

Efficiency of school performance from experiential learning through distributed leadership in the selected Lower Secondary Schools in Bhutan

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Abstract

Distributed leadership sees all members of the staff in a school as expert in their own right. However, there were no studies done in Bhutanese schools on how efficient distributed leadership worked in improving the school performance. An experiential learning process of distributed leadership was undertaken as a case study in two Lower Secondary Schools wherein the author had taken-up the position of school leader. Structured questionnaires and focused group discussions from the selected Lower Secondary Schools in Bhutan were considered to explore effectiveness of distributed leadership. Study findings indicated increased awareness of distributed leadership and effectiveness in improving the overall school performance. Experiential learning processes of the distributed leadership from the two Lower Secondary Schools demonstrated significant overall performance based on sets of assessment guidelines of the school. The scope of this study was limited to selected lower secondary schools only, and similar studies could be undertaken in the Middle and Higher Secondary Schools in Bhutan.

Keywords: Experiential learning; Distributed leadership, Shared responsibilities; Leadership

Introduction

Leadership helps to motivate people to work towards a greater outcome which can benefit the whole group or an institution such as school. There are various responsibilities that need to be carried out by every individual staff based on their job responsibilities. However, it is equally important to have a collective

responsibility in addition to the responsibilities that they have already been assigned. Some schools share responsibilities among teachers who then gain experience while other schools rarely share responsibilities. Experiential learning of distributed leadership sometimes indicates that the teachers focus on their teaching only and other responsibilities are neglected. Sharing responsibilities helps teachers to get experience and opportunity in developing personal leadership qualities. If sharing responsibility is limited, the power of authority will not make one a leader but it simply makes an individual the boss.

All Principals in Bhutanese schools are expected to maintain required instructional hours besides carrying out administrative and managerial tasks. In many schools, Principals find it difficult to complete the required instructional time. This raises the question of the lack of awareness of the strength and support of distributed leadership among teachers in schools in Bhutan. According to Harris (2004), distributed form of leadership can assist capacity building within the school, which contributes to school improvement. Lashway (2003) provides other evidences that suggest the task of transforming a school is too complex to expect one person to accomplish single handedly. Accordingly, leadership should be distributed throughout the school rather than vested in one position. Similarly, there are many other researches that has been conducted that showed distributed leadership help achieve common practices. Nevertheless, there may be few or no such studies conducted in Bhutan. Thus, the research on distributed leadership in lower secondary schools in Bhutan has been put forward to understand distributed leadership through a Bhutanese lens.

The primary research question is to find out what the impact of experiential learning of distributed leadership is, as practiced in the Lower Secondary Schools in Bhutan. More specifically, the study is to explore efficacy of school performance from experiential learning processes by asking on how effectively do our Principals carry out distributed leadership with clear instructions? Do schools involve staff and community in shared decision-making including school vision formulation? and, Do Principals fulfill their required instructional hours?

The hypothesis drawn for this study is that Distributed Leadership enhances leadership capacities, total effectiveness and improvement of the schools.

Literature review

Distributed leadership is an attitude rather than a management technique. It means seeing all members of the faculty and staff as experts in their own right. It is the sharing of responsibilities across the organization and making every individual expert in specific areas of operation (West Chester University, 2004).

According to Harris (2004), a distributed form of leadership can assist capacity building within the school, which contributes to school improvement. This included involving others in decision-making, allocating important tasks to teachers and rotating leadership responsibilities within the school. Evidence also suggests that where teachers share good practices and learn together, the possibility of securing better quality teaching is increased. R&D-NCSL (2004) reports, that they have explored how distributed leadership supports leader style, teams, and how larger numbers of leaders can be developed. According to R&D-NCSL (2004), there is a need for leadership to be shared at all levels and individuals and teams to play a leading part.

Lashway (2003) provides other evidence that suggest that the task of transforming a school is too complex to expect one person to accomplish single handedly. Accordingly, leadership should be distributed throughout the school rather than vested in one position, as leadership plays a crucial role in generating school reform and instructional improvement. McCoy and Felton (2002) corroborate this when they stress that “In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization, and without working hard at creating a common culture, or set of values” (p.1).

The theory of distributed leadership, as shaped by the Annenberg Institute for school Reform (2004) is about developing a shared vision for the school or district that focuses on high-level student achievement. They, too, recognize the need of sharing responsibilities for achieving common purpose. According to

Goldsmith (2010), “employees may feel they are more like partners and become more engaged ultimately paving the road for greater success for the organization, the team, and themselves”.

As per Blum (n.d.), “the future of our communities depends on a generation, not only skilled in academics, but also excited about belonging to an educated community. That community will arise only if schools engage and connect with today’s children. Effective schools create an environment that increases academic, social and emotional success—an environment of strong school connectedness”.

According to Lawrence and Vimla (2012), “Environment plays a vital role in the development of the personality of the students. As a student spends most of his life at school, the school environment is highly responsible for the inculcating of great values in him”. It is also said that the environment boosts up not only the achievement of students but their social ability, healthy status and moral values.

Kolb and Boyatzis (2011) experiential learning process of “Experiencing – Reflecting – Thinking – Acting” is a powerful approach in the enforcement of distributed leadership in the school. Kolb’s experiential learning describes the ideal process of learning, invites one to understand as a learner, and empowers self to take charge of own learning and development. This is in true sense a learning process that empowers all staff in the schools and contribute to efficiency in the annual performance.

Furthermore, a guide to decentralized education monitoring and support services system developed by the Education Monitoring Division (2019) of the Department of School Education require to delegate responsibilities to the teachers. They are also expected to invite teachers into the job delegation processes, implementation, monitoring, reviewing, evaluating, and providing feedback for amendments and improvements. While the Education Monitoring Division (EMD) guidelines/principles (2019) and the importance of distributed leadership are clearly indicated, there is no study that indicates the practices and impact of distributed leadership in the lower schools in Bhutan. Thus, this study proposes to explore Principals’ and teachers’ perspectives on the distributed

leadership and examine their opinions of the impact of distributed leadership in Lower Secondary Schools in Bhutan.

Study Methodology

A case study of experiential learning of distributed leadership by the author in Lungtenphu Lower Secondary School (LLSS) and Taba Lower Secondary School (TLSS) in Bhutan over the four years period in each school was taken to validate the efficacy of school performance. The Department of School Education, EMD guidelines (2019) for assessing school performance was adopted as a guideline for overall school performance.

A qualitative research approach was used since it required the teachers to put forward their personal interpretations. Creswell's phenomenology approach (2003) was adopted in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experience concerning a phenomenon was used.

Purposive sampling of four Lower Secondary Schools Principals and two teachers each from the same schools around Thimphu and Punakha districts was chosen on voluntary basis to participate for in-depth and detailed information collection. Field notes were used to allow for more open and free discussions among the teachers and school Principals. Interpretations were done qualitatively after sorting out the written information and reading it to draw general themes in narrative form. Triangulation process was adopted to enhance the accuracy of the research by debriefing of the findings with the colleagues by asking the same questions to a number of people in different groups in the locality. All the participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to participating in the interview. Anonymity of their names and school was guaranteed to all the participants.

Leadership responsibilities of past year experiential learning processes at LLSS and TLSS were shared in each year during delegation of distributed leadership by rotating every academic year amongst the teachers. Past year experiential learning observations of LLSS and TLSS teachers were accommodated annually to improve the objectives for the particular academic calendar.

Implementation of 21st Century Transformative Pedagogy strategies were initiated from 2015 in teaching meaningful learning at LLSS and TLSS as initiated nationally by the Ministry of Education. Later part of the experiential learning approaches, teaching learning was also enhanced by focusing through Place Based Education (PBE) combined with Transformative Pedagogy at TLSS.

Secondary data were collected from the Education Monitoring Division (EMD) of the Department of School Education (DSE).

Results and Discussion

Awareness of distributed leadership

The concept of distributed leadership is well understood among the School Principals in the Bhutanese Lower Secondary Schools. The schools' Principals are probably exclusively accountable for the success of the school management and therefore delegate effectively to staff members in carrying out the various tasks.

All the teachers who participated in the survey had great awareness of the knowledge of distributed leadership which was perceived to be very effective in the school. It was evident from the respondent ID03 who explained comprehensively as follows:

Without distributed leadership, I feel that any organization will not able to function properly and efficiently. There are so many advantages in distributed leadership. For example:

... helps to develop leadership qualities, develop strong interpersonal qualities, instill a sense of competition, responsibility and co-operation, encourages people to work together to share ideas, creates a shared vision, mission and common direction, helps in smooth running of school, ensure quality work, helps in maintaining accountability, transparency and efficiency, people become confident and competent.

Yet, such experiential learning of distributed leadership also required careful shared responsibility based on capacity of the staff. For instance, respondent ID10 opined that "Distributed leadership is good but too much decentralization is not

good. At times certain things need to be retained to avoid loss of time for discussion. Personal interest might override the objective". On contrarily, respondent ID06 illustrated that a shared responsibility to a single games-coordinator may not be able teach all disciplines of games and sports but rather it would be efficient if we distribute among teachers who are capable to lead as a team. Limitation of assigning multifactor responsibility is similar to what Harris (2004) concluded that Head Teachers often approach through assigning a single leadership to staff.

Distributed leadership practices mechanisms in schools

It was evident in most cases, that the individual's hidden talents would not be exploited when Principals shared leadership roles based on the individual teacher's apparent capacity to achieve the common goals of the school. This was shared by respondent ID07 who stated that their Principal distributed leadership in the effective manner by judging the capability of each member of school staff. However, the Principals prioritized to assign responsibilities among the capable ones as expected in most bureaucracies. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (2004) too describes distributed leadership as sharing responsibilities by everyone in the school who can shoulder school's responsibility to achieve the common purpose. All participants felt that they have adequate mechanisms put in place for shared responsibilities in their respective schools. According to respondent ID06, in their school, responsibilities were given to different teachers who have qualities in those particular areas. The respondent ID06 felt that the Principal has been very effective in the distribution of duties.

Many participants considered that school Principals involved them in decision-making processes by bringing the matter to the floor of scheduled meetings. Teachers also felt that the Principals were motivating and involved in the decision-making processes of the school.

While the mechanism of empowering responsibility to deserved candidates served to promote efficient school management, the development of self-confidence in others who were not involved appeared to be minimal. Apparently, it

had not been feasible to delegate additional minor responsibilities to staff due to limitation of specialization.

Although Principals in schools delegate roles and responsibilities and other duties to able teaching staff, active involvement of the local community in enhancing the school development varied from school to school. It was perceived by the participants in the study that in some cases, community involvement was too high while in some, there was little community support especially in the field of long-term planning and setting the vision and mission of the school. For example, respondent ID02 stated:

The School Management Board meeting is conducted twice in a year to discuss about parents' participation in the school. The community participation is less comparing to other societies.

This may be due to the communities not being aware of the needs in their society as they are populated primarily by illiterate people. It all depends on how advanced the understanding of the community is and their willingness to support the school in its development.

Enforcement of shared responsibilities

Shared responsibilities are generally guided by the school's written policy document while some are guided by the yearly calendar. In all schools, they have committees, clubs, in-charges, house masters, coordinators etc. to accomplish the roles and responsibilities entrusted.

Several strategies of shared responsibility in the school were voiced by the respondents. According to respondent ID09, "Responsibilities are equally shared. During the first ten days of school, we workout with the responsibilities, reframe on what we have, and discuss whether there is a need to add on what we already have or remove if not felt important". Likewise, respondent ID03 shared that "To ensure shared responsibilities and also to ensure that the expectations of the systems are fulfilled, we have a clear written policy on the implementation of all school activities. Tasks are carried out as per the school calendar by different clubs

and committees. The Principal acts as the role model and makes it clear that everyone is responsible for his/her work”.

Generally, responsibilities were discussed and assigned in the beginning of the session with an instruction to submit the action plans along with clear objectives. This was based on planning exercise carried out soon after the annual examination for the next academic year. Respondents felt that the responsibilities are allotted based on interest and capability and the performances are evaluated on such planned tasks (ID05 and ID08). However, it was also important that resources to carry out their shared responsibilities were made available. Requirement of support from the school leadership was evident as stated by the respondent ID01 in making available resources while assigning the shared responsibilities.

Respondent ID04 felt that the school had a written policy document which contained roles and responsibilities of Principal, Vice Principal, Head of Department, Staff Secretary, Class Teachers, House Masters, Club In-charges, and non-teaching staff with clear instructions. As per the ID04 respondent, the school authority makes sure that every staff member takes certain number of responsibilities.

Effectiveness of distributed leadership

In Bhutan, overall school performances are based broadly on three principles namely 1) academic learning score (ALS) centered around structured curriculum, 2) enabling practices of schools (EPS) dealing with guidelines, physical enabling facilities and monitoring mechanisms, and 3) alignment to GNH principles in areas like community vitality, green school policies, and mindfulness training, etc.

The respondents recognized that distributed leadership helped students to engage actively; transformative pedagogy and placed-based education (PBE) provided every student a chance to participate in the class. It was found that no students were left out and all gained equal attention from the teachers. Transformative pedagogy ensures equal attention in classroom management, with learner centered activities. Likewise, PBE enhanced student teacher engagement

that emphasizes hands-on, connects with community and real world learning experiences.

According to the respondent ID02, distributed leadership in an effective manner had facilitated effective management of the school to fulfill the set goal. It was observed that effective managers achieve better results by utilizing the talents of their subordinates. The Principals were seen to act as facilitators in building up the morale of the school. This respondent noted that Principals were ever present and willing to provide advice and assist the different groups (students, staff and parents) to carry out the various tasks and functions for the successful achievement of the school's objectives.

Respondent ID08 shared similar views that distributed leadership was becoming effective as can be deduced from the responsibilities and rights that were given to Head of Departments, Scout Masters, Literary Coordinators etc.

The decentralized operation of school was sounded loud by respondent ID03 who stated that the Principal was just the overall manager in the school. The participant expressed that everything was decentralized. According to this participant, under the Principal, the school had Vice Principals who look after the primary and secondary levels. Varieties of tasks were assigned to different teachers with specific aims, objectives and goals. The school had different clubs, committees, class coordinators, subject departments, monitors, house masters and club in-charges.

Some of the visible impacts of distributed leadership experiential learning was that school had well maintained flower gardens and potted flowers, hedges and plants in all relevant places. School has become litter free with proper waste management practices. The compound walls and paved ground within the school campus have been enriched with educational quotes. They were aligned with the principles of GNH learning as every student and staff get experience in doing specific tasks, reflecting on their tasks and thinking over for improvement. Such experiential learning worked better since the responsibilities have been distributed among the staff.

Efficiency in empowerment of distributed leadership

Most of the present Principals carry out distributed leadership in an effective manner. They are effective managers who achieve better results. They not only attain the major goals expected of them, but they also fully utilize the talents of their subordinates...(ID02).

Studies of distributed leadership in practice by Harris (2004) in National Association of Head Teachers in England and the National College for School Leadership conclude that successful Heads recognized the limitation of the particular leadership approach. It also observed that their leadership role was primarily concerned with empowering others to lead. At times, the Principals of the Bhutanese Lower Secondary schools had retained certain roles to decide unilaterally to avoid domination by personal agendas. The respondent ID10 who was one of the Principals of the Lower Secondary School in Bhutan opined, "*Certain things are needed to be retained*". School Principals prefers experienced and confident teachers for leading roles in their schools to refrain from making mistakes while other interested teachers get experience through assisting the former.

The instructional hours for the respondents in this study varied depending upon the requirement of the school. The teacher's instructional hours varied from 26 to 36 classes of 40 minutes duration while the Principals' ranged 4 to 6 periods per week. The participant who took 36 instructional periods in a week stated:

I feel that teachers are overloaded. Besides teaching, there are so many other works and responsibilities that we have to carry out. Because of this, we are not able to prepare lesson plans daily and make the teaching aids whenever needed. We do not have time for corrections too. So, I feel that we could manage our work schedule better if are given reasonable number of instructional periods.

The prescriptive instructional hours for the teachers and the Principals were felt to be excessive compared with the shared responsibilities in the schools. The deployment of the teaching staff based on the student numbers alone had been

not conducive in many schools. In some schools with comfortable numbers of teaching staff, the Principals resorted to taking up instructional hour classes such as *Value Education* and *Physical Education* as they warrant no formal assessment.

In most situations, inadequate numbers of teaching staff had led to failure to fully utilize the potential of the teachers in both curricular and co-curricular activities. However, given the requirements to complete the curricular syllabus, some teachers have given up additional time beyond the allotted school hours. In spite of the time pressure, both the class teachers and the Principals endeavored to cover the written syllabus in every academic calendar.

It is therefore of paramount importance to note that the school Principals should be an instructional leader rather than manager or administrator, by considering teaching and learning as core business of school. Experiential learning data of class III from LLSS and TLSS in 2012 and 2016 before the distributed leadership enforcement indicated low ALS in the first year when compared to other two criteria (EPS and GNH) as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. In fact, TLSS academic learning score was below 50% while EPS and GNH percentage were above 90%. Such incidences are expected when an instructional leadership is overlooked by not focusing teaching and learning as the core business of the school.

Table 1. Class III Performance from experiential learning application in LLSS case study school

Year	Academic Learning Score (ALS) (%)	Enabling Practice in Schools (EPS) (%)	Aligned to GNH principles (%)
2012	65.73	73.71	69.45
2013	90.33	85.48	74.40
2014	78.08	85.06	78.75
2015	99.17	89.28	80.85
2016	100.00	98.700	92.50

Source: EMD/DSE 2021

Table 2. Class III Performance from experiential learning in TLSS case study school

Year	Academic Learning Score (ALS) (%)	Enabling Practice in Schools (EPS) (%)	Aligned to GNH principles (%)
2016	47.15	90.62	98.75
2017	85.51	99.38	99.06
2018	99.33	98.86	100.00
2019	99.06	99.68	100.00
2020	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: EMD/DSE 2021

Likewise, experiential learning data (Table 3 and Table 4) of the class VI performance from the same Lower Secondary Schools also confirms that teaching and learning as the core business of school were not prioritized in 2012 and 2016 year before new leadership took over and enforced distributed leadership in the schools. TLSS academic score of class VI was consistently lower in 2016 despite achieving more than 90% in other criteria indicating overlooking the core business of school.

Table 3. Class VI Performance from experiential learning in LLSS case study school

Year	Academic Learning Score (ALS) (%)	Enabling Practice in Schools (EPS) (%)	Aligned to GNH principles (%)
2012	69.65	73.71	69.45
2013	73.87	85.48	74.40
2014	73.49	85.06	78.75
2015	64.58	89.28	89.28
2016	92.39	98.70	98.70

Source: Adapted from EMD/DSE 2021

Table 4. Class VI Performance from experiential learning in TLSS case study school

Year	Academic Learning Score (ALS) (%)	Enabling Practice in Schools (EPS) (%)	Aligned to GNH principles (%)
2016	45.77	90.62	98.75
2017	75.62	99.38	99.06
2018	88.15	98.86	100.00
2019	100.00	99.68	100.00
2020	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Adapted from EMD/DSE 2021

Experiential learning experience of distributed leadership in Lungtenphu and Taba Lower Secondary Schools case studies clearly demonstrates that the overall school performance had a significant improvement from 2013 and 2017 onwards. For instance, when the school management leadership was taken over by the author in 2013 and 2017, the overall performance of school in class III at LLSS and TLSS was 69.63% and 78.84% respectively. At the end of four years of experiential learning processes of distributed leadership with primary focus on core business of school, the overall school performance of LLSS in 2016 and TLSS in 2020 in class III significantly enhanced to 97.07% and 100% respectively. Likewise, class VI overall performance of LLSS in 2012 and TLSS in 2016 were around 70.93% and 78.38% respectively before the author assumed the leadership of the respective schools. Once the experiential learning of distributed leadership was implemented consistently for the duration of four years in both schools from 2013 and 2017, the overall performance of class VI in LLSS in 2016 and TLSS in 2020 had achieved 96.60% and 100% respectively. This could be attributed due to empowering of shared responsibilities while ensuring instructional hours of the teachers are within the upper ceiling, in addition to many responsibilities. Data from the two schools for the EPS and GNH criterion for class III and class VI consistently observed better performance in TLSS compared to LLSS. This is likely that recent establishment of TLSS in 2013 when compared to more than five decades old

LLSS in late 1960s might have enabled to score higher EPS and GNH marks as the varied infrastructures might have contributed enabling conditions for EMD assessment criterion. Other hypothesis for consistent better performance of TLSS from LLSS could be due to enhanced professional development practices such as 21st century transformative pedagogy and place-based education approaches that were initiated from 2015 academic calendar only.

However, the initiatives and enthusiasm to carry out the delegated responsibilities confidently has to be there in teachers to maximize their leadership qualities. According to Elmore (2000, p.14-15), in a knowledge intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization, and without working hard at creating culture, or set of values. If the teachers don't cooperate actively when given the opportunities, they might not be able to come out of their cocoon of reservation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The school Heads have a lot of influence in allowing or disallowing teachers in their schools to share responsibilities. School Principals' ability to incorporate shared leadership is hampered and restricted by their personal values, limited familiarity with shared leadership, and the constraints imposed by full schedules and limited resources. In general, the responsibility, accountability and authority do not always go together in Bhutanese civil service administration. As a result, shared decision-making processes face significant countervailing forces due to limitations of accountability.

The aim of this study was to find out how Lower Secondary School teachers, including Principals with five to six years of experience as school managers, felt about distributed leadership. There is an extensive scope to carry out future research to promote the understanding of distributed leadership in all levels such as Lower, Middle and Higher Secondary Schools in Bhutan and also across the country.

It is suggested that school leadership for continuous learning is shared among all staff for efficient management of the school. Rather than being perceived as a place of authority, sharing leadership must be viewed as a dynamic mechanism aimed at achieving common goals. Individuals overseeing hierarchical processes and frameworks should not be understood as distributed leadership, according to the researchers. It is preferable to think of it as a form of collective leadership in which all teachers cooperate to build expertise.

The decentralization policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan in entrusting decision-making processes to the school management has to be understood in right perspective. The policy guidelines and instructions circulated by the Education Headquarters need serious review for implementation by all schools in Bhutan.

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