



**International Journal of Management in Education**

ISSN online: 1750-3868 - ISSN print: 1750-385X

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijmie>

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**Does distributed leadership fit the paradigm transformation of secondary school effectiveness in Nigeria?**

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**DOI:** [10.1504/IJMIE.2024.10059851](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMIE.2024.10059851)

**Article History:**

Received:	29 August 2023
Last revised:	04 October 2023
Accepted:	06 October 2023
Published online:	01 December 2023

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## Does distributed leadership fit the paradigm transformation of secondary school effectiveness in Nigeria?

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**Abstract:** Distributed Leadership (DL) has gradually been identified as a leadership model that needs to be customised to suit the desired expectations based on a differentiated school context. This article aims to explore the notion – why one size does not fit all, in recognition with the DL and school effectiveness in a decentralised context. The paper employs the qualitative method using semi-structured interviews and document reviews to make its argument. The selected sampled principals from the federal secondary schools located in north-western Nigeria provided valuable insights. The findings indicate that secondary school principals tend to implement a leadership model that emphasises sharing responsibilities and participation in decision-making, aligning with the country's transformation of the leadership paradigm. These findings suggest that decentralised systems and DL alone are not the exclusive remedy for fixing ineffective schools. In conclusion, this paper enriches the existing literature on contextualisation of DL by proposing a comprehensive and integrated leadership model suitable for decentralised schools.

**Keywords:** distributed leadership; context; paradigm transformation; decentralisation; political influence.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Bashir, K. and Alam, G.M. (2024) 'Does distributed leadership fit the paradigm transformation of secondary school effectiveness in Nigeria?', *Int. J. Management in Education*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp.70–90.

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## 1 Introduction

Leadership in education has evolved over time and in many ways, giving rise to six fundamental models and a number of approaches in order to make designated models workable in various contexts. The paradigm transformation of leadership suggests that since the 1980s, it has at least moved to four models (Bush and Glover, 2014). Firstly, the instructional leadership model refers to power being concentrated in the principals. This approach gained popularity when respect for authority and the well-being of an organisation were considered as paramount issues in global leadership (Bass, 1999).

As decades passed, the landscape of global leadership changed, leading to the emergence of the concept of transformation leadership in schools. This model shifted the focus to organisational goals and addressing individuals' needs, particularly staff members (Bass, 1999). Recently, DL, recognised as a timely necessity (Gronn, 2008) has emerged in the literature particularly the early 2000s in developed countries (Thein and Chan, 2022; Gumus et al., 2018; Spillane, 2005; Gronn, 2000).

This model originated during the popularity of the Liberal Democrat government (Crowford, 2012), and flourished during the era characterised by marketisation and individualisation (more free market economies and an emphasis on what individuals wanted), when the paradigm universally transformed from industrial age to knowledge age (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Notably, the literature on leadership contended that its applicability in schools is subject to each country's unique context (Thein and Chan, 2022; Hallinger, 2018a; Spillane et al., 2001).

However, implementation of leadership in a school is governed by several variables specific to what is happening in each school scenario (Spillane et al., 2001). Since DL is particularly favoured during complex changes and school reforms (Bowmans et al., 2019; Hairon and Goh, 2015), knowledge of a country's context is crucial. Without adequate knowledge of DL circumstances neither the application nor implementation may be viable or sustained in the long-term in schools (Lumby, 2019).

Moreover, Lumby (2019) argued that it may continually conflict with institutional principles within the schools. For this reason, Bush (2018c) contended that adapting leadership to a certain context requires taking into account leadership models and highlighting why the one size does not fit all needs to be examined. To explore these issues, this research is conducted to tailor DL to be a contextual fit by mapping the challenges and promises it presents. The section that follows cover some of the challenges and promises of this model for scoping this research.

### *1.1 The research gap, scope: objective and questions*

Globally, continuous paradigm shifts lead to changes and reforms in various societies that witness changes in all sectors, and education is not excluded (Chukwurah, 2010; Magno, 2009; Bass, 1999). Secondary schools now face standardisation and ranking constraints, as these are often used for measuring a country's quality of education (Hairon and Goh, 2015). To effectively overcome these transformational challenges, many developing countries are adopting policies that have previously proven successful in Western countries (Hallinger, 2018b; Magno, 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Nigeria, being a developing nation also follows the same pattern of borrowing policies because they seem available and workable (Moorosi and Bush, 2019). The notion put forth by Bush (2018c) about the inadequacy of the one size fits all approach, and the need to broaden the tentacles of DL research based on African issues (Hallinger, 2018b) push the thrust for this research. This study is therefore focused on events in Nigeria to find out if DL fits the paradigm of school effectiveness.

Additionally, the commitment of international finance/aid organisations like the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO to distribute policies for schools (Takala et al., 2018) underscore the relevance to explore this topic. It is essential to recognise that several developing countries from Asia and Africa such as Brazil, India, the Philippines, Kenya, Tanzania, etc., account for a valuable amount of global secondary education and they are considering using DL. Numerous studies have discussed and conceptualise DL throughout the world (Thein and Chan, 2022; Printy and Liu, 2021; Bush and Ng, 2019; Hallinger, 2018a; Hairon and Goh, 2015; Hallinger and Heck, 2009), compared education policies' effects on DL and explained its relationship with other school variables (Thein and Chan, 2022; Liu et al., 2018). However, no study has to date tried to explore whether or not it fits the paradigm shift of effective schools.

Considering the above discussions, we believe more studies can and should be done on contextualising DL. Thus, research undertaken in Nigeria can serve as a case study and will offer lessons to other developing countries and also fill the gaps in the literature on what is happening throughout Africa. The objective of this study is to investigate whether distributed leadership fits the paradigm of secondary school effectiveness. It will be of interest to the study to explore whether the context of a paradigm shift is being accounted for in school leadership. The following research questions are therefore put forward to explore the issue:

- 1 Does a paradigm shift create a distributed leadership model?
- 2 Does a paradigm transformation in a specific context wield an impact on the leadership approach selected by principals?
- 3 How can the constraints of DL undermine the purpose that is being addressed?

A challenge in the field is to subsequently navigate and investigate how leadership is influenced by cycles of organisational development and changes. Sequentially, the literature review, justifications for study design, findings and discussion and conclusion will be documented. Likewise, some suggestions will be provided and areas for further studies recommended.

## **2 Literature review**

This section will encompass a review on leadership styles, the definition of distributed leadership, pre-requisite for distributed leadership and the challenges and promises related to DL in a given context.

### *2.1 Leadership styles*

There are propositions about various models or styles of leadership. Cummings et al. (2021) identified transformational and transactional leadership styles. While Maqbool et al. (2023) mentioned strategic, instructional, and cultural leadership styles. Meanwhile, democratic, or participative, autocratic and laissez-faire or free-rein, collegial, task oriented and moral leadership style are identified by Parveen et al. (2022). However, Bush and Glover (2014) and Makoelle and Makhalemele (2020) identified teacher leadership, system, managerial, moral and authentic, distributed and contingent leadership styles.

Leadership styles are developed with focus on how to lead or the purpose of leading (Bush and Glover, 2014). Ekpe et al. (2017) added that they are viewed differently, interchangeably, and sometimes various leadership styles are blended together. Bush and Glover (2014) noted that transformational leadership is contrasted with transactional leadership while moral leadership includes ethical, authentic and spiritual leadership. Chen et al. (2022) itemised leadership styles as entrepreneurial leadership, integrated leadership involving transformational and transactional, and distributed or shared or democratic leadership.

Zembylas and Iasonos (2010) identified values-led contingency leadership and critical and/or social justice leadership. Meanwhile, Ekpe et al. (2017) portrayed transformational as charismatic leadership and transactional leadership. Hence, the principal leadership model can therefore not be any singular style, but rather a harmony of leadership models (Sagala et al, 2019). Other leadership styles include servant leadership (McCann and Holt, 2010), compassionate leadership (Ramachandran et al., 2023), digital and technology leadership evolving from e-leadership (Jameson et al., 2022). However, the interest of this study is on distributed, shared, participative or democratic leadership.

### *2.2 Distributed leadership: definition problem*

The concept of DL has emerged as a major topic in research on leadership in education (Gronn, 2002; Hartley, 2009; Harris, 2013; Bush and Ng, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020). The definition continues to evolve, and new dimensions keep emerging over time. However, the discussions revolve around three main dimensions. Firstly, DL emphasises

dynamic interactions between the leader, followers and situations, involving shared decision-making and giving rise to emergent leadership (Hulpia and Devos, 2010; Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2004; Gronn, 2002).

Secondly, DL is viewed as a tool to invigorate schools and teachers through additional tasks (Bush and Ng, 2019; Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Hargreaves and Fink, 2008). The third dimension revolves around developing leadership skills and traits in the schools through building strong relationships with teachers and rethinking how power is shared with informal leaders (Harris, 2008, 2004; Bennet et al., 2003). Although the definitions mentioned here are the common ones, Bolden et al. (2009) defined DL as devolved and emergent, dynamic, inclusive, relational, collaborative and contextually situated. This perspective aligns well with the focus and objectives of this study.

### *2.3 Challenges and promises of distributed leadership*

The model of DL in schools both inhibits and warrants leadership (Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2009). The concept offers valuable insights into how school leadership metamorphoses in diverse cultural, institutional and organisational contexts and how it varies (Hallinger, 2018a). Since DL affects schools more than solo leadership (Bush and Ng, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Harris, 2013; Spillane and Healey, 2010), it is perceived to be the best choice during changes/innovations and team reforms (Harris and Jones, 2018). Furthermore, DL provides the flexibility to work and learn beyond bureaucratic principles (Lumby, 2019).

Hence, DL has the potential to address the conflicting views of leadership solely as an individual product (Gronn, 2000). While it improves responsiveness of all members in a given organisation, it may lead to conflicting roles, confusion and fragmentation within the organisation, which can lead to a loss of focus and direction (Crowford, 2012). The socio-cultural context helps to build the crucial role, shaping the pattern of material situations, social situations and interactions within an organisation (Spillane et al., 2001). With this in mind, Lumby (2019) presents DL as an ideal form of leadership; but Bush (2018b); Ho and Ng (2017) and Bolden et al. (2009) question its attainability in practice.

This is because DL resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy where the dynamics of power and influence do not function well or deliver the desired results (Bolden, 2011; Hartley, 2009). Harris (2009) argued that DL and hierarchical structures are a mismatch and Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) also claim it is less effective in organisations. There is no blueprint on standardised DL, and how it is characterised and implemented depends on the organisational culture, values and action (Bowmans et al., 2019).

Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) raised the alarm that the model concords with the view of knowledge as a core commodity, while Crawford (2012) pointed that whom to trust in DL greatly influences decisions thus negating ideal distribution of leadership. DL is mostly centred on the schools, and its applicability outside the field of education has not been fully established. Hence its theoretical validity has been questioned (Ross et al., 2005).

## *2.4 Variables for distributed leadership*

Successful DL greatly depends on the environment in which it operates (Harris and Jones, 2018; Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Harris, 2002; Spillane, 2004). The context of the school includes factors such as political climate, nature of the relevant stakeholders, institutional or system structure, cultural and community norms (Hallinger, 2018a; Spillane, 2004). Moreover, the school context includes specific features like the level of education (primary/secondary), location (urban/rural), nature of the schooling system (public/private) (Spillane, 2004), professional context, internal and external contexts, material circumstances, legal requirements and responsibilities (Braun et al., 2011).

The country's social context may include values or aspirations that deal with improving social justice, democracy, equity, racial or ethnic equality and gender (Hallinger, 2018b). However, what is fundamental to the social context is the need for trust and accountability (Crowford, 2012), cooperation, transparency/full disclosure, resilience and internal motivation (Magno, 2009). Coherence between the efforts of each school, the actual context in the school and districts will determine the patterns and differences in the distribution of leadership (Hangartner and Svaton, 2022; Harris and Jones, 2018; Bryk et al., 2012).

Addressing the question on how distributed leadership fits in the present structural system of schools, Harris (2013) explained that the actual question should rather be: what needs to be done to get the best outcomes and how can we change our structures to achieve them? She clarified that distributed leadership is not an antidote, it does not also mean everyone leads and it is not without its challenges. A reflective question is – should we customise distributed leadership for Nigeria? The next section tries to provide a theoretical basis for the study.

## *2.5 Theoretical framework*

The theoretical perspective in school leadership influences and shapes policies, practices and research (Bush, 2010). Consequently, schools operate within the legislative framework laid down by the government, and policy formulation in school leadership is guided by the ideology and assumptions of the political party in power (Harris, 2005). Although certain theories in educational leadership may not be implemented in practice, their failure suggests further explanations of practice to build robust theories. The value of theory is its congruence with and contributions to solving practical problems (Bush, 2010).

Globally, the past couple of decades witnessed the emergence of decentralisation and principals' specialist qualifications as theoretical themes in education leadership. The main arguments supporting decentralisation are linked to the notion of democracy. Underlying theories suggest that better outcomes are achieved through decentralisation, and school principals can make difference to schools and students' outcomes if they possess principalship skills. This is despite the fact that direct evidence for this is lacking (Bush, 2010; Harris, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The emergence of DL has been argued to be a sign of the times and resonates with contemporary culture (Hartley, 2007). Rhetorically, DL represents democracy in schools and is on par with human relationships management ideology where schools are viewed as a loosely coupled system operating within a flexible, decentralised and soft

bureaucratic framework. The characteristics of DL are: distribution as formal, pragmatic, as strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural (Hartley, 2007).

These traits of DL illustrate its flexibility and adaptability, aligning with the idea of one size does not fit all, as supported by Bush (2018a). DL theory upholds the assumption that situational analysis is one crucial element of organisational socialisation, where leadership decisions are made by carefully assessing the context of a school, its community and stakeholders (Bush, 2018b). According to Thein and Chan (2021), DL involves a social influence process, where one or many sources of influence are exerted over others, the objective being to structure activities and relationships in a group or organisation.

Feng et al. (2017) argued that political and contextual factors influence leadership practices in schools. For this reason, building a strong and assertive school leadership strategy is crucial for improving performance of both teachers and students (Cruz-González et al., 2021). Insights on the transformation of education system in Nigeria are provided next in the section that follows.

### **3 Research context**

The transformation of the education system in Nigeria will be discussed in this section. The purpose is to provide a brief background on the development of public or Western-style education in the country. Primarily, many African countries commenced their education systems based on tradition practices where the management of learning accorded with the traditional methods of leadership and community diffusion (Ushe, 2015). Mainly, traditional education varied among the ethnic/tribal groups and regions, since each group and region has its own cultures, norms, practices, customs, beliefs and ethics. However, the underlying elements of traditional systems management lie in community-based learning, practical skills development and cultural preservation and transmission of beliefs (Adeyemi and Adeyinka, 2003).

‘Initiation ceremonies’ are a common practice of traditional systems and they play a significant role in teenage education and transition to adulthood. These rites are a compilation of the entire communities’ efforts, and all members have a role to play (Adeyemi and Adeyinka, 2003). Religious education is key and contentious in the history of education in Nigeria either before the British colonialism and extending to the present day. From the 16th to 19th century, transatlantic slave distorted traditional system throughout the present-day Nigeria. Communities at the southern parts had more contacts with the Europeans and the Christian missionaries among them began establishing schools in the early 1800, promoting Christianity and teaching reading, writing and arithmetic (Ajayi, 2006; Omolewa, 2008).

The Methodist mission of Britain gave birth to modern education in Nigeria as from 1842 and was followed by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Baptist, the Roman Catholic, the Church of Scotland Missions, etc. Education was solely controlled and expanded by the missionaries and many schools were present in the southern part before the taken over of education by the colonial government. The establishment of colonial administration in parts of Nigeria from 1861 did not lead to any increased investment in the promotion of literacy (Omolewa, 2008).



Meanwhile, communities in the northern part, had more contacts with the Arabs. The Arabs established Qur'anic schools and spread Islam. Later on, Sokoto caliphate which was well established by the 1830s or earlier, developed a delicate Islamic education system which inculcate Islamic arts along with European languages and sciences. At first, when the British had contact with the northern part, they did not interfere in the caliphate activities, rather they signed treaties. Hence, when Britain assumed formal protectorate status over all of modern Nigeria in 1900, the southern region has several mission schools of a variety of denominations while in north, the colonial administration confined missionaries from proselytising in the Muslim areas. The legacy of Islamic education from the Sokoto caliphate continued before and after colonialism as it was considered the formal education for the north during this colonial era (Fraser and Moore, 2019).

In 1906, Ajami (a form of writing African languages using Arabic script) was banned and replaced by Roman script (called Boko) by the colonial government. Consequently, English was declared as the official and national language. As a result, many northern graduates and students using Ajami are labelled illiterate, severely limiting their access to positions and authority. This treaties violation by the Lord Lugard (governor of northern region) caught the northern emirs unprepared and hugely disrupted the Islamic education system. Hence, the colonial administration appointed Christians to teach Roman scripts and allowed the first missionary school in the north where minority of traditional worshippers were residing (Abdurrahman, 2012).

As a result, both systems of education were running concurrently in northern Nigeria. The banning of Ajami had a significant effect on the development of education in the northern region till date. Since the Islamic education was mainly financed and managed by the northern emirs with little to no support from the colonial government, they neglected Roman scripts. Likewise, missionary education got no support from the northern emirs and the colonial administration gave no financial support leading to both systems facing setback (Abdurrahman, 2012). The first form of education proposed, managed and financed by the colonial administration was in 1940, when it embarked on 'mass education' under the colonial Development and Welfare Fund (Neisser, 1955).

The idea was initially welcomed by many southern people in 1944. However, the northern part referred to as the Mohammedans who can read and write did not welcome mass education and are viewed as lagging fundamental education in the sense of UNESCO (Neisser, 1955). Fraser and Moore (2019) asserted that in 2012, UNESCO reported Nigeria was among ten countries with the lowest rate of primary enrolment and general literacy rate of approximately 50 percent. They opined that most of this school age children are from the northern Muslim region and nearly 80% of them have received some form of Islamic education. Either in the form of traditional Qur'anic studies, or Islamiyah schools which offers Qur'anic and secular subjects. The government has made attempts to fund these schools, but the general failure of the educational system has significantly hindered these efforts.

Lord Frederic Lugard was the first Governor-General of Nigeria after the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorate. During his era, colonial education was neither free nor universal, throughout southern (later divided into eastern and western region) Nigeria. Following the adoption of Federal constitution in 1951 (MCPerson Constitution), the legislative houses created three regions, Northern, Eastern and Western regions (Ajayi, 2006). After the establishment of regional government, each region provided a Western education for its people mainly based on traditional and

religious principles (Aluede et al., 2017). For example, in northern Nigeria, government or public schools were managed based on the principles of Islam and the traditional beliefs or culture of the Hausa-Fulani people. Meanwhile in western Nigeria, it was based on Christianity and the Yoruba culture.

The then head of regional government by 1955 proposed free, universal compulsory education for the western region. This scheme witnessed rapid numerical growth of western schools at all levels. The eastern region also followed the same footstep, but the northern part of Nigeria was still hesitant to western education. Many more different constitutions followed on education, until the independence. Political and military government that took over after independence all pledged to provide qualitative free education to Nigerians and designed a national curriculum adapting from the National curriculum for England (Ajayi, 2006). However, all the administrations faced critical challenges due to mainly the heterogeneity of the country, neglecting locals need, poor financing and planning.

Consequently, the management and administration of schools fell into the ambit of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, providing guiding statements that equally promoted the decentralisation of education at the local level (Bolanle, 2013). The NPE has undergone constant revisions as responses to the changes in the country's political landscape and events. The latest is the now decade-old NPE 2013, and it categorised secondary schools as federal, state and private institutions. The federal schools are maintained by the federal government and their financing, maintenance, staff appointment and promotions, students' admissions, etc., are all controlled by the central government. The principles of these schools are homogenous in terms of their training and work, can be posted to work in any of the 36 states and the federal capital, Abuja.

In the meantime, state schools are owned by the state governments. Policy regulations and power to direct the activities of staff and students are maintained by these authorities. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) considered decentralisation as paramount and strikes a balance between local autonomy and national cohesion aimed to foster an adaptable education system that serves the needs of all Nigerians. Comprehensively, a step-by-step guidance on how the research tackled the problem at hand will be explained in the next section of this paper.

## **4 Research methodology**

For this study the qualitative method was implemented. Justification for the method, sampling procedure and inclusion criteria, data collection method, steps in data analysis and ethical considerations were discussed in detail.

### *4.1 Methodological approach and justification of the qualitative method*

Since the research questions require results that will be shaped by the social, political, historical and cultural contexts of the study location, and the participants' perspectives, interpretations and subjective views, the qualitative method is considered best for this paper (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Gumus et al. (2018) reported the use of the qualitative method by most experts in DL like Bush, Harris and Spillane because DL is a new type of leadership. Tools for the study were selected individually based on the research questions (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Research questions with tools for data collection

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>RQ</i>	<i>Primary tool</i>	<i>Secondary tool</i>	<i>Method</i>
1	Does a paradigm shift create a distributed leadership model?	Interview	Literature review	Qualitative
2	Does a paradigm transformation in a specific context wield an impact on the leadership approach selected by principals?	Interview	Interpretations from the findings, academic details and discussions of earlier question	Qualitative
3	How can the constraints of DL undermine the purpose that is being addressed?	Interpretation of findings of RQ 1 & 2	Supplementary from literature review	Qualitative

*Source:* Authors' creation.

#### 4.2 Sampling procedure and inclusion criteria

The study participants were selected from the population of interest, because they can provide a rich data on the problem under study based on their experiences. Principals were selected to be representative of male and female, the experienced (more than 5 years) and less experienced (less than 5 years), the certified (in educational administration, management and/or leadership) and non-certified (in educational administration, management and/or leadership) and the education level which includes Bachelor degree, Master's degree and Doctoral degree. The criterion for inclusion of principals is a career history of 10 years or more in teaching profession. Summary of participants information is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Secondary data of the respondents

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Segments</i>	<i>Number</i>
Career history	Less than 10 years in teaching profession	0
	More than 10 years in teaching profession	11
Education level	Bachelor degree	4
	Master degree	5
	PhD degree	1
Length of principal-ship	Less than 5 years	4
	5 years and more	7
Field of study	Management/administration/leadership	5
	Non-management/ administration/leadership	6
Gender	Male	7
	Female	4
School location	Urban	6
	Rural	5

*Note:*  $N=11$ ; Authors' creation.

The criterion for selecting schools was that the school should be a federal secondary school. All 18 federal secondary schools from seven states in north-west Nigeria were sampled. The federal secondary schools have very much the same features and operation systems in place and are randomly located within the states and in urban and rural areas. Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto states have 3 schools each while Jigawa, Kano and Zamfara states have 2 schools each. The selection of all principals was automatic as all met the requirement to participate in the study. However, 15 principals expressed interest in taking part while 3 declined participation and expressed concern about their personal security.

#### *4.3 Data collection method*

The information mentioned above was obtained through a Ministry of Education memo being sent to all federal secondary school principals. This approach helped to ensure that the research considered a diverse range of participants, documenting comprehensively the workings of DL and its effectiveness across various subgroups. Supplementing the above data, the principals were interviewed to generate the primary source data required. The interviews helped to gain information from the respondents because qualitative research does not typically make external statistical generalisation, but rather provides in-depth knowledge based on experience, beliefs and opinions, etc. (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

Semi structured interviews were conducted in English and were recorded during the sessions with the consent and agreement of the respondents. Six interviews were conducted in person in the principal's offices, while the remaining were conducted via telephone. The interviews halted with the 11th principal, because no new information emerged from the responses. The responses from the 8th respondent (P8) were becoming repetitive of earlier responses and no new issue were identified. The following main question framed the unstructured interviews with all the participants after requesting for background data based on the domains mentioned earlier: *What type of leadership models do you think principals' practice and why do you think principals choose them, and what do you think is distributed leadership?* Follow up questions were asked to provide a more comprehensive data when necessary.

The questions asked during each interview were designed and validated by experts in the field beforehand to avoid deviation from the topic and ensure their relevance. Bell (2010) asserted that emphasis should be on the key issues and trial interviews were conducted first to help fine-tune the questions, and the suggestions received were used to enhance the tool and establish reliability. No exact sequence of the interview questions was followed and generally the discussions went on for 30 to 40 minutes. Data was collected from 9th May 2023 to 23rd June, 2023. Prior to the data collection, permissions were taken from the Ministry of Education and contacts of all the principals were obtained from the zonal coordinator, Federal Teachers Union. The coordinator also helped to provide an introductory message to all the principals on the purpose of the study.

#### *4.4 Data analysis description*

The following steps were taken in the process of data analysis. Firstly, the data collected was recorded from audio to text in MS Word Document. The audio recorded was played

multiple times in privacy by the researcher which makes the data familiar, thus making the process of analysis much easier. The second step includes making a preliminary list of themes arising from the data. This coding process was conducted and texts were assigned to units of meaningful sentences of the data collected which subsequently led to categorised themes.

Furthermore, the data was read again and audio played several times to confirm the themes. The themes were then linked to quotations and notes. The quotations and notes were highlighted and bolded while examining the data. Lastly, the themes were examined, interpreted and applied to distributed leadership as seen through the minds of the principals so as to maintain the trustworthiness of the study. To ensure credibility, related literature reviews and both secondary and primary data collected were triangulated; a thick description of the context was also provided and interpretations were supported by direct quotations from the data.

#### 4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were observed through various measures. Initially, participants were made aware that participation is voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time. To protect the anonymity of all respondents, codes were assigned for all the principals in sequential order starting with the first principal who was interviewed. The principals are represented as P1 to P11, the first principal coded P1, second principal P2, etc. and the pseudonyms were used in all the documents and used to save the audio recording of the study. The confidentiality was also maintained and the data were strictly used for the purpose of the study.

### 5 Findings and discussions

This section will explain whether distributed leadership fits the desired transformation of secondary schools' effectiveness in Nigeria. Information retrieved from both secondary data and interviews (primary source data) are used to build the findings.

#### 5.1 Leadership transformation: customised distributed model

Recent research by Printy and Liu (2021) noted that a culture conducive to DL practice is characterised by active staff participation in schools' decision-making, and shared responsibilities for a supportive environment where school issues can be dealt with. Bush and Ng (2019) opined that countries aspiring to develop into democratic and modern societies driven by technology skills and trade competencies are increasingly taking up the implementation of DL. Notably, shared leadership is expressed as necessary by all principals. They did not perceive DL as a threat to their authority. The views of principal's highlight core elements of their leadership such as hierarchy, trust in ability of teachers, willingness of teachers to take responsibilities and freedom of expression. One of the principals commented:

*'Leadership is not something that one person can do alone. It involves the use of vice principals, teachers, and nonteaching staff but whom are all under the guidance-ship and mentoring of the school principal'.*

Another principal, P5 further remarked:

*'The principal is the chief custodian of all the activities within the school. Responsibilities should be shared and that is why.... The principal should carry everybody along so that the school will move forward. The teachers are responsible and don't need to be reminded of their responsibility.... Of course, they can carry out their tasks successfully'.*

However, female principals P1, P2, P3 and P7 tended to view responsibility sharing as a technique to get the full support of all staff, hence they inclined more on the need to make every teacher have a feeling of importance in the system. All female principals describe their leadership style as shared leadership using participatory and/or inclusive strategies. While majority of the male describes their leadership styles as democratic with few (specifically P8) express it as having some attributes of laissez faire, while P6, P11 express having some attributes of transactional style.

It is evident that all principals have more than 10 years of teaching experience, and most hold a Master's degree, indicating a considerable level of experience in the field for their roles as principals. Interestingly, both the managerial certified and non-managerial certified principals had no extra training for their current roles as principals. Also, rural principals expressed they have more workshops from the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) than the urban principals. Despite these differences in formal qualifications, gender and work location, the research found that most principals practice leadership style that allows the participation of teachers in responsibilities and decision making. This is not unrelated to the historical development of the education system in Nigeria which was founded on voluntary activities and a decentralised system.

## 5.2 Paradigm shift: impact on DL model choice

Primarily, the reasons for DL in secondary schools are based on two central views. Firstly, the country has a preference for decentralisation of power/authority in all institutions within the federal system. This is basically a part of the fulfilment of the democratic ideology of the country which has been sustained since 1999. P1 expressed her opinion as follows:

*'Principals attend workshops and seminars and are informed to be democratic and not authoritarian or laissez faire.... Democracy is the leadership trending in the country and people know their rights'.*

When asked about the term 'distributed leadership', both the certified and the non-certified principals expressed lack of full knowledge and mostly preferred the term 'shared or democratic leadership' as mentioned earlier. The principals with more than 5 years of principal-ship express more autonomy, control and confidence in involving teachers in decision making. Alam et al. (2022) asserted that politicians and bureaucrats turned education into a public policy to promote a political ideology. Interestingly, principals with less than five years in office have argued that decentralisation does not always occur completely and is sometimes taken advantaged by some individual who use it to achieve personal aims.

The historical legacy left the present-day northern Nigeria with a disjointed education system that is poorly funded and unconnected to the local people's dreams, hopes and aspirations. Even after many efforts by the independent government to address the problems of the education sector in northern Nigeria, the system is still dysfunctional.

Many local authorities and communities are reluctant towards the western schooling system, hence not prepared to take responsibility. Secondly, principals view the task of the principal-ship as complex (Bush, 2018b; Harris, 2013). Most principals asserted they are unable to teach in their schools due to the demands of the principal-ship duties. Only P2 and P4 both located in urban area explained that they could not teach because there are enough teachers to cover all subjects, and if they teach, they will make some teachers redundant.

### *5.3 Considering DL: context vs. purpose fit*

Earlier literature acknowledged that DL is more than just sharing leadership (Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2020). Bush and Ng (2019) noted that democracy can curtail the bureaucratic bottlenecks and increase social participation if managed in the right way, thereby creating a conducive environment for DL. However, Bush and Ng (2019) caution the burden of political encroachment on education leadership. Alam (2023) warned about the influence of corruption, favouritism, nepotism, and political interference in education leadership as it is a pervasive and deep-seated problem in developing countries.

Despite findings by Printy and Liu (2021) who argued that school leadership function differs among countries and is influenced by their education policy, Hall et al. (2011) concluded that the historiography of DL is still in its infancy and developments are necessary for real practices to emerge in democratic schools. Alam et al. (2022) argued that no model is complete or solves all of a school's problems. Each model has its own strengths and weaknesses which are influenced by the context. The uniqueness of each school environment and the diverse needs of its stakeholders reinforce the idea that one size does not fit all when it comes to the issue of school leadership.

## **6 Implications, limitations and further research**

Here, we explore the theoretical and practical implications of this study, and the limitations are also highlighted. In Nigeria, neither the conceptualisation of effective schools nor school principal-ship is clearly stated in the government's national policy. The NPE seems to explain explicitly the structure of education management only. Hence, models or types of leadership, school reforms, school change and improvement are partially explained in other instances such as workshops, seminars or committee documents.

Surprisingly, none of the principals have knowledge about DL which shows the need to update the curriculum and policy. The principals explained that they were taught to be democratic in schools by sharing responsibilities and involving teachers and other stakeholders in decision making as cited earlier in the discussion.

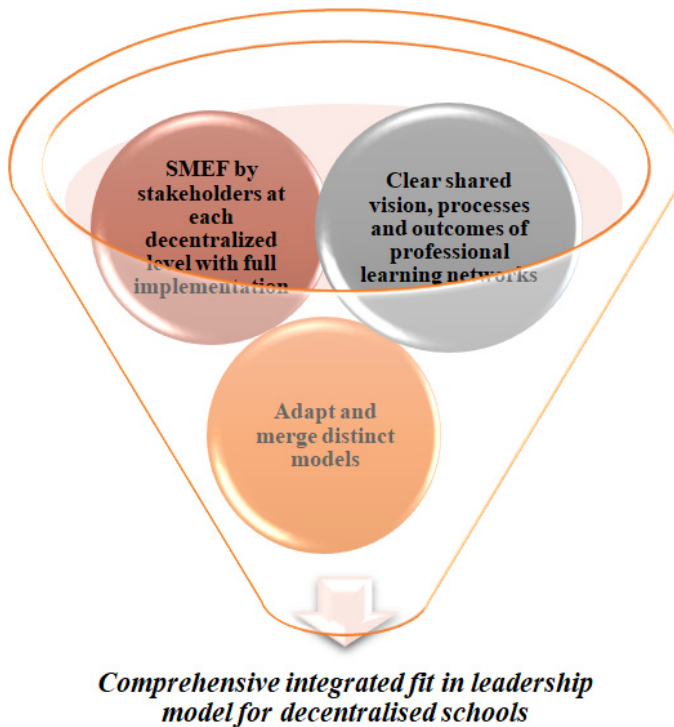
As Harris (2013) explained, DL may lead to school effectiveness if the vision and collaboration are effective. However, our discussions confirm that the principals have no feasibly intended education vision or aim, which Murphy (2023) found when discussing leadership unpreparedness among principals. Therefore, a well-established decentralised system or culture is not just enough for the practicalities of distributed leadership. The reality is that the school principals got carried away by the decentralisation goal and

simply aligned themselves with the leadership paradigm transformation that best suited Nigeria. In their work, Bush et al. (2023) caution against partial and unenthusiastic implementation of DL.

The principals and education stakeholders seem to have no enthusiasm towards implementing DL and improving schools. This might be related to them feeling marginalised and demoralised due to persistent negative reports from local (National Examination Councils) and international (UNESCO) bodies, low level of trust between the national and local school stakeholders and because the national core curriculum is not localised. Meanwhile, countries like Finland, Switzerland, Netherlands where DL is successful and school systems are effective, have a localised core curriculum and shows a high level of trust between the national and local authorities.

Under the above-mentioned circumstances, the evident decentralisation may not mean the schools are ready for DL. School leaders mainly follow what the government states without making innovations to fit in the school context or preparing on how it will benefit teaching and learning. Hence a change in approach for various aspects including aims and objectives of decentralisation, shared leadership and DL is essential in transforming school leadership and leading so that the schools are effective in disseminating learning. As a result, the research proposes a different model which may fit the context, and lead to effective schools (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**    Comprehensively integrated model for decentralised schools



Note:      SMEF = Systematic Monitoring and Evaluation with Feedback.



The starting point for school effectiveness even with a distributed leadership is based on a clear vision where improving teaching and learning are central (Alam et al., 2022). Clearly set out expectations, processes and outcomes of professional learning networks (Azorin et al., 2020) should be shared with all stakeholders. Likewise, systematic monitoring and evaluation with constructive feedback should be given by all the stakeholders at each decentralised level (Bush, 2013) and implemented comprehensively. Schools in Nigeria should adapt and merge distinct models to complement and supplement each other because ‘one size does not fit all’ (Alam et al., 2022; Bush, 2018c). Collins (2013) concluded that local solutions are ‘inevitable’ but what is required is a common understanding of the problem to achieve the widely shared goal.

This case study was restricted to federal secondary schools’ principals located in the north-west region of Nigeria. Regrettably, the suggested model was not subjected to a pilot test during the research due to lack of financial support. As well, the study relies on interviews only. To mitigate these limitations, future investigations using other research approaches such as observations, and longitudinal studies, etc., with adequate financial support and stakeholders’ collaboration can help to achieve more reliable results.

Comparative studies across different decentralised government systems can be conducted to identify the best practice that can counterbalance political interference. Since this case study did not include school teachers, research can be extended to include the perceptions of teachers and other stakeholders, such as children’s parents. More extensive studies should generate insights which have not been addressed by this study. They should lead to further discussions on how to implement an effective and efficient model for developing countries.

### *6.1 Concluding remarks*

Many education systems have increased decentralisation and amended policies in order to implement DL in schools in the hope of achieving greater learning effectiveness and students who know their subjects. Typically, in most developing nations there is a clear disparity between stated goals and actual outcomes of government policies. Hence, central governments’ roles as they play out in developing countries and their ethics and other traditional aspects of their culture do wield an influence on the approach and implementation of leadership in education institutions. Hence, from the discussions above, there still exist bridges to be crossed between the education leadership transformation and secondary school effectiveness.

The central point of this research highlighted the evolution of leadership in education and support the concept of one size does not fit all in the realm of education leadership. In relatedness with the findings, it is evident that decentralised systems and DL alone are not the remedy to ineffective schools. Our findings suggest that school principals should adopt a comprehensive integrated fit in leadership model to enhance school effectiveness in Nigeria and other developing countries.

Note: In Nigeria, the northern region has consistently had the lowest scores in academic performance compared to the western and southern regions in secondary school certificate examinations like West African Examination Council (WAEC, 2022). Likewise, latest UNESCO (2023) report indicates that out of school rates among secondary school age have hardly changed in 20 years and has increased by 61%, from 6.3 million to 10.1 million. Majority of which are from the Muslim dominated areas from the north due to explanations provided earlier in the research context section.

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