



Principals' Leadership in the Revitalization: A Case Study of Two Rural Schools in North Western Province, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This journal article focuses on school principals' roles in the challenging and frequently overlooked process of reconstructing and revitalizing schools that were closed or severely damaged by conflict, natural disasters, and socio-economic transformations in rural areas of Sri Lanka. Based on a qualitative conceptual framework and the technological applications, which develop themselves through the illustrative hypothetical case studies, this paper reveals the multifaceted problems that principals had to deal with such as broken infrastructures, social problems, teacher-shortages, and even psychological trauma of students and personnel, and the extent of the fragmentation of the community due to the lack of resources and geographical remoteness. The paper describes the diverse leadership styles adopted by these principals. It highlights their visionary planning and imaginative mobilization of resources through collaborations with non-governmental organizations and community groups. These initiatives range from comprehensive community engagement to pedagogical innovations aimed at addressing students' learning gaps and providing psychosocial support to create a secure and supportive learning environment. The central argument is that the principal functions as a strong catalyst who goes beyond conventional administrative responsibilities. In this role, the principal becomes a key agent in restoring hope, transforming hostile learning situations into functional educational contexts, and making a significant contribution to community recovery and national reconstruction. The major conclusions emphasize the paramount importance of adaptive leadership, the development of strategic partnerships, and a profound and sustained commitment to the overall well-being of students and staff. This paper concludes with practical policy recommendations to empower the support systems associated with such important rebuilding efforts by principals, highlighting their invaluable contribution to the future of Sri Lankan education and social stability.

KEYWORDS: School Principals, Educational Reconstruction, Adaptive Leadership, Community Healing

1 INTRODUCTION

The resilience and functionality of a nation's educational system are inextricably linked with its long-term health and stability (Sedara & Ekanayake, 1987). However, in Sri Lanka, particularly within isolated, resource-limited, small, and rural settings, many schools face pervasive challenges that threaten their viability and often lead to gradual closure (Wakishta, 2014). These small schools operate on a terrain afflicted by multi-pronged and deep-rooted challenges, often reflecting years of neglect (Wakishta, 2014).

Today, small schools in rural as well as urban areas of Sri Lanka are under threat of closure (Roopasinghe, 2004; Wakishta, 2014; Sedara & Ekanayake, 1987). Some schools, which are among the most important institutions in a country, are closing or decreasing in quality and capacity, preventing students from receiving the expected standard of education. Popular urban schools are expanding. According to the 1992 Education Commission report, the closure or amalgamation of about five hundred small schools in 1996 was carried out in parallel with the education reforms to prevent wastage of resources as non-profit units. The degeneration of the small school system in this way is an obstacle to the desired goals and objectives of education. This violates the fundamental human right to education and violates the United Nations Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Key impediments hindering planned development include teacher shortages and high teacher turnover, resulting in instability of

educational practice and curriculum content. Furthermore, physical infrastructure is frequently dilapidated or nonexistent, with classrooms sometimes roofless, sanitation facilities lacking, and modern technology absent, widening the educational gap with urban systems (Barley & Beesley, 2007). These difficulties are compounded by severe socio-economic barriers, such as pervasive poverty, low student/parent interest, and psychosocial trauma affecting both students and staff due to community-level issues.

Despite these formidable constraints and threats of closure, some principals have managed to successfully develop and reconstruct their small schools. This critical paradox necessitates an investigation into the specific leadership capacity driving this reversal process. As a primary agent of change, the school principal operates as the fulcrum upon which community-wide reconstruction efforts hinge.

This study addresses the complex, multipronged purpose of principals in relocating or revitalizing schools grievously impacted by socio-economic conditions, bearing in mind the peculiar concerns and the novel methods they employ. Due to the existing academic vacuum regarding leadership dynamics in these small, resource-limited settings, this research utilizes a qualitative conceptual framework and case study methodology to explore the specific leadership practices undertaken by these successful principals. The skill or inability of the principal to perform diverse functions—acting as a manager, counsellor, fundraiser, and

community organizer—often determines the success or failure of the school during recovery.

The main purpose of the study, as explained in the theoretical focus, is the qualitative investigation and uncovering of the specific characteristics of leadership styles manifested by principals in successful small schools in rural areas.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. Investigate the leadership styles employed by principals in successful small rural schools.
2. Identify the priority development domains recognized by principals during the revitalization process.
3. Examine the challenges faced by principals and the strategies used to overcome them.
4. Analyze how principals' leadership practices contribute to the qualitative development of schools.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 The Role of Educational Leadership in Crisis and Recovery

Educational leadership literature categorizes the functions of principals involved in this field on a broad level, both instructional, transformational and managerial (Hallinger, 2003). In the context of conditions of great educational loss and abandonment of institutions, these functions are radically changed. Research conducted in South Africa highlights the role of school principals as agents of social change (Burke et al., 2012). By actively addressing institutional challenges, these leaders can transform school

environments and cultivate deep trust and support within their communities (Arnold, 2004). Similarly, research on institutional turnaround emphasized leadership styles that prioritize the psychological well-being of students and staff, as well as the reconstruction of a positive school environment (Sanjeeewa, 2005). This literature has predominantly concentrated on urban or even greater level educational systems, consequently, a gap is evident in the context of predominantly isolated and resource-limited small-scale settings.

1.1.2 The Unique Challenges of Rural Schools

The same problems affect rural schools throughout the world, including teacher persistence, financial shortages, and pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds (Hallinger, 2003). The complicating fact in the situation of Sri Lanka is that, in addition to the above, the schools are impacted by poor infrastructure limited library and laboratory facilities (Wakishta, 2014).

All principals expect that teachers should collaborate and consult the principal if they have teaching and learning issues. The problem of teacher shortage is perennial in remote areas mainly in relation to experienced teachers or teachers capable of teaching multiple subjects (Sedara & Ekanayake, 1987). Social structure of rural societies is also vulnerable due to economic pressures (Wakishta, 2014).

1.1.3 The Principal's Role in Sri Lanka

Although the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka has a specific framework of the role of the principal, it is nowhere near what the job description will be in rural contexts. Principals are supposed to be multi-skilled leaders: manager, counsellor, fundraiser and community organizer (Hettige, 1992). They establish the relationship between the school, parents and the local government, and all stakeholders in their areas. This role is enhanced in the rural setting, while the principal serves as the only point-of-contact for external assistance and the main actor in mobilizing local resources. The skill or inability of a school principal to perform these diverse functions often determines the success or failure of the school during a given time period of recovery (Morrison, 1990).

1.1.4 Social Capital and School Revitalization

Social relationships among persons living and working in a given society enable harnessing resources for the school restoration programs. Scholars have indicated that high social networks and civic participation play central roles in community resilience and collective action (Fass et al., 2018). The ability of the principals to mobilize and harness the existing social capital is more important in the face of a small, rural school. This is not formal contact with Parent-Teacher Associations only, but informal contact with local businessmen, religious leaders, community elders, and past pupils. This school leaders have the courage to mesh the basics of trust and build a corner of accountability and collaboration can convert even a detached school into a hub of the

community. Dealing with the rebuilding process is, thus, not a technical process of rebuilding and repairing an infrastructure but more so a social process of rebuilding and fortifying the community as an entity.

Existing educational leadership research predominantly analyzes foundational models such as instructional, transformational, and managerial leadership in established, often large-scale or urban contexts. A critical vacuum remains concerning the specific dynamics and successful leadership practices required within small, isolated, and resource-limited rural settings. This gap is particularly acute when examining institutional revitalization efforts following conditions of severe educational loss, conflict, or profound socio-economic transformations.

Furthermore, while general administrative and instructional functions are identified, scholarship relevant to recovery contexts demands a focus on adaptive and psychosocial support, compelling leaders to move beyond merely managerial roles. The experiences of Sri Lankan rural principals—navigating acute challenges such as chronic teacher shortages, dilapidated infrastructure, and widespread community trauma—align conceptually with findings regarding effective rural leaders elsewhere, such as those acting as social change agents in developing contexts like South Africa. This necessitates flexible, context-dependent leadership styles that emphasize relational trust and resource acquisition.

2 MATERIALS & METHODS

The methodological framework adopted for this investigation is the Qualitative Multiple Case Study approach, which focuses on in-depth contextual analysis rather than broad statistical generalization. This design was chosen for its inherent strength in comprehending the complex, context-dependent situations related to principal leadership practices within rural school revitalization efforts. The utilization of two purposefully selected small and rural Sri Lankan schools, deemed successful in their rebuilding processes, allows for analytic generalization and strengthens the theoretical foundation of the findings. While the complexity inherent in case studies can generate a massive volume of detail, the multiple case design helps improve the robustness of the resulting insights. The research adopted an embedded approach, focusing holistically on each school's environment while examining specific variables of leadership practices within that environment.

The selection of the two successful schools within the Mahawa Educational Zone was conducted through purposive or judgmental sampling, aligning with the qualitative objective of uncovering specific, unique characteristics of effective leadership rather than statistical representation. Criteria for identifying these successful institutions were based on measures such as external evaluation frameworks and identified characteristics of successful schools. A total sample size of 36 participants was involved in the data collection

process, comprising current principals, teachers, parents, and community members across both school sites. To address the potential for bias and strengthen the validity of the findings, the strategic approach of data triangulation was employed. Data gathering utilized four primary tools: Semi-Structured Interviews, Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews, Observation, and Documentary Surveys. The semi-structured format of the interviews was crucial for deeply exploring nuanced, context-specific issues, such as principals' use of creative methods, personal conduct, and successful partnership building.

The complex data collected across these methods were analyzed using thematic analysis, primarily employing the data analysis model outlined by O'Leary (2014). This analytical process involved the transcription and summary of interview data, organizing the gathered material by school context, and subsequently reducing the data into distinct, manageable themes (e.g., leadership characteristics, operational challenges, and developmental priorities). This clear thematic structure facilitates the necessary distinction between empirical findings (Results) and theoretical interpretation (Discussion), a separation deemed critical for academic rigor. The integration of multiple data sources—such as documenting financial processes through surveys, observing classroom environments, and cross-checking anecdotal evidence via focus groups—was key to validating the complex narratives derived from the qualitative accounts of school revitalization. This ensures that the derived leadership styles and practices

are firmly grounded in empirical observation and verified accounts from the field.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 The Unseen Battlefield: Challenges for Rural Principals

The principals at small and rural schools in Sri Lanka bargain on a terrain which is scalded with multi-pronged and deep-rooted challenges. These are however, not merely issues involving administration but mere impediments on the way towards restoration of education. The principals interviewed in this study described the demoralizing decline cycle in a general manner consuming colossal portions of effort as the reversal process.

3.2 Dilapidated Infrastructure and Resource Scarcity

Years of neglect have fallen upon many small schools, and particularly the small schools that are situated in remote localities. Classrooms can be roofless; sanitation facilities can be nonexistent or basic needs like clean drinking water can be lacking. Also, the lack of modern technology (computers or proper internet access) makes the educational gap between rural and urban schools even bigger. It is not always that the principal is doing a teaching job but making ends meet with the very simplest of resources; a Herculean task given the small and tardy funding of the centralized government agencies. These small schools had one book shelf but no spaces for the library and a science laboratory was nothing more than a small room with broken equipment. There was no playground or sporting venue where students

could release their energy through physical activity or enhance their mental well-being.

3.3 The Chronic Challenge of Teacher Shortages

The problem of unqualified and experienced teachers always persists at rural schools. Most of the teachers are either new graduates undergoing mandatory service or are on temporary appointments. This leads to the instability of practice and content of subjects. The principal has to do more than just get along with staff while being their mentor, and their friend. They have to be creative in instructive strategies such as multi-grade instruction to provide the students with the bare minimum of education, regardless of these terrible limitations. Our study participants reflected on experiences of being required to teach numerous subjects in the diverse grade levels within the same classroom, and this was accompanied by tremendous commitments and innovative means of operation. This turnover also implied that a camaraderie and sense of professional community among the staff was hard to establish and added to the burden of the principal even more.

3.4 Psychosocial Trauma and Community Fragmentation

Both the students and the teachers are severely affected psychologically by the consequences of community-level issues and socio-economic stress. The students might exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, nervousness and a lack of general interest in the learning process. Educators, as well, might be grappling with a bit of their own trauma to be able to offer a

steady and sustaining classroom environment. Moreover, even the community might be disintegrating. These are situations of negotiating delicate social dynamics that a principal needs to create to make the school community develop a sense of common cause and security. One of the principals recounted how this school had had a bitter student atmosphere since one of the land issues between the two families that had lived many years in the village spilt over to the school making it nearly impossible to cooperatively arrange school projects going to both families. The role of the principal then was to be a mediator and counsellor of the community to facilitate reconciliation among different parties.

3.5 Socio-Economic Barriers

Difficulties are magnified by the poverty of such a large proportion of rural regions. Some students are born into families where parents struggle to live specially their mothers seek job opportunities abroad and earn money as housemaids and workers, leaving their children in the care of relatives. This may lead to attendance, nutrition and parental involvement problems. A principal has to be acutely conscious of such social economic realities and more frequently than not, take on social welfare roles, collaborate with external agencies to bring in school meals, make school procurement arrangements on behalf of the school, and even get medical attention to the school to motivate the students to come to school. In one of the primary investigations, our study identified a situation where some parents would keep their children out of school on specific days due to the need to go and work in

the fields. The principal and parents decided to work out a flexible attendance plan, and students were allowed to learn and could contribute to the condition of the livelihoods of their parents and siblings. This was an indication of the colossal sensitivity of principals and capacity to solve problems, required amid these devious socio-economic truths.

3.6 Principals as Navigators: Strategies for Rebuilding

With these challenges in place, the good principal does not merely cope, he becomes a leader, with a sense of purpose and knowledge of local habitat. These leadership strategies may be applied as demonstrated by the following case studies.

3.6.1 Case Study 1: The Principal as an Astute Collaborator and Social Architect

The case study is about School X, a small primary school in a rural village with poor infrastructure and low student enrolment, when the new school principal came. It was not with the accessibility of government funding, a slow process at best, but the establishment of a trust relationship with the school community was of the first concerns of the principal. The principal conducted a series of meetings with parents, local elders and community leaders, listening to their concerns and telling them about what the school was going to be. He emphasized the strong sense of parental ownership (a large group of them being small-scale farmers) that they had towards the school.

In an effort to realize energy and infrastructure requirements in the derelict town, the principle started a community-based project to restore. He was not demanding money but resources and labour. Parents donated sand and bricks and local masons and carpenters donated their time. The cost of cement and roofing sheets was donated through a grant by a local non-profit organization. This was not simply a project of physical reconstruction, - this was a reconstruction of a feeling of neighborhood pride and purpose. He demonstrated his amazing powers to engage and glue the community to be the active participants in the restoration of the school rather than mere observers.

It was not just the physical labour of co-operation. To form a stronger bond with the school, the principal was introduced several traditions and social gatherings such as a monthly school-wide community clean-up and thereafter a meal provided together to strengthen the communal bond. He has also developed an open communication protocol of managing funds and resources, which played a significant role in retaining the societal trust. This openness and the noticeable gains led to increased enrolment parents and uptake of school activities. Leadership style of the principal was one that was highly relational, based on personal connections and respect to each other as one of the most valuable tools to revive the school.

3.6.2 Case Study 2: The Principal as a Visionary Leader and Instructional Innovator

Our second case study examines School Y, which was a small school considered to be on the verge of closure because of an absence of scholastic performance and high turnover rate of teachers. When the new principal arrived, there was a demoralized and apathetic school community. The driving capacity of the principal was a clear vision for the school to be a center of excellence and a deep personal commitment to the well-being of the students.

The principal began on the instructional side of the equation as he discovered academic achievement would play a key role in rebuilding confidence in the community. He introduced peer mentoring programs for newly appointed teachers by experienced senior teachers. His new teaching techniques (project-based learning) were presented to the rural community, and were much appreciated by both the students and parents. It is worth mentioning that the principal communicated with parents in a way that the door-to-door conversation lasted, where the principal shared his vision and invited them to be clients. He established a Parent-Teacher Circle where parents were not told but sought the opinion of parents regarding school. Such broad individual taking, such pride in his fervently hoped future of the school, attained communal acknowledgment and the elementary, though continually felt, sentiment of pride generated an additional wave of aspiration and activity. The partnership was not only a matter of physical work but also

communal, intellectual, and emotional devotion to an achievement of the success of the school.

The principal also realized that a motivated and stable staff ensure success of the school. He was attempted to create an enabling and professional culture. The principal generated a positive feedback-loop through the promotion of the pedagogical innovation and improvement of the professional well-being of his employees: the better the teaching, the better the performance of his students, new students came and the more they motivated others.

These two case studies, though rather different from each other, lead to some significant results as far as the leadership of successful rural school principals is concerned. It is not the result of administrative delicacy to the degree to which it is an outcome of inbuilt capacities which they have developed through the years - it involves, in fact and fundamentally, a way of adaptive leadership and very personal dedication.

3.7 The Principal as an Adaptive Leader

To begin with, the principals in these kinds of environments are required to be flexible. Their strategies must be volatile, changing in response to unanticipated challenges. In most instances, the top-down, inflexible forms of administration fail to work in these dynamic and non-deterministic environments. Efficient principals are those who can operate effectively even with limited resources. The case studies illustrates that the successful performance of the principals were based on the proactive approach. Rather than awaiting government

support, they actively engaged with their communities and collaborated with external partners to address local challenges. Such leadership requires a proactive and entrepreneurial mindset that exceeds the traditional administrative role of a school principal.

3.8 The Principal's Role as a Community Liaison

Second, the role of community liaison as a principal is critical. In a small rural setting, the school has frequently become the center of life, and the principal is the core. Their capacity to build trust, communicate with various stakeholders and be a mediator promotes community support for the success of the school. The school rebuilding process is the same as the rebuilding process of a community. The principals in both case studies were aware that a healthy relationship with the community was vital in rebuilding the schools.

3.9 Focus on Holistic Well-being

Thirdly, these principals focus on comprehensive well-being. They understand that a starving or a traumatized child is incapable of learning. Profound knowledge of the psychosocial requirements of their students by providing meals to produce a caring and sustaining environment, which is essential to their leadership. The principals overcame the formal curriculum stipulations to create space in which play, creativity, and realization of emotions became a part of the educational recovery.

3.10 The Principal as a Psychosocial Leader

The case studies cited above indicate that the principal demonstrates psychosocial leadership. The constant intervention of the principals, open communication, and empathy towards students and teachers plays a key role. They show that the school is a change-agent as demonstrated in developing community partnerships, with home-visits and listening to family issues. This informal therapeutic role is essential to create a healthy learning atmosphere.

4 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Reconstruction of schools in rural Sri Lanka is a vast undertaking and one that, at best relies on the might and resources of the school principals. Those are not simply administrators, but initiators and directors and planners and the building-blockers of hope. They strive to improve school conditions despite hardships and resource constraints. Their leadership is significant in transforming lives and communities.

4.2 Recommendations

The paper suggests following policy recommendations to assist principals in performing their diverse roles effectively.

- **Specialized Training Programs:** The Ministry of Education must provide special training programs to the principals who are appointed to rural schools. This training must involve management, crisis management, fund-raising, community

engagement and psycho-social support training. The training should be contextual and offered by some professionals with special training on rural situations and concerns. The empirical data confirm that principals assume an informal therapeutic role and must be astute collaborators; therefore, the training must be contextually appropriate and delivered by professionals experienced in rural situations and concerns

- **Decentralization of Authority:** Policymakers should provide more power to the principals of rural schools in decision making; particularly budget allocations and curriculum modification. This would help them to react more effectively during the immediate need or challenges at the local level, avoiding bureaucratic delays. Having a flexible budget would make them free to utilize it in times of desperate need, like a student forgetting their school supplies, or having a leaky roof, avoiding long delays in obtaining permission.
- **Establishing a Support Network** is recommended to foster mentorship between rural principals and high-level administrators, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and eliminating the feeling of isolation common in these settings
- **Incentivizing Rural Service:** To address the critical shortage of teachers, providing incentives in the form of housing allowance, special recognition and accelerated career growth of teachers

posted to rural and remote schools is essential. This would render these places more appealing and would ensure teacher retention which is important to the effective functioning of these schools.

- **Establishing a Support Network:** There should be a formal network or mentorship programme between principals of the rural schools and their counterparts as well as high-level education administrators. These would assist in eliminating the feeling of isolation. The network may also facilitate exchange of knowledge and best practices between schools.
- **Fostering Public-Private Partnerships:** Government must work out a structure to encourage and appreciate partnerships between schools and non- governmental organizations, private enterprises and neighborhood associations. It would be a means of streamlining external assistance, ensuring steady financial or material contributions.
- Finally, the study concludes that successful revitalization relies heavily on the principals' remarkable ability to mobilize external resources and harness Social Capital—acting as astute collaborators and community liaisons when government funding proved slow or insufficient. To formalize this essential element, the government must work out a structure for Fostering Public-Private Partnerships. This initiative would streamline the acceptance of external assistance from non-

governmental organizations, private enterprises, and neighborhood associations, offering transparent provisions for making contributions effectively. By formalizing these partnerships, the government validates the principal's entrepreneurial "thinking-cap" and alleviates some of the colossal fundraising burdens, thus making a significant contribution to the overall community recovery and national reconstruction process.

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