Original Research Article

Challenges of Effective Principals Leadership in School Improvement in Government Secondary Schools of Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This research study aimed at investigating varied challenges that principals have been facing in an endeavor of school improvement in terms of input, process and outputs in secondary Schools of Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. In this study, a qualitative research approach was followed and as such the data were collected with the help of semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussions. The study employed clustering, stratified, random and purposive sampling techniques to select 6 zones of Oromia region out of 20; 80 sample secondary schools out of 30, to draw 45 interviewees and 36 discussants, respectively. In this way, the interviews were conducted with the interviewees and focus group discussions were carried out among the discussants. Data obtained from these informants were analyzed using thematic analysis and narrative methods and paraphrasing the results of the discussants. The study identified inactive involvement of key stakeholders in the schools' affairs; a weak capacity building for the principals; poor effort and commitment of students for class attendance and improvement of academic results; shortages of standard facilities and inputs; weakness of the principals together with SIP committee in properly developing strategic plan of the schools were among the main challenges that hindered effectiveness of principals' school leadership in overall improvement of the schools. Because of these and other factors a great majority of the schools stood at level two that is below the expected level (level three & four) in the study area. Based on the findings, it was recommended that principals should be equipped with basic knowledge and skills of school leadership, necessary facilities and inputs need to be fulfilled by the concerned bodies and stakeholders should be re-oriented in order to contribute in all possible aspect for betterment of school performance.

Keywords: Challenges of leadership, school improvement, secondary schools.

1. INTRODUCTION

An effective leadership has been a major area of concern in many educational reforms in the 2000s as can be seen from reports by Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber[33]. In addition, effective leadership and management are increasingly recognized as vital components of successful schooling [8, 14] in their study of successful school leadership stated that improving schools are places where there are demonstrated and sustained student achievement gains over a number of years. Over time, small improvements lead to sustained improvement of practice within a school. Here leadership necessarily convinces people serving in a given institution and need to be effective in order to achieve its goal educational.

According to Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd [37] the school improvement literature internationally affirms that effective school leadership is an important condition for a successful school with other contributing factors such as the characteristics and development of effective school managers and leaders. In this case, evidence about the characteristics and practices of effective school leaders' centers mainly on the work of principals, notwithstanding current interest internationally in sharing and distribution of leadership practice and influence. In the process of school improvement principals have irreplaceable roles and responsibilities as they are primary leaders of the school.

Effective principals influence a variety of school outcomes, including students' academic achievement, through their recruitment and motivation of quality teachers; ability to identify and articulate school vision and goals; effective allocation of resources; and development of organizational structures to support instruction and learning [21].The opposite effect can also occur that poor leadership by

principals leads to lower learning achievement by students and the school ranking lower in quality terms [45] because in many countries, the school administrators and the principals have heavy work.

However, there is less research-based evidence and consensus on the characteristics and practices of effective school leaders in developing country contexts, particularly, to enactment of new expectations for instructional leadership and school improvement. Research on school management and leadership for improvement in these schools is not yet well developed [34,37]. Currently, In Ethiopia, there is also a strong need to address a perceived decline in educational quality through nationally mandated programmes for school improvement [31]. Therefore, it was believed that this study could meet the national need and has an international contribution to the existing literature through assessing challenges of effective principals' school leadership in school improvement.

The challenges of schools and quality of education in Ethiopia are among the major persistent problems that the country has been facing for years. The main challenges identified include limited capacity of management at sector and school level; limited school improvement Progmamme (SIP) implementation capacity at both *woreda* and school levels; unsustainable monitoring and evaluation system of SIP and students' low academic achievement [28]. Recently, result of national study demonstrates that school leadership in Ethiopia could not solve challenges of education system through organizing work forces and engaging stakeholders in school activities in order to improve students' learning outcomes including academic achievement [32].

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Following the formulation of Education and Training Policy [25], the Ethiopian government has devised different intervention strategies and programs to alleviate those educational challenges. The strategies include introduction of General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) with the purpose mainly to improve quality of education, within the framework of education and training policy [27], launching Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs, I-V) among which the ESDP-III gave strong emphasis to strengthen the capacity of the education system; improve the school effectiveness and management and expand access to education [26].

In addition to the above programs, efforts are made to improve professional skills of school principals and the school improvement process, which has been in place, is part of the endeavor for the solutions of education quality problems [28]. Consequently, as other studies show, Ethiopia has made significant progress in providing citizens, especially students, with access to education. However, still there is a serious lack of quality of education that must be addressed [17,2]. In addition, the education system was characterized by low quality of outputs[31, 48]. These studies indicate that students' academic achievement as one of key indicators of education quality is not in progress through years.

The MoE [32] also outlines that poor leadership is one of the main contributing factors for low quality of education that is characterized by scoring below 50 percent, particularly, in natural science subjects in national as well as classroom exams; students' misbehaviors; presence of considerable rate of dropout and repetition. Most of these problems were resulted from the fact that many students did not only consider goals of learning, but they were also not equipped with adequate knowledge, skills and right attitudes on lessons rather they focused plainly on promotion from grade to grade by cheating in the exams.

A study conducted by Tsakeni, Munje, &Jita [41]in South Africa identified that professional development, learner-related challenges, and resources are among challenges affectedschool improvement.In Ethiopian context, as available literatures show, some researchers studied about principals' school leadership in different ways. Among thoseBelay & Maluku's [2]finding reveal raising the quality of education in Ethiopia has been limited and learning achievement in education system remains unacceptably low in secondary schools.

WhileBerhanu [3]found that secondary school principals lacked certain transformational leadership behavior. Likewise, Tekalign [38]found that lack of capacity building and poor school leadership and management were among major challenges of implementing the school improvement programme. However, none of these empirical studies have focused on challenges of principals' leadership styles in school improvement. The reviewed literatures so far clearly show that, in spite of those multifaceted efforts were there in the place, the question of quality of education in Ethiopia still remains unsolved.

The school improvement research has deepened the knowledge of improvement processes at the local level.In schools' improvement processes; knowledge has expanded regarding the context of the effectiveness-enhancing factors demonstrated by the effectiveness research [7,36]. In context of this study, school improvement denotes strategy for school

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change that focuses on the learning and achievement of students [20,31]as a result of improved standards or levels of the schools in terms of inputs, process and output[30].It is also conceived as a core of education reform and is perceived by many as a key tosocial and economic advance. It contributes to determining personal fulfillment and career pathsof individual students and consequently engages the interests of parents and communitymembers[9].

The current study attempts to investigate challenges that the principals of sampled secondary schools have faced in the journey of school improvement. In line with objective, the study searches answers for a basic research question: *What are the major challenges that negatively affect the effectiveness of the principals' leadership for school improvement*?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Description of the Study Area

Oromia region, which is one of the nine national regional states of Ethiopia, has 20 zones including Finfine/Addis Ababa special zone and 19 city administrations. The region is the largest and the most populous of the rest regions of the country with a land area of 363,375 sq km (about 32% of the country) and its population was about 41,000,000 accounting for 37% of the entire population[43]. It has relatively large number of educational institutions at different levels. These institutions are 14,470 elementary schools (1st-8th grades)1137 secondary schools (9th and10th grades), 384 preparatory schools (11thand 12th grades), 13 universities and 13 Colleges of Teachers' Education[35].As illustrated in Figure1, the region stretches across central Ethiopia and shares boundaries with Kenya,

South Sudan and all the other regional states except Tigray [6].

2.2. Research Design

This research study utilized qualitative research methodsin Interpretivismparadigm as it is the most appropriate for the topic under investigation.Qualitative research design (interactive approach) has a flexible structure as the design can be constructed and reconstructed to a greater extent[23].Qualitative research methods such as participant-observation, unstructured interviews, direct observation, describing records are most commonly used for collecting data[11]. Among these methods the current study employed semi-structured interviewsand describing records.

This approach has as significant in that during the data collection,particularly through interviews, the researchers interact with the participants directly. Consequently, data collection is subjective and detailed. The social scientists who are guided by this paradigm respect the subjective meaning of social action[39].Moreover,Flick [18] claimed that," Qualitative research approach is interested in analyzing subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardized data and analyzing texts and images rather than number and statistics." Therefore, the researchers applied some of the methods and techniques of the qualitative research approach for success of this research study.

2.3. Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The researchers have selected representative sample zones by clustering Oromia region into five geographical positions. These are: north, west, south, east, and central Oromia. The sample zones drawn from these clusters were: east Hararghe, north Shewa, Bale,

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You have also explain the Methods you employed were documents, semi-structured interview and Focus group discussions to collect data

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Iluababor, east Wellega and Arsi. These zones were located astronomically between 5^0-10^0 North Latitudes and $35^0 – 43^0$ East Longitudes (Fig.1).
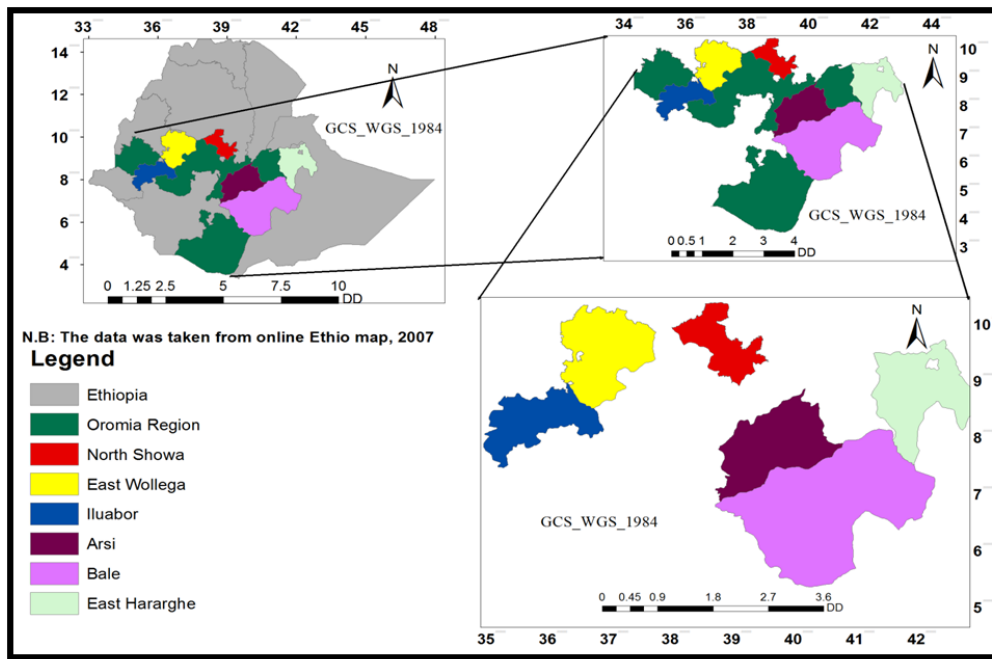

Figure 1. Map of the study area
Source: Own construction using data taken from online Ethiopian map of 2007

Basically, clustering as one of many types of sampling techniques is employed where the whole population is divided into groups and then a random sample is taken from these clusters [45]. Then, from the five clusters of the region the researchers took 6 (30%) zones by applying simple random sampling technique. This sample size is representative of the 20 zones in the region and it enables the researchers to extract emerging data because scholars suggest that a minimum sample size should be 30 percent of the target population[10].

In the sample zones, there were 307 government secondary schools (9th and 10th grades) out of which 80 (26%) were selected by stratifying the schools into two categories on the basis of the principals' work experiences followed by simple random sampling techniques. This technique is employed as it helps to divide the population into homogenous groups and is mostly applied when population spread over different areas [1]. Accordingly, the researchers have divided the secondary schools into two stages on the basis of principals' current service years. First, about 165 schools, whose principals served for less than three years, were purposively omitted. Second, among the remaining ones (142), 80 secondary schools were selected by lottery methods after all of the 142 schools were listed and numbered. The basic

rationale for employing lottery method is that it is the most applicable technique of simple random sampling where the sample size is relatively small [13].

This study covered 38 *woredas*- 6, 7, 7, 6, 5 and 7 in east Wollega, Bale, east Hararghe, north Shewa and Iluababor zone respectively- in which the principals served for three years and above within the sample zones. As stated in the current administrative structure of Ethiopia, each *woreda* has one WEO head,SIP focal expert and secondary school supervisor. To draw adequate sample size, the researcher employed random sampling techniques and selected 15 WEO heads; 15 focal SIP experts and 15 supervisors by proportionating number of secondary schools and that of the interviewees.

On the other hand,for the focus group discussion, the researchers employed the purposive sampling techniques and took total of 36 informants; that is, 18 PTA's representatives and equally 18 students' council representatives from the six sampled zones where the secondary schools are situated as a cluster taking into consideration the proximity of the schools so as to minimize time and transport costs and, inversely, to increase an access for the invited interviewees. In general, 81 respondents were drawn as samples in order to participate in this research study.

2.4. Instruments of Data Collection

2.4.1. Interview guides

This study used interview in order to extract information upon face-to-face basis between an interviewee and the interviewer for a more in-depth understanding difficulties of leadership practices of the principals. The main reason for applying this tool is thatsemi-structured interviewing is perhaps the most common interview method used in qualitative inquiry [15]. In usage of the tool, individual interviewer allowed participants to share information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication with meaning and purpose.

The interview guides used for interview consisted of both structured and more of semi-structured format. The focus on semi-structured interview was because of the fact that it allows respondents to express themselves at length[12] and is highly effective for the establishment of rapport, boosting response rates and data quality [4]. For this effect, 15 woreda education office (WEO) heads, 15 school improvement program (SIP) focal persons and 15 supervisors in the sampled zones of ORS were interviewed. The selection of these interviewees was based on assumptions that they were small in number and their formal position and responsibilities were important to fully describe challenges that hindered principals' school leadership styles for the success of school improvement.

2.4.2. Focus group discussion

Focus group discussion (FGD) was another instrument used to collect the qualitative data from predetermined key informants, who were believed to have better knowledge on the issue and different from an interview. The FGD is a qualitative data collection method that engages 6 to 12 people who have shared characteristics pertinent to the specific discussion topic and is led by a trained facilitator. The discussion is facilitated using a semi-structured interview guide to foster active participation and in-depth discussion among the discussants. It encourages the participants to talk to one another, discuss and build upon or challenge each other's opinions [16].

A FGD is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population[40]. Best and James [5] add that a FGD is an efficient and interesting way of gaining insight into ways in which informants share their knowledge and argue their different point views.

A FGD is considered a low-cost method whose flexible format allows the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues. It enables rapid collection of multiple perspectives on the topics under investigation, thus generating more information faster than in individual interviews [44].Therefore, this study employed the FGD as it helps collect some comprehensive qualitative data from the key informants–18 students' council representatives and 18 PTA's representatives– that substantiated the data gathered via the rest three methods discussed earlier. For this effect, general questions were designed for group discussion which held among 6-9 discussants in each of the targeted zones of Oromia region.

2.4.3. Document analysis

This study observed a national education strategy and guide line with respect to school inspection in order to get insight into current school standard/level. In Ethiopian case, school inspection is the process of quality assurance which is used to evaluate an overall performance of a school based on clearly defined standards and criteria [28, 31]. It is considered as a powerful tool for promoting improvement by establishing the minimum levels of quality that all schools should achieve in terms of input, process and output. The inspection classifies the school into four levels indicating that: level 1 scoring below 50% is found at early stage, level 2 scoring 50-69.99% is fulfilling its standard, level 3 scoring 70-89.99% is at required standard and level 4 scoring 90-100% is highly standardized [30].

3. METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Prior to extracting and narrating or thematically presenting results of qualitative data, each of the interviewees was represented by a letter of his or her initial name. As such, the *woreda* education offices' heads (*N*=15) were coded as: H1, H 2, H 3…and H15; secondary school supervisors (*N*=15) as: S1, S 2, S 3…and S15 and SIP focal experts (*N*=15) as: E1, E 2, E 3…and E15. While the results of focus group discussions were presented and analyzed in a manner they substantiate the results of quantitative data by paraphrasing just following presentation of the interviewee's views.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pragmatically, school principals and educational leaders are problem solvers and facilitators. In particular, the principals are expected play a significant role in promoting teacher job performance in secondary schools [46,24]. However, school leadership practices of the principals might not be free of limiting factors that couldpotentiallyhinder their effectiveness in school improvement and students' academic success in the study area.Correspondingly, this paper wasintended to detect the prevailing factors of effective principals' school leadership.

For the above effect, the research participants (interviewees and discussants)

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were requested to expresstheir views on the prevailing of diverse factors of school leadership in their respective second ary schools. The semi-structured interview as well as group discussion guiding questions was given and their views and experiences were captured and analyzed qualitatively as follows: A question –*"Do you agree with existence of a weak capacity building? Why?"-* was given for the interviewees (heads and school improvement program focal persons in *woreda*education offices and supervisors of secondary schools).

As a result,the responses of all of the interviewees indicated that the roles and responsibilities of woreda(district) education offices (WEOs) or zone education offices (ZEOs) in capacitating the principals with pertinent leadership skills and competencies through different methods like continuous professional trainings (on-job or in-service)were insufficient in most of the sample secondary schools.

Similarly, the interviewees (representatives of parent-teacher-association and students councils) reported that principals in their respective secondary schools were not well equipped with leadership knowledge and skills and also lacked work experiences and the required competencies. This result implies lack of skills, pertinent to conceptual, human and technical, and competencies of the principals which help how to lead and manage might hindered overall school performance. This finding was fairly congruent with that of Tekalign [38] who reported that the practice of capacity building for secondary school principals was above the middling point in one of the nine national regional states of Ethiopia. It was also consistent with report ofBerhanu [3] that secondary school

principals lacked certain transformational leadership behavior.

In another way, the respondents were provided with another question-*"Do you agree with presence of gaps in SIP preparation and implementation and weakness in monitoring and evaluating quality of teaching and learning process"* As a result, theinterviewees confirmed that there was weakness in collectively planning and implementing SIP and evaluation of teachers' activities. In supporting this view, the discussants concluded that actually the duty of evaluating teachers' performance was conducted by the school supervisors, school supervision committee and/or the principals but it lacked quality and continuity.

This finding was in agreement with an evaluation report of FDRE's Ministry of Education(MoE) which highlighted that SIP monitoring and evaluation system is not yet well established [31]. As these views, beingintegral components of effective school leadership, weakness in planning, implementing,monitoring and evaluating school activities ultimately erodes realization of school improvement in a number of ways in the study area.

In relation to school resources (material and financial) utilization, the discussants reached on a conclusion that wastages of resources were observed in some of their respective secondary schools. From these results; therefore, one can conclude that unwise utilization of the available school resources, in the majority of the schools, was one of the main challenges that might negatively affected improvement of the schools' levels and in turn students' academic achievement in the study area.

Likewise, the respondents were asked that;" *Do you agree with existence of low efforts and commitment of the principals and local community in school leadership duties*? Few of the interviewees (H8, S6) asserted their views as *"Commitments demonstrated by the principals and local community on improvement of schools' levels were below the expected."* Similarly, for the points raised, a great majority of the discussants concluded that communication network between the schools and stakeholders, commitment of the principals and the local community for overall improvement of school performance was found at low level.

This finding was similar to that of Yohannes [49] that effectiveness of the principals to promote a culture of open communication with families was the lowest. From this result; thus, it is safe to infer that lack of strong commitment on part of principals as well as the local community could be considered as one of the main hindrances of effective school leadership styles for school improvement and students' academic achievement in the study area.

The current study was also consistent with that of Tekalign [38] which concluded that there was lack of school leadership commitment in implementation of the school improvement programme. However, it stood at opposing direction of the study of UNESCO [44] stating that school organizations play a critical role in the promotion of sustainable development and without their commitment, it is impossible to achieve this goal.

The respondents were given a question that: "*Are there significant shortages of curriculum inputs and standard facilities in your secondary schools?* Correspondingly, all of the discussants agreed upon that their schools not only had shortages of required curriculum materials like textbooks,

furnished and sufficient classrooms, but they also had facilities with low standards. Similarly, the interviewed groups asserted shortages of the curriculum inputs were among the common challenges encountered for years almost in all secondary schools.

In the above case, Garland further[19] contends that for effective school improvement process to occur, within the school academic environment there must be provision of required learning aids such as attractive school physical environment, well painted classrooms, adequate chairs, laboratory, library, pedagogical centers, electric power, internet access, water sources and toilets. From these results; therefore, one can conclude that shortages of these inputs and standard facilities could hamper effectiveness of school leadership styles in order to not adequately improve the schools and consequently students' academic results.

In other way, the interviewees were asked that "*What is the degree of effort and commitment of students regarding regular class attendance, developing their academic knowledge and competencies and doing exam independently*?" and their responses showed that students' personal readiness to take these roles and responsibilities became very low since the recent past years. In this case, two of the interviewees (S7,H12) concurrently stated that*" Majority of students in our secondary schools are arbitrary in their class attendance due to family pressure for home works*."
Again, another interviewee (S10) added that "*More than 50% of students do not attend their lessons in appropriate manner rather they are highly dependent on getting national examination's answers from others by different means such as receiving answers via messages and exam sheets with answers*." In supporting this, one of the

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interviewed groups (E8) added that*" more of our students in secondary schools focus on many times to cheat rather than prepare themselves to do exams independently*" In general, one can deduct from all of these results that irresponsibleness of the students for academic progress became one the key challenges of education quality in the study area.

The discussants were also provided with a point in order to extract their experiences and perception that," *Do you agree with existence of weak implementation of school structure and procedures*?" In response they reached consent that the structures (such as student councils and class meetings) and procedures (involving students in decision-making and school leadership) that enable the students to develop a sense of responsibility and self-disciplined culture were not properly implemented in their respective secondary schools. This implies that academic achievement which is precisely a mirror image of school improvement might not be realized in absence effective implementation rule and regulation and strong engagement of the student in the elements. Thus, most of the targeted secondary schools were affected by the dysfunction of these managerial issues.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study focused its attention on analysis of main challenges affecting activities of principals' school leadership for improvement of school standards in Oromia region of Ethiopia. It applied qualitative research methods with interview, focus group discussion and record observation. In doing so,the study identified that the secondary school principals have been working in multifaceted challenges including inactive involvement of the parents and other stakeholders in school affairs, shortages of standard facilities and

relevant curriculum inputs, weakness of the principals together with SIP committee in properly developing strategic and action plans, students' less commitment academic attendance and outputs. Moreover, most of the sampled school, as the existing records evidence, were found at level two(not fulfill their standards).Therefore, it can be inferred that the prevailing challenges had potentially affected the effectiveness of the principals' in fully exercising the school leadership styles in order to realize improvement of the schools.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested to be accomplished *woreda* and zone education offices and the principals, as they are expected play central roles for continuous school improvement items of curriculum inputs, process and outputs. Among various outputs, academic achievement calls for paramount emphasis as it is measurement and final goal of the school improvement in Ethiopian general education system.

The principals need to make extra committed efforts to fill practical gaps observed in school leadership and management activities. The principals together with teachers and parents should shoulder the load of shaping students' attitudes of dependency and reverse inattention they acculturated from their seniors.

The *woreda* education offices should also assign all rounded competent principals on the basis of merit and open competition and then work on capacity building through education and trainings. The offices are expected to sustainably and effectively monitor and evaluate activities of the schools and provide all pertinent technical and professional supports.

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