

THE NATURE AND AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL DEPARTMENT HEADS IN THE ERITREAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Secondary school department heads play a pivotal role in leading department teams to promote quality instruction, yet the position appears to be ambiguous. In Eritrea, the role of the department head has not yet been studied empirically. The aim of the study was, therefore, to explore the nature, role and responsibilities of department heads in secondary schools. The study employed a descriptive design and data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire, observation. Qualitative analysis such as interview and document analysis were utilized to address the research objectives. Based on the findings, the position of a department head is not yet fully utilized or established due to a lack of a formal written job description. The department of education should work on the established structure, formal authority, an official job description and written policy document.

Keywords: Departmental Heads, Secondary Schools, Educational Management, Eritrea

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the knowledge society, the unprecedented development of informational technology, the marketization of educational millennium-goals as well as the turbulence of globalization have brought a revolutionary change in educational leadership (Sotirakou, 2004). After Eritrean independence in 1991 from Ethiopia colonization, the Eritrean educational system has gone through a massive change and relentless evaluation to meet its needs, standards and demands. In meeting this condition, the Ministry of Education in Eritrea infuses a strong moral and ethical value to schools through a newly introduced curriculum and this directly influences the entire school culture towards democratization and liberal education (Author, 2012). By far, it is also the vision of the nation to revolutionize the entire educational system and improve quality in relation to global competition. The Minister of Education, Russom (2011) explained at the 36th Plenary Session of UNESCO's General Conference that Eritrean education is expanding rapidly as a response to global competition, challenges and pressures. Nevertheless, he pointed out that providing competitive education requires the establishment of policies and vivid roles of instructional leaders. Since the nature of education in post-industrial societies is ever-changing, it impacts the role and responsibilities of education leaders (Crow, 2001; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989).

Eritrea as a young country needs instructional leaders who can confidently address issues, such as curriculum development problems, the inadequacy of instructional technologies, shortage of professional development and inequality of access. The State of Eritrea in general and the Ministry of Education, in particular, have worked collaboratively to address issues and promote and speed up the development of human potential through the availability of both internal and external resources. School leadership, for instance, is a blueprint to address issues, meet challenges, mobilize resources, and modernize an educational system. In Eritrea, the importance of school leadership by principals and department heads became apparent in 2005 after the introduction of the new curriculum

called “student-centred and Interactive Pedagogy” (Education Sector Plan, 2018). This kind of curriculum by its very nature requires the participation of many middle managers in leadership roles. In Eritrean secondary schools, department heads are very crucial in the advancement of the teaching and learning process. Onn, (2010) stated that department heads play a vital role in managing a teaching-learning process and ensuring quality education through selecting, preparing and organizing materials. In the past two decades, the role of department heads has been increasingly highlighted (Adey, 2000). Part of the reason for this has been the realization that departmental leadership is critical to the morale of an academic unit and conducive learning atmosphere (Audrey-Hopkins & James, 2003), and school accountability (Brown, Rutherford & Boyle, 2000).

Statement of the Problem, Significance and Purpose of the Study

The ambiguous role of a department head is an old-age problem, but the real changes in the role, however, began in the mid-1990s (Brown & Rutherford, 1998). The role of the department head in the current school environment is streamlined and limited (Catholic Teachers Association, 2007), and remained ambiguous (O’Neill, 2000). The complexity of the position is attributed to an organizational structure of a department, such as size, configuration, status, resource, power and staff expertise (Busher & Harris, 1999). In Eritrean secondary schools, several barriers or challenges, such as poor department governance, the inadequacy of office management, lack of participation in curriculum development, lack of research, poor department assessment and communication often complicate the position of middle managers. This makes the position underutilized (Turner, 1996), and variable, complex and ambiguous (Johnson, 1990). As of this, the research knowledge of the study may serve to conceptualize the position of a department head or inform schools, the ministry of education and educational authorities about the current situation of secondary school department heads. The purpose of the study was, therefore, to explore the nature and examine the perceptions of department heads about their roles and responsibilities, and to find out what are the causes and conditions that underlie the uncertainties or ambiguities of the position in Eritrean secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Eritrea, the nature of a department head has not yet been explored. There are no sufficient sources or documents available. The position of a department head is important and viewed as a front-line leadership that is the least studied and done (Gmelch, 2000 & Brown, 2002). To compensate for the dearth, the researcher synthesized sources outside of the Eritrean educational system context and reviewed important theories and models that help conceptualize the role of department heads.

Theories and models guide a researcher’s action and are keys to unravelling issues that surround a particular research topic. For this reason, the researcher employed selected theories and models as a stepping stone to understand or interpret the issues or challenges that Eritrean secondary school department heads encounter. The theoretical frameworks that underpinned this study are the situational leadership model, the bargaining and negotiation theory, and Bush’s and Glover’s model. The situational leadership model helps determine a leader’s style for an organization (Mthethwa, 2011). This model aids leaders to study an organizational climate and thereby apply an appropriate leadership style to manage or lead. Characteristics of a leader play an important role in organizational performance through skills that help build positive relationships among educators and teams. This model suggests that nature of challenges of department heads encounter to determine a leadership behaviour or skill in different contexts. Similarly, Bush’s and Glover’s model (2009) assists leaders to promote quality instruction through observing, monitoring, evaluating and demonstrating. Apart from this, there seems always a conflict of roles or responsibilities within the field,

particularly when department heads try to bring about change, and thus the bargaining and negotiation theory serves as a guide for department heads to deal with conflicts and disputes through verbal and nonverbal communication (Jonsson, 2002). This theory is a dispute resolution strategy that helps educators to engage more people or parties to solve conflicts and differences through common understanding (Morley, 2006).

The Nature of the Position of a Department Head

A subject department is generally chaired by someone who may be elected by a school, principal or assigned by a simple rotation among tenured teachers. The position of a department head is termed as middle management between teachers and a principal (Gronn, 2003; Bell, 1992). Department heads are complex middle managers and located at an organizational fulcrum (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017), which offers department heads the leverage to influence academic policies, structure, management, strategies and decision making in schools (Fields, Kenny & Mueller, 2019).

Department heads as middle managers are instructional leaders (White, 2001), facilitators of teaching-learning (white, 2000), resource leaders (McEwan, 2003), and curriculum strategists and architects of instruction (White, 2001). Researchers explain the position as a front-line. The position requires many tactics and means to confront new and unfamiliar challenges (Dalton, 1999). Despite the importance of the position, it is paradoxical (Higgerson and Teddi, 2007), underrated (Seagren et al., 1993), ill-defined and extremely variable (Ross, 2010), highly multifaceted and open to various interpretations (Weller, 2001) and characterized by ambiguities and conflicts. Conflict occurs when a department head is caught between faculty and administration (Bennett, 1983). The ambiguity of the position is, however, due to different expectations of the position (Gmelch, 2000) and the split of focus among stakeholders (Moses & Roe, 1990). The role ambiguity is best explained by Koehler (1993) that department heads walk a tightrope between the maintenance and human professional needs of a school. Gold (1998) also acknowledged that middle managers are torn up in their loyalties between their teachers and school principals while performing a wide range of responsibilities. Although department heads are the victim of poorly defined job description ambiguities, the position has immense potential to promote adequate instruction and strong school culture (Youngs, 2017).

Turner (1996) stressed that the underutilized position can be utilized and played a significant role for an effective instruction and best student learning. If their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, department heads are the most influential people (Gold (1998). The nature of the position as middle management bestows department heads the opportunity to play a critical part when it comes to policies, procedures of changes, instruction, reports progress, communication issues, conducting meetings, governing, managing offices, planning, hiring, budgeting and developing programs. In doing so, department heads fully realize their leadership potential (Vanblaere&Devos, 2017).

The Roles and Responsibilities of a Department Head

A role or responsibility is a set of activities an individual is expected to play, whereas role or responsibility ambiguity is when that individual has insufficient knowledge of that expectation (Huse, 1988). A department head has pastoral duties: facilitation of instruction, sustaining of integrity, harmony and cooperation within a department team (Gold, 1998). In addition to that, a department head executes commonplace roles, such as scheduling classes, reports, coordinating certain programs, channelling information and enforcing rules (Turner (1996), but at a higher level a department head executes curriculum planning, managing department resources, working with stakeholders, fundraising, and internal and external communications (Blandford, 1997; Hecht, 2004). Such tasks have been expanded over time

to the development of school policy and progressivism (Jones et al. 2017; Brown & Rutherford, 1999). The roles have been shifting from a specialist to a generalist (Bennett, 1983). Some scholars also concur with the above statement that a department head fulfills diverse and divergent roles and responsibilities (Benoit & Graham, 2004), which makes it multifaceted (Benoit, Graham & Heiman, 2002).

The role function of a department head is largely situational and varies from school to school based on socio-economic, political or technological factors (Hecht, 2000), and geographical nature, educational scope, system, structure and traditions of a school (Earely & Fletcher, 1989). In effect, this may bring about role ambiguity, which in turn results to low job satisfaction, reduced organizational effectiveness and a high level of tension (Lunenburg & Cadavid, 1992).

Lambert (1975) stipulated and developed a department head role functions to attenuate role ambiguities, such as playing part in school development policy, implementing school policy, developing departmental policy, setting definite objectives for a department, preparation of work schemes and syllabuses, revising the syllabus annually, developing new teaching techniques, taking part in curriculum development, remain abreast with contemporary developments, arranging an educational visit for interested outside speakers. Similarly, Howson (1982) identified several roles and responsibilities that might help department heads overcome uncertainties: developing overall department policy, holding meetings at least a month, being a good teacher, allocating staff, taking part in a staff development program, assessing teaching competence, maintain departmental morale, monitoring pupils' progress, and purchasing and maintaining resources. When roles are specified and pellucid, department leaders and colleagues are effective sources of professional support, development and instruction (Pifer, Baker & Lunsford, 2015). However, a department head to play an instructional, managerial and leadership function, needs competencies, such as administration of subject, curriculum development, professional development of teachers, interpersonal relations, and supervision and monitoring of teachers (Onn, 2010). Besides, personal characteristic plays a great role in maintaining a leadership persona. Charisma, tact, energy, sympathy, decisiveness, flexibility, honesty, approachability, commitment, innovativeness and diplomacy help department heads maintain their position and get recognition from subordinates (Bennis & Goldsmith, 2003), and as a result collaboration and participation, activities prevail (Lomos, Hofman & Bosker, 2011).

As department heads utilize their position well, they view their role as ever-changing. According to Glover (1998), the change could be demonstrated in four ways: First, the focus shifted from administration to leadership and management; second, department heads are cognizant of the increasing responsibility of monitoring and evaluation; third, the cognizance of communications and interpretations of the change from senior management down to teachers, and fourth, the cognizance of their role to support in the execution of change. Steven Graham and Pam Benoit (2004) summarized the major roles of a department head comprehensively as illustrated in the table below (Table 1).

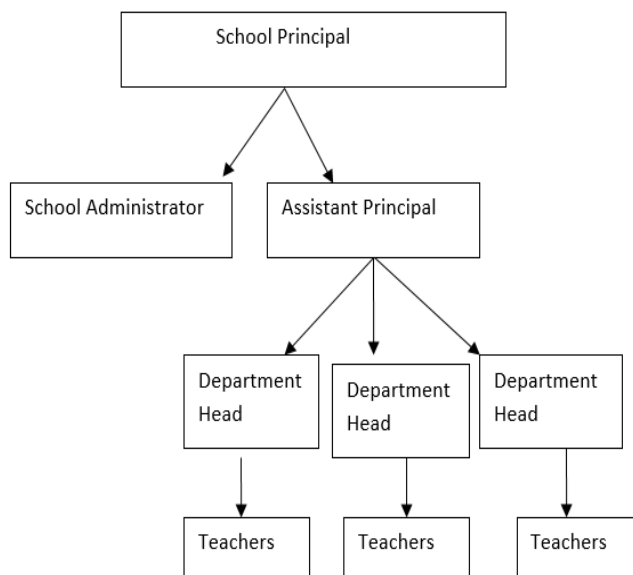
Leadership Roles	Administrative Roles	Interpersonal Roles
Vision	Schedule coordinator	Coach
Role Model	Report writer (paperwork)	Mediator
Curriculum Leader (planning, development, revising & implementing)	Teacher supervision	Counsellor
Liaison (bridge-building between school and community)	Fiscal overseer (watching budget)	Environment Regulator
Internal Advocate (promote and support)		
Internal Intermediary (dual responsibility)		

Source: Steven Graham and Pam Benoit (2004)

The Position in Policy (Based on Existing Schools’ Documents)

Secondary school teaching is organized into effective departmental functioning (Lomos, Hofman&Bosker, 2011). In Eritrean secondary schools, depending on the size and nature of schools, the administration is made up of principals, assistant principals and department heads (Ministry of Education, 2003). Schools set up units of subject-oriented and assign a department head to each unit based on teaching experience. The role of the department head by definition relates to both management and leadership. A department head offers a vital link in the series of management and leadership roles held by a school principal. A department head, however, performs tasks that are relegated to assistant principals (Bliss, Fahrney&Steffy, 1996), and often perform and fulfill duties that are assigned by a supervisor (Sergiovanni, 1984).

In Eritrean secondary schools, normally department heads are expected to teach, allocate teaching loads, schedule, monitor examinations and communicate department progress to a school principal through the assistant principal. A department head works as a transmitter of core strategic values through the enactment of mentoring, guiding and coaching (Clegg &McAuley, 2005). Most importantly, a department head serves as a crucial link between a unit and a school and makes sure the flow of information. Department heads stress the need to link and communicate in a more formal sense and go beyond those that could be described (Earley& Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). The position of a department head in the Anseba district is illustrated in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1
OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE OF ERITREAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a descriptive research design. An appropriate research methodology was implemented to address the objectives of the study. It is a qualitative study in its approach. Qualitative research methodology is based on the principle that behaviors and actions can be described, assessed or observed. Qualitative study is important for theory generation, policy development and improvement of educational practices (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), and gaining insight and understanding about circumstances (Van Gog

&Paas, 2013). Qualitative analysis including interview and document analysis was utilized to address the research objectives.

Population and Data Collection Strategies

The Population of the study is all heads of departments employed by the Ministry of Education in Eritrea. The sample that participated in the study includes 117 current department heads (13 secondary schools comprises 9 department heads each) in the Anseba region, one of the six regions in the country. The Sampling technique employed is nonprobability, which is specifically based on convenience to the researchers in terms of proximity, cost and time.

In collecting data, the study adopted a multi-method or cross-sectional approaches, which includes survey questionnaires, document analysis and on-site observation. The researchers also requested documents like schedule dates for departmental meetings and minutes, departmental records, timetables and departmental policy documents. The purpose was to get additional information that might have been left out from observation and questionnaires.

The study utilized a self-administered questionnaire. The researchers administered the survey questionnaires (open & closed-ended) to department heads and left with them for almost two weeks for department heads to get adequate time to respond. In the entire research process, the researchers also employed natural and participative observation (five departmental meetings and three school meetings) and documented all the events. In the observation process, the researchers used the roles of a department head identified by Graham and Benoit (2004) as a guide during the observation time. After data collection, the researchers did a content analysis by identifying the main themes, assigning codes, classifying responses and eventually integrated themes and responses into a research report. Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were maintained. Permission was obtained from relevant authorities before conducting the study. In any study, a researcher is an instrument, and thus the researcher must address his philosophical methodology and get informed consent. For this purpose, the researchers stick to the stance of empathetic neutrality to avoid biases and maintain confidentiality.

Research Instrument

In carrying out the study, the following main research questions were used to explore, investigate and understand the nature of department heads in regards to leadership roles and responsibilities.

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of a department head?
 - 1.1. Do you have a job description in a written form, and if so, does it meet the real ground?
 - 1.2. Where did your roles and responsibilities come from and do you have a part in it?
 - 1.3. Are your roles and responsibilities clear and free from ambiguity? If 'No', 'Why'?
 - 1.4. Why the position of a department head is complicated in nature?
 - 1.5. As a department head, what do you think your roles and responsibilities should be?
2. What are the essential knowledge, skills and qualities a department head should exhibit?
 - 2.1. Have you ever been prepared adequately for the position?
 - 2.2. What knowledge, skills and qualities do you think are important to run the position effectively?
 - 2.3. As a department head, what is the best way to acquire knowledge and skills?
 - 2.4. What is your role in teacher development and evaluation?
 - 2.5. Do you take part in teacher recruitment, retention and firing? If 'no' who does it?

Trustworthiness, Reliability and Validity

To ensure trustworthiness, reliability and validity, the researchers employed a multi-method or cross-sectional approach, which includes survey questionnaires, document analysis and on-site observation. Experienced or qualified professionals in the field were consulted to offer their inputs on the framing and wording of the questions to warrant the face validity of the questionnaires. The credibility of a study result depends on the appropriate data collection process through proper selection of participants and procedures of analyzing and interpretation of data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and anonymity were also maintained through the stance of empathetic neutrality to avoid biases and ensure confidentiality. Permission from the local educational authorities was also granted before conducting the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This part presents the findings in regards to what roles and responsibilities department heads play, how they play, what problems, challenges and difficulties they encounter; what is the cause behind role uncertainties, and what knowledge and skills are necessary to execute the position.

Age	No of Participants	Experience/year
25-30	24	>7
31-40	52	>16
41-62	41	21<

Fourteen (12%) of the 117 middle managers were women, but to ensure anonymity, all were referred to as ‘department heads’. Fifty-two of the department heads lead technical science, while sixty-five lead social science departments.

RQ1: What are the Roles and Responsibilities of a Department Head?

A role is an integral part of an organization (Chad, 2011), and is characterized by long working hours (Bob, 2007). The role or responsibility of a department head ranges from instructional to leadership, but in the study, 87% of the respondents reported that a department head does not go beyond the mundane routine activities: teaching load, paperwork, channeling information, monitoring classroom instruction, scheduling classes, report writing, reminding rules, attendance checking and handling discipline issues. The majority of the middle managers (91.6%) reported that their roles and responsibilities should be more of academic matters: classroom instruction improvement, teacher supervision, curriculum planning, development and evaluation.

The participants were given a questionnaire to assess the sources of their roles: from the result, 89% of the participants reported that roles and responsibilities come from a school through a principal, whereas the rest 11% reported that roles come from the central office of the ministry of education. The participants, however, do not play part in setting and deciding about what roles and responsibilities a department head should execute. The majority, which is 63%, indicated that they have an informal job description, whereas 30% reported that they do have directives to follow and the rest 7% reported that they do not have an informal and formal job description at all, which makes them vulnerable to execute petty managerial roles and secretarial tasks.

One department head reported, “I am glorified paper courier. I am disabled and exhausted by non-instructional tasks and feel wasted.” Another department head also noted, “Some teachers within my department have more authority than I do in the issues that I have more expertise and experiences.”

The study also discovered that teacher evaluations is done by a school principal, but in some complicated situations principals consult department heads for further information. Similarly, the study discovered that teacher development is conducted at the ministry level if there is any, whereas teacher recruitment and retention are handled at a central office in a district level. Department heads are merely restricted to writing reports to a principal about teachers’ situations, such as shortage, absenteeism, discipline and teaching problems, then the principal reports to a central office for an action; otherwise, a school does not have the authority to recruit and fire teachers. One respondent from the participants noted that such things frustrate a school principal and department heads because the school does not have a legitimate authority to recruit the right teacher and fire the bad ones. This suggests that department heads are powerless, but they believe that their role is characterized by instructional leadership and commitment (Rosenfeld, 2008). In the study, 89.5% of the department heads expressed their interest to involve and participate comprehensively in leadership, curriculum development, school-wide decisions, program evaluations, resource management and collegiality. Because department heads are within the teacher bargaining unit, they must ignore managerial functions that are related to reporting and evaluation (Catholic Teachers Association, 2007).

Barriers of Department Heads

The majority of department heads reported that the nature of the position is poorly structured, uncharted, multifaceted and an open season to many interpretations. The middle managers in the study explained that the ambiguity of the role is attributed to the nature of the position (41%), school administration and context (33%) and the lack of departmental participation at a school and district levels (26%). They also indicated that their inability to fully utilize the position partly attributed to school context and centralized educational system. During the observation period, for instance, the researcher learned that the school principals perceive and recognize department heads as masters of subjects, not as leaders of subject departments and that it confines department heads within the unit. Lack of training and development in leadership limited department leaders (Bass, 1990). Furthermore, the dearth of leadership models or official written job descriptions hinders department heads from playing their roles fully. Research indicates that most institutions pay little attention to evaluate the changing role and improve the position (Chad, 2011). The position is crucial, but department heads lack preparedness, inadequate induction and supported inadequately (Bob, 2007), and thus schools need adjustment to aspects of the position (Chad, 2011), and building shared vision and implementing them takes an organization to the next level (Senge, 1990).

RQ2: What are the Essential Knowledge, Skills, Competencies and Qualities of a Department Head?

The position of a department head is one of the leadership functions that charges middle managers the skills to develop and build (Gmelch, 2002). More than 95% of the respondents reported that they have not been prepared or trained formally in departmental leadership skills. In line with this, some researchers found that 60% of department heads had no leadership training (Williams et al., 2010), but Kuhl (2006) discovers that less than 25% of department heads receive professional development in connection with their duties. However, 5% of the participants indicated that they took school-based workshops as a preparatory for the position.

One respondent put it eloquently this way, “It was a long day workshop where a school principal and three department heads explained the roles and responsibilities of a middle manager. What I have learned was that principals as bosses and department heads as subject masters; otherwise, it is not a tradition in my school to train department heads professionally. Department heads learn the basic beliefs through experience and observation.” Generally, the department heads are good teachers, but not leaders of their units. The overall response indirectly indicates that many department heads have weaknesses in important areas, such as strategic planning, curriculum issues, teacher development, information management, resource management, quality assurance, communication, pastoral system, marketing and liaison. 89% of the department heads work as teachers rather than leaders. Research indicates that ten out of ten department heads expressed the need for leadership development (Williams et al., 2010).

During the study, the participants were asked that what are the most essential skills, knowledge, and qualities a department head should possess. More than 80% of the respondents reported that personal skills (self-awareness and self-management), interpersonal skills (social awareness and relationship management), knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of a curriculum, skill of teacher supervision, and skills of good communication are the most vital to the position of a department head. Merely fifteen per cent (15%) of participants’ state that knowledge of leadership to work collaboratively during challenging times are among the most essential skills for a successful department head. The rest five per cent (5%) reported that only officially written roles and responsibilities help a department head to become a successful leader.

One respondent reported that I have to have deep knowledge, interpersonal skills and good communication skills in order to maintain the position and improve classroom instructions. Besides, another respondent replied that I have to be tolerant, flexible enough, work collaboratively and diplomatically, for I have no administrative authority. Yet another third department head emphasized that mastery of subject matter knowledge matters more than anything else, for it provides the power to influence teachers, increases legitimacy and recognition from the school principal.

In Eritrea, department heads are industrious and curious to learn new things and change the way of doing things, but there are no universities or colleges which can particularly provide leadership development or training. However, some researchers indicate that leadership development in the position is not only about training, but also about the combination of experience, education and training (Brungardt, 1996). In Eritrea, department heads have experience and qualifications in a subject area, but principals do not fully recognize the position as an integral part of leadership, and thus do not take an initiative to train department heads.

During the study, the researcher observed the participants’ competencies in areas, such as administration of a department (annual budget, educational programs, mobilization of teachers), curriculum issues (development, implementation, teachers’ adherence to syllabus, student learning and performance), supervision, monitoring of teachers, staff development programs and interpersonal relations, and learned that department heads lack leadership skills and competencies. The frustration of department heads to handle the position results from lack of leadership training (Williams et al, 2010). In Eritrean secondary schools, department heads as middle managers function in multiple directions, and yet do not know which path to turn on, for there is no leadership model to follow or formal roles to stick on.

DISCUSSION, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

School principals as instructional leaders are important. Principals, however, spend only 11% of their time on instruction improvement (Stronge, 1988). Similarly, a recent study showed that principals spent only 13% of their time on instructional leadership-related activities (Grissom, Baranen&Mitan, 2019). This creates more space or room for department

heads to be involved heavily in instructional improvement (Weller, 1999), but in Eritrea, department heads have been constrained. Department heads as it is explained by Graham and Benoit should play leadership, administrative and interpersonal roles, because the position has enormous potential and direct bridge between teachers, students and principals toward improvements of school effectiveness than any other position within a school (Gold, 1998). Similarly, Siskin (1991) describes that the position is an ideal place to facilitate instructional progress. To make use of this ideal leadership potential, however, principals need to be in a position to understand the nature of the position (Glover, 1998). It is a pragmatic thing rather than a theoretical aspect.

The role of department heads, in Eritrean secondary schools, could be improved if more attention is given to the practices of leadership (Adibe, 1997). Based on the findings, the role of a department head in Eritrean secondary schools is not yet fully established and has no official authority and recognition from teachers and principals. Department heads are suspended, tangled and sidelined. The nature of the position requires an established structure, a formal authority, an official job description and the policy of wise placement.

The position is a bridge or a transition, and thus it may serve as a pivot to maintain balance and build academic excellence from middle to bottom or middle to top. As middle managers, department heads are the immediate contact persons between teachers and school principals, and also have critical roles for curriculum development, implementation and evaluation. This role manifests itself when heads initiate teacher development, promotion, supervision, evaluation and recruitment, but according to the findings, department heads are reduced to routine duties, and in any way, they are yet to partake in leadership roles.

A department as a unit of a school is a cornerstone and plays a significant role in the areas of administration, leadership, management and interpersonal relations. However, in the study, it was discovered that the school principals do not utilize the position as an asset to promote instruction, inspire staff, enhance academic excellence and enrich community learning. The talents, gifts, abilities and skills of a department head have been frozen, underutilized and marginalized. The department heads are consumed by overwhelming paradoxical roles and reduced to nonacademic routine duties, such as paperwork, reporting writing, scheduling classes, discipline and information channels. This confinement has a detrimental impact, not only on department heads but also on teachers. Department heads are sandwiched between teachers and senior managers to whom they are accountable for (Marshall, 2012).

In conclusion, department heads because of their proximity to teachers and familiarity with a curriculum, may help to lead changes if empowered and recognized. A department head cannot work effectively unless he or she is a master of his/her craft (Howson, 1982). Real school change and effectiveness is not the outcome of effective technique, but also the outcome of effective and inclusive school leadership. Successful department heads are more leaders than managers and administrators. Some experienced and confident middle managers pointed out that a department leader needs to take initiative and promote the legitimate power of his position through personal skills of self-awareness and self-management, and interpersonal skills like social-awareness and relationship management as a strategy to maintain legitimacy of authority and power. Correspondingly, Chatwin (2014) argues that department heads can utilize the position if they apply strategic influencing skills, such as technical, administrative, communication and contingency within their units to promote effective instruction.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Department heads often come without any leadership, management training and experience, and without a clear comprehension of the position's complexity and ambiguities (Bolton, 2004). 68% of department heads come over to the position without leadership experience (Tucker, 1984) and yet they are expected to run the position effectively (Moses &

Roe, 1990). The study also implies that department heads need to be prepared for leadership responsibilities to maximize their leadership position (Bliss, Fahrney&Steffy, 1996). A department head needs professional training that directly relates to interpersonal skills, relationship management, political power and teamwork (Deece, 2003). To do so, however, social, political and technological change is important. The change affects the position in two ways: First, change takes place within the traditional structure of the position; Secondly, a department head is required to have the qualities of management change skills to cope up with changes (Earley& Fletcher-Campbell, 1989), and thus successful department heads, over time, develop seven habits: goal setting, getting to know colleagues and fellow administrators, agents of change, appreciating of teaching, research and public service, honesty, fair and evenhanded, consensus builders and good communicators(Leaming, 1998). The overall implication of the study is, the need to prepare and train prospective department heads in pre-service and in-service leadership programs.

The study also implies that department heads cannot bring about educational goals achievement and lead their units excellently, and thus department heads should employ apropos intervening strategies to resolve departmental problems through teamwork, supervision, professional development. Teamwork does not only help department heads to deal with instructional issues, but also it helps them to explore and understand the roles and responsibilities of their position. Teamwork creates synergy in an organization. In teamwork, stakeholders give support to one another to join energy to bring about organizational and individual success quickly. Teamwork coupled with team leadership can be an important component for instructional leaders like middle managers, to assume a strong leadership position by defining or stipulating their roles and responsibilities collaboratively. In addition to that, supervision of teaching and learning by department heads ensures effective leadership and management that in turn would help department heads to understand the nature of the position and overcome complexities. To leverage the advantage of supervision, department heads, however, may need to make supervision collaborative, collegial and democratic (Gunter, 2001). On supervision and teamwork, department heads are expected to practice professional development for themselves and subordinates to hone leadership skills and thereby develop their units to cope up with ever-changing educational goals. This can be done by building professional learning communities within and outside the school for quality practice.

Recommendations to the Ministry of Education

The roles and responsibilities of the department heads have not been studied extensively. The role of the department head represents a missed opportunity for leadership (Adrian, 2008). Hence, in view of this, it is imperative that the Ministry of Education should offer continuous professional development, introduce a new model of leadership and provide provisions to encourage department heads to make research and learn more in overcoming the paradoxes of the position.

Recommendations to the Schools

The roles and responsibilities of a department head are wide and complex. Department heads need to make sure that teachers and programs are evaluated, resources are utilized and curriculum is delivered and assessed. However, these require department heads to have clearly defined roles and possession of relevant knowledge and competencies. Weakness of department heads exhibits when there are hierarchical structural constraints, too much bureaucracy processes, failure to analyze data on learners' performance systematically, weak communication between department heads and staff, confused lines of accountability, and responsibility, and thus evaluating the policy in position is indispensable for the development of an academic unit (Home, Plessis &Nkomo, 2015). Therefore, it is highly

recommended that the schools should provide in-house training and form teams of department heads within a school and outside to arrange professional developments. Additionally, the school principals should provide free access to information and resources to empower department heads.

Recommendations to Department Heads

A school is a place of knowledge creation and the centre of diverse cultures. Learning is the best scholarship ever and a vehicle to explore the future. Therefore, department heads should be leaders, administrators and researchers of their position, and should continuously update their existing knowledge as a strategy to cope up with challenges and pressures.

Limitation of the Study

The researcher believes that the study could be improved, broadened and deepened in nature particularly in theoretical conceptualization or approach. The study was conducted in the Anseba region, Eritrea. Despite all the schools in the region were surveyed, still, the study is limited and might not be enough to generalize the findings to schools outside of the region. Nonetheless, the study addresses a specific issue and provides insights into the current challenges, barriers or problems of department heads related to leadership roles and responsibilities. It could be used as a basis for future study.

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