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Distributed Leaderships: A Key for Achieving Effective Students' Learning (A case study of Nekemte Preparatory School, East Wollega Administrative Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia)

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ABSTRACT

This research study had examined specifically the importance of distributed leaderships for the achievement of effective students learning. I used a descriptive research design of survey type and gathered data through questionnaire and personal interview. The samples of this study comprised; the Director, the teachers and the students from a well-known school, namely, the Nekemte Preparatory School (NPS), at Nekemte town, in the East Wollega Administrative Zone. The population for my study included a total of 226 respondents, viz., forty two (42) teachers/instructional leaders (including 1 director and 11 departmental heads), one hundred seventy nine (179) students and five (5) officials from regional and district level education offices. Two important research questions, based on policy implications, had incredibly guided my study. The data collected were then analyzed through the use of SPSS software computations. My study findings here indicated significant relationships between distributed leadership and the school's goal achievement; like teachers' professional development; instructional program management; effective teaching and students' learning; and promotion of the school's overall climate which included facilitating and understanding of the lesson, creating conducive environment with high class participations from every stakeholder. Based on the researcher's empirical findings, it is recommended that the school heads/authorities should make it mandatory that the distributed leadership should be adopted in such a way that everyone in the school is empowered to make his or her job more efficient, meaningful, and effective in the larger interests, especially the students' learning for the fulfillment of the society's take.

1. Introduction

The effect of synergetic distributed leaderships in schools, especially starting with the head-teachers' leadership (in our case, it is the Director), had been the object of an extensive study since the late '60s, but the concept of leadership was neither unanimously defined, nor a consensus had been yet

reached on its definitive role and actual relevance within the school environment (Fullan, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2012; Harris, 2014). However, it was evidenced that good leaderships could certainly contribute to the +school improvement by abetting the motivation, participation, and coordination of all the teachers. Recent further studies on the subject had now widened the range of action of school leadership research to the various organizational levels like school managers, department heads, coordinators, teachers (Goldhaber, 2012; Harris, 2014), and the entire theme thus converged is popularly understood as distributed leadership that could evidently yield a higher impact on students learning.

President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Field Marshal Omer Al-Bashir, on December 08, 2016, while

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addressing the celebration of Ethiopia's Peoples, Nations and Communities' day had renewed his earlier calls and categorically advised the country's educational leaderships to be more vigilant, focused and proactive for the students cause.

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling. As countries worldwide are extensively seeking to adapt their education systems to the needs of contemporary society, expectations for schools and school leaders are changing. Many countries have moved towards decentralization, making schools more autonomous in their decision making and holding them more accountable for results. At the same time, the requirement to improve overall student performance while serving more diverse student populations is putting schools under pressure to use more evidence-based teaching practices.

As a result of these trends, the function of school leadership across countries is now increasingly defined by a demanding set of roles which include financial and human resource management and leadership for learning. There are concerns across countries that the role of principal/director as conceived for needs of the past was no longer appropriate.

From my study, I have identified four main policy levers which, taken together, can improve school leadership practices.

One is to redefine school leadership responsibilities. Earlier researches had shown that school leaders could necessarily make a difference in school and student performance if they were granted autonomy to make important decisions. However, autonomy alone does not automatically lead to improvements unless it is adequately supported.

In addition, it is also important that the core responsibilities of school leaders be clearly defined and delimited. The responsibilities should be defined through an understanding of the best practices most likely to improve teaching and learning. Greater degrees of autonomy should be coupled with new models of distributed leadership, new types of accountability, training and development.

This also identifies few major domains of responsibility as key for school leadership to improve student outcomes: Supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality: School leaders have to be able to adapt the teaching program to local needs, promote teamwork among teachers and engage in teacher monitoring, evaluation and professional development. Goal-setting, assessment and accountability: Policy makers need to ensure that school leaders have discretion in setting strategic direction and optimize their capacity to develop school plans and goals and monitor progress, using data to improve practice.

The second one envelops the strategic financial and human resource management issues. Policy makers can enhance the

financial management skills of school leadership teams by providing training to school leaders, establishing the role of a financial manager within the leadership team, or providing financial support services to schools. In addition, school leaders should be able to influence teacher recruitment decisions to improve the match between candidates and their school's needs.

The third aspect encompasses the criteria of collaborating with other schools. This new leadership dimension needs to be recognized as a highly specific role for school leaders. It can bring benefits to school system as a whole rather than just the students of a single entity. But school leaders need to develop their skills to become involved in matters beyond their school boundaries.

And the fourth one is to develop school leadership frameworks for improved policy and practices. School leadership frameworks can help provide guidance on the main characteristics, tasks and responsibilities for effective school leaders and signal the essential character of school leadership as leadership for learning. They can be a basis for consistent recruitment, training and appraisal of school leaders. Frameworks should clearly define the major domains of responsibility for school leaders and allow for contextualization of local and school-level criteria. They should be developed with involvement by the profession.

An assertive article written by D. Vidoni, L. Grassetti (2013), on "The Role of School Leadership on Student Achievement" took its moves within the strand of research that identifies a significant role of leadership for student achievement and presents the results of the Pilot Project on the topic that was developed within the framework of CRELL, the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning of the European Commission. The project tried to understand whether there were evidential patterns of behavior of head-teachers that could yield better results than others with respect to facilitating the student learning process and whether such patterns are consistent or replicable across countries. The article presented in detail the methodology and the result of the project, the last part of the manuscript was dedicated to the discussion of the results, made suggestions for further research and for policy makers.

School and district leadership had been the focus of intense scrutiny in recent years as researchers tried to define not only the qualities of effective leadership but also the impact of leadership on the operation of schools, and even on student achievement. A recently published literature authored by the Ministry of Education, Ethiopia (2013) titled "Education Sector Development program: Action plan", contributed to this growing body of knowledge by examining the links between student achievement and educational leadership practices.

Three major discussions are here warranted about the different forms of leadership reflected in the literature.

1. Many labels were used in the literature to signify different forms or styles of leadership masked eventually the generic functions of leaderships. These were described using attractive

adjectives such as “instructional,” “participative,” “democratic,” “transformational,” “moral,” “strategic” and the like. But those labels primarily captured different stylistic or methodological approaches in accomplishing the two essential objectives critical to any organization’s effectiveness: helping the organization set a defensible set of directions and influencing and motivating members to move in those directions. Leadership is both this simple and complex.

“Instructional leadership,” for example, encourages a focus on improving the classroom practices of teachers as the direction for the school. The “Transformational leadership,” on the other hand, draws attention to a broader array of school and classroom conditions that may need to be changed if learning is to improve. While both the “democratic” and the “participative leadership” are especially concerned with how decisions are made about both school priorities and how to pursue them. The lesson here is that we need to be skeptical about the “leadership by adjectives” provided in the literature. Sometimes these adjectives have real meaning, but sometimes they mask the more important underlying themes common to successful leadership, regardless of the style being advocated.

2. Principals, directors, superintendents and teachers are all being admonished for being “instructional leaders” without much clarity about what that really meant. The term “instructional leader” has been in vogue for decades as the desired model for education leaders – principals/directors especially. Yet the term is often more a slogan than a well-defined set of leadership practices. While it certainly conveys the importance of keeping teaching and learning at the forefront of decision making, it is no more meaningful, in and of itself, than admonishing the leader of any organization to keep his or her eye on the core objective of making schools work better for kids.

Hallinger’s model had been the most researched; it consisted of three sets of leadership dimensions – i) Defining the School’s Mission, ii) Managing the Instructional Program and iii) Promoting a Positive Learning Climate, within which are 10 specific leadership practices. Both Dukevi and Andrews and Soddervii (2015) had provided other well-developed but less-researched models of instructional leadership.

3. Today, in this twenty-first century, the “Distributed leadership”, the most chosen one these days, is found to be in danger of becoming no more than just a slogan unless it is given more thorough and thoughtful consideration. As it is frequently used in the field and in education leadership, the ideas underlying the term “distributed leadership” have mainly commonsense meanings and connotations that are never disputed.

Here, in this model, neither superintendents nor principals or directors can do the whole leadership task by themselves. Successful leaders develop and count on contributions from many others in their organizations. Principals typically count on key teachers for such leadership, along with their local administrative colleagues. In site-based management contexts,

parent leaders are often crucial to the school’s success. Superintendents rely for leadership on many central-office and school-based people, along with elected board members. Effective school and district leaders make savvy use of external assistance to enhance their influence. While many in the education field use the term “distributed leadership” reverentially, there is substantial overlap with such other well-developed, longstanding conceptions of leadership as “shared,” “collaborative,” “democratic” and “participative.”

Promising efforts have recently begun to extend the concept of distributed leadership beyond its commonsense uses and provide evidence about its nature and effects (e.g., Gronn, 2012; Leithwood et al, 2014). These efforts suggest, for example, that it is helpful for some leadership functions to be performed at every level in the organization; for example, stimulating people to think differently about their work. On the other hand, it is important for other functions to be carried out at a particular level. For example, it seems critical that leaders in formal positions of authority retain responsibility for building a shared vision for their organizations.

1.1 The Basics of Successful Leadership

The several practices mentioned above can be thought of as the “basics” of successful leadership. Rarely are such practices sufficient for leaders aiming to significantly improve student learning in their schools. But without them, not much would happen for sure. Though it seems to be tempting to get caught up in defining the many adjectives often used to describe leadership in education literature (e.g., participative, instructional) but one should note that ultimately these descriptions focus on style, not substance. A more productive strategy would be to examine three sets of following practices that would make up requirements for successful leadership issues: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

1.1.1 Setting direction

School improvement plans can be a means of setting direction. Effective principals understand direction setting. They know that an investment of time is required to develop a shared understanding of what the school should “look like” and what needs to be done to get it there. They know that teachers and other staff included in identifying goals are much more likely to be motivated to achieve those goals.

1.1.2 Developing people

Developing people through individualized support can be extremely vital. This emphasizes the principal’s role in providing guidance that improves teachers’ classroom practices. Philip Hallinger’s instructional leadership model has been the most researched. It consists of three sets of leadership dimensions—defining the school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate—within which 10 specific leadership practices are delineated (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2014).

1.1.3 Redesigning the organization

Redesigning the organization from the inside out requires that leaders identify and capitalize on the competence of others and both model and require collaboration. As author Carl Glickman (2013) observed: "In successful schools, principals aren't threatened by the wisdom of others; instead, they cherish it by distributing leadership".

2 Organizational Context

There is a rich body of evidence about the relevance to leaders of such features of the organizational context as geographic location (urban, suburban, rural), level of schooling (elementary, secondary) and both school and district size. Each of these features has important implications for what it means to offer successful leadership. For example, successful principals in inner-city schools often find it necessary to engage in more direct and top-down forms of leadership than do successful principals in suburban settings. The curricular knowledge of successful elementary principals frequently rivals the curricular knowledge of their teachers; in contrast, secondary principals will typically rely on their department heads for such knowledge. Similarly, small schools allow for quite direct engagement of leaders in modeling desirable forms of instruction and monitoring the practices of teachers, whereas equally successful leaders of large schools typically influence their teachers in more indirect ways; for example, through planned professional development experiences.

3 Student Population

There is still much to be learned about how leaders can successfully meet the educational needs of diverse student populations. But there has been a great deal of research concerning both school and classroom conditions that are helpful for students from economically disadvantaged families and those with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Almost all of the early research conducted as part of the "effective schools" movement aimed to identify such conditions. In addition, a very large proportion of educational policy research concerning, for example, class size, forms of instruction, student grouping practices and school size has been conducted using evidence about and from such students. This evidence suggests, for example, that economically disadvantaged primary students will learn more in relatively small schools (250 to 300 students) and classrooms (15 to 20 students) when their teachers engage in active forms of instruction focused on rich, meaningful, curricular content using heterogeneous student grouping strategies. At a minimum, then, such evidence suggests that to increase the achievement of diverse student populations, leaders should assist their staffs in implementing the school and classroom conditions warranted by this research – "school leader as policy implementer."

4 The Policy Context

Policy contexts change substantially over time but tend to be the same for many leaders at the same time. At the moment, large-scale, accountability-oriented policy contexts are

pervasive for educational leaders across the country and so in Ethiopia. States and regions are key actors in the enactment of educational leadership. Currently, the focus on state standards and accountability systems is driving local decisions and policies in ways that are unprecedented. In addition, the funding of local school has, in many states, shifted increasingly to the state, while in others it remains a largely local responsibility. Research about successful school and district leadership practices in contexts such as these is still in its infancy, even though the capacities and motivations of local leaders will significantly determine the effects of such contexts on students.

5 Objectives of the study

The following are the major objectives of the study:

- To identify whether policy has definite implications on the functioning of distributed leaderships for the overall improvement of the schools.
- To evaluate leadership consequences in the perception of effective students learning.

6 Materials and Methods

My study sample included a host of stakeholders associated with the Nekemte Preparatory School (NPS), Jeetu, Nekemte Town, East Wollega Administrative Zone, Ethiopia. At the first stage, I conducted a focus group study to assess the possible impact of policy implications on the distributed leadership issues aimed at overall wellbeing of the stakeholders, especially on the criteria of improvement of students learning at NPS. Four research questions, based on policy implications, guided my study. The data collected were then analyzed through the use of SPSS 20.0 version software computations.

Based on this pilot study, appropriate questionnaire was designed and was put on test. I used convenience sampling method in completing my survey. The data were collected on five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

I have distributed a total of 240 questionnaires among my targeted sections of NPS, but got only 226 respondents instead. Therefore, the population for my study included a total of 226 respondents, viz., forty two (42) teachers/instructional leaders (including 1 director and 11 departmental heads), one hundred sixty nine (179) students from the NPS.

The data were then analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS 20.0 version. Item to total correlation was used to check the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Face validity test was applied to check the validity of the questionnaires. Cronbach Alpha was used to check the reliability of the questionnaire. And at last Z-Test was applied to evaluate the difference of perception on the specific practices of distributed leadership style at the school.

7 Results

7.1 Item to Correlation

In order to check the consistency of the items from my questionnaire, total correlation was verified. Under this condition, every item with the total was measured and the

computed value was then compared with the standard value, i.e., $R = 0.1298$. Now, if the compared value happened to be found less than the standard value, then that whole factor statement was subsequently cancelled and termed as inconsistent pertaining to this study. However, it is noticed that in my study, no question was eventually cancelled from the questionnaire.

The standard formula is: $R = \frac{\sqrt{3.8416}}{\sqrt{n+1.8416}}$, where, n = Number of respondents,

$$R = \frac{\sqrt{3.8416}}{\sqrt{226+1.8416}}, \text{ here, } n=226$$

$$= 0.1298$$

Table-1: Showing Item to Total Correlation of Uses of distributed Leadership

Sl. No.	Question Statement	Correlation value
1.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style incorporated by the present school Director is good for the NPS.	0.656074
2.	I am convinced that the Director sincerely upholds the sanctity of the distributed responsibility in the NPS.	0.477724
3.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has brought a positive change in the mindset of both teachers, staffs and the students at the NPS.	0.549939
4.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has allowed instructional leaders a free hand to design the appropriate curriculum.	0.480441
5.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has dawned accountability among all the stakeholders.	0.470003
6.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style adopted in the NPS has had green signals from the policy makers.	0.534484
7.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has duly motivated the functioning of dept. heads, the teachers, the staffs and the students.	0.432886
8.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has brought a paradigm shift in the perception of students' parent community.	0.357666
9.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has brought	0.562336

	dramatic change in students' learning scenario at the NPS.	
10.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has brought high self-confidence level and esteems among the instructors at the NPS.	0.482072
11.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style has seen significant positive change in the outcome of school's final academic results.	0.565344
12.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style could be a precursor for the overall progress of other schools in our country.	0.358454
13.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style, if used judiciously, can be a boon to school education for the entire country.	0.347567
14.	I am convinced that the distributed leadership style can set an exemplary trend to other sectors beyond educational establishments.	0.330120

7.2 Reliability Test

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test was also introduced using SPSS (version 20.0) software and such test measures are mentioned below:

Table-2: Showing Reliability Statistics using Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.730	0.739	14

In the statistical interpretations, it is considered that whenever the reliability value appears more than 0.7, it is favorable. From the value posted above, it can be seen that the reliability value of Cronbach's Alpha in my study was found in the higher side.

7.3 Z-Test

This study had two distinctly differentiated variables, comprising at one side teachers, instructional leaders, and educational officials (variable 1) while on the other side the expected beneficiaries i.e., the students (variable 2). Therefore, the test was applied to these variables and the value of the Z was calculated as under:

$$\text{The formula for } Z = \frac{X_1 - X_2}{\text{Standard Error}}$$

Where, X_1 = Mean of Variable 1 and, X_2 = Mean of variable

2

$$\text{And, Standard Error} = \sqrt{\frac{SD_1^2}{M_1} + \frac{SD_2^2}{M_2}}$$

Where, $S. D_1^2$ = Square of Standard Deviation of variable 1.

$S. D_2^2$ = Square of Standard Deviation of variable 2.

M_1 = No. of respondents of variable 1.

M_2 = No. of respondents of variable 2.

In my study, the constructions of hypotheses are as under:

Null Hypothesis: There is significant impact on the quality of distributed leadership and students' learning.

Alternative Hypothesis: There is no significant impact on the quality of distributed leadership and students' learning.

Matching Z-Test result and the Hypothesis

Standard deviation and Mean were then computed using Excel sheet functions. As mentioned earlier, the variable 1= Teachers, instructional leaders, and educational officials (combined) and variable 2= the students. *Standard Error* =

$$\sqrt{\frac{SD_1^2}{M_1} + \frac{SD_2^2}{M_2}}$$

$$\text{Standard Error} = \sqrt{\frac{52.34836^2}{202} + \frac{91.8846^2}{24}}$$

$$= 2.021$$

$$\text{Now as } Z = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\text{Standard Error}} = \frac{52.02 - 49.66}{2.021}$$

$$= 1.20$$

Here the calculated value of Z was found less than the standard value of 1.96 at 5% significance level. Hence the Null hypothesis is accepted that there is significant impact on the quality of instructional leadership and students' learning.

7.4 Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis of my study was done using SPSS (version 20.0) on the aspect of positive impact from distributed leadership on the arena of students' learning which had already been established through my tests. Here the results are shown in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table-3: Showing Applications of distributed leadership style by the respondents

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percent
1	Instructional convenience	120	53.09
2	Motivational aspects	58	25.66
3	Student learning	138	61.06
---	Total	226	100.00

Table-4: Students' Satisfaction Level on Learning Aspects by the respondents

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percent
1	Yes	214	94.7
2	No	12	5.3
---	Total	226	100.0

Table 5: Overall Acceptability by the Respondents

S.No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percent
1	Yes	170	75.3
2	No	56	24.7
---	Total	226	100.0

Table-6: Percentage of Benefits Accrued by the Respondents

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percent
1	Instructors' personal benefit	18	08.0
2	Institutional gains	88	38.9
3	Freedom for pedagogy selection	14	06.2
4	Results on student learning	76	33.7
5	Positive policy implications	30	13.2
---	Total	226	100.0

7.4.1 Discussions

Now it is empirically evidenced from the above results (Table: 3, 4, 5, and 6) that my study was able to indicate that the uses of distributed leadership styles were very appropriate at NPS. Its applications as a whole have provided significant boost through several aspects of school's functioning and the respondents overwhelmingly showed their inclinations to those factors (Table: 3), viz., instructional convenience (53.09 %), motivational force (25.66%), and student learning (61.06%). It can also be seen from Table: 4 that the students learning had leap-forged to as high as 94.7 % showing very strong liking towards distributed leaderships. In the question of overall acceptability, 75.3% respondents had preferred the choice of distributed leadership (Table: 4). The respondents had vociferously mentioned their preferences on the accrued benefits gained (Table: 5) mainly through institutional (38.9%) and student learning (33.7%).

8 Conclusions and Recommendations

I strongly believe that my research findings would definitely argue for an exclusive research aimed less at the development of particular leadership models and more at discovering how such flexibility is exercised by those in various leadership roles, in particular the distributed one.

The researcher recommends that further study will reveal more about what is needed to identify specific leadership practices that lead to the achievement of contemporary goals school education. He suggests that Principals/Directors, the head of the school, through his/her team to initiate the following:

- Create and sustain schools that are dedicated to community development.
- Empower others (through distributed leadership) to make significant decisions.

- Provide instructional guidance, whatever and whenever it is necessary.
- Develop and implement strategic and school improvement plans in consultations with stakeholders.

How the kind of distributed leadership style influences students' learning emphasizes that the most influential educational leaders remain the principal, director and superintendent, and that their leadership is inextricably linked to student performance. Having examined a host of factors that contribute to what students learn at school in the study, the researcher concludes that the contribution of leadership is second in strength only to classroom instructions. And, effective leadership has the greatest impact where it is most needed—in the nation's ultimate academic progress. These facts make the case, the researcher assert, for improving not only the recruitment and training of school principals/directors/teachers but also their ongoing developments and evaluations. In addition, the researcher takes pleasure to cite the need for expanded study as to how the leadership in totality even on other areas—such as community leadership, political leadership, academic leadership, technological leadership etc.,—can eventually contribute to student achievement across countries.

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