

## **Perceptions And Challenges Of Collaborative Leadership At Secondary Schools In Bangladesh**

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**Abstract:** Leadership is the cornerstone of school reform in any education system. Several studies related to this topic show that leadership makes a difference in school environment, culture and student performance. This study has attempted to explore the perceptions and challenges of collaborative leadership at secondary level schools in Bangladesh. The issue was selected due to its documented importance in supporting sustainable school improvement. In Bangladesh, school leadership is shaped by positional and prevailing heritage of historical colonial system where top down approach to management is exercised. We have exploited in-depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) as research tools to gather qualitative data from urban and rural schools. The results affirmed a similar model of leadership in rural and urban schools. Stakeholders of leadership have not yet been oriented to the concept of collaborative leadership. Existing shadow political School Managing Committee (SMC), vertical relation among the stakeholders and lack of opportunities to participate in functions slow down the activities of school management which necessitates attitudinal and cultural change among the SMC members, Head Teachers and general teachers through effective professional training and other motivational initiatives and extricating the school management committee from political influence.

**Key words:** Perceptions, Challenges, Collaborative Leadership, Improvement

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### **I. Introduction**

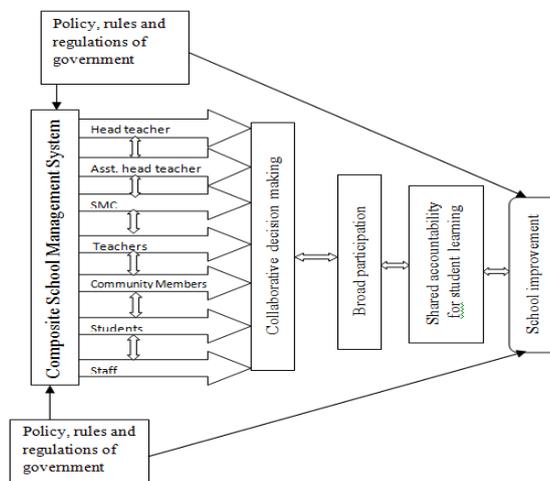
Leadership in education is the key lever for school reform at all levels of the education system. Studies germane to educational leadership substantiates that effective leadership is very crucial for successful school development and improvement of teaching and learning. Strong research evidence implies (Elmore, 2000, Smyle, Conley and Marks, 2002, Mullick, Sharma and Deppeler, 2012) that without improving school leadership, we cannot get the best out of our education policy. After the birth of Bangladesh, provision of basic education was enshrined as a constitutional responsibility (Article 17, Bangladesh Constitution). The assumption of this responsibility led to the nationalization of primary schools i.e. a state takeover of community established schools, and a drive to ensure access to primary education for all children. For the secondary education sector, however, no such corresponding policy engagement was undertaken. The spread of secondary education thus continued to be a community-driven affair but with two contrasting engagement by the state – the assumption of expanding regulatory jurisdiction and a more limited resource engagement in the way of partial subventions of teacher salaries (Rahman, 2014). There are three major streams in secondary education in Bangladesh: general, technical/vocational and madrasah (Islamic Religion based education) education. General secondary education covers seven years with three sub-stages: three years of junior secondary, two years of secondary and two years of higher secondary (BANBEIS, 2010). In the context of management and funding, there are four types of secondary schools – government secondary schools which are fully funded and managed by the government, non-government secondary schools that are initiated by the community or local patrons but have subsequently come under coverage of government subvention of teacher salaries, private secondary schools that are initiated, funded and managed by the non-state actors and missionary schools which are established by religious missionaries mainly from the UK and other western countries as well.

School administration is shaped by the traditional and prevailing heritage of the historical colonial system (Thornton, 2006) where a top-down approach to management is exercised (Salauddin, 2012: 53). In the

administrative hierarchy of secondary education, the Ministry of Education is the highest authority for policy formulation, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and Head teacher and SMC are the root level authority for school management. SMC have huge space to exercise power in school governance such as raising and managing funds and creating endowments for school, recommending for the appointment, suspension, dismissal and removal of teachers, granting leave, approving annual budget etc. Head teacher is Member-Secretary (ex-officio) of SMC and also leader for academic development (MoEdu). With a vast area of work but limited power, Head teacher could not pay proper attention to quality learning outcome areas, such as class room management, classroom performance of teachers, sharing knowledge and technique among the teachers, students' attentiveness and participation, evaluation of theoretical and practical knowledge. As a member of positional leadership culture, Head teachers are accountable to the authorities and to school communities by virtue of their position, with little consideration of capabilities of other staff in the school (Salahuddin, 2012: 51). In this perspective other stakeholders of school management, such as students, teachers, community members, could not input their talent and insights because of the concept of positional leadership in the system. Teachers have little involvement in decision making related to the holistic school improvement. As a result, they feel undervalued and do not have a stake in school management (Thornton, 2006). From this point of view, collaborative leadership might be the best approach in school management to achieve the target of school improvement and quality learning outcome. This article attempts to explore the challenges and perceptions of collaborative leadership among the stakeholders.

### Conceptual Framework of Collaborative Leadership

Although collaborative leadership is a relatively recent concept of educational leadership, it has by now become a universally embraced one. Recent researches in the context of global education reform show that principal leadership makes a difference in the quality of schooling, school development and student learning. Scholars across the world have tried to consolidate the ground that principal leadership works as a catalyst for school's academic improvement (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). The roles and responsibilities of school leaders are changing frequently due to a wave of global reforms which cause leaders to face continuous challenges in their jobs. Depending on the school situation and personal characteristics, leaders may work alone or collaboratively to reach their goals. Heroic forms of leadership, where leaders work mainly alone, tend not to use the leadership capabilities and aptitudes of others (Duignan, 2006; Riley and MacBeath, 2003 cited in Salahuddin, 2012). Over the past decade there has been increased interest in exploring the sources, means and implications of viewing school leadership much more broadly than it has been exercised by the school leaders or principals. Although scholars have proposed significant distinctions between terms such as 'distributed' (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006), 'shared' (Marks & Printy, 2003; Pounder, Ogawa, and Adams 1995 cited in Hallinger and Heck, 2010), and 'collaborative' (Hallinger and Heck cited in Hallinger and Heck, 2010) leadership, all three terms express a similar concern for broadening the sources of school leadership. There are some other terms such as 'supportive leadership' and 'consultative leadership' which are also assumed to be synonymous with this leadership concept. Collaborative leadership entailed the use of governance structures and organizational processes that employed staff and students, encouraged broad participation in decision-making, and fostered shared accountability for student learning (Hallinger and Heck, 2010: 97). Conceptually, this study employs a participatory role of SMC, Head teacher, assistant head teacher, teachers, students and community members in a composite school management system which can positively exert its influence on school improvement and quality learning outcome as illustrated in the figure below:



Source: Restructured from Hallinger and Heck (2010)

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher leadership is not the product of recent educational reform. It has been prevailing in the form of informal leadership in schools and classrooms (Smylie, 1997). Weise and Murphy (1995) shows that the idea of teacher leadership as a means of reform has its origin at least in the early 1990s, in progressive educators' calls to reshape schools as democratic communities. In the last two decades, several new approaches to teacher leadership have emerged. Smylie et al (2002) explores three new approaches to teacher leadership for school improvement. He has referred to a radical change of the idea of leadership which focused on the principal or the superintendent (Fullan, 2001 cited in Smylie et al. 2001). He, at first, examines teacher research as a form of teacher leadership, then turns to the idea of distributive leadership and finally concludes with the idea of self-managed teams as means of teacher leadership and substitutes for administrative leadership. These new approaches are in sharp contrast with the individual empowerment, role-based models of teacher leadership that dominated the 1980s and early 1990s. They restructure teacher leadership as a more collective, task-oriented and organizational enterprise.

Because of its considerable conceptual elasticity, the term 'collaborative leadership' admits some confusion. This lack of conceptual clarity does not allow for a clear operationalization of the concept in empirical research (Hartley, 2007; Storey, 2004 cited in Sales et al, 2016). Distributed leadership acknowledges a broader perspective of leadership activities than just the leadership of school principals. A distributed perspective in school frames leadership practice as a product of interaction among leaders, followers and the situations (Spillane, 2006). In this sense, collaborative leadership is a democratic and participative leadership because it shifts influence away from the top of the organisational hierarchy towards the work teams and teachers themselves. The dynamics of open inquiry play a major role, in which the pursuit of shared aims generates a nodal cooperative process in which each of its parts is an equally important element of the whole (Trujillo, Lopez, and Lorenzo, 2011 cited in Sales, 2016). The collaborative perspective acknowledges that school leadership extends beyond the work of the principal and includes the leaders at other levels of the organisation, including teachers. This implies that collaborative leadership goes beyond the work of individual leaders and encompasses the assumption of the shared and distributed leadership embedded in situated practices (Hauge and Norenes, 2015). Through the practice of collaborative leadership the educational development purpose of a school might be fulfilled. A positive correlation has been found between distributed leadership and teachers' self-efficacy and level of morale (Harris, 2005). Collaborative leadership is also considered as an essential element of high performance learning organisations.

Elmore (2000) substantiates that in a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, distributed leadership implies multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture. Distributed leadership poses the challenge of how to distribute responsibility and authority for guidance and direction of instruction, and learning about instruction, so as to increase the likelihood that the decisions of individual teachers and principals about what to do, and what to learn, how to do, aggregate into collective benefits for student learning (Elmore, 2000).

Mullick et al. (2012) find in their research that teachers who participated in professional development activities on inclusive education (IE) hold more positive perception about distributed leadership practices for IE. There is a significant difference between the urban teachers' perception and that of teachers from semi-urban and rural areas. Exercising distributed leadership practices for IE, in both big size and small size schools (in terms of students) is not as good as in a mid-size school. There is a positive correlation between the practice of distributed leadership and teachers' satisfaction. If teachers perceive that their schools are exercising distributed leadership practices for IE, they also consider that the work environment of their schools is satisfactory. This research was designed to investigate distributed leadership practices in public funded primary schools. Participants for this study were only Head teachers and teachers; other stakeholders of school management have not been taken into account. As the data gathering tool, only questionnaire was exploited to find the insight oriented objectives.

The study of Salahuddin (2012) covers the challenges to effective leadership of urban schools and reveals that principals have adequate experiential knowledge for their schools but they lack theoretical knowledge of school leadership. The leadership in education still retains some colonial views and demands. External influence in recruiting teachers and students creates challenge to make appropriate decision. Lack of physical facilities, very high student-teacher ratio, political pressure, unethical recommendations and lack of skilled personnel are also challenges to leadership. Only four urban schools were selected from the ten top ranked schools in Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Dhaka, Bangladesh, for the academic year 2009-2010 excluding rural schools. Respondents of the study were only the four school principals with semi-structured interviews.

Rahman (2014) discloses the present scenario of secondary education with secondary data and its emerging concerns. Good results and high fees have become intrinsically linked with the non-government schools with the consequence that poorer students are increasingly getting distant from good results. Increasing

disparity between the performance of urban and rural schools is a manifestation of this trend. There are a limited number of public schools where the poorer students do not have the opportunity to avail because of highly competitive admission test. It also reveals that ill-educated SMC chairs in a sizeable segment of rural schools and ruling party influence on SMCs are two major concerns. Although, four policy agenda are suggested as a concluding remark in this study, it does not explore the status of school leadership and quality education.

In his study Ali (2011) explores that leadership means Head teacher who is all in all for the school's improvement. A good school means a good Head teacher, other stakeholders are also considered according to their relationship with Head teacher in an organisational setting. Sometimes, Head teacher calls other members in for cooperating in crucial moment. But all participants express that leadership becomes successful if all stakeholders participate in decision making process collectively. The style of the leadership is a combination of democratic and managerial ones. Government officials influence the decision making of Head teachers which in most cases are not related to school improvement and quality learning outcome. In rural areas illiterate people sometimes become members of the SMC and they have difficulty in understanding and deciding on matters related to school management. The study was conducted only on positional leadership (Head teachers) of four schools of Sirajganj district, which does not cover the concept of collaborative leadership.

Thornton (2006) works on teachers' collaboration and support given from one teacher to another teacher, focusing on improving teaching in the classroom. The study finds that teachers' collaboration for class improvement is visibly absent in secondary schools in Bangladesh. It also identifies the constraints to developing a collaboration culture such as difficulty of curriculum, perceived low ability of many students, the teachers' own educational background and contextual factors which influence teachers' motivation. But there are potentials to nurture collaborative culture through formal and informal ways. Informal collaboration for mutual support enables teachers to talk about their problems, acknowledge the constraints being faced by them and work together to try to improve student performance which certainly has a role in promoting more positive approaches to teaching and learning. The study was a small scale one on eight schools from urban and rural upazilas of Bangladesh.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perception of shared leadership at secondary schools among the stakeholders of composite school management system. This qualitative study has employed in-depth interview and focused group discussion (FGD) due to place of respondents and easy administration for extracting qualitative data. The area of the study was urban and rural schools of Bogra, a Northern district of Bangladesh. Two upazilas, one is Bogra sadar (urban) and another is Sariakandi which is rural, from this district had been selected purposively. From each upazila, three schools had been selected purposively. Respondents of shared leadership comprise Head teacher, president of SMC, member of SMC, general teachers and community members in the study. Fifteen in-depth interviews and six FGDs at six schools had been carried out to understand the present status of shared leadership. Among this cohort the Head teacher, president of SMC, one member of SMC excluding teacher member of SMC, general teacher and community members had been selected from each school for in-depth interview and FGDs. Data had been interpreted through descriptive analysis.

### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The rule 2009 (BISED Circular, 2011) delegates the power of SMC for school improvement activities including infrastructure development, resources collection and its management, teachers and staff recruitment and their promotion, annual leave, salary from school fund, collection of education materials and maintenance and working for quality education etc. On the other hand, the rule describes that Head teacher and general teachers are responsible for the academic development. But the functions of SMC and academic progress are inseparable with regard to improvement of school and quality learning outcome. A participant of FGD, Azmal Hossain, expresses thus:

“We do not often know the issues and decisions of SMC. There is no collaborative bridge between teachers and SMC on sharing information and views. Although Head teacher and two general teachers are the members of SMC, but they often remain inactive for the authoritative power of SMC president.”

Coordination, collaboration and information exchange are not in vogue between teachers and members of SMC. As a result, participation of general teachers does not happen in development functions both academic and non-academic. An interviewee opines,

“Development of library facilities, buying books and teaching materials are very much related to academic progress. General teacher do not often know anything. Only Head teacher and SMC take decisions on what are needed in this respect”.

There is a knowledge gap regarding collaborative leadership especially in the attitude of Head teachers and president of SMC. They think that a controlling power should be the prerogative for the authority. In most schools of Bangladesh, leadership is seen as positional leadership; the leadership style is based on the authority

and power given by the position of principal. Conceptually they do not understand or recognize collaborative leadership till today. This might be due to their lack of orientation to the idea of collaborative leadership which is a bit alien to our culture. Even the training institutions emphasize on positional leadership and the regulations of school governance since they are directed to do so as part of the government policy implementation. A vertical relation exists among the stakeholder especially general teachers and members of SMC. Such type of relation hinders the goal of school improvement. Sometimes, conflicts and confusions about decision making are observed with considerable amount of staff disappointment which consequently results in the lack of competence of teachers to accomplish all sorts of jobs efficiently (Salauddin, 2011).

Although educational expertise is a prerequisite for effective leadership, it is not sufficient; leaders must also build trust relationship if they are willing to generate and sustain improvements in teaching and learning. The members of SMC do not have adequate educational qualification for understanding the tenets of school management and improvement. But it is observed that they pretend to have ideas of school management and quality education. They do so to keep themselves engaged in development functions and exercise unethical power and influence over the general teachers. Majority of the SMC members do not attend meetings and remain inactive in their responsibilities. In most cases, the president of SMC belongs to political party and he/she tends to handle everything without the consideration of quality learning outcome or school improvement. An interviewee expressed his views thus:

“Political interference in school governance is the greatest curse to our education sector. In our country, affiliation with the ruling political party is the sole qualification of those who become the presidents of SMC. They have no knowledge on education management. They always try to gain their vested interest by exerting influence on the Head teacher and other members of SMC”.

As a result, trust among the stakeholders and collaboration learning and practising atmosphere do not exist. Among the thirteen members of SMC, in 75 percent cases it has political influence to select members for the school managing committee (Ali, 2011: 42). People have to maintain liaison with the ruling party lobby to be the member of the committee. They want to be the members of the SMC in order to play an authoritative role in the community. Presence of ill-educated SMC chairs in a sizeable segment of rural schools and ruling party influence on SMC are two major concerns (Rahman, 2014: 7). It is expressed by a guardian that, “shadow (latent, politicized) political SMC is now key problem in secondary schools but nobody wants to express this colourless truth. Ironically, the government also is half-hearted regarding this issue”.

At present the issue of school leadership has gained tremendous prestige. What we in Bangladesh seem to have responded to most avidly has been the authoritarian aspect of leadership. Our zeal has been accompanied by only a remote understanding of the essential ideas that undergird all critical and creative facets of school leadership.

Head Teacher is the leader of academic planning and member secretary to SMC. As positional leader, most of them think that a controlling power is needed to drive the school. On the basis of such attitude, he/she exercises power, and even tries to keep apart from the cohort of general teachers. Because of their authoritarian attitude other teachers feel inferior as a counterpart. Abul Ahad, a senior teacher, expresses, “The Head Teachers always maintained a professional demeanour throughout. And this hinders the establishment of a democratic and collaborative atmosphere in school management”. Indeed, the school loses unanimous decision and collective actions for overall development. A sense of ownership and culture of reciprocity do not grow among the stakeholders due to the lack of participation in the functions of school improvement.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Among the stakeholders SMC governs the school without the consideration of others' skill and talent where most of the presidents of the SMC are the shadow political persons even in rural schools. Their educational qualification, knowledge of management and quality education is very poor. An educational ceiling such as at least Bachelor degree should be one of the minimum requirements for the SMC member post. Moreover, motivational training intending to provide them an orientation to the concept of collaborative leadership, education policy, curriculum, syllabus, evaluation system etc. is urgently needed.

The existing power of SMC should be undermined for a more lively and effective participation of all stakeholders in a democratic atmosphere. Here the participatory function means such an environment where the activities of school improvement are accomplished under a horizontal relation instead of vertical relation for sharing culture among the stakeholders especially between the members of SMC and general teachers. Indeed, the culture of a sense of ownership should be introduced in the school.

The attitudes of Head Teachers regarding his power relation with other teachers should be changed. For this reason, the concept of collaborative leadership is needed to incorporate in the education policy and training manual instead of positional leadership approach. Sharing culture in a mutually responsive atmosphere should be promoted through the professional training and motivation.

In fine, the school reform is substantially a great challenge in the context of shadow political SMC, authoritarian attitude of management body emanating from the deep-rooted sense of positional leadership and non reciprocal culture among the stakeholders.

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