Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian High Schools: Contextualisation of theory and practice

Mohammed Gunu Ibrahim

PhD, Department of Educational Management and Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

Email: igunu@uds.edu.gh

Abstract

There is an increasing interest in school leadership's ability to maintain school discipline whilst protecting students' rights and dignity as well as self-esteem. The accelerating interest in school leadership's ability to maintain a disciplined school is anchored on the belief that school discipline determines student learning outcomes. Whilst there is the need for effective leadership behaviour to propel Positive Behaviour Management in Secondary is widely acknowledged, there is no accessible literature on the leadership behaviour which can produce the desired behaviour. This research aimed to explore the theoretical underpinning of Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management and the empirical evidence of using these concepts in developing successful schools. The findings of the research demonstrated that the link between Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management is positive and significant. This understanding has implications for how Positive Behaviour Management is conceptualized and implemented in schools by school leaders and teachers.

Keywords: *Distributed Leadership; Positive Behaviour Management; Theory; Practice*

Introduction

The need to improve educational systems to remain relevant in the global competition is fast increasing. Researchers argue that educational attainment and improved learning outcomes among learners are significant for nations to survive amid a global economic competition (Bush, 2019). The globalised economy requires knowledge, creativity, skills and innovation. These elements are needed for economic success and prosperity (Wolf, 2002). Also, the increasing global significance of using student learning outcomes to determine the effectiveness of the educational system often drives the national education reform agenda (Mayrowetz et al. 2009; Hallinger, 2010; Williams and Young, 2022).

Globally, several countries are making tremendous efforts to ensure quality in their respective education systems through effective school leadership to facilitate better learning outcomes and enhance their competitiveness (see Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Ryan 2005). School leadership is the skill of a leader which enables him/her to motivate subordinates to work with zeal and confidence with the ultimate goal of achieving a set objective (Taylor and Ryan 2005). Effective school leadership is widely accepted as an important driver of school effectiveness and improved learning outcomes (see Hulpia et al. 2009).

School leadership is expected to manage student behaviour capable of providing an opportunity for a creative and innovative learning environment (O'Brien, 2012). There are several leadership styles (see Hallinger & Heck, 2010; 2003), however, this article focuses on Distributed Leadership as a way of supporting Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian High Schools. The seminal works of Gronn (2002, 2000), Spillane (2006), Mayrowetz et al., (2009), Harris (2004, 2010), Bolden (2011) and Bush, 2011, 2019) theoretically laid the ground for research on distributed leadership.

One of the reasons for the acceptance and popularity of Distributed Leadership is to support to reduce the strain on overworked head teachers and other school leaders (Botha & Triegaardt, 2016; Bennett et al. 2003). The researchers' work on distributed leadership has been on school-based leadership (see MacBeath, 2005 and Spillane et al., 2007).

Also, increased interest in distributed leadership style is a result of the search for new leadership paradigms, shifting attention from managerial styles based on formal roles and toward change-oriented approaches to leadership (see Jones, 2014 and Jones et al., 2017). The main focus of this research is on how distributed leadership is practised in Ghanaian high schools within the context of Positive Behaviour Management. This is intended to bring about enhanced student outcomes, knowledge, skills, innovation, creativity, transformation and positive change by shifting leadership approaches away from the dominant managerial paradigm in the management of student behaviour.

School leaders have been continuously measured by stakeholders on their ability to maintain discipline in the school (see Agbenyega 2006; Ibrahim, 2017). On this basis, it is often the interest of the school to tout itself as a well-disciplined institution. In response to the challenges of maintaining discipline in the school system whilst protecting the rights, dignity, as well as self-esteem of the students (see Raths 1964; Kyriacou 2014; Ibrahim 2018), this article explores the applicability of distributed leadership to navigate the complexities associated with Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian schools.

Positive Behaviour Management is committed to the idea of elimination of disciplinary violence in schools thereby preventing disciplinary exclusions (see Ibrahim, 2018) and ensuring education for all as enshrined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4.a, 4.1 and 16.2.

Ibrahim (2017:18) defines the concept of Positive Behaviour Management as "the actions of school leaders and teachers in partnership with students and other significant stakeholders to maintain an appropriate behaviour in the school taking into account the rights, dignity and self-esteem of students which potentially will generate a feeling of acceptance, safety and promote learning and mental growth of the students". Also, according to Article 28 (2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention".

Positive Behaviour Management requires the sharing of leadership with individuals with expertise to manage student behaviour effectively and provide an opportunity for a conducive learning atmosphere for students (Strahan et al., 2005; Kyriacou 2014). This is aligned with the theoretical understanding of Distributed Leadership which promotes sharing and collaborative leadership approach (see Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Hulpia et al. 2012; Mullick, Sharma and Deppeler, 2013).

Positive Behaviour Management in schools will remain a widely discussed topic in the educational discourse, hence the need for school leaders to identify appropriate means of sharing leadership to handle these issues. Leaders in the school system should act as a catalyst (see Leithwood et al. 2006) to propel positive change in attitude in dealing with school discipline. In the following, the research question that needs to be answered is presented.

Research Questions

How can distributed leadership practices facilitate Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian High Schools?

Literature Review

The Concept of Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership has gained prominence as an area of study and theorizing, with significant initiatives and texts attempting to give models of Distributed Leadership and proof of its usage to achieve successful practice in schools (see Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al. 2009; and Bush 2019).

Leithwood et al. (2009) described distributed leadership as the regular means of dividing responsibilities in organizations, so limiting the likelihood of mistakes committed under the solo leadership models. Woods et al. (2004) postulates that distributive leadership can support the coordinated action of many individuals in formal contexts or by ad - hoc basis. According to researchers, distributed leadership allows for the utilization of a broad range of expertise that is "distributed across the many, not the few... " Woods et al., 2004: 449).

Despite its emphasis on non-formal leaders' collective participation, theorists have argued that distributed leadership does not in any way replace formal leaders, but rather complements them (Woods, 2004; Hartley, 2007; Heikka and Hujala, 2013). This is demonstrated by the fact that distributed leadership might consist of individual teams, work teams, committees, and etc, all functioning inside a hierarchical organization (Woods, 2004; Hartley, 2007). Gronn (2009) likened distributed leadership to "hybrid leadership" to emphasize the notion that it may be applicable in diverse situations and contexts that exemplify the heterogeneity of contemporary organizations.

The rationale for Distributed Leadership is reflected in the actual outcomes or benefits derived from collective action. Distributed leadership is not only concerned with how work activities are diffused, but also describes greater degrees of engagement between individuals who are working toward common goals in an organization. Individuals in positions of leadership tend to be monitors of distributed leadership (Harris, 2009). In the following, the theoretical underpinning of Distributed Leadership is presented.

Theoretical Understanding of Distributed Leadership

Leadership theory has its traits focused on skills and behaviours of individual leaders (Bolden, 2011; Bush, 2011; Iszatt-White & Saunders 2020). It acknowledges that context, situation, environment, and contingency are important (Vroom & Jago, 2007; Mullins, 2016). In a recognition of the vital role leadership plays, this research explores a more suitable leadership approach for Positive Behaviour Management. This is empirical research to support the implementation of Positive Behaviour Management.

Distributed leadership has roots in the work of researchers like Gronn (2000), Spillane (2006), Harris (2009), Leithwood et al. (2009), Bolden (2011) and Bush (2011). Following the examples of researchers like Bolden (2011), Bolden, Petrov & Gosling (2009) and Jones et. al., (2014) who turned to the Activity Theory, this research uses Activity Theory to explain the concept of Distributed Leadership and its relation with the Positive Behaviour Management concept. Gronn's (2000) understanding of Distributed Leadership is in line with the Activity Theory (see Engestrom, 1999; Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2012).

Hartley (2010) describes this as Engestrom's 3rd generation activity theory (see Hartley, 2010; MacBeath, 2009; Engestrom, 1999). It is built on the recognition for change (Hartley, 2010) which is the current condition of Positive Behaviour Management in Ghana. It is hoped that Positive Behaviour Management will replace corporal punishment and related abusive punishment in Ghana. Contextually, Distributed Leadership promotes collaborative efforts and recognizes the contribution of parents and other significant stakeholders (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009) which are key elements in Positive Behaviour Management.

Activity theory emphasizes the need for social and environmental context in handling issues (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009; Woods, 2004). This promotes the circulation of activities for individuals within the school system. Expertise is distributed among individuals therefore utilization of these skills will improve student learning outcomes. Distributed Leadership approach maintains that leadership should be interested with the practices/activities instead of the leadership positions and assigned responsibilities (Irvine, 2021). The common ingredient of this theory is the recognition of leadership roles at various levels, including official and informal settings, as well as its imperativeness for collaborative networks to interact within dynamic structures such as schools.

Distributed leadership is widely used to enact change in schools in the USA and the UK (Jones et al., 2014; Harris, 2009; Spillane et al., 2007). It must be mentioned that Distributed Leadership does not suggest that everybody should be a leader. In the following the research Methodology is presented.

Methodology

The research design for the study is a case study design (see Yin, 2018) which was qualitative in approach. Ghanaian Senior High Schools are stratified into four categories according to Ghana Education Service criteria; categories "A" to "D". This is based on infrastructure and academic performance. The most effective and successful schools are in category "A" and the least effective and less successful and are in category "D". This research adopted a stratified sampling procedure, selecting two schools from each category in six regions of Ghana: Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, Northern, Upper East and Upper West.

The essence of the stratification was to establish elements of distributed leadership in Positive Behaviour Management Techniques in secondary schools. The sample included rural and urban schools. Several interviews were conducted in each school with the headmasters/mistress or representatives, assistant headmasters (domestic), senior house masters and two teachers in each school to understand the nature of Distributed Leadership.

The data involving 240 participants from 48 schools in the six regions of Ghana were analysed. In the first instance, a case study report was prepared for participating schools. The data was organized to establish a picture of distributed leadership and Positive Behaviour Management in a specific West African context. Thematic analysis characterized this research based on the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Conceptualizing Distributed leadership and Positive Behaviour Management

Distributed Leadership supports a collaboration between the school and stakeholders. This is an important relationship between Positive Behaviour Management and Distributed Leadership because teachers, school leaders, parents and other significant stakeholders are important in all the processes.

Positive Behaviour Management is a collaborative effort in the school system aimed at dealing with school disciplinary measures devoid of abusive disciplinary punishment (Ibrahim, 2018). Students who suffer from abusive disciplinary measures (i.e., corporal punishment) are directly related to their rights, self-esteem and dignity. For instance, students who are humiliated publicly as a form of punishment retire being hurt (Ibrahim, 2017), feeling a sense of disappointment and resentment. This may significantly influence their behaviour and self-esteem subsequently.

The field data in the case study schools established that the responsibility for normalizing judgment about disciplinary issues is distributed among school leadership and teachers. In the words of Foucault (1977:304);

> *"... the judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge ... the educator judge ... ; it is on them that ... each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes ...".*

In the school context, the network of observational power is executed as a part of the school's regular activities. The movement of students and their conduct in the classroom and the school as a whole are all regulated by the school. In the following one of the assistant headmasters sums up the issue.

> AH5 *" ...the students are many so we have a monitoring mechanism to get the deviants, ... these teachers monitor the students and report to management ... ... so they are helping the school to run effectively...".*

The distributed observational power of the school officials is sanctioned by the Ghana Education Service (GES) Code of discipline. GES requires school administration and teachers to assume observational and disciplinary responsibilities in the school. The senior house masters in the following established the nature of the network of distributed observational powers.

> SH6 *"In fact, ... the senior house master, form masters and form masters monitor the students and give us information based on that we take action ...".*

> SH1 *"Well ... student leaders like the prefects, class monitors, have the responsibilities of ... and monitoring colleague students for deviants ...".*

The conceptualization is established in the above presentation. In the following an understanding of Distributed Leadership and as a means to Positive Behaviour Management is presented.

Understanding of Distributed Leadership as an Avenue to Positive Behaviour Management

The school leaders and teachers construct of Positive Behaviour Management is significant to link Distributed Leadership to Positive Behaviour Management. The distributive nature in this research was "allocative" (see Bolden et al., 2009; Bush, 2019) and not "emergent" (see Bush, 2019) which allowed headmasters to delegate responsibilities to assistant headmasters (domestic), senior house masters and teachers.

The senior house masters (who are in charge of school discipline) constructed the concept of Positive Behaviour Management as the involvement of significant stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers and students) in decision making. These are some of the attributes of Distributed Leadership.

Students, teachers, parents and school leaders are significant stakeholders in maintaining school discipline. Discipline (Behaviour management) and punishment in schools encompass a highly complex blend of interests related to the interests of classroom teachers, school and the nation as a whole. Majority of the interviewees perceived Distributed Leadership as an integrated component of Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian schools. Some of the interviewees stated that:

SH2: *"... experienced teachers are able to handle student disciplinary issues when they are on duty ...".*

SH4: *"... with the support of parents we are able to handle disciplinary issues ...".*

Whilst there is global interest for Positive Behaviour Management because of its perceived advantage of promoting innovation, creativity, self-esteem, dignity and human rights of individuals, there is no accessible literature on the kind of leadership behaviour that can produce the desired outcome. This article explored the theoretical underpinning of Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management and discusses the empirical evidence of using these concepts together in establishing successful schools.

Some of the Distributed practices in Positive Behaviour Management in the Ghanaian context include the following:

Sharing of Responsibilities: The findings of the research indicate that school discipline is a shared responsibility involving school leaders, teachers, parents, students and GES. This shared responsibility is highlighted in the The Unified Code of Discipline (n.d:2) which states that;

"The setting up of Committees with student representation on them to deal with all aspects of school life is highly recommended. It is hoped that P.T.A. and School Committees ... will help to maintain the desired discipline in schools."

- **Collective Decision Making**: Teachers in this research connected the concept of distributed leadership with their involvement in decision making. The following were the instances where collective decision was needed:

  o Referral of students has to be made by a range of stakeholders acting in collaboration with one another. Referral is made to higher authority, colleague teachers among others (Kyriacou, 2014).
  o Praise is classified into verbal (see Jenkins, 2015) and non-verbal such as written praise (see Bani, 2011; Jenkins, 2015). Contextually written praise was effectively used based on collective decision. This reduced office disciplinary referrals and motivated students to keep-up good conduct.

- **Collaboration**: The following operational instances of collaboration were found in the case study schools:

  o *Contact with Parents on Disciplinary Issues*. This was common in the case study schools. One of the teachers explained that in the following;

Tr4: "… *we contact parents for support if the student's misbehaviour continues … sometimes they are asked to sign a bond …".*

o **Counselling:** Providing students with counseling services is one of the approaches teachers employ to maintain good behaviour and dissuade bad behaviour in Ghanaian Senior High Schools (Ibrahim, 2017).

All the Participants in the 48 case-study schools highlighted distribution aspects; however, the majority of their examples pertain to collaborative activities instead of distributed leadership as explained in European/UK and North American Literature. The benefits of Distributed Leadership in school disciplinary management issues include reduction of job stress among school leaders and teachers and Utilization of the expertise of teachers and other significant stakeholders. The findings of the research established that the link between Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management is positive and significant.

Distributed leadership is conducive for the implementation of Positive Behaviour Management. Some of the practices of Positive Behaviour Management like counselling, contact with parents, time-outs, after school intervention among others are well related with the principles of Distributed Leadership. In the following contextual discussion is presented.

The increasing global prominence of distributed leadership among scholars and practitioners of educational leadership and management stems from the dissatisfaction associated with solo leadership (Bush, 2019; Bush and Glover, 2014; Bennett et al., 2003). Distributed Leadership dwells on expertise rather than positional authority in the sense that schools are required to be staffed with personnel who can contribute to the development of a relevant and inclusive learning culture and atmosphere (Kyriacou, 2014; Ibrahim, 2017).

This article advocates for distributed leadership in Positive Behaviour Management is an acknowledgement of its likelihood to improve leadership schools that can contribute to enhanced student outcomes in Ghanaian schools. The nature of Distributed Leadership is allocative in nature (see Bolden et al., 2009).

Limitations

The research is clothed with some limitations. These limitations include: First, the views of other stakeholders in the school system such as parents, students and so on were not considered. It is possible the views of these people might not be in line with the views expressed by school leaders and teachers but would be an important dimension of understanding the linkage between Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management. On this ground further research should seek to elicit the views of these significant stakeholders.

Conclusion

This research provided an understanding of the linkages between Distributed Leadership and Positive Behaviour Management. However, it was noted that the practices of Positive Behaviour Management within the school cannot operate in isolation from the micro-politics of the school organization which promotes discourses that are consistent with allocative Distributed Leadership. Disciplinary issues in the school will continue to be an important discourse in the educational policy and practice.

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