been established:

Our previous leader had a very clear vision for the physical, academic, and all other aspects of education. His ten-year plan was achieved. He was a visionary leader who created a feeling of community in the school. He guided us to a common purpose. He was truly able to make all the teachers, staff, and community become a single family. He was able to develop the team and guide this spirit of a team.

Kishan reinforced the important role Rajendra, the former head teacher, played in enhancing individual and organizational performance in this high-need school and that the positive results had not come by magic. The teachers had worked extra hours preparing students in science and math. Formative assessments had been added. Individuals had worked as a team with community support to raise money to fund additional teachers and resources. As a result of all of these actions, academic improvement had resulted. Narayan had also worked at the school under Rajendra's leadership and recognized the strong relationships with the community members that Rajendra had built. These relationships had been instrumental in providing additional resources for the school. Narayan said,

The community has a greater role in this school. From the time of the establishment of community involvement to the present, the community has envisioned the pathway for this school. It is tough to get everyone on board, but this is how we have come to this point. The community members have put bricks and mud together to build this school to what it is today. Our school has a better physical infrastructure in comparison to other public schools in the region. The excellent physical infrastructure was not possible from the Nepal government's grants. It was possible by the financial, moral, and physical support of the community people. The community is not apart from the school. It is part of this school, probably the most important stakeholder.

From the community, resources were attained, but the community members still had high expectations for the continued high performance of the school. Narayan continued,

When the community starts to watch you, what your students are doing, how you are doing, and what is lacking, you have to be more prepared. You should always keep going. The government authorities observe you once a year concerning performance. They want you to follow the rules, but they look only at a few aspects of the school. However, the community is always there, so you do not escape from regular inspection. Narayan was proud of the accomplishments of the school and valued the close connections with the community; yet, he recognized the need for the school to continue to improve.

**Knowledge of important practices in teaching and learning.** Narayan was well-positioned to move into the role of head teacher having served as a math teacher at the school for 23 years and as assistant head teacher for eight months. In addition to his practical skill, he had studied active learning instructional practices that involved students in projects and deep learning, and he had implemented these strategies as a teacher. Now, in the role of head teacher, this knowledge influenced his vision for the school, which was “to focus more on the internal culture of the school and the instructional practices of the teachers.” Expressing that the strong external support was not to be ignored, he expressed that a renewed internal focus was needed, a vision he was working for all to share. Narayan viewed his role in strengthening the culture as a model, a supporter, and a shaper of values: “My role is to model that I am always learning as a principal and also as a teacher.” He further emphasized,

If teachers come to work for a specific hour and only for money or salary, education starts to shrink. Unless a teacher is able to understand each child in the school equal to his or her own son or daughter, education cannot touch the heart of the learner.

**Shared leadership and a learning culture.** Shared leadership by teachers was one of the ways a learning culture was sustained in this time of transition. Narayan explained the way new curriculum materials had been introduced at the school:

I remember the situation of some 20 years ago. At that time, as new curriculum was introduced in the school, Rajendra made all of us really understand the intent of the new curriculum. He always provided all kinds of resources and materials for the teachers. He navigated the changes occurring in the education system. He was always ahead of us in knowing what was going on. We continue to maintain this approach.

Narayan discussed how the culture of the school was influenced by the community and the teachers:

Our students are always ahead of us in using technology. However, Rajendra encouraged us to learn and include technology in teaching. High school completion has remained high with our high school completion rate almost 100% every year. Our students are confident. When our students apply to colleges, they are getting easy admission.

While the community and administrators were influencers, Narayan also explained the vital role of the teacher in strengthening a learning culture:

Teachers have to play the most significant role to make a learning culture. The values and culture of the teachers play a vital role for establishing a learning culture in the school. All the teachers need a collective feeling that we are always improving our practice. The shining of our students occurs through a learning culture. When my teachers, including me, keep learning, we will be able to shape a learning culture.

Narayan expressed a strong sense of responsibility in bringing the community, school board, parents, teachers, and students together for strengthening a learning culture:

What people see from the outside and say about us only reflects a half understanding. We, as a school, are still becoming the school that we need to become. We need a yoga or meditation class or additional music and dance classes as well as many other such things for the growth of creativity. We need better materials and science and technology labs for academic enhancement.

### **3. How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in a high-need school during a time of transition of head teacher leadership?**

The internal school context included the primary challenge faced within the school in addition to the challenges that resulted from external factors such as governmental policies. As Narayan stressed, “The challenges are both external and internal, yet these interrelate. The external challenges presented by the government policies impact the internal culture.”

**A key internal challenge.** The primary internal challenge included helping teachers to recognize the need to change instructional practices when the ratings of the school were high and to move beyond the status quo to fully meet the socioemotional as well as academic needs of the students. As a leader, Narayan faced the challenge of creating a mindset of ongoing learning. As he shared, “Some teachers maintain the status quo on the basis of their work in the classrooms for decades. The status quo is the enemy of every initiative of promoting learning.” As he emphatically added,

I don’t think there is any education without learning. I think when we, as leaders and teachers who should drive education forward, focus on maintaining the status quo, it reduces the learning of students.... Finally, the whole educational experience of the school degrades.

To meet the challenge of closed minds is not an easy task as the head teacher shared. He explained that, many times, the government introduced programs that rarely changed teachers’ attitudes. He expressed that developing a learning culture is an “ongoing process” affecting the heart as well as the mind. In his viewpoint, “To become a successful school, the environment must reflect boundary-less learning with a focus on each child learning to his or her potential.” Narayan stressed, “If teachers fail to demonstrate unconditional love, a school cannot become the

school where all kinds of learning are possible.” He added, “Neither money nor power teaches a teacher to love the students. The change we are talking about is not physical or technological. To understand accountability and identify each child’s need, we need a real heart.” Although he acknowledged, “To be honest, we have a long way before achieving this,” Narayan’s vision for school improvement has focused on strengthening the internal culture. He stressed, “All the teachers need to have a collective feeling that we are always improving our practice. When we all keep learning, we will have a learning culture.”

Narayan was aware that those who just know about the achievement of the school may not recognize that challenges still exist, yet he poignantly described the current context: “We are still becoming the school we need to become.” In describing a way that the internal response is influenced by the student’s needs, he emphasized,

These students always live in an extreme need of the basics. Most of the parents do not even have money to buy books, stationaries, and dress for their children. We have to understand each child’s background and address these needs with full respect and empathy.... An absolute loving and nurturing environment in the school is the ultimate aim. I am not claiming we have achieved this. I do not even say we are close, but we know where we are going.

**External challenges.** Responding to external challenges remains a need in that governmental resources are insufficient for the school, and governmental policies can hinder progress.

**Governmental resources.** In Nepal, schools are to operate using only the funds provided by the Ministry of Education without additional funds from the parents or the community. Yet, the resources are insufficient in the allocation of teachers, supplies, and classrooms that are needed. As Narayan related,

The government tells us not to get financial support from parents. However, the government does not provide the required number of teachers. The resources and support the government provides does not match with the school’s or students’ needs. There is an enormous mismatch.

Additional science labs, technology resources, and teachers who can provide electives for students and lower overall class size are needed. As Narayan related,

We still have physical limitations and most importantly, we have huge educative limitations. We are not able to support each student to become who they can and want to become. Our extracurricular and co-curricular activities are still limited. We have not made sufficient progress in providing an opportunity to meet each child’s interest.

**Policies that hinder progress.** Many of the policies of the Ministry of Education served as external challenges to the school. For example, teachers were assigned by the government and pay raises given for permanent teachers and not temporary teachers. This practice caused internal concerns. The teacher's allegiance was also to the Ministry of Education rather than to local school leaders since the assignment of teachers to schools bypassed the head teacher and school board. As Narayan explained,

The new teachers, instead of being loyal to the school board, become individuals loyal only to the government or political party. Teachers get assigned to schools based on the recommendations of the political parties. Teachers are also transferred frequently by government policies making it difficult to sustain a shared culture.

In addition, the transfer policies impact stability for future leadership roles. Narayan stressed,

We hope there will be more permanent teachers in the coming years, and we can distribute the work with them to carry on the legacy of the school for years to come. When there are few permanent teachers in the secondary school, it is uncertain who the next leaders will be.

Policies are provided unilaterally for the rural and urban schools of Nepal even though the contexts vary markedly. For example, the policy stating that members of the school board must have children in attendance at the school results in some of the "founding community members feeling marginalized. Many alumni parents and community members are disappointed that they are not allowed to play a significant role." As Narayan further explained, "Policies do not fit the rural and urban school settings, in the same way, yet the government expects the policies to be followed." In short, the "external challenges presented by the government's policies impact the internal culture." In overcoming these challenges, a focus is being applied toward sustaining a shared vision "to shine from both the inside and outside." Narayan expressed,

I think the result of our high school finals, which always remained high despite our high-need situation, made us shine from the outside. We are also working on shining from the inside. We are trying to focus on the core of education, which is not only the academic achievement on final examinations. What I dream as a leader is to shine from the inside and outside both.

## Discussion

The relentless focus on implementing practices and processes to truly meet the needs of all students, by providing a loving and nurturing environment as well as by fostering strong academic success, was evident throughout all of the interviews and observational data. Narayan's strong sense of moral leadership was also evident through his words and actions. Dipak stressed that Narayan was always in the midst of the school activities and emphasized, "You won't find him in the office." The vision to focus on meeting internal needs while meeting the expectations from the external community and government with the school's strong reputation for academic accomplishments, demonstrated the leaders' desire to further the trajectory of school improvement. The new leadership team members were building on the

legacy of leadership provided by the previous head teacher, yet recognizing the need to keep improving.

Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Portin (2010) emphasized that effective 21<sup>st</sup> century school leadership “makes learning improvement a central priority and mobilizes efforts to this end” (p. 5). Selection of the head teacher from a teacher leader within the school, who was highly effective in fostering academic success, contributed to the school’s success in sustaining academic progress in the two years following Rajendra’s retirement. In addition, mentoring and coaching by Rajendra and Kishan contributed to a sustained focus on school improvement and a culture of learning. The results of the study have implications for schools when educators consider the sustainability benefits that can result from selecting new administrators from campus teacher leaders. In addition, the former head teacher and assistant head teacher provided mentoring and coaching, and these processes helped to sustain the school’s focus on continual improvement.

Arguing that what is required to change the status quo is often underestimated, Hatch (2013) suggested, “Instead of waiting for disruptive practices and technologies, we need to create the conditions for individuals, groups, and organizations to adapt, innovate, and improve all the time” (p. 34). Narayan’s passion for learning as the core of education and his clear sense of mission to emphasize continual improvement instead of the status quo, were supported by his authenticity. As he described, “My role is to model that I am always learning.” Even though the school had won academic accolades, Narayan’s approach to continual improvement was characteristic of his leadership. His experience as an excellent teacher in the school added to his effectiveness in school instructional leadership as head teacher. Horng and Loeb (2010) described instructional leaders as “hand-on leaders, engaged with curriculum and instruction issues, unafraid to work directly with teachers, and often present in classrooms” (p. 66). This style of *hands-on leadership* was characteristic of Narayan’s work.

This study identified ways the school leaders successfully confronted the external challenges of limited resources and restrictive government policies as well as the key internal challenge of confronting the status quo. Specifically, the study described the vital importance of each educator’s commitment to meeting both internal and external needs in sustaining a record of high academic achievement and continual improvement. The results of the study, although not generalizable to all contexts, also clearly supported the power of a shared vision strongly communicated by the head teacher, assistant head teacher, and teacher leaders in enhancing the ongoing school improvement process. Recognizing the unfinished nature of continual improvement (Day & Gurr, 2014; Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson, & Merchant, 2014; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008), these teacher leaders emphasized that learning was essential for all for sustained academic achievement and growth. Their words and actions serve as powerful exemplars of successful school leadership in a high-needs context.

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