Practices and Challenges of Distributed Leadership in Secondary Schools of Aksum Town, Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the practices and challenges of distributed leadership in secondary schools of Aksum Town. Three research questions were formulated mainly focusing on the concept, practices and challenges of distributed leadership. Case study was employed in this study. For the purpose of this study, eight teachers, four school principals and four members of PTA used as a sample using comprehensive and purposive sampling techniques. Semi-structured interview was used as a data collection instrument. The qualitative data gathered through semi structured interview analyzed narratively. The findings obtained from the majority of respondents indicated that although the concept of distributed leadership understood as a way of sharing tasks throughout teachers and school community, it has failed to implement due to lack of sense of belongingness, responsibility, confidence, supportive culture, trust and smooth relationship on the part of staff members. Therefore, it needs to establish supportive school culture, develop a sense of belongingness, responsibility, accountability, confidence and trust on the part of staff members to implement distributed leadership in schools.

Keywords: Leadership, Distributed leadership, Practices, Challenges and Secondary school.

1.   Background of the study

Education plays a vital role to speed up the overall socio-economic development of the country. As a result of this, nations of the world has given high priority to education sector to realize that education could be the gateway to future economic, social, political and technological development of the country. The role of education, therefore, is not only just to impart knowledge and skills that enable the beneficiaries to function as economic and social change agents in the society, but also to impart values, ideas, attitudes and aspirations which are important for natural development. This requires the active participation of stakeholders particularly teachers, school leaders and management (Aggarwal, 1985).

There are different variables that contributes for the development of education system. Among these, school leadership is critical to school improvement and create a situation in which best teaching learning process can occur. To improve the effectiveness of schools, we need to have well selected curriculum and improved instructional situations and professionally motivated and competent teachers and school leaders. Although schools have the required instructional materials, financial and human resources, effective performance cannot not be realized without appropriate leadership practice.

Leadership is a highly complex concept to define, but most definitions focus on the exercise of influence (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999) as the notion of efficient leadership has shifted from delegation and direction to collaboration and shared responsibilities. In the traditional perspectives, the definitions of leadership focus on the ability of an individual person to influence other peoples so as to achieve certain objectives. However, currently the concept of leadership shifted from analyses of individual leaders either those in formal leadership roles or charismatic or informal leaders to distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is an advocacy for democratic leadership with a sharing of authority among principals, teachers and other stakeholders (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Unlike traditional leadership definitions, distributed leadership is based on expertise, knowledge and contributions created as a result of relationships network among individuals who direct, guide and work with teachers in the process of improving education (Davis, 2009). Similarly, Harris (2004) defines distributed leadership more inclusively, as it includes the practice of leadership that is shared and stretched out among a number of individuals collectively either in formal or informal way.

Engaging many people in leadership activities are the foundation of distributed leadership (Harris, 2004) and where positive effects of distributed leadership clearly have been demonstrated. Research by Silns and Mulford (2002) has shown that student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and teachers are empowered to make decision in areas of expertise. Such an emphasis on decentralized leadership informs the increasing focus on the role of teacher leadership and the development of the contribution of teachers in making decision about the approaches to teach students (Anderson, 2004). Thus, literatures suggested that effective schools have greater educational and social cohesiveness (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

From distributed leadership perspective, effective principals do not just string together a series of individual

actions, but systematically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of school life (Spillane, 2006). Leadership is distributed not by delegating it or giving it away, but by weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause. Similarly, Bass (1997) stated that effective leadership involves greater participation of the entire workforce and working towards individual and organizational performance.

In practice, this approach addresses leadership along with teams, groups and organizational characteristics. Advocates of this idea argue that shared leadership is necessary since educational organizations are too complex to be led by a single person (Heller & Firestone, 1995). Responsibility for managing complex tasks is distributed among many individuals who have different sort of qualification (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). The basic principle of this approach is based on the ineffectiveness of efforts to ascertain a series of best single leader behaviors.

The basic philosophy underlining in this approach is the mobilization of shared wisdom and common sense by creating synergy among the staff at organizations and maximization of organizational efficiency, productivity and competence which will ensure achievement and happiness in the members of the organization. Moreover, distributed leadership moves beyond the philosophy that leadership emanates solely from the formal position of the principal and instead frames leadership as a practice that involves an array of individuals whose dynamic interactions mobilize and guide teachers in the process of instructional change and learning improvements (Spillane, 2005).

Although distributed leadership understood differently by different scholars, it viewed as the interaction between school actors and their environment using Spillane's leadership model as a frame work of this study. Thus, leadership was defined by Spillane (2006) as the product of the connective web of the school actors' interactions, use of artifacts, and the situation. Spillane's conceptual framework did not center on the acts of a singular individual but rather the group of actors involved in various dimensions of leadership. As a result, Spillane's work moved away from leadership as a sole proprietorship and toward leadership as a collective endeavor. Spillane's work on distributed leadership yielded a new focus on the concept of multiple actors taking part in school leadership, including formal leaders, informal leaders, and their followers.
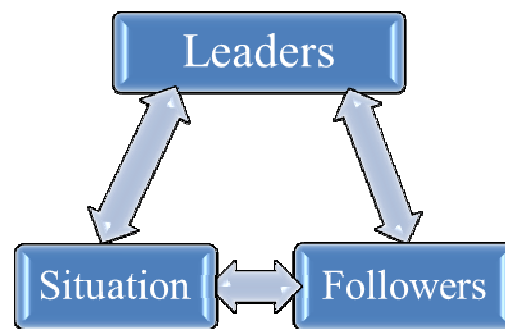

Figure 1: Elements of Spillane. (2006) distributed leadership Model

This idea supported by Harris (2002) and Elmore (2000) that it opens the possibility for every organizational member to become a leader and requires people to operate in a network of shared and complementary expertise rather than in hierarchies that have a clearly defined division of labor. In addition to this, distributed view of leadership incorporates the activities of multiple individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding school staff towards a desired change (Spillane, 2005). They focus on leadership practices as they are distributed among appointed, formal leaders as well as informal leaders within schools. Thus, leadership in schools is almost distributed, and the issues to be considered are how the leadership activities are distributed and the ways in which this distribution is differentially effective (Spillane, 2006).

Hence, it is possible to conclude that leadership is not the work of individuals; rather, it is the joint contribution of teachers, students and other stakeholders so that they enthusiastically make every effort towards the achievement of school goals. To support this idea, Leithwood, Mascall, and Strauss (2009) argued that distributed leadership enhances opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members through empowering them to participate in decision making process and increase their commitment to achieve the goal of the organization.

In this competitive environment, schools rely upon their leaders' to facilitate the changes and innovations required to maintain competitive advantage through optimizing human resources. School leadership can be considered as a catalyst for change and effectiveness of the school system as an organization. It has been widely accepted that effectiveness of schools largely dependent on the quality of its leadership. That is, school needs improved school leadership in order to achieve its purpose.

Due to the prevailing political, social and economic shifts in the environment in which schools are located, as well as significant changes has brought in the education system, such as the way educational institutions are managed, school leaders need to be well developed to meet the challenges of the twenty first century. Moreover,

increased competition, technological advancements, the global demands of a professional workforce and the diverse needs of students are just a few indicators why school leaders need to be efficient and to continually foster development to enable their schools to be sustained within a challenging environment in an era of globalization (Bono & Judge, 2003). This shows that schools requires the participation of many peoples who have different sort of knowledge, skill and attitude to be successful.

2.   Statement of the Problem

Although there has been large proliferation of leadership theories and styles, the majority of studies are largely concerned with the leadership capabilities of just one person (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Traditionally, school leadership has been followed top-down approach where the leader leads, makes key decisions, motivates, and inspires followers. In contrast to traditional leadership practices, distributed leadership approach advocates the need for schools to adopt a more democratic and collective form of leadership that reflects the view that every person in one way or another can demonstrate leadership (Goleman, 2002). Therefore, it is unwise to think that principal is the only one providing leadership for school improvement (Spillane, Halverson, & Kaplan, 2001).

There is a claim that schools are not led in ways that enables them to respond to the current increasing demands that face educational institutions (Elmore, 2000). This happened due to several forces continually changing educational context in which school leaders operate (Murphy, 2002). Educational contexts are now become more complex, dynamic and fluid than ever before, suggesting various scenarios that could affect the ways in which leaders perform their roles and deal with problems challenging them. Therefore, schools need to follow distributed leadership approach to cope up with the challenges of the changing environment. Moreover, with the rise of the accountability system, the participation and collaboration of educators help schools produce higher student achievement. However, the literature shows that the possible effect of school leadership practices on student achievement is limited. This implies that still it is not yet understood about how school leadership able to transform schools (Leithwood & Reil, 2003).

While the research findings proved the contribution of distributed leadership towards the performance of schools (Graetz, 2000), it seems seldom to implement practically due to the presence of confusion in understanding the concept (Bennett, Harvey, Wise, & Woods, 2003). That is to say, the concept and approaches of distributed leadership still continued to be described as self-leadership, super leadership and shared leadership (Bostancı, 2012). This variation in conceptualizing distributed leadership embracing a wide range of understandings and often bearing little apparent relationship to what happens in schools and classrooms (MacBeath, 2009). As a result, the researcher is inspired by the view that there is no clear understanding about the concept and the practices of distributed leadership in schools (Senge 1990).

Although the government of Ethiopia is working to improve the performance of schools, school leadership does not seem effective in enhancing achievement in schools due to increasing the complexity of factors related to school management and performance. The practices of distributed leadership seem invisible in Aksum Town secondary schools. In addition to this, there is no research conducted so far in this area to assess the practices and challenges of distributed school leadership. Although school leadership is nationwide program designed for both primary and secondary schools in Ethiopia, this study delimited to secondary schools of Aksum Town due to the methodology followed and time and resource constraints.

Hence, the researcher used case study to address issues related to the concept, practices and challenges of distributed leadership in secondary schools of Aksum Town using teachers, school principals and members of PTA as a sample to get relevant data concerning the issue under investigation.

To address the phenomenon under investigation, the researcher formulated the following research questions:
1.   How do teachers, school principals and members of PTA understand the concept of distributed leadership in secondary schools?
2.   How far is distributed leadership practiced in secondary schools?
3.   What are the major challenges influencing the successful implementation of distributed leadership in secondary schools?

3. Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the current practices and challenges of distributed leadership in secondary schools of Aksum Town. The specific objectives of the study were:
- To assess teachers', principals' and PTA's levels of understanding about the concept of distributed leadership in secondary schools.
- To examine the extent which distributed leadership practiced in secondary schools.
- To identify the major challenges influencing the successful implementation of distributed leadership in secondary schools.

4.   Research Methods
Since this study involves small number of samples to assess the practices and challenges of distributed leadership, qualitative case study found suitable. In this case, the researcher followed this design as a guide using multiple cases to address the issue under investigation. Case study is one of the qualitative research methods emphasize on contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships within a specific context. When researchers are interested in exploring, explaining, and describing a phenomenon within a real-life context, a case study methodology is desirable because it focuses on a particular situation, program, expresses rich details, and illuminates the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In most cases, case study method selects very limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study.

In Aksum Town, there are a total of 4 secondary schools both with first cycle (grade 9-10) and second cycle (grade 11-12). Thus, the researcher included all the four secondary schools as a target of this study due to the implementation of distributed leadership seems invisible to bring changes. School principals, teachers and members of PTA used as respondents in this study because they are critical actors in the school improvement process.

For the manageability of reason, four school principals and eight teachers were selected as a sample school using comprehensive and purposive sampling techniques respectively. In addition to this, 4 members of PTA selected as a sample from the four schools using purposive sampling technique. Stake (2005), also described this approach as one where the researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting a case of some typicality but leaning toward those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn.

Therefore, in this study, 8 teachers, 4 school principals and 4 members of PTA included as a sample, making a total of 16 respondents for interview purpose.

With regard to data gathering instrument, the researcher used semi structure interview to gather data about the concept, practices and challenges of distributed leadership. Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

In this study, narrative analysis technique used to analyze the data which gathered through semi structure interview. Case study researchers commonly interpret their data by coding systematically through searching data to categorize specific observable characteristics (Saldana, 2011). The analysis techniques enable to perceive as an integral process in qualitative research whereby the researcher reflects continuously on how their own actions, values and perceptions impact upon the research setting and affect data collection and analysis (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006).

With regards to research ethics, the researcher sought permission from respondents about their will to participate in this study. After getting their consent, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the activities that they exposed to. The researcher also tried to inform them about the absence of potential risk and benefits due to participation in the study.

5.   Results and Discussion
This chapter discussed the key findings of interview according to the themes of the research questions in relation to the concepts, practices and challenges of distributed leadership respectively which are discussed below. Finally, the results and discussion of findings were presented concurrently.

5.1   The Concept of Distributed Leadership from Respondents' Perspectives
It is evident that different scholars define the term distributed leadership in different ways which meanings resemble earlier notions. This prompts the question of whether there is a conception of distributed leadership which takes understanding of leadership further than a re-naming of previous ideas. As a result, this study tried to identify elements that suggest what may be unique about the concept of distributed leadership between the research respondents.

Initially, respondents' interview gave an impression that teachers, school principals and members of PTA had similarity and difference in understanding the concept of distributed leadership.

Five teachers expressed distributed leadership as a way of working together for a common goal through shared responsibilities. According to these respondents, distributed leadership is shared where staff members in the school lead each other and everyone is invited to make a contribution through a process of mutual accountability. In this regard, the perspectives of respondents was quite similar with Harris' (2005) idea in that distributed leadership consider the collective contribution of individual towards the accomplishment of organizational objectives. In contrast to this, the rest of three teachers understood distributed leadership similar to the traditional leadership perspectives through focusing on the ability of single person to participate in different leadership dimensions. Accordingly, they believed that the success of school depends on the performance of principals qualified with different leadership knowledge in managing hierarchical systems and structures irrespective of the contributions of teachers and other stakeholders. This is similar with Sisungo's (2002) assumption that principal can influence teachers, students and other stakeholders so that they are

willingly make every effort towards the achievement of school objectives. This showed that still there were teachers not yet properly understand the meaning of distributed leadership.

With regard to school principals, all principals had similar understanding about the concept of distributed leadership. As Spillane *et al.,* (2001) described distributed leadership the product of the connective web of the school actors' interactions, use of artifacts, and the situation, all principals also viewed distributed leadership as a collective form of leadership that reflects the view that every person can participated in school activities with collaboration and shared responsibilities. That is, they considered it as an approach how the work of leadership takes place among many people in a given context to accomplish certain tasks. In the same way, Halverson, (2007) also consider distributed leadership as a means working for the common goals with continuous communication and interaction rather than individual effort. Therefore, distributed leadership mainly concerned with the collective practices to bring improvement in the school.

According to three members of PTA, distributed leadership entails the view that varieties of expertise are distributed across many stakeholders of school. They added that stakeholders with different expertise working together can contribute for the success of schools. Initiatives may be inaugurated by those persons with relevant skills in a particular context, but others will then adapt and improve them within a mutually trusting and supportive culture. It asserted that distributed leadership opens the possibility for every member to become a leader and to be able to create changes for school improvement. In the same way, Davis (2009) shared the ideas of respondents in that distributed leadership is based on expertise, knowledge and contributions created as a result of relationships network among individuals who direct, guide and work with teachers in the process of improving education. From this perspective, no one is ultimately responsible for the overall performance of school. In this case, Spillane (2006) asserted that with the help of distributed leadership, cooperation is created among the actions of individuals and leadership is realized in this manner. Howe ever, one of PTA member understood distributed leadership different from the other three members in that he conceived it as the provision of powers and authority for school principals to influence teachers, parents and other support staff.

5.2   The Practices of Distributed Leadership from Respondents' Perspectives

Distributed leadership theory advocates the need for schools to adopt a more democratic and collective form of leadership that reflects the view that every person in one way or another can demonstrate leadership (Goleman, 2002). While it would appear from the research evidence that distributed leadership can be advantageous to school and teacher development, achieving it is far from easy. Essentially, it requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power and control to others. In distributed leadership perspective, the practices of schools viewed as a result of the interactions of different persons in their environment. This distributed view of leadership shifts focus from school principals and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice (Diamond & Spillane, 2007).

In this study, respondents were asked how far distributed leadership carried out in their school. In this regard, the majority of respondents (six teachers, two principals and three members of PTA) had similar understanding about the implementation of distributed leadership in their school. According to these respondents, the principal considered as the only actor of the school to make important decision that affect the performance of schools. They also added that even if an attempt was made to empower stakeholders participating in schooling activities, still their roles became minimal in making important decision that will improve learning outcome. Thus, still they are dominating with traditional leadership perspective in which only those individuals formally appointed to leadership position empowered to exercise leadership practices.

However, the rest of respondents (two teachers, two principals and one member of PTA) believed that distributed leadership practiced in their school. According to their expression, teachers and other stakeholders empowered enough to make decision with respect to school improvement. This leadership model recognizes the nature of instructional practice requires people to operate in networks of shared and complementary expertise rather than in hierarchies with clearly defined division of labor (Elmore, 2000).To sum up, respondents had similarity and difference with respect to the practices of distributed leadership in their school.

5.3   The Challenges of Distributed Leadership from Respondents' Perspectives

While it is acknowledged that we have very little systematic evidence about the relative contribution to the achievement of school goals of different patterns of distributed leadership, there is empirical evidence to support a strong relationship between distributed patterns of leadership and school performance. The inherent difficulties in achieving this are at once immediately apparent. In this study, respondents were asked to identify the major challenges that hindered the implementation of distributed leadership in their school. In response to this question, teachers, principals and members of PTA pointed out some of factors as barriers to apply distributed leadership in their schools.

According to teachers, top-down management structures in schools as a main impediment to the development of distributed leadership, as they militate against stakeholders attaining autonomy and taking on

leadership roles within the school. Similarly, Harris (2004) suggests that top-down approaches to distributed leadership, when not executed properly, can be interpreted as misguided delegation. In addition to this, they also reported that lack of sense of belongingness, responsibility, confidence as well as necessary knowledge to exercise leadership as major challenges affect the successful implementation of distributed leadership. Related to this, Spillane (2006) and Danielson (2006) also viewed that distributed leadership failed to implement due to time limitations on the part of stakeholders.

Moreover, principals also believed that absence of supportive school structures and culture, lack of knowledge and skill and lack of trust in the working environment on the part of stakeholders to address significant issues were identified as barriers of distributed leadership. Similarly, Harris (2004) suggested that structural, cultural, and political barriers operating in schools that make distributed forms of leadership difficult to implement. In addition to this, they reported that distributed leadership within a school influenced by relationships with other teachers and school management. This is evident with respect to teachers' ability to influence colleagues and developing productive relations with school management. This shows that nomination of teacher leaders by colleagues may not realize potential expertise within the group because colleagues may select their leaders using other criteria (Harris, 2005).

Furthermore, members of PTA also reflected their points of view about the challenges of distributed leadership in their school. Accordingly, community's expectation that the principal is in charge of every leadership activity, changing a school's culture when teachers are accustomed to being followers, resistance of staff members in performing duties perceived to administrative, stakeholders who traditionally have been in leadership roles may perceive a loss of power and stakeholders with leadership skills may be pulled from the classroom to train others.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings obtained from the majority of respondents, it is possible to conclude that though there was an attempt to exercise distributed leadership, still it was not yet properly practiced due to lack of sense of belongingness, responsibility, confidence, knowledge, supportive culture, trust and smooth relationship on the part of staff members.

7. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommended the following points to implement distributed leadership so as to improve the performance of school. These are:

- There should be supportive school structures which powers and authorities distributed over teachers and other staff members to exercise the leadership roles in schools.
- Staff members should have prerequisite knowledge to take on formal and informal leadership roles to improve the performance of schools.
- There should be shared vision, goals, values, respect and smooth relationships between staff members with hope of engaging all stakeholders in democratic governance.
- Staff members should be confident, responsible and developing a sense of belongingness and accountability to engage in school leadership.
- Finally, the writer of this research strongly believes that if distributed leadership properly designed and implemented, the performance of schools will improve remarkably.

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