School Reformation for a Better Performance Through School-Based Governance: A Study in Eritrean Secondary Schools

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Abstract:
School-based management might be an age-old research topic, but its significance for amalgamating school efforts is of paramount importance. The purpose of the study is to empower principals to push for school base management and thereby to decentralize the schooling system in order to bring about collaborative or participative efforts. Focused group discussion was employed to gather data from secondary school principals. The study also built on a conceptual framework that is strongly grounded in theory and practice. The findings revealed that archaic school practices, bureaucratic red-tapes, tenuous school-community relationships and a dearth of instructional resources impede school effectiveness.

Keywords:
School-base management, school reform, high school principal, community participation, educational centralization and decentralization


National demography and political context

Eritrea is located in the North-East of Africa, adjoins Sudan to the North and West, Djibouti to the South-East, and Ethiopia to the South with an estimated population of four million. It officially became the 182nd member of the UN in 1993, after thirty years of bloody-war from Ethiopian occupation (Connell, 2005).

Shortly after 1993, Eritrea set off for a national refurbishment and economic growth. In the education sector, the provisional government discarded the old Ethiopian curricula, and built schools, both in rural and urban areas to provide educational access for all citizens, and thus the Eritrean societies who had been deprived of schooling for many years, for the first time started to send their progenies to attend schools, but the educational, political and economic scenarios did not transform as many have expected from the inception of independence due to the absolute power exercised by the president (Berhane, Ephrem & Gaikar, 2021).

By any measure, Eritrea is amongst the poorest countries in the world, with an average annual per capita income of US$ 200, and stands 157th out of 177 countries in the 2014 human development index (World Bank, 2015). The country still cannot produce sufficient sustenance because much of the economy is contingent on imports and agro-pastoralism.

Culturally, Eritrea is a diverse nation; it has nine nationalities and four main religions: Catholicism, Coptic Christianity, Islam and Protestantism. Tigrigna, Arabic and English are the official dialects in the media and government offices. At the primary level, students are taught in their respective mother languages plus the
English language as a separate subject. After primary education, English is, however, the only medium of instruction.

At the present, Eritrea has a centralized administration that hinders the educational sector. The country under the leadership of the despotic president employs a Maoism style of centralized planning to solve national problems, and in doing so, he has fashioned stringencies at all ministries, particularly in the Ministry of Education (Plaut, 2016). Centralization at its pinnacle point is when a single individual carries out all decisions (Levy, 1966).

**Educational context**

In principle, the Eritrean people believe that education is a third-eye opener for an economic development and a technological advancement. Since Eritrean formal independence in 1993, the educational infrastructure has improved considerably, but little effort has been made to modernize the educational system. In 2002, the Eritrean government drafted a paper for illiteracy eradication, promoting technical and vocational education as well as developing institutional capacity. However, two years later, it was discovered that the Eritrean educational system has to undergo $27 million to improve quality and ensure access in secondary schools (Irir, 2004). Then in 2005, the Ministry of Education upgraded the national curriculum from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centred and interactive pedagogy. Many believed that the new curriculum would meet the international standard. Schools, however, could not execute it as the new curriculum by its very nature requires high community participation and partnership among school stakeholders.

Parent-school-community partnership, in the Eritrean educational system, has not been commendable (World Bank, 2015).

Principals are education specialists (Stephenson, 2011). In Eritrea, principals are, however, ambiguous and wait habitually for a direction from the higher authorities in the Ministry of Education (Berhane, Ephrem & Gaikar, 2021). Schools, all over the country, are state-controlled (David, 2004). The single party in charge of the State has been controlling the educational goals and manipulating education for a solo political purpose, which further thwarts the evolution of the educational system. The Ministry of Education retains responsibility for policy and standards formulation, curriculum specification, national examinations, educational quality assurance, human resource development, sector development planning, research, monitoring and evaluation (World Bank, 2015), yet the Ministry of Education does not have adequate, qualified and experienced educators to prepare the curricula and draft comprehensive educational policies and plans (Bokre & Olden, 2006).

Since Eritrea’s independence in 1993, the country has achieved little progress, if any, in educational reform, economic growth, technological advancement and political maturity, and as a result schools have been affected detrimentally. The toughest and yet protracted challenge the Eritrean people face is nation-building through education development, because the regime is not constitutional (Connell, 2005). Schools throughout the country are not invigorated to mend their instructional practices, behavioural climate and social culture due to the dearth of teaching materials, facilities, trained teachers and principals (Madsen, 2006).
Schools, in Eritrea, more than ever, encounter unprecedented demands for change that sprang out from the impractical instructional practices, paucity of instructional resources and inept leadership that further exacerbate the existing educational situation throughout the country. In the past two decades, there has been a demand for democratization and decentralization. Criticism of centralistic character and bureaucratic structure is the need for educational reform and policy development to revolutionize the educational system. School-based management might be an age-old research topic, but its significance for democratization and fusing school’s efforts is immeasurable, particularly when it comes to school performance or effectiveness. School-based management as a restructuring approach bolsters schools to reform old practices and most importantly to inure educational challenges imposed by technological advancement, economic development or complex cultural integration.

Problem statement

As in many countries, education in Eritrea is an indispensable instrument for economic development, technological advancement and mass enlightenment. The government of Eritrea in general and the Ministry of Education, in particular, have been striving to modernize somehow the education system, yet without tangible success. A highly centralized educational system and paucity of budget, among other things, impact detrimentally school leadership, educational goals, curriculum tasks, instructional quality, community participation and partnership. Administration and academic matters, such as curriculum development, budgeting and staff development are centralized that schools do not have any role or contribution at all. In centralized systems, innovation is planned and designed at a national level and then disseminated to schools for implementation which impedes the voice or initiatives from the grassroots (Fenech, 1994). Similarly, Madsen (2006) discovered that a centralized education system sidelines principals, and as a result, schools somehow experience an inept leadership practice and over-management. A decentralized school system, in contrast, encourages local participation, improves accountability and responsiveness to schools’ needs and fosters better use of resources (Galway & Wiens, 2013).

School-base management may not be the panacea for all education problems, but as a model of decentralization process or restructuring approach, challenges a centralistic character and bureaucratic structure of an educational system to reform. A decentralized school system and participative leadership determine commitment to instructional duties (Silins & Mulford, 2002).

Purpose and research questions

School stakeholders, mainly principals, have a major responsibility for developing the management structure and processes for undertaking the whole school planning, implementation and review (Levacic, 1992). For stakeholders to act fully and responsibly, however, the concepts and approaches of school-based management are of paramount importance. The main aim of the study was, therefore, to provide evidences to the Ministry of Education to empower principals through school-based management and thereby to decentralize the schooling system in order to bring about collaborative or participative efforts.

The overarching research questions were: 1) What instructional problems/barriers do schools encounter in Eritrea? 2) What keeps principals busy for the most of their time? 3) To what degree are stakeholders, including students, parents and community members, engaged in
decision making? 4) To what extent do schools have the discretion to be able to plan their instructional goals, generate their funds and participate in curriculum development? 5) How is school performance affected when stakeholders participate daily in school matters? 6) What type of communication style occurs between schools and the Ministry of Education? 7) How conversant are principals about school-base management? 8) How to plan or implement school-base management to decentralize schools and thereby bring about educational excellence?

Review of Literature

School-base management

School-base management is generally seen as a method of decision making to model high involvement or a movement from centralized to decentralized educational systems. It is a reform strategy or technique to raise the level of involvement, increase input and achieve better schools (Brown & Cooper, 2000). As a notion, school-base management has a long tradition, but in the 1980’s, it became the centrepiece of restructuring, reorganization or transformation (Karsten & Meijer, 1999), because policymakers have shown a growing interest in producing high quality education (Farrell, Wohlsteer & Smith, 2012). In some countries, mainly in the west, school-base management is a priority for improving school performance (Wohlstetter, Smyer & Mohrman, 1994). School-base management means a considerable change in the nature of a school. Some scholars argue that school-base management is an outcome of public dissatisfaction to restructure schools based on four values: equality, efficiency, liberty and choice (Caldwell, 2008), which in turn helps schools to operate freely and competitively (Somech & Wenderow, 2006), for it has been discovered that there is a direct and indirect link between school-base-management, effectiveness and leadership capacity (Arar & Nasra, 2018).

Benefits of school-based management

School autonomy and local decision making

The new autonomy initiatives aim to increase school decision making authority to leverage school improvement. It enables schools to develop and implement approaches to teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2012). Although school-base management does not solve all the problems, it does simply localize decision making in schools. As a school gains more autonomy, principals accept added responsibilities to work collaboratively in the communities (Doggett, 1990).

Shift of focus for new structure

Local school management changes the way resources and incentives have been allocated, enhances the power of parents and governing bodies, and provides an equitable distribution of public funds to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes (Levacic, 1992). With a new structure, a great deal of weight is placed on decentralizing the roles of principals, teachers, school councils and school personnel (Dimmock & Hattie, 1994).

Expanding of roles

The shift from a centralized administration to a decentralized school system generated changes of roles, and produced varieties of models that require different commitments and resources (Jacobson, 2016). Expanding of roles redefines high involvement, reducing central office bureaucracy and collective bargaining (Steinberg, 1974). Expanding roles refers to a radical change in social relationships, restricting the dominance of a few individuals to allow all hierarchical levels to engage in decision making (Wissler & Ortiz, 1986). This suggests that
school-base management challenges the institutional assumption of school stagnation, compliance and isomorphism. With school-base management, the role of stakeholders expands dramatically and becomes more complex in execution than before, because it exposes stakeholders to internal and external challenges. Stakeholders, mainly principals become resource investigators, foster new initiatives and find new financial support for school development and improvement (Earley & Weindling, 2004).

School principals, teachers and students

With the introduction of school-base management, school principals can be exposed to contradictory pressures that affect their actions and practices, and thus their role becomes more pivotal than in the past (Yemini, Addi-Raccah & Katarivas, 2014). Similarly, Goldring and Schuermann (2009) summarize principals’ roles comprehensively, particularly in instructional improvement to advance student learning, make decisions based on data and research, integrate schools with their communities and markets. With complete autonomy, principals further expand their roles to make contract services to private enterprises, recruit and hire personnel, negotiate salaries, and oversee curriculum development (Doggett, 1990).

Some scholars also observed that school principals engage in boundary-spanning activities to seek new partnerships with various agencies and stakeholders to include parents, and community members (Leithwood, Jantzi & McElheron-Hopkins, 2006). In effect, principals act within a more complex network of groups, agencies and interested individuals. On top of that, principals have the privilege to build school community relationships, influence policy, allocate resources and mobilize (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2014), and surpass traditional roles to higher responsibilities to meet central governmental regulations, policies and standards (Yemini, et al. 2014).

School-base management also features teachers’ control through delegation of decision making, and thus it is linked to teacher empowerment (Karsten & Meijer, 1999). Traditionally, teachers are restricted to the deliverance of a content. This monotonous workload limits teachers from participating in important school matters. Often teachers have been given an advisory role rather than decision making power (Raywid, 1990). School-base management, however, bestows teachers more time for a lesson preparation and curriculum development, and empowers and exposes them to other areas of organizational operation and offers (Mentell, 1993). In other words, school-base management makes teachers more agile and capable of controlling their environment, and augments their roles from teaching tasks to leadership responsibilities.

Similarly, a more active role is required from students. Students participate and collaborate in school life. With school-base management, schools integrate in their role the development of nontraditional academic competence to bring about civic capability and self-efficacy in order to prepare students for the labor market (Wal & Waslander, 2007). Similarly, Veloso, Craveiro and Rufino (2013) summarize students' involvement in three areas: activities organized by schools, relationships developed by school governing bodies, and the organization of activities by students. The traditional scenario of parents leaving their children at the school gate will be obsolete when schools and communities work together (Borg & Mayo, 2001).

Community participation and control

With school-base management, communities can partake in education in a number of ways,
and play an important contribution to students’ development and education (Sanders, 2001). Eritrean scholars also highlighted the importance of parental involvement in education development. Sebhat (2003), for instance, explored the prevailing problems that curtail the Eritrean parental involvement in education development, particularly in relation to supporting teachers, and he established that parents’ role is substantial, and thus parents can bring about tremendous input to revitalize educational processes and improve teaching-learning practices. Similarly, Warren (2005) identified four roles of community participation: ensuring school provision and sponsorship, formal representation on a school board, participating in educational issues, and direct involvement in a school life. Additionally, the engagement of parents and guardians increases by playing an important role at home to support students in their homework and taking part in school activities that would ultimately lead to new initiatives in schools, such as healthcare, counseling, and literacy assistance (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). In Eritrean context, Ephraim (2007) explored the disparities in school provision and suggested that it is through holistic participation of parents, teachers, educators and community members that inequalities in all forms can disappear.

Since a school is bound to the community it belongs to, its dialogue with community members and experts is necessary. Community participation or control increases family choice at school and also characterizes by more accountability from parents and communities. Community participation and control means a shift of power from professionals and administrators to parents and interested community members (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992), and decision-making power over personnel, curriculum, policy, financing and formation of advisory committees in making decisions between local and central school boards (Ornstein, 1975). Most importantly, community participation initiates a principal support for decision-making structures and expanded teacher decision-making authority (Mayer, 2013).

School-base management prompts decentralization

School-base management is a self-evaluation, strategic planning and decentralizing method (Paletta, 2019), and therefore reform is always an integral component of educational systems. School reform or reorganization is associated with decentralization despite its impact on school performance and student achievement (Wissler & Ortiz, 1986). Decentralization principally focuses on reform and exchange of power. Administrative decentralization permits a school system to divide into a smaller, yet interdependent and functioning units with the locus of power and authority remaining on the board of education (Ornstein, 1989).

Administrative decentralization vs. political decentralization

Administrative and political decentralizations are used interchangeably despite their significant differences. Generally speaking, decentralization is a management tool. Administrative decentralization is when authority is transferred from a higher level to field units, but the selection of local administrators and broad policy comes from the central office. On the other hand, political decentralization, sometimes called devolution, is when power transferred to a local body (Dimmock & Hattie, 1994).

In decentralized administration, policy development is centralized, but their implementation is decentralized to schools, whereas in political decentralization, both policy...
development and its implementation is decentralized to local school administrators.

The issue of administrative decentralization and political devolution is viewed as a political rather than apolitical. Public policy (principles of social laws) and decentralization of education spring from the interaction of political powers and national values. Whatever the exact reason might be, decentralization and devolution take four explanations in educational restructuring: a response to public opinions about educational dissatisfaction (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1978), teacher professionalism, empowerment, techniques and technologies for implementation (Perrow, 1970), ensuring equality, efficiency, liberty and choice (Caldwell, 2008), and making a school the central unit of decision making (Guthrie, 1986). In a nutshell, decentralization bestows schools a local power to focus more on teaching and learning aspects, and helps generate resources and plan the future (Shaked, 2019).

**Model of decentralization**

Back in the days, schools were largely run by bureaucratic and traditional regulations. Over the past decades, however, participation has increased gradually; perhaps it was due to new social and economic pressures (Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012). School autonomy is the major aspect of decentralization processes (Ashmawy & Gessler, 2014). Depending on socio-economic, geographical and political conditions, decentralization can take a variety of forms. There is a growing consensus that democratic administration, self-determination, community control and local participatory management are indispensable for a successful implementation and sustainability of educational practices (Raman, 2006).

Decentralization is an attempt to increase responsiveness in public schools. Forty six years ago, it had been underscored that administrative decentralization and community control are important to move away the decision making power from the central office toward smaller units (Zimet, 1973), because it aids achieving various advantages, such as relieving the central government from financial burden, reducing the costs by responding to divergent local needs, and as a result engenders a sense of commitment and ownership among stakeholders, and eventually schools become the vehicles of education (Caldwell, 2008), and produce quality service delivery and positive outcome (Diaz-Serrano & Meix-Llop, 2019).

In decentralization, the big issue is not about who participates, but how many people participate. Ornstein (1989) set a formula to determine the degree of participation. According to Ornstein, the larger the ratio is, the more centralized; the smaller the ratio is, the more balanced the centralization and decentralization of the school system.

\[ \text{Administrators in the central offices - Administrators outside the central offices} = \text{Result} \]

Similarly, Levacic (1992) proposed a model of decentralization process about school management. According to this model, top-level managers determine the organizational structure and specify the goals, but do not involve in operational decisions. The first element: the inputs- consist of the specification of organizational structure and goals. The second element of the model includes the school and the process involved in it. The third element of the model comprises of educational outputs. According to this model, accountability is one of the measures of decentralized administration.

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**Administrators in the central offices - Administrators outside the central offices**

**Result**

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Figure 1: model of school decentralization

INPUTS
- Money
- Real Resources
- Policies-National Curriculum
- Exhortations
- Expectations

STAKEHOLDERS
- Central government
- Parents
- Community
- Industry

ACCOUNTABILITY

OUTPUTS
1. PERFORMANCE
2. INDICATORS:
   - Qualitative
   - Quantitative
3. Market indicators:
   - Enrollment
4. Financial Controls

SCHOOL PROCESSES


Research Methodology

Focused group research methodology was employed. Focused group methodology is a qualitative method to access opinions, stories and linguistic exchanges within a given context (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998). It is also a collective conversation to examine a specific set of topics (Kitzinger, 1995).

Its genesis is traced back in 1926 by Emory Bagardus to describe group interviews in social psychology (Wilkinson, 2004). As a method, it was underutilized in education, although it has a long history in market research (Morgan, 1988) and medical research (Powell & Single, 1996). In the last two decades, however, researchers at secondary and post-secondary levels have relied heavily on focused group discussion to evaluate curriculum issues, improve education and develop learning tools (James, Rienzo, & Frazee, 1997). As of this, the author believes that the issue of this research is a context-based, and thus focused group methodology would be helpful to understand better the educational context. Besides, focused group discussion is participatory in nature to engage participants in experience-based discussions. A survey would be a good approach to reveal and learn what opinions or experiences principals hold, but the best method to unravel what and why principals hold a certain view about a certain context is focused group discussion because it enables participants to ask questions among one another and reevaluate their understandings (Hennink, 2007). As a method of study, it also provides insights into what participants think about the phenomenon being studied.
Focused group discussion

Focused group discussion is a small gathering of participants with a common experience assembled by a moderator to gain information about a particular topic and produce qualitative data (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998), by promoting a conducive milieu of disclosure (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In education, focused group discussion is very important in developing learning tools (James, Rienzo & Frazee, 1997), evaluation of curriculum issues, and formulating of new educational marketing programs and strategies (Ashar & Lane, 1993).

A successful group discussion relies heavily, however, on the number of participants, social environment, the skill of a moderator, and analysis and reporting. Hennink (2007), for instance, states that a comfortable social or non-threatening environment encourages participants to discuss freely.

The researcher opted for the focused group methodology because 1) it is comparatively easier to conduct, 2) explore issues and generate hypotheses, 3) generate data within a short period of time, 4) high face validity, 5) economical in terms of time, but most of all bestows an opportunity for Eritrean school principals to discuss school matters. Most recently focused group discussion has been gaining popularity in qualitative academic research because of its economic nature in terms of time and money (Kroll, 2007).

Sample size, location and ethical issues

The number of participants in this study was 10 secondary school principals. All the school principals in the capital city of Eritrea (Asmara) participated in the study. As many researchers claim that the number of participants in a focused group discussion differs from context to context. MacIntosh (1981), for instance, recommended six to ten numbers of participants; Gross and Leinbach (1996) recommend up to fifteen informants, and Kitzinger (1995) recommends as few as four participants.

The focused group discussion was conducted in a lecture hall at the University of Asmara because neutral locations are more helpful to avoid negative or positive associations with participants’ particular site or building. The discussion took two hours and thirty minutes divided into two sessions (each session comprises one hour and fifteen minutes). Focused group discussion lasts from one to two hours (Powell & Single, 1996). Some studies use only one meeting (Burgess, 1996), others use a couple of meetings with the same group.

Ethical considerations for the focused group discussion are the same as for other research methodologies (Homan, 1991). In this study, when consenting and inviting participants, the researcher provided full information about the purpose of the study and ensures confidentiality. In general, the participants were very excited to participate in the project. They felt a sense of ownership by being asked to share their opinions for future development.

Data collection and analysis

Creating the focused group discussion, the researcher carefully planned the questions because poorly-worded questions could derail the quality of data. In doing so, the author limited the number of questions to open-ended, short and engaging. They were categorized into three types of questions: probe questions, which are designed to introduce participants to the nature of the discussion; follow-up questions that delve into the heart of the main issue, and exit questions to make sure that nothing is missing. In analyzing the data, the researcher was aware of the different levels of information.
On a one level, the principals spoke from their individual construction struggling to express inner thoughts and meanings that are viable in their own practice. On the other level, the principals spoke from a socio-cultural perspective that is deeply rooted in social practices. The author, as a moderator, remained neutral throughout the discussion and acted spontaneously and dealt with dominant participants, and took unique notes and transcribed the entire session, and eventually content and thematic analyses were conducted through familiarization, identifying and interpretation of data.

Research Findings

Roles and profile of principals

Principals have a considerable influence on a school culture and workplace through creating a positive school atmosphere and community partnership (Backor & Gordon, 2015). The study considered secondary school principals as a source of information, experience and knowledge to learn about the status quo of schools.

Most of the principals were trained in general sciences rather than educational administration or leadership. Two principals majored in educational administration, while the rest of the participants specialized in biology, chemistry, geography and English. Besides, all the principals in the city are males and their experience ranges from 4.5 to 21 years.

The principals reported that they have written roles and responsibilities from the Ministry of Education and local administration; they are well informed or versed about what roles they should play and how. The principals also explained that they spend a great deal of time on administrative and management matters than instructional leadership issues. Four principals in the study, for instance, reported that most often they deal with attendance, graduation rates, discipline issues, report writing and other administrative issues. Over management and centralized administration focus on a routine paper work, but they ramify from the ignorance of leadership. Conceptually, however, the participants acknowledged that principals are instructional leaders who should play an ultimate role in creating a culture of shared values and collaborative atmosphere. It is also the belief of the principals that leadership practices which are based on democratic principles may help the birth of school-base management and attenuate the unyielding bureaucratic rules.

Principals as an impetus of school-base management

Principals are the main agents in enforcing, acclimating and executing school-base management, because their position avails a vantage to supervise or oversee the status quo, and make action research about school climate and the impact of decentralized reform on students’ cognitive, affective and behavioral domains (Conner & Krajewski, 1966). The principals viewed school-base management as a collective bargaining among the Ministry of Education, district administration and individual schools with the purpose to improve participative management and coordinated action. In substantiating their views, the principals expounded that school-base management is a response to a waning school performance, meager fiscal integrity, poor curriculum implementation, absence of school-community partnership and low teacher morale. Similarly, in the early 1980’s when school base-management was kicking in, it was in response to a lack of accountability, depletion of funds,
and obsolete curriculum and unsuccessful instructional practices (Pankratz, 2000).

During the focused group discussion, several problems from a classroom instruction to a school budget to leadership and community presence were identified and argued over. The first problem, a very critical one, was about the paucity of a school budget. Eritrean schools do not receive a sufficient lump sum annually because the government of Eritrea allocates approximately 7% of its national budget to the Ministry of Education, which is insignificant to finance schools all over the country for building, renovation and teaching material supplies. The principals explained that classrooms are poorly equipped, barely have good blackboards, a noticeable dearth of instructional delivery materials, such as computer labs, overhead projectors, tape and other technological teaching aids. Eritrean schools lack teaching facilities and trained teachers (Madsen, 2006). The principals believe that school-base management can help schools to mitigate the existing budget crisis, and distribute budget by a formula, and as a result, each school can receive a lump sum for instructional materials, maintenance, construction, staff development programs and the like.

The second problem is related to teacher education. In the focused group discussion, the principals were solicitous about teacher development, recruitment and retention. “In Eritrea, teachers,” the principals explained, “have been limited to classroom zones that they have an insufficient schoolwide participation.” The World Bank (2015) also reveals that teachers in Eritrea need certification, intensified in-service support and English language skills. The study reveals that teachers as leaders are specialists in instruction, curriculum, mentorship, counseling and coaching, among others, which in other words implies that teachers are leaders and catalysts of change, and never content with the status quo.

The principals recognize the importance of teacher development, recruitment and retention as a critical part of their leadership role. School principals, however, have a nominal power in programs such as teacher pre-service and in-service trainings. The principals also observed a nationwide attrition of teachers due to a negligible salary, heavy teaching loads and incompetent school management.

One principal in the study observed that over the past eight months alone, his school lost more than 17 teachers due to fleeing to the adjoining countries for a better life. Even though, the school substitutes them with new ones, the problem remains critical as many are thinking to follow the same path.

In the focused group discussion, two critical questions arose about teacher education, and put to the principals for their insights: 1) How should principals recruit teachers, if they are empowered to do so? 2) What initiatives and plans should principals take to develop new teachers and secure a long-term commitment to the profession? In answering the questions, the principals underscored the importance of proactive approaches, such as seeking assistance from universities and community partnership in recruiting prospective teachers, and involving them in pre-service student-teacher programs, signing a contract form, and eventually providing a regular professional development at a workplace to equip teachers with subject matter knowledge, pedagogical talent and discipline management skills. The principals suggested that school-base management is an opportunity for schools to display a wide variety of learning
contexts, flexibility and innovation by customizing new programs to develop, recruit and retain teachers.

*The third problem is absence of parent, family and community participation.* The degree of parental representation and scale of engagement in Eritrean schools, by any measure, is ineffectual, partly due to an old school practice and poor leadership. Actually, parents rarely hear from schools. The principals, however, observed that although parents and community members barely attend school programs and events, there is a burgeoning interest over the previous years to participate.

In the focused group discussion, the principals elucidated that Eritrean parents are modest that they defer to authorities and assume that they have no a political right to influence the day-to-day school activities. Similarly, Stone (2000) discovered that parents in low-income societies consider schools as alienating institutions, and thus their participation is minimal. Traditionally, parent participation is too often associated with positive outcomes. Some scholars explain that inclusion of parents in schools is associated with improved curriculum, instructional materials, school environment, community development, decision making, educational outcome, social service and economic development (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Comparably, Sebhat (2003) in his comprehensive study, explored the current trends and future possibilities of parents’ involvement in relation to teachers and secondary school governance, and the study established that school-community relationship is a collaborative effort among teachers, parents and educators.

In the focused group discussion, two principals argued that parents and community members must push to include and count off their voices in the teaching-learning process and leadership roles because at the end of the day it is their children who will be the victims of poor educational goals.

Parent and community involvement is not a stand-alone project or add-on programs, but rather an inherent component of a school life. Epstein’s framework for parent involvement includes: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2001). According to the model, parents, families and community members are the primary actors in school life, but principals, educators and policymakers are responsible to pave the way. School-base management galvanizes parents into an action (Mette & Bengston, 2015). Similarly, the principals acknowledged that building school-community relationship and leadership capacity is one of their primary goals. Accountability of schools to parents and communities is worth of examination.

*The fourth problem is a lack of cooperative effort among school educators.* The principals discussed on how to bring about coordinated action among students, parents, teachers and community members. The principals explained that since they are divested their leadership power and overwhelmed by management, administrative and progressive reports to the Ministry of Education, they do not have adequate time to bring about a participative effort.

**School-base management as a decentralizing apparatus**

The focused group discussion reveals that school-base management is a special movement directed toward improved educational...
outcomes, collaborative action, staff development, personnel empowerment, school-community relations and community development. The principals, however, pointed out some challenges about how to put the entire staff in the process of assuming new roles, and realign the nature and structure of decentralized power. Mentell (2007) explains that to mobilize the entire staff of an organizational structure and communication network systematically, school-base management should be the first action. This is so because responsiveness and adaptability are the components of school-base management. To accomplish these expectations, the principals maintained that schools should be trusted and empowered with political decentralization to embrace civic capacity and participatory leadership.

The participants revealed that school principals walk a tightrope when dealing with instructional leadership tasks. When discussing for a solution, the principals highlighted the importance of decentralization, participation, competition and research. However, to produce a coordinated effort within or among schools requires a thorough assessment from 360 degrees or from all possible sources (Day, 2009).

One of the distinguishing features of western education is its fondness for assessment. Practically, everything from an individual student outcome to a particular school practice is assessed timely with the purpose to help educators and policy makers to understand the status quo and plan a reform accordingly. In Eritrea, however, educational assessment is done infrequently.

School-base management might seem simple, but to decentralize an educational system is a matter of policy, research and thorough evaluation of the status quo. In the focused group discussion, the participants suggested some points and are summarized as follows and translated them below (figure 2) into a model:

1. Green light from the Ministry of Education for evaluation and reform policy
2. Survey the existing educational practices and needs of involvement, then
   2.1. Develop and pass a comprehensive policy and law
   2.2. Recruit community members who have experience and knowledge about the culture, history and languages
   2.3. Provide professional development dedicated to school educators
   2.4. Provide timely access to information about school life
   2.5. Partnership and collaboration with higher institutions, churches, mosques, NGO’s
   2.6. Evaluate the progress and effectiveness of involvement
   2.7. Set school-base management committees
   2.8. School-base management tasks
Ministry of Education initiatives for evaluation and reform policies

School status quo

Evaluation by principals, administrators, managers, teachers, students, parents

Evaluation by community members, researchers, educational specialists, higher institutions, private organizations, pundits, religious organizations

Presenting and interpreting results to introduce School-base reform

Setting School-base management Committee

Inputs: learning resources, budget support, community norms and resources,

Instructional processes: students' potential development

Outputs: good grades, technically skilled, career interest, effective citizens

Teachers' instructional tasks

Principals' leadership roles

School-Based Management activities: Interpretation, adaptation & implementation of reform policies; formulating, reviewing & regulating school-based policies; evaluating students' results; mobilizing resources.
Discussion

We are in an era of a competitive world. An explosion of new knowledge and mounting demands for organizational improvement accompanied by a technological advancement, daunt school educators to look for an alternative method. Based on the study, school-base management is one of the best approaches to improve the Eritrean school operation. Nationalism, professionalism and privatization are the major forces behind decentralization of a school structure (Barroso, 2005), but in Eritrea, nationalism is a predominant force to shape a school organization. The principals highlighted that schools are political-administrative units consisting of educational system rather than a learning environment.

Educational management in Eritrea has been an authoritarian seeking to impose rather than winning consent from educators. The essential decision-making apparatus is held by the Ministry of Education. This is a symptom of a democratic deficit. Nowadays, no one can doubt the fact of the relentless change in the labor market, but schools have little choice in the nature and direction of change (Grant, 2009).

Keeping the true power of decision making at the center thwarts the decentralization processes and school performance. The principals explain that, in Eritrea, schools are directly connected to the Ministry of Education for budget, teacher recruitment, curriculum development, communication and policy.

If power changes hands, children would learn more and schools would function better. Principally, school-base management became popular in educational leadership with the need to empower school staff and improve school performance. It promotes the redistribution of authority, sharing of power and culture of learning. The rationale behind school-base management is efficiency and effectiveness. With the emergence of school-base management, authorities lose their former unquestioned practices and similarly students are constantly confronted with information from many sources other than their schools.

The shift from an industrial economy to information-based market, imposed tremendous challenges and pressures on schools to reform. The pace of change is so rapid that sometimes it is hard to determine, which knowledge teachers should teach and how. The task before schools is to find methods by which they can improve instruction, while better serving their stakeholders (Brown & Cooper, 2000). In doing so, schools establish a school council, parent-teacher association, school board to instructional problems, and board of trustees to tackle issues about budget and instruction (Ashmawy & Gessler, 2014).

Conclusion

The study focused on secondary school principals to learn about the status quo of schools through their experience, opinions and knowledge, and has discovered that the sample schools experience meager fiscal integrity, noticeable dearth of instructional delivery materials, insufficiency of parent-school-community partnership, lack of cooperative effort among school educators, attrition and low teacher morale, among others, which endanger poor curriculum implementation. Part of the reason, for this cause, is due to a highly centralized education system, over-management of schools, a lack of leadership training for principals and teachers’ in-service training. As a matter of fact, the participants spend a lot of time in administrative and management tasks, rather than instructional leadership. The principals shared their views and believed that the remedy to the existing problems is leadership based on democratic
values, decentralization, participation, competition and research, which can be executed by modeling school-base management. This could help turn over the essential decision-making apparatus from the Ministry of Education to individual schools. School-base management is a singular movement to bring about responsiveness, adaptability and improved educational outcomes through participation, personnel empowerment and community partnership (Mentell, 2007). Similarly, Herman (1991) discovered that school-base management is a challenge to a centralized administration and bestows schools the control over instruction, budget, personnel, policy and management.

There might be a number of causes that directly or indirectly influence the shift from centralized to decentralized educational administration, but in Eritrea the need for school-base-management is apparent that school stakeholders, particularly principals, regardless of centralized administration, too often push toward school-base governance. Education reform must start at the local to build upon school staff (Lundahl, 2002). Now, it is high time for Eritrean schools to claim school-base management as a decentralizing approach and thereby introduce new instructional reforms and technologies.

Implication of the study

The study implies that school-base management is an inherent nature of schools. The need to transform or model school base-management is an integral part of schools’ culture. A school as an organization is shaped by endogenic forces, and by the social and cultural systems it belongs (Veloso, Craveiro & Rufino, 2013). Out of those forces, factors or systems, school-base management initiatives spring out (Caldwell, 2008). In Eritrean schools, there have always been some decisions taken by principals, albeit without the knowledge of the Ministry of Education. This simply suggests that school-base management is an intrinsic constituent of schools, but the need to brand it with formal recognition lies on the Ministry of Education to amplify its presence. This further implies that school-base management is not feasible without the participation of concerned authorities, educators, community members, because it is a research base and collective effort method (Neal, 1991). Unless the service providers and customers work abreast, the exigent need for modeling school-base management seems impossible.

Recommendation

Any country institutionalizes its fundamental values through educational reforms. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should delineate viable policy guidelines, procedures, and enact appropriate laws to franchise schools with legal backing, and broach among school educators the importance of school-base management. Besides, the Ministry of Education should produce a brochure and organize cluster-type of training in the form of workshops directed toward school educators about the nature of school-base management along with new roles and instructional technologies.

Limitation of the study

The author, apart from the internet, could not access documents from either the Ministry of Education or a regional education office directly. Besides, there are few, if any, publications conducted in the area. The author could not find adequate and up-to-date publications. To alleviate that scarcity, the author opted to a focused group discussion with secondary school principals.
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