

Critical Examination of the Actual Functioning of Strategic Planning as a Management Tool by Principals in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The initial component of administration is planning, which centers on determining what, when, and how objectives will be accomplished. Strategic planning, a long-term plan spanning 5-10 years, is created by top management to establish the vision, mission, and objectives of an organization. Strategic planning is a crucial factor for success in schools, as it helps to set the direction and goals of the institution. The development of a strategic plan by top management ensures that the school is aligned with the dynamic internal and external environment. This comprehensive planning process addresses the entire organization and its operations. The purpose of the research was to assess the efficiency of strategic planning in public schools in the Galle District in Sri Lanka. The objectives of the study were to identify the actual functioning of the strategic planning in the schools in the Galle District and investigate the factors affecting when drafting and implementing the strategic plan in the schools in the Elpitiya Education Zone, Galle District in Sri Lanka. In this study, a qualitative descriptive approach was taken to investigate the strategic planning documents of schools. The validity of these documents was then established through conducting interviews with principals. The study utilized semi-structured interviews to obtain the viewpoints of the principals. According to the results of the study, strategic planning is not a common practice in many schools within the Elpitiya Education Zone, Galle District. The study utilized issue-based models recommended by the Ministry of Education, which involved the use of SWOT as the main instrument. Although all schools incorporated strategic planning in their annual work plan, there was variation in the components of planning, and not all schools consistently implemented their plan. To ensure effective strategic planning in schools, it is recommended to adhere to the strategic planning process to ensure that schools develop strategic plans, involve all stakeholders in the planning process, follow the strategic planning process, and implement plans according to their intended goals and timelines.

Key words: Strategic Planning, SWOT

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I. Introduction

Management can be defined as a process of achieving the organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, leading and controlling organizational resources. Management plays a vital role in building the culture of any organization. The successfulness and survival of an organization depends on its management. School management is also an important part of any educational system. Various activities to effectively manage school activities and provide better educational experience to students are conducted continuously by school authorities around the world. Serving everyone in the academic process is a one of main advantage of school management.

Management process is defined as a process of an execution of interrelated social and technical functions and activities, for the purpose of achieving predefined objectives through the utilization of resources including human resources and physical resources.

There are 6 functions in the management process which is needed at every level of management. They are Planning, Directing, Organizing, leading, Staffing and Controlling. Planning is the most important functions of management. In the education system, strategic planning plays a vital role. Also implementing strategic planning in schools provides a new focus on the quality of education. Risks of uncertainties can be minimized by planning various activities in the best possible way. It also enables coordination among different sections and leads to end of wasteful activities. In strategic planning, expected future must be initially identified through the collaboration of various networks of concerned educational partners. It also helps for schools to ensure that they are able to face the challenges of the changing environment. Many Principals may no longer be formally prepared with knowledge of planning models and practices (Beach and Lindhal, 2000). But they utilize a variety of such models intuitively with varying degrees of success (Beach & Melnerney, 1986; Copper, 1990).

Problem Statement

Serious concerns about the quality of education in Sri Lanka can be identified. After 11 years of schooling still there are some children who fail in all subjects at the GCE O/L examination. A common problem which faced by the employers is that the output from the school system does not produce expected level of skills in candidates. Therefore, schools are empowered to take decisions on planned development of the school to fulfill the labor market requirements with participation of the community in school management.

In the absence of strategic planning all the school activities will become a chaos. A main problem that happens is that without having learnt the skills of strategic planning, principals face difficulties in crisis management. In 2013, Ministry of Education has introduced a guidance to prepare medium-term strategic plans and annual implementation plans for schools. It is expected to develop overall personality of all students which is needed to face the challenges in life as well as those in the emerging global community. Therefore it is necessary to examine actual functioning of strategic planning as a management tool by principals in schools.

Objectives:

1. Identify the actual functioning of the strategic planning in the schools.
2. Investigate the factors affecting when drafting and implementing the strategic plan in the schools.

Research Questions

1. What is the actual functioning of the strategic planning in the schools?
2. What are the factors affecting when drafting and implementing the strategic plan in the schools?

II. Literature Review

Importance of Planning

Functions of management are a systematic way of doing things. These functions of management help managers to perform to accomplish goals of the organization efficiently and effectively. According to French (2009) strategic management was firstly introduced in early 1980s with the specific goal of defining a new paradigm for business policy. Planning is the most important functions of management. It is needed at every level of management. Through the education system, strategic planning plays a vital role. It also identified by the UNESCO and they have defined educational planning as follows.

In the absence of strategic planning all the school activities will become a chaos. In strategic planning, expected future must be initially identified through the collaboration of various networks of concerned educational partners. Then the learning system for planning for the predefined future can be designed. It also helps for schools to ensure that they are able to face the challenges of the changing environment. Risks of uncertainties can be minimized by planning various activities in the best possible way. It also enables coordination among different sections and leads to end of wasteful activities.

Education planning is to bring in to education system, the goals that the great educationists expect to instill in the child. It is a rational and scientific approach to problems. In such instances it is necessary to identify the goals. It is necessary to examine the alternative processes and select the appropriate process. Specific targets that could be implemented within the specified time limits should be selected. Finally the best process should be selected and such selected decisions should be implemented systematically (MoE, 2005)

The Terminology in Planning

There can be identified certain terms used in planning. They are policy, plan, vision, mission, goals, strategies and objectives, programs, projects, targets and activities. Plan is a mean for achieving goals. It is the document produced through the planning process. Way of pursue the achievement of goals, objectives and targets is described in a plan. There are different types of plan. They are long term – short term plan, Strategic – tactical – functional plans, Action plan or annual implementation plan

According to the set of beliefs about the organization/ school vision is built. Vision is the long term goal of the organization which is about the organization's environment, structure, culture, facilities and planning process. Mission will explain the vision further. Mission is the end of the road target that any organization/ school want to achieve. Goals are the overall ultimate achievements to be attained over a long period through

long term plans. Each goal contributes to the achievement of mission. Activities, programs and process of an organization/ school are determined by goal.

Strategies are the means through which the goals and objectives of the plan are attained. Objectives are the results expected to be reached through the implementation of the medium-term plan. These results are intended to contribute to the attainment of the long-term policy goals. The characteristics of an objective are described by the Acronym "SMART". The letters stand for: S specific M measurable A attainable R realistic T timely

Programs are sets or groups of activities which are necessary to attain the objectives. Projects are key activities which contribute to the achievement of specific objectives under a program. Targets are the specific measurable results to be achieved by the implementation of key activities in order to attain the objectives. Activities are the detailed actions that need to be carried out in achieving the targets.

Strategic Planning Process

According to the guild lines for school level planning issued by Ministry of Education (2013), there are two main stages in the planning process.

1. Preparation of the plan
2. Implementation and monitoring.

The key steps involved in the planning process are given below.

- **The situational analysis** to find out the facts about how the organization is functioning at present, the problems and challenges and issues that need to be addressed and its strengths and weaknesses.
- **Designing** for the future, i.e. preparing the plan, by setting policy goals and strategic objectives, formulating implementation programs, setting targets, assessing resource requirements, setting priorities and designing implementation strategies.
- **Preparing the Annual Implemented Plan (AIP)** based on the long-term or the strategic plan spelling out detailed activities to be carried out annually.
- **Adopting the document** as an official document of the organization with the concurrence of the supervisory authorities.
- **Implementing and monitoring** the plan implementation. The monitoring information is feedback in to the plan implementation process and used to review the plan regularly and adapt it as necessary to changing needs and conditions within the overall planning framework.
- **Evaluating the plan**, including its achievements in terms of reaching the stated objectives and targets, producing the expected outcomes and impact on priority target groups as well as its cost effectiveness

III. Methodology

This study followed a qualitative research approach to determine the opinions of participants in their natural setting. Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Also I have gathered relevant data by reviewing related documents such as strategic plan and annual implementation plan of the school.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 5 school principals in the schools in Elpitiya Education Zone. The questions of the semi structures interview was originally written in English then translated into Sinhala to eliminate possible comprehension problems. The translation was carried out by the researcher.

Data Collection Techniques

In this study the data collection technique was semi structured interviews. According to King (2004) (as cited in Saunders et. al., 2007) semi-structured interviews often referred to as qualitative research interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the research will have a list of themes and questions to be covered, although these may vary from interview to interview. Data gathered through the interviews helped to get a more correct conclusion regarding the research objectives. It was conducted with three principals. There were seven open ended questions regarding actual functioning of the strategic plan in their schools. Because participants recommended that to interview them over the phone or through an online meeting owing to the current circumstances in the country, I consented to do the interview over the phone. I also used the documentation review to gather information on current practices. I asked them to send their strategic plan and annual implementation plan. These plans were sent by the principals and observed them to get the ideas on strategic planning process in these schools.

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data analysis is largely an inductive process that involves grouping data into categories and looking for patterns (relationships) between them. The data in this study was categorized into categories based on the questions which were used in the semi structured interviews and analyzed accordingly.

IV. Results and Discussion

This study was designed to do the critical examination of the actual functioning of the planning in the national schools in the Elpitiya Education Zone. In this chapter describes the actual functioning of the planning in these schools and critical examination on the planning.

Availability of the Strategic Plan in the School

A question was included in the interview schedule asking the respondent to state whether you have formulated the strategic plan for the school. All principals responded that they have a strategic plan in place. They have also forwarded their strategic plans and annual implementation plans. Participated principals are also aware of the usefulness of such strategies in providing direction to their schools.

Identifying School as an Organization

When preparing the plan for the school, all responded principals have identified their schools as an organization up to some extent. When identifying the school as an organization geographical variations, environment, history, traditions, and socio-economic status of communities have been considered. Even though those factors have been identified, those were not identified properly. In these schools it could be identified number of stakeholders such as the principal, teaching staff, students, parents, past-pupils, support staff, the community around the school including well wishes, the supervising officials, and the leaders in society and politicians.

Involvement of Stakeholders

These schools are more people-centered schools and principals have good relationships with all stakeholders. And also principals do not entertain the bureaucratic mechanisms. School programs have an impact on the development of the personality of the students. However, it becomes a reality only if there is a good relationship between the teacher and the students in the class room. Also disposition of the teacher at a given moment, his/her motivation and many other factors impact for this process. Even if it is very difficult to manage this process, principals in these schools have tried to manage all of these. Though they have tried to motivate most of the students to be interested in learning, it was not achieved. It is true that all the stakeholders should involve in the preparation of schools developing plan, but students, providers of employment and training, consultancy organizations and subject specialist were not involved in preparing the strategic plan. According to the circular number 7/ 2013 issued by ministry of education, on planning and procurement for school based qualitative, quantitative and structural development, it is the responsibility of the school development committee to prepare the medium term plan and the annual implementation plan for the school. Also school development committee may assign the school management committee to formulate the draft plans. In these schools, principals have taken action to prepare the school plan accordingly. After that they have discussed with deputy principals and assistant principals about the draft plan and it has been submitted to the school development committee's reviews and finalization.

Situational Analysis

All of the participants responded that they have made situational analysis before developing the strategic plan. When outline the plan document, all principals have mentioned that the background of the school has been mentioned in the plan. After reviewed the strategic plan and annual implementation plan, it has been revealed that history of the school, number of students, physical facilities, school stakeholders and future aspirations had been mentioned in the plan. But expected optimum numbers of students, additional facilities required were not in the school plan. The logo, school song, and site plan of the school have been annexed to the strategic plan. When doing the situational analysis, all respondents stated that the technique called SWOT analysis has been used. SWOT analysis is interrelated and interdependent. Using this SWOT analysis along with whole staff and school community has held to understand the weaknesses, threats, strength, and opportunities in the school. According to the SWOT analysis all respondents have decided, how the school should be improved. The SWOT analysis for these schools has been carried out by providing fill in the blank SWOT sheet. All educational stakeholders should be involved in formulation of strategic plans. Responded principals have taken open discussion with stakeholders to identify the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Most of the participants stated that all stakeholders do not participate for this discussion. They also mentioned that all ideas

have not been taken in to the consideration as complexity of the group. To overcome of this problem, there had been discussion as small groups by most of the participants.

Participated respondents mentioned that, even though the number of participants for doing SWOT analysis discussion was high, large majority had been kept as silent. Therefore data from the silent participants could have been taken through questionnaires. Collecting data to find a collective view of stakeholders' perception on the school's strength and weaknesses in this manner can be useful for development of plan. Those data can be further discussed and debated so that the agreement emerges. SWOT analysis was built through like this participative process by the principals. SWOT analysis profile had been become more acceptable. Carrying out a self-evaluation, self-assessment by the school is also useful technique that can be applied in school to identify problems and issues at school level. This has been done up to some extent. If it had been done in this full capacity, experiences of the teachers could be shared. It could lead to professional enrichment of the whole team and useful for teams of external evaluators when they carry out external evaluations.

Medium Term Plan

Most of the participants stated that after identified the goals to be attained over the long term, they formulate the vision and the mission for the school. A medium term strategic plan for the school has been prepared for a period of five years by the participants.

After identified the problems and threats, they have set the policies and derived goals to find out the solution for the identified problems. Identified policies have been mentioned in the strategic plan. A set of activities have been identified to achieve the goals.

Since the resources in these schools are limited, it was impossible to give solutions for all problems which were identified. Therefore they could have selected the priority components with consideration financial situation of the school as well.

Programs have been organized according to the set of activities grouping under a field. Hence some activities were small projects have been developed instead of a program. Setting policy and identifying programs and objectives could have been done according to the national policy framework. The objectives of programs and activities should be SMART further. To achieve the objectives strategies have been mentioned in the strategic plan. Also to achieve the targets activities in the objectives and strategies were planned in this school.

Annual Implementation Plan

After preparation of the medium-term plan, annual implementation plan (AIP) has been prepared by the participants. There were greater detail strategies and activities in annual implementation plan of this school. The AIP has been prepared as a separate document and details have been presented in a Grant diagram. It was prepared for 25 numbers of pre-identified themes. In the Grant diagram strategies, activities, time frame, responsibility, cost and output have been mentioned. In the succeeding years, the objectives, strategies, activities and cost could have to be adjusted in the light of experience gathered during the previous year of implementation.

Since planning is a continuous process once the activities envisaged for the first year of implementation of the five-year plan are completed, it could be prepared the rolling plan for the next five years, better than current process. But these participants did not follow this.

Objectives and activities to improve the results of the all subjects were mentioned in the annual implemented plan. There should be entrusted the implementation of activities to the relevant persons. Their job descriptions should be clear and need to be made method to identify the whether they have understood their roles.

Costing

Funding of projects and plans are vital factor whenever plans are made. Most of the participants stated that, since funding from the Ministry of Education was not received on time, it has an influence on payment that need to be made to implement possible plan.

An estimate of the cost of implementing the plan has been included in the plan by participants. Expenditures of the AIP has indicated in details by activities and categorized under two headings such as recurrent and capital. When refer the plans, it was found that the sources of funding were not shown in the plans.

Implementation and Monitoring

An item was included in the interview schedule asking the respondent to state whether strategic plans are implemented and monitored in their respective schools. All participants mentioned that once the plan document is finalized, arrangements are made for implementation. Most of the principals have coordinated the relevant activities with necessary resources to ensure the implementation process.

A strategic plan that has been properly planned out and arranged should be fully implemented. The statement of the school's mission and vision, a SWOT analysis, the arrangement of the school's resources, and the implementation and monitoring of strategic plans are all part of proper planning. The implementation of strategic plans must be closely evaluated and adjusted as needed. Monitoring arrangements have been identified and included as indicators, methods, responsibilities and the respective time frame for monitoring the progress of implementation of the plan by most of the principals. As the process of monitoring, both goals monitoring and activity monitoring were included in the monitoring framework. Goals were mentioned using indications.

Even though they have already developed a monitoring chart, it should be developed quarterly for monitor the improvement of activities developed for the increase the results of the subjects. When developing the annual implementation plan results based monitoring was emphasized. There should be more powerful the monitoring system to indicate how far the monitoring indicators have been achieved.

Evaluation

Even though evaluation is a higher level process which carried out at longer intervals, these schools have not arranged such productive mechanism. But in some grades, teachers have made a mechanism for self-evaluation as a collegial exercise by teams. Mostly in Grades 5, 10 and 11 teachers had self-evaluation records and those were appreciated by the external evaluators.

Generally evaluations should be done prior to the start of the process, at mid-term and at the end of the process. Most of the participants mentioned that they didn't identify issues, constraints and suitability of various components of the plan suits the requirements. Also they have mentioned that they don't do any advance evaluation. If they had done the advance evaluation, they could have identified in advance the obstacles that might be occurring in implementation.

The summative evaluations were carried out at the end of the plan period and identified the changes effected in the school through the implementation of the plan by most of the participants. It is provided the principal an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the strategies. Mainly in these schools principals have used results as their indicator. But monitoring studies could have been implemented to assess the success of the plan.

When developing the plan, implementation and monitoring the plan, the principals in these schools have taken the leadership. All participants had the thorough understand about the planning and ability to explaining it others. However all the stakeholders in this school were not parts of the group of formulation of the plan, hence it is better to make feel everybody that they have contributed to the formation of the plan and they would feel they own it.

Influencing Factors for Strategic Planning

Participants mentioned a variety of factors.

1. Where strategic plans are in existence, they are not properly monitored or evaluated in terms of progress. As a result of the absence of monitoring, such plans are not implemented in the end.
2. When making plans, the finance of projects and plans is always a consideration. In many circumstances, the school simply lacks the financial resources to carry out its ambitions. The department's funding is not always received on schedule, which has an impact on payments that must be made to carry out possible plans.
3. A strategic plan should be written and implemented as a team effort. There will be no success if teachers or parents do not assist and support such preparation.
4. Stakeholders appear to prefer not to be involved because that would require them to accomplish something planned and quantifiable. They are afraid that if they do not accomplish what they set out to do, they would be regarded as a failure.
5. When schools rely on the government to supply them with resources, issues arise such as receiving materials late or not at all. The majority of parents are poor and unable to contribute to the school's budget. This makes it difficult to come up with strategic fundraising proposals.

V. Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusion

Strategic planning is a valuable tool for school improvement because it assures a well-coordinated action plan for school renewal, innovation, and transformation. As a result, strategic planning in schools should aim to bring about change and/or influence innovation, and should be a collaborative effort between the school communities in the goal of continuous improvement. Strategic planning is essential for schools to run properly.

Suggestions for Improvements

This study was designed to examine the actual functioning of the plan in in the schools located in Elpitiya education zone.

| Critique | Suggestions | Justification |
|--|---|---|
| Lack of identification of stakeholders | Identify all the stakeholders apart from current parties such as community around the school including well wishes, the supervising officials, the leaders in society and politicians and involve them drafting the Strategic plan. | Participation of all the stakeholders when preparing plan is the only way of ensuring that the plan is owned by them. |
| Absence of appraisal at classroom level | Lapses can be identified when plan is assessed frequently. There should be a well-defined system of appraisal. | Assessing the plan after the period of time limits the ability for improvement and measures to overcome the constraints. |
| Absence of participation of all the stakeholders for SWOT analysis | Identify the size of the groups and arrange several SWOT discussions and method of collection of data accordingly. | Suggestions and innovative ideas from all stakeholders are important in preparing plan. Therefore, suitable method of collecting data should be used. |

Apart from the above the following are also some of the suggestions in effective planning for the school.

- 1) To identify or anticipate the external expectations and match these to the internal expectations of the school, representatives of the wider community should be involved at the onset of planning process.
- 2) Drafting plan formally and planning in cycles is essential.
- 3) By making monitoring and amendments on yearly basis 5 year plan cycle should be amended.
- 4) Strategic plan should be attainable with the current resources.
- 5) When planning priorities should be given to the activities for student development.

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