

# Distributed leadership in government secondary schools of East Shewa Zone: Policy, practices, and challenges

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## Abstract

This study explored distributed leadership in government secondary schools of the East Shewa Zone through a pragmatic worldview qualitative approach. The population of the study includes seven secondary schools chosen using purposive sampling technique. The participants include seven principals, five district education office heads, two city education office heads, and one official each from the Regional Education Bureau (REB) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), with interview as data gathering method. Data analysis follows a qualitative approach where inductive analysis under which categories, themes, and patterns are obtained from the data. Study results indicated that the opportunities and enabling conditions provided medium to high support for the secondary schools; the secondary schools under study were found working under many challenges. To hurdle the challenges, secondary school principals are recommended to provide teachers their deserved benefits. Similarly, district and city education offices need to revisit their selection and placement of principals while the Regional Education Bureau revisits its budget allocation and the Ministry works to include curriculum for fields of study that require special attention in higher learning institutions.

**Keywords:** *distributed leadership, principals, leadership practices, education policy, and challenges*

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## 1. Introduction

Empirical evidence on leadership depict that while leadership has been a topic of interest since the origin of humankind, leadership studies were taken seriously from the early 20th century onwards (Coggins, 2011). While the earlier theories of leadership focus on the character and personality of successful leaders, the recent theories concentrate on what leaders do (Hiebert & Klatt, 2001). The study of leadership, which began with the Great Man and Trait theories, reached distributed leadership theory in the 21st century. Distributed leadership has emerged as a result of the research works that different authorities (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane et al., 2015) have been through to search for a solution to the challenges that organizations face while practicing other theories of leadership (Gronn, 2002). While earlier leadership theories are in different forms, distributed leadership theory came to being independently, originating in the field of organizational theory in the mid-1960s (Williams, 2011). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it gained more emphasis as organizational development reached the level at which it requires sharing leadership practices among organizational constituents. As a result, the value given to leadership has grown in almost all sectors, and education has no exception (Harris, 2004). Since its emergence, scholars had defined distributed leadership differently before it came to take its current form (Bolden, 2011). These include shared, collective, collaborative, co-leadership, inclusive, and emergent leadership. In these definitions, it is evident that leadership is not the responsibility of a single individual and requires a more collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process. Like other leadership theories, distributed leadership has also been questioned for the complexities that it brings to organizations.

Following the current complexity of schools and the demand it places on principals, the idea that school principals can independently lead schools to effectiveness is questionable (Spillane, 2005). In search for a solution to this problem, distributed leadership is becoming a preferred school leadership model in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Baiza, 2011; Harris, 2008; Moos et al., 2005); Spillane & Diamond, 2007; and Silins & Mulford, 2004). In schools, distributed leadership is preferred with the assumption that it assists school principals in at least three ways: making a school a community where the interaction and interrelationship of all members are realized, enhancing effective teaching-learning in the classroom, and improving students' outcomes. With the emergence and development of distributed leadership, school principals' attention is shifting from the former one-person leadership to shared leadership, where school

leadership is a function of the interaction between and among the principal, followers, and their situation (Asrat, 2017), and this, in turn, necessitates two conditions to be fulfilled. First, leadership must be distributed to those with the knowledge required to carry out leadership tasks. Second, leadership distribution needs to be planned (Leithwood et al., 2007; Chen, 2007).

The practice of distributed leadership in different countries is almost similar. For instance, in Sweden, it is a part of state reforms while in Ireland, it has legal ground in schools, where the involvement of all members of staff, parents, board of management, and partners in school management activities are expected (Humphreys, 2010). Like Sweden and Ireland, the implementation of distributed leadership has legal provisions in Botswana schools (Mphale, 2015). Meanwhile, the current practice in Ethiopia indicates that the philosophy behind educational leadership in general and school leadership in particular is shifting from one-man leadership to distributed form (MoE, 1994). Nevertheless, when one looks at the current practice of the government secondary schools of Ethiopia concerning distributed leadership practices, empirical evidence showed that the practice is not to the expectation (Asrat, 2017; Bayisa et al., 2020; Dejene, 2014; Mesfin, 2019; Misgana, 2017; Shimelis, 2018). In addition, the information from archival sources also supports the research outputs.

Given the gap in the distributed leadership, this study aims to assess the distributed leadership practices of secondary school principals in Ethiopia. The basis of this study is threefold. First, distributed leadership is a new leadership theory which requires conduct of further study. Second, the few researches conducted in the country in relation to distributed leadership in schools have methodological gap; majority of them were quantitative approach by considering only principals and teachers as data sources. Lastly, the current leadership practice in Ethiopia is weak at all the national, regional, and local levels of educational management (MoE, 2021). Hence, this study identifies the opportunities and enabling conditions in the practice of distributed leadership in secondary schools and the significant challenges affecting distributed leadership practices. This study is assumed to extend the current research on distributed leadership in the Ethiopian education system in general and secondary schools in particular by bringing attention to how policies, opportunities, and situations contribute to school effectiveness (Natsiopoulou & Giouroukakis, 2010; Tekleselassie, 2002).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. *Research design*

The primary objective of this study is to explore stakeholders' perceptions of the opportunities and enabling conditions in place for practicing distributed leadership in government secondary schools in the East Shewa Zone. The study was guided by pragmatic worldview, which relates theory and practice; oriented to real-world practice, and problem-centered (Graff, 2016; Biesta & William, 2003; Creswell et al., 2007).

Research design refers to a plan and the procedure to be followed to conduct a research. This covers all activities that range from making decision on the broad assumptions up to the detailed methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). Accordingly, for this research, pragmatic research paradigm underpins the methodology. Pragmatic research paradigm applies to mixed methods research under which researchers draw from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions (Creswell, 2009). In social science, until recently, there had been two mismatching research paradigms on the basis of their differences in ontological and epistemological views. These are the quantitative methodology of the post positivists' paradigm and the qualitative methodology of the constructivist and interpretive paradigm.

### 2.2. *Sample and sampling technique*

According to the data obtained from Zonal Education Department, there were ten districts and three city administrations in the study area. Accordingly, five of the ten districts were selected as a sample using purposive sampling, considering the number of secondary schools and teaching staff they have (Manion & Morrison, 2000, as cited in Rahi, 2017). Similarly, two of the three city administrations were purposively selected and included in the sample (Cohen et al., 2000). After selecting the sample districts and the city administrations, the sample secondary schools were selected following two different mechanisms: the secondary schools that are working in the sample districts were directly taken for the very reason that each sample district has only one secondary school (Grades 9-12). From those secondary schools working in the sample city administrations, the sample secondary schools were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. Accordingly, two of the five secondary schools were selected and included in the sample. Together, seven government secondary schools were taken as a sample.

### ***2.3. Data collection***

Following the research design and the qualitative approach, the interview was chosen as the data collection tool for it helps a move from seeing human subjects as manipulated to considering knowledge as generated between humans, realizing the idea that data is socially situated (Cohen et al., 2002). Accordingly, semi-structured interview guides prepared in the English Language were used to collect the data needed for the study. For this study, 16 interviews (with seven secondary school principals, five district education office heads, two city administration education department heads, one official from regional education bureau, and one from the ministry) were conducted. On average, the interviews took 50 minutes to 1 hour. During the interview, the discussions were recorded using an electronic medium with the interviewees pre-asking and gaining consent.

### ***2.4. Data analysis technique***

The phenomenological research design with a qualitative approach was used to conduct the study. Qualitative data analysis involves an inductive process through which a researcher works to answer research questions by explaining phenomena. Accordingly, the qualitative data obtained through interviews were analyzed using inductive analysis under which categories, themes, and patterns were obtained from the data. For this study, inductive analysis refers to the approaches that a researcher uses in making detailed readings to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data. This implies the fact that a theory emerges from the data. The three major purposes of conducting inductive analysis include: condensing extensive raw text data into a brief and summary format; establishing clear links between the research objectives and the findings; and developing a theory about the structure of experiences evident in the text data (Thomas, 2006). The process to analyze the structure of lived experience (inductive analysis) is the final stage of phenomenological approach in analyzing data (Behal, 2023).

## **3. Results**

As a result of data analysis, three major themes emerged: policy provisions support the practice of distributed leadership; school organization supports practicing distributed leadership and school culture support to practice of distributed leadership. Under each theme, responses obtained from study participants were analyzed.

***Theme One: Policy Support on the Practice of Distributed Leadership***

***The responsible body for the selection and assignment of secondary school principals.*** Responses obtained from Ministerial and Regional level educational officials about the responsible body for selection and assignment of secondary school principals and whether there is a criterion in place to do so indicated that there is a responsible body for selection and assignment of secondary school principals. As to their responses, it is done by district and city education offices, and there are set criteria. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents is presented as follows to have a better understanding of the issue:

*Yilikal: A criterion is used to select and assign secondary school principals. It includes having an MA degree in leadership or any one of the subjects taught at secondary schools. For those who have MA in subjects, it requires them to take short-term training like following Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PGDSL) during summer time (HOI01).*

According to the responses of interview participant officials (from district and city education offices) with whom the interview was conducted to collect the data needed for the study, concerning the responsible body for selection and assignment of secondary school principals and whether there is a criterion in place to do so, it is their offices that are responsible for the selection and placement. For this, all of the seven interview participant officials agreed that there are criteria for selecting and assigning secondary school principals. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents are presented hereunder to get a better understanding of the issue:

*Zemedie: Yes, there is a criterion in place to be used to select and assign secondary school principals. It is processed based on an officially announced vacancy. One of its essential requirements is having an MA degree in leadership or any of those subjects taught at secondary schools (EOI01).*

According to the responses of secondary school principals who were interview participants, the results of the data collected concerning the responsible body for the selection and assignment of secondary school principals and whether there exist criteria to be used in the selection of secondary school principals indicated that district and City Education Offices do the selection and placement of the secondary school principals. There are officially provided criteria jointly from the Regional Education Bureau and the Ministry for the selection. To better understand this issue, one of the direct verbatim of the respondents are presented as follows:

*Yonas: The City Education Office is responsible for selecting and placing secondary school principals. It is done through competition, for which the department announces the position based on the criteria set by REB. Some of these include having an MA degree in school leadership or any subjects taught at secondary schools, sitting for the written exam, and giving an interview (PI01).*

### ***Theme Two: School Organization Supports Practice of Distributed Leadership***

***Secondary school organizational structure and participation of teams in decision making.*** The respondents were asked whether the current secondary school organizational structure allows teams to participate in decision-making. The respondents from the region and the Ministry agreed that at current secondary schools are structured in a way that teams can participate in decision-making. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents:

*Yilikal: I think the current secondary school organizational structure has no problem in practicing distributed leadership. It allows teams to participate in decision-making. For example, while we are currently developing a Job Evaluation Grade (JEG) system for schools, one of the criteria we are considering is distributing decision-making (HOI01).*

Responses of district and city education officials on current secondary school organizational structure indicated that secondary schools are structured in a way that they could participate teams on decision-making activities. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents is presented as follows:

*Megersa: the current structure of the education system follows a decentralized leadership approach. It is structured from the Ministry up to district and even to the school level since what is planned at a higher level is implemented in schools (EOHI02).*

The school principals also indicated that the structure has space for teams to participate in their secondary school decision-making. For instance, out of the seven interview participants of the sample secondary school principals, all assured that the secondary school structure has space for team participation. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents:

*Yonas: Yes, the current secondary school organizational structure allows teams to participate in decision-making. At our school, almost all the work is done by participating teams. I think a school principal could not be effective without teams (PI01).*

***Theme three: School Culture Supports Practice of Distributed Leadership***

***Support provided to teachers who provide coaching to their colleagues.*** The respondents were asked whether there is a mechanism by which teachers who provide coaching to their colleagues are supported. Results indicated that secondary schools have a mechanism by which teachers who provide coaching are supported. They justified it with examples indicating that it is one of the requirements for continued professional development (CPD) of teachers since teachers with better performance at CPD get priority for other benefits. One of the direct verbatim of the response:

*Yilikal: The current secondary school organization has a mechanism by which teachers who provide coaching to their colleagues are supported. For instance, providing induction training for newcomer teachers is one of the criteria for fulfilling what is expected from a teacher for CPD. It is also an element in teachers' performance evaluation, which is essential for their promotion. In this regard, teachers are benefitted in different ways, like getting priority for short and long-term training (HOI01).*

On the other hand, the school principals indicated that secondary schools have different experiences in this regard. There are secondary schools where teachers that provide coaching and take on additional responsibilities are encouraged. However, there are also secondary schools without coaching and mentoring. Two of the responses include:

*Temam: Yes, at the end of the year, at the ceremony for parents' day, at least a 'thank you' certificate is provided for those teachers with better performance (PI03).*

*Samson: Not at all. There is no mechanism by which teachers are supported for performing additional works. Of course, there is a request from teachers, but because the school cannot do so, we could not practice it (PI 04).*

***Mutual respect and trust among secondary school staff and between the staff and school administration.*** At some secondary schools, there is observable mutual respect and trust among teachers, the staff, and the school administration. However, there are secondary schools where mutual respect and trust is not a culture. Two of the direct responses of the secondary school principals are quoted herein.



*Yonas: Our school has no problem concerning mutual respect and trust among teachers, and this is partly because most of the teachers are those who stayed long together (PI01).*

*Samson: There is a problem concerning mutual respect and trust among teachers. They suspect each other. Our experience with mutual respect and trust between the staff and school administration could be moderate. Few staff members have a problem in this regard (PI04).*

***The experience of planning to improve individual student's achievement.*** All seven secondary school principals confirmed that their schools have experience in planning to improve individual students' academic achievement. One of the direct verbatim of the respondents is presented here under:

*Lidetu: Earlier, we had the experience of planning to improve individual students' achievements. It is done so that students plan their performance for each subject and teachers check and approve. At the end of each semester, teachers compare students' plans and actual performance. Nevertheless, the case of this year is different. Because of COVID-19, which forced us to divide each of the sections into two and multiply the number of sections, as a result of which teachers are forced to take more than their regular workloads. As a result, this year, it is not that much practiced though some students have plan (PI02).*

#### ***Theme four: Major challenges affecting the practice of distributed leadership***

***The significant challenges to practicing distributed leadership in the secondary schools.*** Higher officials at the Ministry of Education and Regional Education Bureau identified significant challenges that negatively affect the distributed leadership practices in secondary schools including in-school and out-of-school factors. One of the direct verbatim of the response;

*Yilikal: The significant challenges that negatively affect secondary school leadership include: the skill and knowledge gap that school principals have, lack of support provided by Woreda Education Offices, lack of cooperation from teachers and students, and lack of follow-up from the parents' side (HOI01).*

The district and city education officials indicated that the challenges are system-wide, which include: hiring the needed teachers; lack of professionals like laboratory technicians,

librarian, and psychiatrist; situational factors like COVID-19 related challenges; lack of school facilities like laboratory and library; and difficulty to get the required principals following the newly issued directive concerning selection and assignment of secondary school principals. One of the participants said;

*Megersa: The significant challenges include: the challenge we are facing in getting the needed teachers to the standard, both in number and in the required qualification types. According to the current experience, cities like ours (Bishoftu) get new teachers only through transfer. Most teachers who come to the city through transfer have medical problems. As a result, we face challenges in two ways: first, getting young and energetic teachers is difficult. Second, it is challenging to place new comer teachers where we want for they have difficulty teaching at our secondary schools with buildings up to 4 stairs. The other challenges include a lack of students' textbooks, a lack of budget, and a lack of administrative staff like lab technicians, librarians, and psychiatrists, all of whom are necessary for the work of secondary schools (EOHI02).*

According to the secondary school principals, the challenges are much fold which includes: political interference, lack of budget, lack of educational facilities like science laboratories and library, lack of professionals like laboratory technicians and librarians, lack of interest both from teachers and students, challenge related to COVID-19 protocol, and lack of on-the-job training provided for secondary school principals. One of the participants quoted;

*Yonas: different challenges could negatively affect the works of secondary schools of which political challenge is the major. Sometimes it happens when almost all parties like kebele administrators, sub-city administrators, and political organization leaders want to give the order to school principals, when a principal is expected to deal with school matters. They all lack school situation information and experience. Generally speaking, I can say what is written on government documents and what is actually implemented are totally different. Due to this, sometimes it happens when I return to the school accepting what I am not convinced myself and give orders for my staff to do accordingly, and this is one of the practices that could negatively affect the trust between my staff and me.*

***Recommended to overcome the challenges.*** To combat the challenges, the higher officials from the Ministry and REB indicated the four categories of solution: strictly selecting the secondary school principals following the criteria set; providing secondary school

principals with continuous on-the-job training; organizing a forum where the secondary school principals discuss with higher officials from WEO, ZED, and REB; and follow up and evaluation of the works of the secondary schools by different parties which include supervisor, Cluster Resource Center (CRC), and district education office, all of which provide the secondary school principals with advisory services and of course corrective measures where necessary.

According to the district and city education officials, solutions are many which include: allowing cities for 50/50 level of teachers' employment and transfer by REB; creating a system by which universities train professionals like laboratory technician, librarian, and psychiatry by the Ministry; working with stakeholders like NGOs to facilitate the income generation of the secondary schools; revisiting the budget that is provided for secondary schools; and providing educational leadership training for educational leaders. One of the participants quote;

*Megersa: As a solution, it is recommended that the REB allows cities at least a 50/50 level of teachers' employment and transfer. It is also recommended that the MoE facilitates the system by which universities train professionals in fields like laboratory technician, librarian, and psychiatry, all of which are very important for the work of secondary schools. It is also good if the REB provides us with enough students' textbooks, and last but not least, it is also good if the REB provides us with enough budget (EOI02).*

The school principals indicated various solutions, which include: avoiding political interference; developing community and parents' understanding on the schools as human development agents; improving the current financial support provided to secondary schools; fulfilling the secondary schools with the necessary facilities like laboratories and libraries; and providing on-the-job training for secondary school principals.

#### **4. Discussion**

In the Ethiopian education system, distributed leadership has been more emphasized since the 1990s. This was with the education and training policy, the decentralization program, and strategy documents (MoE, 1994; GebreEgziabher & Berhanu, 2007). These are confirmed by all the participants indicating that a responsible body exists for selecting and assigning secondary school principals, with criteria in place. Nevertheless, the actual situation indicated

that most of the secondary school principals (six out of seven) were working taking secondary school leadership positions with MA degrees in subjects other than educational leadership. In addition, out of those seven district and city education office heads, only two of them were found to have educational leadership backgrounds. Hence, it is possible to conclude that even though there is a policy provision that supports the practice of distributed leadership, the actual practice indicated otherwise.

Distributed leadership is a form of power sharing that extends authority and influence to groups and individuals contrary to hierarchical arrangements (Arrowsmith, 2007). In education in general and schools in particular, distributed leadership is considered to expand leadership roles beyond formal leadership positions (Harris, 2011), and this, in turn, could bring the complexity of practices resulting from working with various stakeholders and the numerous day-to-day activities that characterize educational leadership (Cunningham, 2014; Despres, 2004). In schools, distributed leadership could also be defined as a leadership role whereby a principal develops leadership skills throughout the organization (Gronn, 2002). The directive of the Ministry of Education also supposes the organization of educational leadership to follow the principle of professionalism, democratization, decentralization, working in coordination, and openness and accountability (MoE, 2009). These are emphasized in the interview indicating that the secondary schools are organized so that teams could participate in decision-making activities, which implies that school is designed to support the practice of distributed leadership. However, the reform initiatives and the apparent lack in the ability of many schools, policy makers, educators, and intellectuals tried to look for alternative strategies that could foster school-wide change. In this context, authorities have argued for reconceptualization of schools as ‘learning organizations’ (Kools et al., 2020).

In schools, staff and stakeholders move in and out of the leadership role depending on situations, implying that distributed leadership is situation-dependent (Spillane, 2015). In this regard, schools in general and secondary schools in particular, are expected to realize the culture of helping each other and respect between and among teachers and students (MoE, 2009). According to this directive, a secondary school principal is expected to facilitate a school culture under which teachers, administration workers, or students who have exemplary work performance are awarded or recognized at a meeting where parents and teacher association (PTA) members and the community take part.

Based on its purpose and mission, every organization has different characteristics. Likewise, a school has a unique culture. The school culture is perceived as a key aspect which enhances and gives meaning to various activities of the school. Thus, for the successful implementation of educational reforms, it is important to incorporate the reforms into the existing school culture (Ismail et al., 2022). Among other aspects, the political and organizational specificities of schools include the degree of political–administrative centralization, the governance model, and the organizational configuration challenge the analysis of organizational culture. This implies a consideration of several levels in the process of cultural construction of schools (Torres, 2022). For instance, the support provided to teachers who participate in coaching, secondary schools have different experiences. There are secondary schools in which teachers are supported by providing coaching and taking on additional responsibilities. Contrary to this, some secondary schools lack support for coaching and taking on additional responsibilities. With regards to mutual respect and trust, there is observable mutual respect and trust between teachers, the staff, and the school administration. However, there are secondary schools where it is difficult to find mutual respect.

Following the government change of 1991 and the analysis made concerning the practices of the earlier education system, the idea that 'schools have to be secular' got constitutional recognition in the Ethiopian education system. In this regard, the Ethiopian constitution states that education shall be provided free from any religious influence, political preconception, or cultural prejudices (MoE, 1994). Even though there is policy provision for the decentralization of education management at all levels, in the country's education system in general and in secondary schools in particular, leadership is among the significant challenges facing the system (MoE, 2018). Due to the prevalent political, social, and economic shifts in the external school environment as well as the significant changes brought in the education system, school leaders need to be well-developed to meet the challenges of the twenty first century. In addition, the 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. From this, it is possible to understand that for schools to be successful, the participation of people with different knowledge, skills, and attitudes is required (Mesfin, 2018).

Generally, within the educational context, challenges and issues of distributive leadership could be divided based on challenges in the school hierarchical structure, teacher

competencies, the willingness to assume leadership roles, and the concept of power sharing between head teachers with teachers. Another substantial challenge faced by school leaders while practicing distributed leadership is the difficulty in finding teachers that implement the delegated tasks (Ishetu et al., 2020). This study indicated that the challenges are system-wide and many-fold which encompasses in-school and out-of-school factors.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the stakeholders' perceptions of the opportunities and enabling conditions in place for the practice of distributed leadership in government secondary schools in the East Shewa Zone. Based on the study findings, the value given to educational leadership is low, school culture not entirely support the principals' distributed leadership practice, and the secondary schools work under challenging situations. Even though policy provisions support the practice of distributed leadership in the secondary schools, the actual practice indicates otherwise. Furthermore, this may negatively affect the secondary schools' goal achievement.

In the light of the study findings, the secondary school principals need to develop a culture of providing teachers with benefits. In terms of the higher officials, district and City Education Offices need to revisit their experience concerning the selection and placement of secondary school principals, district and City Administrations must consider policy directives for selection and appointment of education office heads and reduce political interference on secondary schools, the Regional Education Bureau needs to revisit its budget allocation for secondary schools and fulfills the HR that secondary schools need, and the Ministry of Education must work on the inclusion of the curriculum for school laboratory technicians, librarians, and psychiatry training in academic programs of higher learning institutions.

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