



SCHOOL-LEVEL PLANNING: ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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In the context of Sri Lanka's shift toward decentralized education, school-level planning has become a cornerstone for improving school effectiveness and educational quality. School leadership plays a pivotal role in guaranteeing the success of such planning by aligning institutional goals with national educational priorities. School leaders must act not only as institutional managers but as systemic change agents capable of implementing long-term educational reforms. The Short Course on School Management, introduced by the Department of Educational Leadership and Management at the Open University of Sri Lanka, aimed to strengthen school principals' competencies in areas such as strategic planning, supervision, and evaluation. The primary purpose of this study was to examine how school leaders implement school-level planning, identify the challenges they face across various planning stages, and explore the strategies they adopt to overcome these obstacles. Employing a case study design, the research focused on 20 principals from the 5th batch of the short course. Data was collected through online questionnaires, focus group discussions, reflections, and document analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that while all principals engaged in one-year and five-year planning based on national guidelines, their efforts were frequently obstructed by financial constraints, inadequate stakeholder involvement, limited teacher capacity, and insufficient data systems. Despite these challenges, most principals adopted strategic, collaborative, and situationally appropriate approaches to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of planning processes. The study recommends greater investment in professional development, improved data infrastructure, and stronger community engagement to enhance school-level planning outcomes. These findings have implications for both policymakers and educational leaders striving to achieve equitable and context-relevant education across Sri Lanka.

Keywords: school leadership, educational planning, strategic planning, school management

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INTRODUCTION

School leadership plays a significant role in school management; it helps to improve students' academic achievement and increases teachers' professional development, ultimately improving the quality of education. According to Hansen (2010), school leaders must develop as professional leaders not only to build their own schools but also to consider the educational system as a whole to enact powerful systemic interventions at all levels of the educational system. School leadership has become the most important priority in education, and it plays a significant role in school outcomes. The Department of Educational Leadership and Management of the Faculty of Education, the Open University of Sri Lanka, introduced the short course in school management in 2022 for Principals to build and improve their managerial and leadership competencies for fostering their professional development to enhance the school's effectiveness. School-level planning was one of the important areas that were discussed through interactive learning pedagogy according to the above course.

Educational planning is a key part of educational management, especially in Sri Lanka, where schools are encouraged to take ownership of their development. This aligns with the National Education Commission's (NEC, 2020) focus on decentralization and school autonomy. By planning according to their specific needs, schools can improve educational quality and relevance. School-level planning is a long-term process, typically one to five years, aimed at guiding operations, fostering change, and promoting school improvement (Cuckle & Broadhead, 2003:230).

Planning refers to the systematic organization of work to achieve organizational objectives within a specified timeframe while making efficient use of limited resources. An organization must clearly define its goals, identify available resources, and determine the most appropriate course of action from available alternatives. In schools, limited stakeholder involvement weakens the planning process. Ineffective planning creates uncertainty, increases costs, and threatens the achievement of objectives. Despite policy shifts toward school-level planning, several challenges continue to hinder effective implementation. Studies indicate that a centrally designed national curriculum often does not meet the needs of all schools, especially those in rural areas, due to differences in resources, teacher training, and infrastructure.

This research examines school-level planning in selected schools with participants from a short course on school management, identifying factors that support or hinder its success. The study aims to show how planning can be adapted to local contexts to achieve educational objectives and strengthen school autonomy. The short course



aims to improve school leaders' competencies, enabling them to perform their roles effectively and implement quality educational practices to meet national goals.

Accordingly, the short course on school management was developed to achieve three (3) intended learning outcomes by the school leaders as follows.

1. To enhance knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards effective school management
2. To provide hands-on experience in the key areas of school management
3. To facilitate the application of skills, strategies, new trends, and innovations in school management

This course was offered fully online through interactive learning sessions conducted Zoom platform. The overall course consisted of eleven (11) activity-based sessions (Table -01) which were adapted to Scenario Based Learning (SBL) pedagogy.

Table 5:- Course outline of the Short Course on School Management (SCSM)

Session Number	Session Title	No. of hours
01	Educational Management Theory and Practices	06
02	School Leadership for the 21 st Century)	06
03	School-Based Planning and Implementation	06
04	School-Based Supervision and Monitoring	06
05	Evaluation and Assessment in the School	06
06	Human Resource Management in the School	06
07	Curriculum Management in the School	06
08	Conflict Management and Work Life Balance	06
09	Change Management	06
10	Financial Management in the School	06
11	ICT for Educational Leadership & Management	06
12	Final Evaluation (Oral Presentation)	06
Total Number of Hours		72



REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Role of School level planning

Planning is the process of anticipating the future and mapping out actions to achieve specific goals (Akpan, 2011). Effective school-level planning is crucial for enhancing educational quality and organizational success, requiring systematic arrangement of activities to achieve targeted objectives (MoE, Sri Lanka, 2020). A plan is described as the “design of a desired future” and forms the foundation for achieving a school’s vision and overall objectives (National Education Commission, 2016). Without careful planning, schools struggle to determine direction and realize their mission. Planning also underpins other leadership functions and is key to successfully implementing educational programs (Goodstein, 2011; Juwariah & Kurniatun, 2021).

Principal as Planner: The Principal’s Pivotal Role in School level Planning

Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger (2003) stated that school principals significantly influence student achievement, school climate, and organizational effectiveness, highlighting the importance of school-level planning and the principal’s leadership role in achieving educational goals. As the primary leader, the principal shapes students’ educational trajectories and ensures quality education through strategic planning. According to Pihillegedara and Kumari (2022), both principals and stakeholders share responsibility for developing goals and objectives to enhance school effectiveness. Lunenburg (2010) emphasizes that principals manage resources through four leadership functions: planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring. While principals lead the development of effective school plans, stakeholder participation is crucial to foster ownership and commitment, ensuring successful implementation, as illustrated by the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka (2020).

School-Level Planning and Educational Success

School planning provides direction for schools, helping improve education quality, reduce risks, and minimize future uncertainty. Effective implementation enables schools to achieve their vision and mission (Juwariah & Kurniatun, 2021). Aljondi (1999) found that strategic planning supports schools in identifying challenges, making rational decisions, and aligning administrative functions with organizational goals, thereby improving efficiency and productivity. Strategic planning also fosters coherence, enhances processes, and strengthens organizational cohesion. The Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka (2020) notes that school planning is more complex than planning in industrial organizations, as educational goals are broader and less time bound. Consequently, research highlights the importance of school-level planning and the principal’s key leadership role.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:



1. What is the nature of school-level planning implemented in selected schools?
2. What are the key issues and challenges encountered by school leaders in school-level planning?
3. What specific strategies do principals adopt to ensure the smooth implementation of school-level planning?

Research Design

The study adopted a case study research design. This qualitative approach examines a specific case (e.g., an individual, group, organization, or event) within its real-life context to provide a rich, multifaceted understanding of its complexities (Crowe et al., 2011). Data were collected using online questionnaires, discussion forums, reflections, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis (one-year and five-year school plans). As Stake (2006) notes, using multiple data collection methods is a hallmark of case study research, enhancing credibility by capturing diverse perspectives. Common methods include interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis. Quantitative Data were analysed using simple statistics, and Quantitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing the case study design to provide systematic insights into school-level planning and how school leaders implement and adapt planning processes.

Participants

This study was conducted using 20 school leaders(principals) who participated in the short course on school management, 5th batch offered by the Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka. The following table (Table 2) shows the demographic information of the participants (N=20). The convenience sampling technique was adapted to select the study sample.

Table 6- Participants' Distribution: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables					Variables		N	%
1. Gender	N	%	N	%	2. Age	25 – 35 years	02	10
	M		F			36 – 45 years	08	40
	1 2	60	08	4 0		46 – 56 years	08	40
3. Academic Qualification	N		%			Above 55years	02	10



Degree	14	70	5. Service	5 – 10 years	13	65
Master	06	30		More than 10 years	07	35
6. Professional Qualification	PGDE		09	45		
	PGDEM		02	10		
	M.ED		06	30		
	MTE		01	05		
	MSC. (Mgt)		02	10		

As shown in Table 2, the demographic characteristics of the participants. Among the 20 principals, 60% were male and 40% were female. The majority were aged between 36–45 years (40%) and 46–56 years (40%), while 10% each were in the age groups of 25–35 and above 55. Regarding academic qualifications, 70% held a degree and 30% had a master's degree. In terms of service, 65% had 5–10 years of experience, while 35% had served for over 10 years. Professional qualifications varied, with 45% having a PGDE, 30% holding an M.Ed., and smaller percentages possessing PGDEM (10%), M.Sc. in Management (10%), and MTE (5%). This indicates that most participants were experienced school leaders in mid-to-late career stages, which adds credibility and depth to their responses.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Multiple strategies were used for data collection throughout the process, including online questionnaires, discussion forums, principals' self-reflections, and documentary analysis provided by the participants. Mainly, a quantitative approach was taken in the analysis of data, based on the simple statistical analysis (Frequencies and percentages). A qualitative approach (Content analysis) was also taken in the analysis of data based on thematic categorization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1-What is the nature of school-level planning implemented in selected schools?

All principals reported actively preparing school-level five-year and one-year plans in line with the Ministry of Education's 2020 guidelines. The planning is done in collaboration with the School Management Committee (SMC) to ensure all relevant activities and initiatives for improving educational outcomes are included. Once finalized, plans are submitted to the Zonal Education Office for approval before implementation. While the guidelines grant schools greater decision-making authority and stress accountability, transparency, and professional responsibility, principals face challenges at all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



Despite this, they are encouraged to adopt a strategic, goal-oriented approach to achieve both short- and long-term school improvements.

RQ2. What are the key issues and challenges encountered by school leaders in school-level planning?

To answer this question, responses to the online questionnaire, inputs of online discussion forums, and Self-reflections and focus group discussions' data were used.

The responses in relation to question No. 2 were reviewed multiple times at four levels to understand the common patterns, themes, and ideas shared by the participants, and Open/Initial Coding identified key concepts from participant responses. Next, Category Development grouped these codes into broader categories, and in the Thematic Coding stage, overarching themes were derived. This process provided a comprehensive understanding of the school-level planning, especially related to the annual and five-year planning. With three levels of analysis, the research team was able to focus on an in-depth examination of the issues and challenges encountered by the principals within their real-life context.

Table 3- Thematic Coding (key issues and challenges encountered by school principals in school-level planning)

Theme 1 . Resource Limitations as a Barrier to Effective Planning
This theme reflects the difficulties leaders face due to financial and material shortages. The lack of funding and resources often results in compromised planning and limited implementation. For instance, one respondent stated, <i>"Due to economic recession and lack of funds, planned infrastructure work couldn't be completed,"</i> [Participant-01] showing how budget constraints disrupted school-level progress. Related Category: C1: Limited Resources and Financial Challenges
Theme 2. Need for Stronger Stakeholder Collaboration
This theme draws attention to the difficulties in establishing pleasant and productive relationships with crucial school stakeholders, including parents, the community, and internal staff. Plans often face disagreement or a lack of support if proper engagement is not maintained. <i>"Low cooperation of stakeholders was a big issue, so we used participatory planning to overcome it,"</i> [Participant-2] for instance, demonstrates how methods of engagement became crucial for effective planning. Related Category: C2: Stakeholder Engagement and Communication
Theme 3. Internal Capacity and Planning Constraints



This theme shows internal challenges such as limited staff training, low motivation, lack of time, poor flexibility, and weak data systems. These issues make it hard for school leaders to plan and implement effectively. One principal noted, *“We had to implement school-based professional development to motivate staff,”* [Participant-5] while another said, *“Plans lacked flexibility; when COVID hit, we had to rethink everything.”*

Related Categories:

- **C3: Human Resource Management and Development**
- **C4: Planning, Time Management, and Flexibility**
- **C5: Data, Monitoring, and Evaluation**

Theme 4. External Disruptions and Systemic Pressures

This theme addresses outside concerns such as limited tech use, policy changes, and interference in politics. Plans for school are frequently disrupted by these factors. The impact of unanticipated disruptions was demonstrated by one participant who explained that *“annual school events had to be postponed due to heat waves and sudden holidays.”* [Participant-7]

Related Category:

- **C6: External Factors and Policy Environment**

RQ3: What specific strategies do principals adopt to ensure the smooth implementation of school-level planning?

The third research objective (RQ3) aims to explore the specific strategies adopted by school principals to guarantee the smooth implementation of school-level planning. To analyze this, a thematic analysis approach was used to identify the initial codes and categories. Ultimately, the following themes were identified as the specific strategies adapted by principals to smoothly implement the school-level planning.

Table 4 - Specific strategies that principals adopt to ensure the smooth implementation of school-level planning

Theme 1: Empowering Staff Through Capacity Building

A key approach many principals took was helping their teachers grow both in skills and confidence. They suggested school-based professional development programs not just to train teachers but to make them feel more involved in the planning process. As one principal put it, *“We had to implement school-based professional development programs to motivate staff and improve planning awareness.”* [Participant-5] This shows how principals used training as a way to build both capability and commitment among staff.



Theme 2: Promoting Data-Driven Decision Making

Some principals focused on using data to make smarter decisions. They created systems to collect and analyze performance data, which helped them monitor progress and adjust plans when needed. One leader shared, *“We created a proper data system with the staff to support data-driven decision-making,”* [Participant-11], highlighting how teamwork and evidence-based strategies played a big role in managing school plans effectively.

Theme 3: Building Strong Stakeholder Collaboration

Collaboration with parents, teachers, and the wider school community came through strongly. Many principals used participatory planning and community involvement to bring everyone on board. One principal explained, *“We organized creative sponsorships and established a strong network of parents and old students,”* [Participant-18], showing how tapping into local support helped overcome challenges and created a sense of shared responsibility.

Theme 4: Adapting Plans to Crisis Challenges

School leaders emphasized the need to be flexible, especially when faced with unexpected events like COVID-19 or natural disasters. Plans had to evolve quickly. One principal said, *“Plans lacked flexibility; when COVID hit, we had to rethink everything.”* [Participant-16] This shows how adaptability became a survival strategy in difficult times.

Theme 5: Resource Optimization through Partnerships

When budgets were tight, principals looked outside for help. They formed partnerships and sought sponsorships to get the resources they needed. As one participant mentioned, *“We formed partnerships with the community and organized sponsorships.”* [Participant-7] These efforts not only brought in much-needed support but also built stronger ties between the school and the community.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that school principals are dedicated to creating clear and strategic five-year and one-year plans aligned with national education frameworks. Yet, their efforts are consistently tested by challenges such as limited financial resources, insufficient stakeholder involvement, gaps in professional development, and external pressures, including policy fluctuations and unexpected crises. Nevertheless, principals show positive resilience by building staff capacity, meaningful community partnerships, and maintaining flexibility to adjust plans when necessary. To help schools succeed, Sri Lankan policymakers and educational leaders should provide more funding and ongoing support for professional growth and encourage everyone’s involvement in planning. By working closely with parents and local community groups, schools can gain much-needed support while also creating a stronger sense of shared purpose. When everyone feels involved and committed,



schools are better able to turn their plans into real, lasting improvements that make a difference for both students and teachers.

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