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EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NEPAL: AN EXPLORATION OF EDUCATION QUALITY OF PRIVATE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CONTEXT OF A DECENTRALIZED EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NEPAL: AN EXPLORATION OF EDUCATION QUALITY OF PRIVATE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CONTEXT OF A DECENTRALIZED EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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It is my honor to be dedicating this paper to all the teachers who have taught me so much. Without you all I could not have completed this work. For that, I am immensely grateful.

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ABSTRACT

As a strategy for improving the country's education sector and meet national development initiatives, the government of Nepal has implemented decentralization measures. Similarly, the government has committed to the Sustainable Development Goal 4, the premise of which is ensuring by 2030 all Nepalese school aged boys and girls have access to quality education. Decentralization, as defined, is the transfer of authority over school management to local governments, the private sector, and local communities. Decentralization, however, is not a panacea for all and when incorrectly implemented the consequences can be deleterious. Therefore, this study sought to answer this research question: In the context of a decentralized education system, what is the quality of primary and secondary education in private schools in Kathmandu, Nepal?

The research was conducted on-site at a private school in Kathmandu, Nepal. The researcher utilized primary data gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with five primary education teachers, one administrator, and four secondary education teachers. The collected data was thematically analyzed, and findings presented according to the themes of administrative inputs, pedagogical practices, and school infrastructure. The findings of the study indicate that school environments lacking proper administrative leadership, teacher support, educational resources, and professional development opportunities compounded with poor classroom environments negatively impacts the quality of education schools provide. This study's implications suggest that Nepal must mandate Fundamental School Quality Levels in all private schools to accomplish its target goal by the year 2030.

Keywords: Decentralization, Democracy, Federalism, Neoliberalism, Quality Education, Sustainable Development Goals

Acronym Chart

EMIS	Educational Management Emergency System
HSR	Human Subject Recruitment Form
INEE	Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergency
NPABSAN	National Private and Boarding School Administration
PABSON	Private and Boarding School's Organization
SABER	Systems Approach for Better Education
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SMCs	School Management Committees
SNG	Sub-National Government

Introduction

The Government of Nepal (GoN) correlates national development with advancement of its education sector; however, it is not only Nepal that recognizes the connection between quality education and national development (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020; UN Nepal, n.d.). Supranational organizations such as the World Bank Group, the largest funding agency of education in the developing world, and the United Nations (UN) have arrived at similar conclusions. Both organizations have been instrumental to funding and supporting the development of Nepal's education sector and national development (Education, n.d.; The Right to Education, 2023; United Nations, n.d.). The World Bank strongly emphasizes decentralized but collaborative partnership between federal, provincial, local governments, and the private sector in promoting and sustaining local as well as national development efforts (World Bank Group, 2018).

Currently, Nepal's education sector is significantly underfunded and characterized by gross administrative mismanagement at all levels of government resulting in educational reforms generally not being codified to law (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Nonetheless, Nepal has opted to implement decentralization as a policy to improve its education sector to meet national development efforts (Edwards, 2011; Pherali, 2021). Decentralization, as defined, is the transfer of authority over school management to local level governments or the private sector (Rondinelli, 1999; World Bank Group, 2013). However, as Prud'homme (1995) theorizes, decentralization is like a potent drug: when incorrectly prescribed, "the medicine" does more harm than good. Often disconnected from local realities and its benefits prone to capture by local elites, decentralization can exacerbate inequalities, especially concerning access to quality education (Edwards, 2011).

In this capstone, I introduce and describe the concept and typologies of decentralization as well as explore the quality of primary and secondary education in Kathmandu, Nepal, in the context of newly implemented decentralization policies. While most studies have critiqued education reforms guided by decentralization theories, few studies explore the influence of decentralization on the quality of primary and secondary private education in Kathmandu, Nepal. Thus, the purpose of this capstone is to the address the following question:

> In the context of a decentralized education system, what is the quality of primary and secondary education in private schools in Kathmandu, Nepal?

Political Climate of Nepal

Located on the Indian subcontinent, Nepal shares a border with India on the south and the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China to the north (Nepal General Country Profile, n.d.; *Nepal Profile – Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal MOFA, n.d.*). Nepal is a highly plural nation and is home to 126 ethnic groups and 123 spoken languages (Nepal General Country Profile, n.d.). The topography of Nepal reflects similar diversity; the country is divided by three ecological zones, the mountains, hills, and lowlands (Kafle, 2007). The mountain region covers a total of 35.2% of the land area where 7.3 % of the population resides; the hills and lowlands cover 41.7% and 23.1% land mass, respectively (Kafle, 2007). The United Nation Country Team in Nepal (UNCT) (2011) asserts that 80% of the population lives in the rural area of the country, with Kafle (2007) reporting more than 90%. Discrepancies aside, the takeaway from both these sources is that a significant portion of the Nepalese people live in rural parts of the country. The hill region in which the Kathmandu Valley is located serves as the center of development efforts and the seat of the Nepalese government.

Nepal's education development efforts officially began in the mid-1950's, along with plans to develop various other sectors (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). Nepal has undergone significant political changes since 1951, when the country began transitioning to a federally structured government; nonetheless, the country remains divided on the best means of facilitating the transition (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). Preceding Nepal's transition to democracy, the country experienced a decade long civil war from 1996-2006, between the Nepalese Royal government and Communist Party of Nepal as well as seven constitutions over the span of 70 years (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). In 2015, Nepal approved a new constitution that would transform the government from a unitary state to federal democratic republic (Shrestha, 2019). Under the federal structure, the government consists of three tiers: the central government, seven provincial governments, and 753 local level governments (Shrestha, 2019). Nepal's ratification of a federal constitution was expected to have major implications for decentralizing education (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). The benefit of the new governmental structure is that education governance would be a shared responsibility of between the central, provincial, and local governments (The Fifteenth Plan, 2020).

Currently ranked a low middle income country by the World Bank, Nepal's vision is to achieve high-income country status by 2043 with poverty reduction and economic prosperity as key priorities (Gandharba et al., 2020; The Fifteenth Plan, 2020). The Fifteenth Development Plan aims to create the foundation for improving quality of life through economic, social, and physical infrastructures to accelerate economic growth (Gandharba et al., 2020). Lockheed and Verspoor (1991) express that an educated population is the cornerstone of economic and social

development efforts. Therefore, Nepal must prioritize educational development if the government hopes to realize its development commitments.

Sustainable Development Goal 4

Mainstreamed by the Fifteenth Development Plan, Nepal has committed to achieving the targets set forth in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development (UN NEPAL, n.d.). Outlined in the 2030 Agenda are 17 wide-ranging and interconnecting goals that include 169 targets. In this capstone, I refer only to SDG 4 as the goal directly pertains to quality education. This fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) describes ensuring inclusive access to education for all Nepalese school aged children (UN Nepal, n.d.). Two of the of the most relevant targets of goal 4 are:

- 4.1: By 2030, ensure that by all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.
- 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles (UN NEPAL, n.d.).

Currently, more than a third of the country's 12.6 million children live below the national poverty line, lack adequate access to education, are severely malnourished, and/or deficient in one of the seven basic human needs (United Nation Country Team in Nepal (UNCT), 2013).

Consequently, the GoN has integrated all seventeen SDG initiatives into the country's national development framework (Nepal: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, n.d.). The goals adopted by Nepal are incredibly ambitious, given that the country confronts high levels of inequality, unemployment, unplanned migration, and constraints to human capital development (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, 2019). Furthermore,

significant challenges remain in improving access to quality education as well as employability and productivity outcomes after educational attainment (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, the GoN hopes to realize its goal through improved access to universal basic education, a move that has resulted in increased literacy rates (Nepal Planning Commission, 2019). To further address the need for quality education the government introduced the School Sector Reform Plan 2009/2010—2015/2016 (SSRP) which guarantees eight years of free basic education to all Nepalese school aged children (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). Although the initiatives promote education as the key to development, the Nepalese government confronts issues in codifying interventions that promote access to education (Shrestha, 2019), thereby limiting the country's pace towards national development.

Social Climate of Nepal

A highly diverse country, Nepal is plagued by exclusionary practices, including the enforcement of a Hindu-based caste system, which reinforces the marginalization of lower social groups (UNCT, 2013). In a government dominated by the majority caste, there is low representation of non-majority ethnic/caste groups that is compounded to institutional discriminatory practices (UNCT, 2013). The consequence of socially excluding minority social groups places limitations on their access to resources and social mobility. For example, Dalits, are a minority social group experiencing social, religious, cultural, and economic caste discrimination thereby reducing opportunities for upward mobility. Even though there is government recognition of the pluralistic aspect of the nation, social exclusionary practices persist. The lack of commitment from political parties and leaders in implementing strong

measures mitigating the challenges faced by Dalits contributes to the proliferation of inequities (UNCT, 2013).

Bennet et al. (2008) further posit that the values and morals of Hindus, the majority social group, were enforced upon the general populace, thus creating a hierarchical framework based on the Hindu caste structure. As a result, caste-based practices have become a defining factor of identity, social status, and life chances (Bennett et al., 2008). For example, privileged social groups such as Hindu Brahmans, Chettris, and Newars are more influential in community decision-making process (Bennett et al., 2008; Bhattarai, 2004; Pherali, 2021). As explained by Bhattarai (2004), social habitus plays a definitive role in high caste groups being able to appropriate "power, influence, wealth, and prestige available in the system" (p. 302).

In response to decentralization efforts in Nepal, the managing of schools was transferred to local School Management Committees (SMCs) (Edwards, 2011). However, the social domination by high caste elites is a direct conflict to the existence of SMCs, which are intended to ensure all community members, regardless of caste, are included in decision-making process with regards to schooling. Furthermore, SMCs are recognized as "moderators" whose purpose is to ensure community participation in schools' decision-making process (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020, p. 17) and "should reflect a wide range of stakeholder interests, including representatives of women, Dalits, and marginalized groups in society, but in reality, chairpersons of SMCs dominate the committee" (Pherali, 2021, p. 250). Similarly, the existence of patronage systems in local communities can be implicated in the politicizing of member selection to SMCs (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). These factors generate realities that marginalize parents and communities, transforming schools into political playgrounds.

In sum, Nepal is a low-income society with considerable economic and social inequities. These factors compound to affect the country's ability to ensure equitable access to quality education. Therefore, decentralization was introduced to a context lacking the proper social, political, governance, and economic conditions to sustain effective implementation. It is questionable if decentralization can be an effective method to promote quality education in Nepal.

In the following literature review the researcher discusses the proliferation of the private school economy in Nepal, the relationship of democracy, federalism, and neoliberalism to decentralization. In doing so, the researcher illustrates that decentralization measures alone cannot be soley relied on for ensuring equitable access to quality education in a context as dynamic as Nepal.

Literature Review

Proliferation of the Private School Economy in Nepal

Bhatta (2015) claims parental preference for private education is fueled by the underperformance of Nepal's public education sector. Nepal Economic Forum (2020) posits that parents prefer private education because they prefer the infrastructure, learning facilities, and extracurricular programs that these schools offer. Consequently, parents have been led by private institutions to believe investing more financially guarantees education quality. Bhatta and Pherali (2017) explain that the overreliance on private education, while beneficial to the existence of private schools, is disruptive to the public education system. Between 2005 and 2010 Nepal's Ministry of Education (MOE) reported increases in private school enrollment; at the primary level, there was a seven percentage point gain, from six percent to 13 percent (MoE 2005, 2010 as cited by Bhatta & Pherali, 2017). Lower secondary observed similar growth, increasing from

7.6 percent to 15 percent; and enrollment increased from 9.7 percent to 17 percent at the secondary level (MoE 2005, 2010 as cited by Bhatta & Pherali, 2017). The exponential growth of private schools has been met with several responses. Radical leftist political groups advocate for outright nationalization of all private schools (Bhatta, 2021). Conversely, centrists have argued for stricter regulations and right-wing individuals, who are pro-private schools, support deregulating privatization and commercialization of education. In Nepal, the unregulated growth of private schools is cause for alarm as these schools are predominately profit-facing. Bhatta and Pherali (2017) explain that most private schools in Nepal are established as for-profit company schools, factors evidencing the commodification of education in Nepal.

The demand for privately provided education results in private schools charging higher tuition fees and employing non-committed part-time teachers with lesser qualifications (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). These practices produce the understanding that private schools are for-profit rather than service driven (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Furthermore, the Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal (PABSON) and National Private and Boarding School Administration Nepal (NPABSAN) are ideally positioned to take advantage of the public's preference for private education as private school owners and school administrators have been found using their political affiliations to gain favor over these organizations (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020).

According to the Nepal Economic Forum (2020) the objectives of PABSON and NPABSON are to "guide, promote, give permanency, and protect private schools" (p.17); nonetheless, there are claims likening the operations of these organizations to cartelism due to constant disregard for regulations issued by the MoE. Comparable to cartels, private schools in Nepal engage in practices known as tied selling: a practice of providing services on the condition

that the customer must purchase another service (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). For example, parents are required to purchase additional services such as school uniforms and/or stationary supplies from the school or businesses in partnership with the school and pay higher tuition fees than what is legally mandated (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Resultantly, NPABSON and PABSON's role in "improving education quality" is ineffective as both organizations are reputed to ignore education regulations issued by the government that are not in alignment to the organizational interests (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020).

While previous studies have discussed the impacts of the political economy of educational decentralization in Nepal on community schooling and school-based management (Pherali, 2021); the disconnect and capture of education decentralization reforms in Nepal (Edwards, 2011); the consequences of decentralization (Kharel, 2017); educational decentralization in Nepal at the primary level (Bhatta, 2005); and decentralization as a driver of privatization (Bhatta & Pherali, 2017), this study offers initial insights into the quality of education in the private sector of decentralized education systems. This study explores the quality of primary and secondary education in private schools in Kathmandu, Nepal in context of a decentralized education system.

Introduction to Decentralization

Experts advise that before countries make a choice between administrative, fiscal, or market decentralization, they consider the characteristics of each approach due to differing characteristics, policy implications, and conditions for success (Rondinelli, 1999). Governments should carefully consider the country's social, political, economic, and infrastructural climate before implementing decentralization reforms. While decentralization can assist in simplifying complex bureaucratic procedures and sensitize national governments to local needs and

conditions (Rondinelli, 1999; World Bank, 2013), these measures can also exacerbate existing divides between individuals who are economically advantaged and individuals belonging to low caste, poor, and marginalized communities (Decentralization - Decentralization in Nepal, n.d.; Prud'homme, 1995; Usui, 2007).

Decentralization is defined as the "transfer of authority and responsibility of public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organization or the private sector" (Rondinelli, 1999, p. 2). The World Bank Group (2003) further asserts there are several categories of decentralization: fiscal decentralization, economic/market decentralization, political decentralization, and administrative decentralization. In most cases, differing principles of decentralization can be combined to suit the needs of the country (Rondinelli, 1999). The typologies of administrative decentralization, beginning with deconcentration, will be described next to provide readers with an introduction to the degree of power transferal. Fiscal decentralization is then described with particular reference to the Nepali context. These two types of decentralization are the focus here because the Seventh Amendment, enacted in 2001, describes the administrative and financial parameters of Nepal's current education system (Edwards, 2011). Edwards (2011) further argues the amendment was a catalyst for decentralization reforms.

Deconcentration is often viewed to be the mildest form of decentralization as it is the redistribution of decision-making authority and financial and management responsibilities at different levels within the central government (Rondinelli, 1999). In other words, deconcentration describes processes of shared responsibilities at the central level of governments. Delegation, which is more extensive than deconcentration, represents the transfer of responsibility for decision-making and administration of public function to semi-autonomous

organizations, not under full control of the central government although accountable (Rodinelli, 1999). For instance, an example of a delegation in the United States of America would be the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), created to ensure the safe passage of people and commerce (TSA History | Transportation Security Administration, n.d.). Finally, devolution, the most extensive form of administrative decentralization, is the transfer of authority for decision-making, finance, and management to quasi-autonomous local government units with corporate status (Rao & Georgas, 2015; Rondinelli, 1999). Rondinelli (1999) further explains, “devolution usually transfers responsibilities for services to municipalities that elect their mayors and councils, raise their revenues, and have independent authority to make investment decisions" (p. 3). Devolution of powers to the local government ensures local governance has the authority to implement policies and provides opportunities for local leaders to be accountable to their citizens.

The logic for fiscal decentralization dictates that because sub-national governments (SNGs) are closer to the people compared to the national government, local governments are better placed to meet citizens’ wants and needs in public goods and services (*Fiscal Decentralization*, n.d.). Additionally, fiscal decentralization describes the transfer of resources from higher to lower levels of government combined with increases in administrative responsibilities and function (Ghaus-Pasha & Pasha et al., 2000). In Nepal, the Local Self Governance Act (LGSA) organized in 1999 describes three types of local bodies, endowing each with revenue powers and expenditures responsibilities (*Decentralization in Nepal*, n.d.). Formed in 2002, the organization of the Local Bodies Fiscal Commission (LBFC) is responsible for initiating the process of fiscal decentralization. The main objective of the commission was the development of the fiscal or intergovernmental transfer system from the national to subnational

governments (*Decentralization in Nepal*, n.d.). However, the fiscal transfer system developed by the GoN was not guided by clear objectives, resulting in a flawed product (*Fiscal Decentralization*, n.d.). The rationale for the intergovernmental transfer system is that the measure enables the borrowing and sharing finances amongst the different tiers of government thereby permitting effective and efficient delivery of social services (Ahmad & Craig, 1997). Similarly, The World Bank describes effective transfer systems as comprising the following characteristics. Firstly, the system clearly describes the objectives that are being pursed so that form suits function; secondly, it is transparent to SNGs and promotes the development of understandings on how resources are vertically allocated and horizontally distributed at the SNGs level; thirdly, the system is stable, predictable and functions in a timely manner; fourthly, equity is preserved in addressing vertical imbalances between the different tiers of government and is complemented by equalization mechanisms for addressing horizontal imbalances; and finally, local governments are incentivized into making the correct decisions (*Fiscal Decentralization: Intergovernmental Transfers*, n.d.). The World Bank Group posits that Nepal's intergovernmental transfer system, "creates perverse incentives in local government performance regarding fiscal efforts" (*Fiscal Decentralization: Intergovernmental Transfers*, n.d.). For instance**,** local governments are exceedingly dependent on financial transfers from higher-level government and lacks the capacity for raising revenues (*Fiscal Decentralization*, n.d). This dependence of local governance on fiscal transfers conflicts with fiscal decentralization efforts. The challenges faced by the Nepalese government are the result of weak institutional capacity, overlapping expenditure responsibilities, and inadequate public financial management systems (Shrestha, 2019). The consequences of overlapping expenditures culminate in overlapping of functions that are damaging to the efficiency of the provisioning of social services and

undermines the accountability principles that decentralization is predicated to deliver (*Fiscal Decentralization: Expenditure Assignment,* n.d.). Furthermore, Nepal's transition to federalism exacerbates fiduciary risks due to "inadequate allocation of financial resources, fiscal indiscipline, and inefficient expenditures leading to poor service delivery" (Shrestha, 2019, p. 42). Similarly, Nepal's inability to manage its public financial manage responsibilities is alarming as transition to federalism is to be complemented by fiscal decentralization.

At the local levels of government, "a major share of the education budget will be planned and executed, but they do not have the tools or the capacity to prepare education sector plans" (Shrestha, 2019, p. 42). Consequently, inability to manage and allocate public finances compounded against inadequate technical and administrative talents, reduces the chances of public education in Nepal improving and, subsequently, the government's capability to realize its commitment to decentralization. If public education does not improve then Nepal cannot provide quality education to all, which in effect stifles national development. The Nepal Economic Forum (2020) posits that, "low funding in public schools reduces their resources to make any progressive efforts to improve their quality of education" (p. 38). The fact that the GoN is not able to effectively manage its education sector does not bode well as private education alone cannot lead Nepal to inclusive development. A significant portion of the population lacks education access and remains marginalized by poverty. It is also important to reiterate that the benefit of decentralization is the improvement of service delivery. Furthermore, Shrestha (2019) positions that under the federally structured government, local governments were awarded the most responsibility for school management, however, poor education service delivery remains a pervasive issue.

The Relationship between Federalism and Decentralization

Nepal's adoption of federalism is central to decentralization as "it is assumed that education governance will be a shared responsibility between the central, provincial, and local government" (Nepal Ministry of Education & UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2015). Together federalism, decentralization, and democracy form an equilateral triangle in which the ideas of accountability and autonomy tie together these individual principles. Similarly, individualism is a marker of a neoliberal system (Davies and Bansel, 2007; *Federalism and the Constitution*, n.d.). An autonomous citizen actively engages and participates in society and is responsible for themselves. Therefore, it is:

> "no longer the state's duty to be responsible for providing all of society's needs for security, health, [and] education. Individuals, firms, organizations, schools, hospitals, [and] parents must all take on (and desire to take on) responsibility for their own well-being" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252).

Decentralization, however, is expected to improve service delivery as based on accountability from the local governments to constituents and accountability between local governments and the national government (Usui, 2007). The economic rationale for this belief dictates that "political accountability can translate local information into better services" (Usui, 2007, p. 3)

Local representatives will be accountable to constituents because, "first, citizens pay taxes and influence politicians to satisfy their needs, and then hold politicians accountable for resource allocation. However, even if this voice chain works, services cannot improve unless politicians can hold service providers accountable" (Usui, 2007, p. 3). Similarly, the caste system institutionalized in Nepal limits the social mobility of citizens of low-caste, thereby

marginalizing their voices (Kafle, 2007). For these reasons, it is questionable that the most disenfranchised will have a choice to observe their demands and preferences be recognized.

The Relationship between Decentralization and Neoliberalism

Most notably, the belief that education is a public service that governments should invest in conflicts with tenets of neoliberalism. Furthermore, neoliberalism is impactful to education policy as the principle often foreshadows the decentralization of education systems (Rao & Georgas, 2015). Education is a public good as its benefits extend to societies; however, education accounts for a large portion of governments' expenditure (Ter-Minassian, 1997). Moreover, neoliberalism is directly opposed to the concept of public goods and the notion governments must invest in public education (Rao & Georgas, 2015). Education, according to the ideologies of neoliberalism, is a service or product like any other for trading (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Nevertheless, decentralization's aptitude for promulgating improvements in efficiency and welfare dominates economic literature (Ter-Minassian,1997). Similarly, neoliberalism prioritizes privatization of public services and redefines citizens as consumers and competition as the reason for human interaction (Monbiot, 2016 as cited by Why Decentralize Power in a Democracy?, n.d.). According to Rao and Georgas (2015), "if investment in public goods is solely the purview of the market, then according to neoliberalism, there is the 'free rider' problem, where some people end up paying more than others" (p. 46). Therefore, in order to prevent the 'free rider' issue, governments introduce measures increasing citizens' autonomy and accountability, such as decentralization (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Typical of neoliberal governance, the passive citizen is transformed to the "autonomous active citizen with rights, duties, obligations, and expectations—the citizen as active entrepreneur of the self" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254). The autonomous citizen is crucial to

decentralization, as it is an individual citizen's duty to exercise the right to vote; hence the need for de-socializing of economic governance. Davies and Bansel (2007) posit that economic governance has been de-socialized in order to promote the development of individual citizens' entrepreneurial proclivities by way of political interventions. Political interventions are utilized for creating the conditions for entrepreneurship by way of "restructuring, deregulation and privatization of the economy and the labour market, as well as restructuring of those welfare provisions that are seen as producing what are now construed as untenable passivity and dependent of the paternalistic or 'nanny state'" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252). For example, governments' investment in education provides a positive rate of return, therefore limiting government investment in education can be claimed to be the result of neoliberal principles (Rao & Georgas 2015). In other words, neoliberalism takes issue with governments investing in education and social services because the belief is that if the government is funding education they are enabling individuals who will be dependent on the nation for support (Davies & Bansel, 2007). This cannot be the case; therefore, political interventions are levied to create the conditions for citizens to be competitive and entrepreneurial. Under neoliberal governance, the concept of citizen is transformed. Davies and Bansel (2007) posit that the passive citizen of the welfare state become the autonomous "active citizen with rights, duties, obligations, and expectations—the citizens as active entrepreneur of the self; the citizens as morally superior" (p. 252).

While the economic rationale for decentralization accepts that local governments are well placed to determine constituents' demands, service costs, and are thus better able to provide services at a lower cost (Usui, 2007) and neoliberalism promotes decentralization as a move from "Big Government" to "Big Society" (Rao & Georgas, 2015). The fact remains,

decentralization measures are only effective when local politicians can be held accountable (Usui, 2007). As Fritzen (2007), as cited in Rao and Georgas (2015), states, reforms have the veneer of democracy but are easily captured by central and local elites, and inadequate downward accountability to communities. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund, nonetheless, coerce countries into cutting public financing of education (Rao & Georgas, 2015). As Pherali (2021) theorizes, "the gradual withdrawal process of state from education has become a major symptom of a neoliberal attack on already malfunctioning education systems in the developing world" (p 243).

Using the United States as example, Trostel (2008) states, a dollar invested in education provides the government a seven dollar return. Therefore, even if we take the economic and financial view, "cutting investments in education does not make sense" (Rao & Georgas, 2015, p. 46). Scholars therefore conclude the introduction of decentralized policies in developing countries is the influence of globalization and international aid (Rao & Georgas, 2015).

Decentralization in Nepal

Pherali (2021) claims decentralization in education has created a burden on poor parents who do not have the economic and cultural capital that school demands. Similarly, Nepal Economic Forum (2020) states that, "private schools have been receiving complaints regarding teachers' salaries and qualifications, infrastructure, extracurricular activities, courses and school fees" (p. 29). Therefore, it would seem, under decentralization the education system is a burden for parents who send their children to public as well as private school. Kharel (2017) further theorizes that once Nepal adopted education decentralization to ensure quality education for all, the country implemented a market mechanism for education management.

This market mechanism is observable in private schools. Although, school fees charged by private schools is regulated by the Guideline for Fee Declaration Standard 2027, there are private schools in existence operating as "A+" level schools without approval from local government (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Furthermore, 'A+' and 'A' level schools have been revealed to be charging exorbitant school fees, to which parents have complaints. As previously mentioned, the introduction of market mechanism creates an illusion for parents in that they have a choice in school education (Bhatta & Pherali, 2015). However, in a context where public schools are underperforming and the cost of private education is sky high, parents are positioned between a rock and a hard place. Resultantly parents do not have much of a choice, which is a direct contradiction to the promise of decentralization, to give "greater voice and choice to individual constituents to influence decision" (World Bank Group, 2013). In reality, decentralization provides economic growth for the rich and marginalizes the poor, consequences that will stagnate social inclusion and push marginalized people even further into the periphery of society.

Although Nepal has committed to the SDGs, the underperformance of the public education sector strengthens Nepalese parents desire for a private school education. Likewise, current economic constraints poses significant challenges to Nepal funding its already challenged public education system. Therefore, if the purpose of signing the SDG was to provide quality education for all school aged Nepalese children, the researcher was interested in learning about the quality of education students were receiving in private schools. The premise of decentralization is the transferal of school management to the local government, community, and private sector. However, decentralization is linked to neoliberalism, the promotion of commoditization of educational services, and worsening inequities. So, in a context as dynamic

as Nepal, this study endeavored to investigate the quality of education provisioned by private schools at the primary and secondary level in the context of a decentralized education system.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative, intrinsic case study approach. The methodology was intentionally utilized to respond to the question: In the context of a decentralized education system, what is the quality of primary and secondary education in private schools in Kathmandu, Nepal?

The intrinsic case study-approach enables researchers to utilize a particular case, Loving Academy (LA) in this study, to gain an in depth understanding into a larger social concern. An intrinsic case study methodology is undertaken by researchers "whose aim it is to gain deeper understanding of the case" compared to instrumental case study methodology that "provides initial insights into an issue" or collective case study which is undertaken "in order to inquire into a particular phenomenon" (Zucker, 2009, p. 3). The researcher utilized primary data gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with primary and secondary education teachers and an administrator at LA to gain in-depth understanding of the quality of education in context of decentralization.

Research Context

Loving Academy (LA) is a residential private co-educational kindergarten through 12th grade English language medium school located in Kathmandu, Nepal. I was an intern at LA from May 2022 to December 2022 teaching English to students at the primary level. I taught several sections of classes at the institution from first to sixth grade. In addition to teaching at the school, I lived in the home of the founders of the school from May 2022 to August 2022. I have engaged in the research environment as an active participant and observer of education delivery at LA.

Private education in Nepal is afforded more value in society as the language of learning is English whereas the language of learning for public education is typically the Nepali language (Poudel, 2022; Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). LA's website emphasizes the talent of its "distinguished" and "devoted teaching staff" stating that they are "skilled academicians." In addition, LA's webpage highlights that the school is well equipped and offers science labs, spacious rooms in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere.

In Nepal, private schools are required to utilize a grading system that is mandated by Nepal's Education Act of 2028 (1971) and Education Regulation 2059 (2002) (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Research published by the Nepal Economic Forum (2020) indicates there is a positive correlation between private school grading and tuition fees charged. For example, a private school with 'A' grading is predicted to charge higher tuition sums than a private school with 'B' or subsequent grading. Under this system, schools are graded according to their physical facilities, teacher management, number of students, academic achievement, total expenditure, and the length of period the school has been in operation. A maximum of 100 points can be earned according to the rubric: 30 points can be awarded for physical facilities; 20 for teacher management; 10 points for the number of students enrolled; 20 points for school academic achievement; 10 points for total expenditure; and the final 10 point for school operation period (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). Moreover, private schools are in high demand in Nepal, "due to [them] being highly competitive in terms of infrastructure, leaning facilities and the quality of education they impart" (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020, p. 18). Resultantly, private schools have taken the liberty of manipulating school fees as the demand for private schools surges. Furthermore, it was the proliferation in the number of private schools that gave credence to the founding of PABSON AND NPABSAN; organizations that play an ineffective role in the

improvement of education quality (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020). The researcher could gather from their time at LA, that the school is considered an "A" level school.

Interview Questions Development Protocol

To develop the interview protocol, the researcher relied on Mayer et al.'s (2000) research which explored why some schools perform better than others at facilitating students' learning. The researcher's rationale for relying on the report can be supported by two understandings. First, Nepal has committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Educational for All initiatives, central to which is ensuring all school age children have access to *quality* education. Second, the research conducted by Mayer et al. (2000) was commissioned in request for reports identifying and discussing the health of the U.S. education systems by a congressionally mandated Special Study Panel on Education Indicators for National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Mayer et al., 2000).

Specifically, Mayer et al.'s (2000) research anchored the process of developing interview questions. This work identified three factors of schooling impactful to student learning: school context; teacher; and classroom. The three factors are described by 13 school quality indicators (Mayer et al., 2000, p. i). For example, the quality indicators for school context are, "school leadership goals, professional community, discipline, and academic environment" (Mayer et al., 2000, p. ii). The quality indicators describing teacher talent are "academic skills, teaching assignment, teacher experience, professional development, and for classroom course content, pedagogy, technology, class size" (Mayer et al., 2000, p. ii). The purpose of utilizing the quality indicators was to ensure questions posed to participants would provide information in line with the factors described by literature to determine school quality.

In total, 31 questions were developed, eight questions inquired about school context, ten on teachers' talent and qualifications, and eight on classroom environment. The list of pre-determined questions posed by the researcher to participants appears in Appendix A.

Data Collection

This study used purposive sampling to identify participants, a method in which the researcher utilized reasoning for identifying the study's sample population (Bullard, 2022). Understanding teachers and administrators are key stakeholders in the education process, the researcher invited this population to participate in the study.

In order to address the issue of validity the researcher employed the method of data source triangulation. Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999) describe data source triangulation as one of the four approaches to data triangulation. Carter et al. (2014) conclude that, "data source triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people, including individuals, groups, families and communities to gain multiple perspective and validation of data" (p. 1). Similarly, the Inter-Agency Network for Education Emergencies (INEE) describes triangulation as a mixed method approach to collecting and analyzing data to measure overlapping and difference aspects of the phenomenon leading to increased understanding of the phenomenon being studied ("Minimum Standards for Education," 2010). For instance, the data informing this study was collected from five teachers at the primary level, four at the secondary level, and one administrator.

The researcher gained access to teachers' emails after being granted permission to conduct the study from LA's principal and the School for International Training Institutional Review Board (IRB). The initial recruitment letter was sent electronically to all 21 basic education teachers and nine secondary teachers in September 2022. Due to concerns of not

having a sufficient number of participants participate in the study, the researcher requested additional permission from SIT IRB to expand recruitment strategy and sample population. After receiving approval from the IRB, administrators who were not recruited electronically were recruited in person. At this time, administrators were provided the recruitment letter and consent form. Only one administrator volunteered to participate.

Participants were asked for consent to be audio recorded and quoted in the consent form and before interviews. Those who did not consent to being quoted and audio recorded on the consent form or in person were not interviewed. Beginning in early October, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five primary education teachers, one school administrator, and four secondary education teachers at LA. During the recruitment phases and before each interview, participants were reminded their participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw consent from the study without penalty. During the recruitment phase and before each interview, participants were also informed of the efforts the researcher would employ to ensure participants personal identifiable information was not included in the final document resulting from the study.

After interviews were conducted, they were transcribed using Trint's audio transcription, an online software. The researcher used Trint's transcription application as the company assures in its security guide the researcher is the only individual with access to the uploaded data (Trint Ltd., n.d.).

Participants received a copy of their interview transcript and interview notes a week after interviews were conducted to ensure accuracy and reliability. Participants were given a week to offer inputs regarding corrections and were subsequently informed, if zero inputs were offered, the researcher would assume the transcripts were accurately transcribed. Two participants

responded to the email. One participant questioned if their identity would be anonymized. The researcher confirmed no personal identifiable information would be included in the final paper resulting from this study. The second participant who responded to the email, reaffirmed their participation.

Data Analysis Coding Scheme

The researcher used thematic analysis for data coding as the flexibility of the approach allows researchers to take either an inductive or deductive approach to coding information contained within the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, in this study, the researcher utilized a bottom up approach for identifying codes and themes within the data set (Patton, 1990 as cited by Braun & Clarke, 2006). A bottom up approach describes a process where the researcher mines the entire data set for closely related themes without applying a theoretical framework. Therefore, the process of coding is data driven.

The codes identified during the initial stages of data analysis were pedagogical practice, administrative inputs, school infrastructure, public versus private education, student behavior, and challenges with speaking English. However, the main codes informing the findings of the research are pedagogical practice, administrative inputs, and school infrastructure. Findings are limited to these three codes since the quality of education provided by schools is not dependent on individual factors, such as an individual student's behavior or one teacher's concerns about their own level of English proficiency, but rather several compounding factors that can be described by the concepts of pedagogical practice, administrative inputs, and school infrastructure. Additionally, these factors are interrelated because administrative inputs influence teachers' approaches to pedagogy, thereby determining teachers' pedagogical practice. Furthermore, research indicates pedagogical practice as impactful to students' learning outcomes

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Guerriero, 2014; Entz, 2007). School infrastructure impacts teachers' ability to effectively utilize the classroom to maximize student learning and is influential on students' and teachers' comfort in the learning space (Cai, 2021; West & Meier, 2020; Ojonubah, 2015).

Accordingly, Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that in thematic analysis, initial codes may form the main theme, others form the sub themes, and still others get discarded. In the case of this research a few initial codes did form the main theme, as they were determined to be the most organized way to present and interpret the results of the study. Codes corresponding to challenges with speaking English, students' behavior, and public versus private education will not be presented or interpreted. Presentation of these themes would muddy the intention and purpose of this research.

The first theme, administrative input, focuses on instances in which participants discussed professional development and training opportunities offered by school administration. Data extracts supporting this code were grouped. The same approach was taken with pedagogical practice, which is a collate of data points related to LA's academic environment and teachers' approaches to lesson planning and pedagogy. The third theme of school infrastructure refers to data centered on classroom context and class sizes.

Researcher Positionality

Consideration of researcher positionality is important when conducting research as "positionality reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" ((Darwin Holmes, 2020, p. 2). Most of my educational career was done in the United States of America. I moved from Jamaica to United States at 11 years old. I remember being told

the motive for the move to the U.S. was so I would have access to better quality of education and life.

In 2022, I first visited Nepal and observed a similar mentality. It was a shock, living in Nepal and observing the trend of outward migration motivated by a desire for improved quality of life. This is the trend in Nepal. Most of my friends in Nepal plan on or nurse desires of migrating abroad. However, as an individual who migrated from their country of birth, I wish I did not have to. In the pursuit of improved quality life, some of us who migrate lose our personal grounding and connections to our culture. I believe this consequence of migration should be better highlighted.

Limitations

Even though teachers were required to possess English speaking competency, language was a limitation of the study. While it was never the researcher's expectation that participants were perfect speakers of English, several instances arose in which participants did not understand interview questions. The researcher assumed that it may be possible participants were not clear on the framing of the question being asked. In these instances, the researcher reframed the question utilizing simpler language and was often successful. On the chance that the researcher was not successful even with reframing of the interview question, the researcher moved on to the next interview question.

Another significant challenge to participant recruitment was self-selection bias. In research, self-selection bias becomes a limitation as participants electing not to participate can be a barrier to sample representativeness (Glen, n.d.). Self-selection bias was likely present in this study due to the fact that in October most schools and businesses, government and private, are closed to celebrate traditional Nepalese holidays, Vijaya Dashami, Deepawali, and Chhat

Festivals. During the festival season it is typical for the Nepalese people to return to the rural parts of Nepal to celebrate with their families. LA was also closed in observance of the holidays. For these reasons amongst others unknown to the research, participants were more inclined to opt out of participation. As participation was voluntary, the researcher tried to mitigate these challenges by utilizing in person and well as electronic recruitment methods. A third limitation corresponds to the timing of participant recruitment which occurred during the administration of terminal exams at LA. For this reason, participants were less likely to volunteer to be participate as a result of giving priority to examination duties.

Findings

Administrative Inputs

Administrative leadership is influential on students' academic achievements, school objectives, and teachers' development. As Mayer et al. (2000) posit, "pervasive and sustained student learning is more likely to occur in schools with leadership" (p. 38). Two questions in the interview protocol ('In what ways are you supported by school leadership, either personally or professionally?' and 'What do you view as opportunities for professional development at the institution?') directly inquired about school administration's approach to leadership. However, there were other instances in which participants were questioned on the support they could expect from school administrators based on improvements or tasks they expressed wanting to accomplish.

Mayer et al. (2000) state that "in quality schools, an individual or group of individuals takes responsibility to provide school leadership, assemble faculty with the skills to achieve school goals, provide direct support for those teachers, and make teaching and learning a main preoccupation around which everything else revolves" (p. 38). Brolund (2016) positions that,

"instructional leadership is a model of school leadership in which a principal works alongside teachers to provide support and guidance in establishing best practices in teaching" (p. 1). School leaders exhibiting positions incongruous to the tenets of instructional leadership are in effect reducing the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the school.

Moreover, instructional leadership is not the responsibility of only principals as power and influence is shared amongst administrators (Mayer et al., 2000). For instance, at the site where this research was conducted, the administrative staff is composed of academic deans, an administrative head, the principal, and school founders. It is the responsibility of these individuals to ensure teachers are supported and provided access to high quality resources.

The data collected from participants does not describe an institutional culture that is supportive of teachers nor encouraging of teaching practices grounded in evidenced-based research. Interviews conducted with participants described an environment that is detrimental to teachers' and students' success. For example, Participant 4, the only administrator who participated in the study, described approaches she shared with teachers for them to increase classroom engagement, but the measures were not implemented due to resources constraints. The researcher asked, "Do you think administration would support or provide the tools teachers need to be able to do some of those things?" Participant 4, replied, "No! No! The administration they do not give us, we have to provide ourselves. We can ask student only, supposed tomorrow you just bring apple, we will share it"[1]. The situation described by Participant 4 depicts a context in which the institution cannot be relied upon for providing instructional materials and as a result teachers are not receiving the support they need to engage effectively with classes. It also illustrates an environment where teachers have the strategies but lack the resources for

[1] In all direct quotes, the researcher preserved participants language rather than impose their own personal grammar rules on participants self-expression.

implementation. The same participant details further instances in which they approached other members of the administrative staff at LA with suggestions of improving the library; however, they were advised by administration not to proceed. Participant 4 stated, “Suppose I want to do this and that for the betterment, then they discourage me. Let’s leave it. You cannot do.” Participant 4’s response illustrates an academic environment in which teachers’ efforts are rejected even when they make the initiative. Participant 4 observed that students, “From class 2 to 5, I’m telling all the time they feel bored with reading the same book. Teaching method is not changed.” Participant 4 observed a need and offered solutions motivated by the understanding that “we have to update ourselves.” Brolund (2016) supports Participant 4’s claim, stating “instructional leaders support teachers to improve their practice by giving them access to the resources that they require, coaching them and mentoring them, and providing professional development opportunities, both formal and informal” (p. 1). Without access to quality resources teachers are limited in what they may accomplish in the classroom.

The interviews conducted with participants illustrate an environment where teachers are discouraged and do not receive mentorship or professional development whether formal or informal. For example, in response to the question, “What improvement would you like to be made at LA?”, Participant 4 stated, “Teachers time to time, they [should] get training. Training also needed because if you sharp each and everything, it writes nicely. That’s why we need some trainings each and every term. Yes! So, the teachers, they need little training, for that, also checking their result also, output also. The admission they must have to do. That also not done.” Participant 6, teaching at the secondary level, shared a similar experience stating,

> "I must say, so far I don't think, I don't see any professional development and professional development strategies. So, there is no, no, I must say no! There is not any kind of professional development strategies that the institution is applying so far."

Posing a follow up question, the researcher asked Participant 6, "And has the school taken steps to motivate teachers?" The participant responded stating, "And again, I must say no!" When, Participant 5, teaching at the secondary level, was asked, "So, are there any processes or, like ways of doing things that you believe could be done better to improve the experience in the school for teachers or student?" Participant 5 explained,

> "The thing which I am feeling lacking in our school is that they are not providing training for us. If they provide training then, if they will monitor whether we are doing according to that training or not, the teaching will be more effective, for us also for the student also. We can improve oursel[ves] through that [training] we can help our student also, which is nice."

The researcher followed up with the question, "Why isn't there training?" Participant 5 answered,

> "I don't know. They can get training for teaching, to give us more knowledge, more ideas. But that kind of training I am not getting. Not only me, maybe other teachers also. Although I am working there for six years and two years there was coronavirus, lockdown. We taught online class but for four years also, there was no training. How much we learn privately that much only. From the school we are not getting anything."

This participant's statement that they are not receiving any training or other professional development truly indicates an environment lacking without a clear vision regarding the purpose of the school. According to duPlesis (2013), creating a vision for improving student achievement

is a critical responsibility of instructional leaders. Similarly, Brolund (2016) argues instituting a vision and creating goals help guide schools toward greater student achievement. Entz furthers Brolund's (2016) assertion positioning that

> "Articulating desired outcomes, setting benchmarks, and establishing various types of standards are important steps in designing a quality educational program, but they are not enough. To achieve the desired results, particularly with the most challenging students, the teaching process itself needs to be examined" (Entz, 2007, p. 2).

Participant 5 explains, however, that during the coronavirus pandemic, teachers did not receive much support from LA's administration. It is widely agreed that the pandemic was a challenging time for educators and students across the globe. From participants' accounts it is understood that they were responsible for ensuring they had the technological resources required for online instruction. What the participant describes is a situation in which teachers are not positioned for success. Participant 1, teaching at the primary level at LA, was asked "Can you describe your experience during COVID? How did the school support you?" They stated, "Yeah, at that time we did that online class, yes. And online class, then we get half salary from school. We took class from ten to one o'clock. Work also hard salary also hard." Participant 3 teaching at the secondary level at LA expressed similar sentiments, stating that "In COVID time only online education we are doing at that time, very difficult to run a school also. How can we run even school in the pandemic time?"

These accounts of participants illustrate school leadership's poor approaches to pedagogy. The COVID-19 pandemic was especially challenging and disruptive to the educational landscape. Administrative leadership and support are crucial during challenging times, yet it was absent. Participant 5 stated,

> "Actually, the school didn't do anything. How much we did that is from our efforts only and luckily, I had the laptop. At least there was the laptop. So, with the help of the laptop I was able to teach and before there was no internet in my house and they just announced that there would be online classes. Then I was too much worried about how to manage with our internet. So, for a few days I went to the school, and I taught from there, and for a few days I went to my mother's house. There is net, here was no net. So, I went there, from there also I taught. So, it was difficult in the beginning and later we learned ourselves."

For teachers to do their jobs effectively, they require a variety of materials and resources. It is the role of instructional leadership to ensure teachers are prepared with what they need to adopt effective approaches to pedagogy ("Four Instructional leadership Skills", 2015 as cited in Brolund, 2016). As Nepal is generally a low-income country, there is a greater chance teachers did not possess these resources before the pandemic and would struggle to attain them. Technologies, specifically internet access and computers play an important role in the school environment. Likewise, they are used in a variety of ways in school environments, therefore it is unsurprising technologies are impactful to student learning (Mayer et al., 2000). Based on the tenet of instructional leadership, it is the responsibility of the administrative team to provide support for teachers in their teaching practice, professional development, and resource management (duPlessis, 2013; Hansen & Làrudsóttir, 2015; Salo et al., 2014 as cited in Brolund, 2016). Participant 6 however, indicates that administration does not have the qualification to be leaders,

> "Management I find is not consistent. Is not consistent, okay! Because the people in the management are not well qualified and professional. They should have at least, those

> sitting in the chairs of management, they should have at least attend MPHIL or PhD from the university. But the people who are sitting in management are not qualified to be frank, and not professional. They're just running after the money, the profit, the business. They are doing the business. They are not educating the children. They are not making them learn well, so they are running after the profit."

Participant 4, a member of the administrative team, indicates the school's founders,

> "are just invest[ing] their money, during starting time only. After that, all the time that pencils, stationary things also paid by parents only. And here is a compulsion in private schools we have to manage that stationary also. Compulsory we have to buy from school only, not outside."

Participant 4 describes a situation in which the school exploits parents through a practice called tied selling, in which procurement of service is dependent on the purchase of another service. Parents enroll their students in school and must purchase stationary materials from the school. The practice of tied-selling is a problem for parents as the institutions increase the price. In such a situation, while parents could purchase supplies externally at a lower cost, due to tied-selling, they have to purchase materials from the school directly at the price they dictate.

The purpose of instructional leadership is to focus "on practices and strategies that support the improvement of teaching and learning" (Le Fevre, 2021). Instructional leadership impacts what takes place in the classroom and if leadership does not provide quality resources or develop teachers' talent, they are not in a condition that allows for engagement with effective pedagogical methods (Le Fevre, 2021). Similarly, effective instructional leaders coach and mentor teachers; the rationale being that teachers receiving informal or formal training are more likely to practice new skills and implement them in their classrooms (Carraway & Young, 2014).

Brolund (2016) argues that it is characteristic of principals in high achieving schools to create opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and implement informal training for teachers to work together on developing best teaching practices. Together formal and non-formal opportunities enable teachers to create connections between theory and practice (Brolund, 2016).

The role of instructional leadership in the school is to support, mentor, and provide opportunities for teachers to excel in the classroom. However, participants' recounts indicate they are overworked and burdened by the schooling process. Lacking access to proper instructional materials and leadership, teachers take a rudimentary approach to pedagogy, doing their best with the resources present. A schooling environment providing teachers with less than basic support does not enable effective pedagogical in classrooms or high student achievement.

Pedagogical Practices

Pedagogical practices, specifically lesson planning, provides teachers with the necessary guidance for them to be effective instructors in the classroom (Effective Pedagogical Practices, n.d.). Similarly, curriculums implemented in schools can be described by their content (what is taught in the classroom), pedagogical practices, instructional materials, and classroom (class size, for instance) (Mayer et al., 2000). Support (2019) states that lesson planning helps to make lessons clear and maintains students' attention, capturing their participation and interest. While there are other methods of engaging students in the class, lesson plans help teachers utilize time, resources, materials, and techniques at an optimum level (Support, 2019). Furthermore, lesson planning is crucial to the pedagogical process because teachers without deep seated understanding of lesson plan design, are essentially, "sailors on a boat without a rudder" (Iqbal et al., 2021, p. 1). Knowledge of learning theories not only empowers teachers in varying their

pedagogical approaches, but they are also advantageous, enabling teachers to be flexible and confident leaders in classrooms.

Participants were asked about theories used for structuring their approach to lesson planning. Responses indicated lesson plans were not framed by theoretical approaches and participants could be described as having a rudimentary understanding of lesson plan design. In general, participants expressed only identifying lesson outcomes and required instructional material. However, if the steps of lesson planning were to be listed, the first step is identifying learning outcomes. The second is lesson plan development, the third step is determining methods of assessment, the fourth step is identifying required resources, and the final step is evaluation (Support, 2019). Participants were only able to describe the first and fourth stages of lesson planning.

For instance, Participant 3 was asked, "How do you develop your lesson plan? Can you tell me your process?" Participant 3 explained that,

> "Generally, the thing I want to teach and can be completed in one period. Those things I will complete here, what are the object[ives] of that lesson. What are the sources we can get that kind of information and which kind of material we can use here and which purpose."

As indicated, Participant 3 indicates taking an approach that is predominately materials-focused and that requires lessons to be completed in one period. These comments are cause for concern as traditional teaching practice is unable grasp students' attention.

Participants 2 and 8, both of whom are primary teachers, were asked, "How do you make lesson plans? What theories do you use?" Participant 2 expressed that lesson plans were made, "Weekly. We'll make weekly!" Participant 8 expressed a similar pattern having stated, "Weekly.

Then what kinds of teaching materials, we need we have to maintain over there also. And we have to bring that teaching materials also and we have to slow the children also." While the researcher was able to ascertain the frequency with which lesson plans are created, the participants' account does not indicate teachers take a theory-based approach to lesson development. Iqbal et al. (2021) indicate that, "theory-based lesson plan[ning], seating arrangement in the classroom, monitoring class activities, and teaching experience are essential for designing and implementing lesson plans in the classroom" (p. 1). Teachers prepared with a well-designed lesson plan are well-prepared not only to adequately respond to challenges arising in classrooms but also to take a reflexive teaching approach in which teachers engage the whole person (Duarte & Fitzgerald, 2005). Effective educators employ a reflexive approach for developing understandings on what student's actual learning needs will be and including what is necessary for developing understanding (*Effective Pedagogical Practices*, n.d.). These educators continually assess student performance to understand how students are progressing and what is necessary for continued progression (*Effective Pedagogical Practices*, n.d.).

Mayer et al. (2020) discuss the concept of the implemented curriculum. The implemented curriculum describes content from the intended curriculum that is actually presented to students. In addition, aspects of the implemented curriculum are influential to school quality, specifically curriculum content, pedagogical practices, educational resources (such as technology), and the school context in which the curriculum is implemented. As previously mentioned, education quality is the measure of multiple compounding factors. Thus far participants have described poor instructional leadership, inadequate approaches to lesson planning, and subsequently poor curriculum implementation. Therefore, if education is the sum of its parts, the parts of education at LA indicate it is of poor quality.

School Infrastructure

According to Ambrose (2010, as cited in Classroom Climate | Center for Teaching Innovation (n.d.), classroom dynamics can support or inhibit students' motivation. Moreover, students and teachers learning and teaching in overcrowded learning environments are in distressing situations (Cai, 2021). In addition, students' learning outcomes can be significantly impacted by their learning environment. And as Participant 5 explains,

> "Because of the number of students. It is little bit difficult to make them attentive in the class. The students who are in front of me they will listen to me and who are behind they will not listen. They will be talking; they will be shouting and we have to shout. Yes or not? And the class will be more noisy. There will be nois[e] because of more students. And [when] there will be less student, the noise will be less."

The challenge Participant 4 describes occurring is unsurprising as an impact of overcrowding in the classroom is that it reduces students' ability to pay attention and increases issues of incivility (Cai, 2021). When Participant 4 was asked, "What can you say about class sizes?" The participant stated, "Class sizes is not good, really. This simply, it's very congested and the desk, bench is not a suited for them also." In addition, Participant 4 explains teachers and students do not have space to move freely in classrooms because,

> "the room is also so congested and they have to keep 20, 20 students we can see them individual, but they are keeping more than 25, 30. And if you keep 20, the Admin says here only 15 or 10 are paying and half not paying. They are in (receiving) scholarship[s], so we have to keep anyhow 30 students. It's our compulsion, anyhow we have to keep 30 students."

The context of the classroom environment is influential to students especially younger, minority and disadvantaged students who learn better in smaller classes (Mayer et al., 2000). Participant 5 however indicated,

> while [students] are doing the work also it is very, very uncomfortable for them also, me also I'm thinking. It is traditional, because only the teachers they just see and they cannot move here and there. We cannot check individually. They do not know; we do not know about our children, how they are doing."

Another participant indicated that they experience challenges related to class size. Participant 6 states,

> "So, class sizes in the institution. It's not let's say it's not good. Okay. Not spaces, I mean not wide enough to adjust 30 and more than 30 students, okay." Moreover participant 6 states, "there is no good air conditioning, I mean in the classrooms are not aired. Hoina [NO?], not aired. Okay. And the teachers are presenting for example, the teachers are presenting their things in a particular classroom and that is disturbing the other classes."

Functional class spaces and learning environment are crucial for engaged learning environments. Additionally, research shows teachers lacking adequate workspaces performed significantly lower than those did not (Cai, 2021; West & Meier, 2020).

Discussion

Effective pedagogical practices are grounded in research-based teaching techniques and depend on high quality resources. Furthermore, quality instructional leadership allows teachers to create classroom environments in which students are challenged, engaged, and feel safe taking risks (*Effective Pedagogical Practices*, n.d.). The pedagogical or instructional approach teachers engage with in classrooms are impactful to students' attention, learning, and long-term

knowledge retention (Baker & Robinson, 2017). When teachers lack understanding of the relevant theories and techniques necessary for guiding their classroom approach, they are not able to teach at an optimal level (Baker & Robinson, 2017). From interviews, participants' description of LA is indicative of an environment that is lacking proper administrative leadership and support, educational resources, teachers engaging with theory-based lesson planning, and professional development opportunities. Furthermore, these factors compounded with poor classroom climate present barriers to the provisioning of quality school education at LA.

The quality of education provided by this private institution is especially concerning as GoN is relying on decentralization for managing education and for providing systems for marginalized ethnic groups to be active in decision-making processes by way of a federal democratic governance. The country's social stratification due to the caste system, however, confers advantage to elites who are ideally placed to capture educational reform such a decentralization (Edward, 2011; Usui, 2007). Moreover, the government of Nepal is unable to finance education for all as governance lacks the technical capacity for effectively implementing legislatures and managing public finances (Nepal Economic Forum, 2020; Shrestha, 2019). The impact therefore of implementing decentralization under these conditions is that the policy instead promotes competition for advancing the economy and increases in the number of private schools in Nepal. Parents will therefore have to rely on private schools for quality education as they have lost faith in the public education system. Although the quality of education in private schools is questionable, private education is perceived to be better quality because the English language is the medium of instruction. Although the education provided by private schools is questionable, and private education is costly, parents who can afford a private education will opt for the additional benefit that their child will speak English (Poudel, 2022).

While this research does not necessarily indicate that decentralization has not contributed to improving education quality in Nepal, it does suggest that the quality of education in private schools urgently needs improving. In the section below, I offer suggestions for improving the quality of education in Nepal. Even though founders and administrators of private schools may have the cultural capital to open a school, this research indicates they may not possess the capacity to be effective instructional leaders, provide teachers with the tools they need to plan lessons, and ensure learning-appropriate classroom environments.

Implications

Even though the right to quality education is internationally recognized, specific internationally proposed standards or norms describing the quality of service students can expect while completing primary and secondary education is not available (Attfield & Vu, 2013). Nonetheless, learners have the right to an education of good quality ("Minimum Standards for Education," 2010). So, while education quality is the result of several interrelating and compounding factors, it is also true that education quality varies based on the priorities and the values of stakeholders. It is necessary to establish minimum standards for schools to ensure all learners in Nepal have access to education of acceptable quality. Therefore, the researcher proposes Nepal mandate organizations PABSAN and NPABSAN require all private schools develop and maintain Fundamental School Quality Levels (FSQL) to facilitate the improvement education quality. The purpose of standards is for ensuring schools support meaningful learning and development of core competencies. Similarly, establishing minimum standards in conjunction with decentralization of investments, resource allocation, and robust accountability measures is feasible by raising awareness on issues such as quality and utilizing school report cards (Attfield & Vu, 2013).

As indicated by the World Bank (2011) standards are an integral aspect of schooling and are crucial to supporting enhanced systems of accountability. Furthermore, the use of educational standards, particular minimum thresholds, are widely utilized in both resource advantaged and disadvantaged contexts (Attfield & Vu, 2013). Additionally, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) supports that international minimum standards have been developed for provisioning education during humanitarian crises (INEE, 2010). Likewise, Mourshed et al. (2010) identified that transitioning all schools to minimum standards is a key strategy utilized in low-income contexts for improving school systems from poor to fair.

FSQL is a flexible instrument with standards defined by themes, each with a limited list of requirement statements (Attfield & Vu, 2013). The FSQL standards proposed in this capstone paper are based on the themes of school administrative inputs, pedagogical practice, and school infrastructure. The objective of the FSQL is to capitalize on accepted measures of setting school standards in Nepal, adjusting those standards, making them obtainable for a majority of schools and proposing to gradually raise them over time (Attfield & Vu, 2013). To bring schools to minimum standards, initial evaluations must be conducted in order to ensure equitable and efficient allocation of resources. Data collected can be managed an interpreted using either or both data management tools EMIS and SABER (Van Wyk & Crouch, 2020; *Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER)*, n.d.). School report cards can be issued to all schools after data collected from annual school audits are analyzed and interpreted. It is important data collected is triangulated to ensure the validity of the information before conclusions are decided upon (“Minimum Standards for Education,” 2004).

To operationalize FSQL, annual school audits can be conducted for benchmarking and measuring progress in quality inputs relating to the themes previously mentioned and

corresponding key indicators. Audits are conducted for measuring schools' attainment of minimum quality standards and enable information-based planning and monitoring of inputs and outcomes. Additionally, data from yearly audits are utilized by local governments, development partners such as The World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and schools for providing insights to the schooling education process.

Recommendations

Themes	Requirement details	Key Indicators
Mobilizing schools' implementation of minimum standards	• Minimum standards are to be set for schools/students and to be complemented by frequent assessment of student learning • Monitoring systems such as EMIS and or SABER are utilized for collecting and analyzing initial and annual assessments of schools to continually measure progress against FSQL standards and for determining program relevance • All schools must be equipped with basic learning and technology resources	• Private Schools are audited yearly, gaps between minimum standard and indictors are described along with what is attained. In addition, the reason for gaps must be explained and what is necessary to realize the standard described • All stakeholders are included in the process of determining minimum standards with an eye towards regularly improving minimum standards set • PABSON AND NPABSAN are mandated to

		require all private schools develop a FSQL plan
Administrative inputs	• Annual professional development training and curriculum coaching is provided for principals, academic deans, administrative heads (vice principal), and head subject teachers • Collaboration amongst teacher is fostered and supported • Regular visits from government officials from the central office are organized for motivating administrators, teachers, and students	• Teaching and learning are centered on essential school factors (curriculum, training, instruction, assessment) that promotes effective teaching and learning
Teachers (Pedagogical practices)	• All teachers must meet the minimum qualification requirements • Teachers possess basic qualification working with children from diverse backgrounds, including children with disabilities. • Annual theme based and continuing in service training for at least five days at 8 hours per day on relevant classroom management strategies and effective pedagogical practices	• Teachers are engaging with theory based lesson planning in classrooms • Teachers meet or surpass minimum qualifications • Teachers are regularly receiving training and professional development
Students	• Students basic needs are fulfilled, and administration ensures students are present in class • Student to teacher ratio does not exceed 1 teacher per 20 students	• Sufficient resources are available to ensure continuity, equity, and quality of services

		• Absenteeism is reduced
School Infrastructure	• Classrooms must be spacious, with adequate furniture and natural lighting • Classroom temperature is monitored/regulated to avoid either hot or cold temperature extremes • Space is available for teachers' instructional materials • Students' have sufficient space to work	• Learning environments are comfortable for students to work collaboratively and engage in educational activities

Conclusion

Supranational organization such as The World Bank and International Monetary Fund are aware that effective implementation of decentralization, especially devolution and fiscal decentralization, depends upon good governance, accountability, and autonomy (Nakatani et al., 2022; Prud'homme, 1995; Rodinelli, 1999; *Decentralization in Nepal*, n.d.). These three key concepts are widely absent in Nepal due to inadequate and weak governance at all levels but especially at the local level, where decentralization is dependent on competent governance. Nonetheless, economic logic supporting decentralization explains that politicians are accountable to their electorate through democratic measures such as voting and paying taxes. However, in a society in which the caste system is as institutionalized as racism in the United States of America, why would decentralization be effective?

Decentralization however can be effective, if Nepal mandates that all schools (public and private) establish minimum standards with an eye towards making continuous improvements and upgrading them. Similarly, government capacity must be continuously developed, and accountability measures strengthened to ensure accountability and good governance. Further,

standards are necessary as they inspire stakeholders confidence that quality of education students receive aid in the development of skilled and competent autonomous beings ("Minimum Standards for Education," 2010). Finally, minimum standards are based on the understanding that individuals have the right to a life with dignity.

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Appendix A:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1.How many years of professional teaching experience do you have?

2.How long have you been a teacher at Loyalty Academy?

3.What has been your greatest success as a teacher at Loyalty Academy?

4.What advance degrees do you have? What academic qualifications were required of you to teach at Loyalty Academy?

5.How many years have you taught in private schools, in public school?

6.If you have taught in both how do the experiences differ?

7.What have you found to be the most rewarding aspects of your teaching experience at Loyalty Academy?

8.What have you found to be the most challenging aspects of being a teacher at Loyalty Academy?

9.What improvements would you like to be made at the Loyalty Academy?

10.What can you say about class sizes?

11.How would you describe students behavior during lessons?

12.In what ways are you supported by school leadership, either personally or professionally?

13.What do you view as opportunities for professional development at Loyalty Academy?

14.What educational resources are available to you?

15.How do you make use of these resources?

16.Do you develop lesson plans? What is your process of doing so?

17.What guidance do you use for developing lesson plans?

18.What can you say about the rigor of the academic curriculum?

19.What measures are used to evaluate students learning?

20.How often are these measure or measures administered?

21. At which grade level do you teach?

22.What subject/s are you qualified to teach?

23.What can you say about the class sizes in the current grade that you teach?

24.What is average number of students in your class?

25.How do class sizes impact how you lesson plan?

26.What do you believe are signs of quality education?

27.What is your opinion on private schools in Nepal?

28.How well are students ethnic identity reflected in the curriculum or lesson plans?

29.What is the social background of parents who are able to afford private school education?

30.In what ways does the education provided by Loyalty Academy prepare students for life out of school?

31.Are you satisfied with your renumeration? If yes, can you explain why and if no can you explain why not?