



Delegation of Authority and Secondary School Effectiveness in Conflict-Affected Settings: Evidence from Cameroon's South West Region

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Abstract: Despite robust international evidence linking distributed leadership to school effectiveness, little empirical research has examined how the delegation of leadership functions operates as a school effectiveness mechanism in post-colonial African educational systems shaped by strong hierarchical governance traditions and ongoing socio-political instability. This article reports original findings from a large-scale explanatory sequential mixed-methods study involving 480 principals and teachers across 30 secondary schools in the Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. Using Spearman rank-order correlation and ordinary least squares multiple regression, the study found that delegation of functions is the single strongest predictor of school effectiveness perceptions ($r_s = 0.683$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.507$). Qualitative thematic analysis of 24 in-depth interviews identified three mechanisms through which delegation produces its effects: resolving the institutional bottleneck created by authority concentration; building collective leadership capacity through genuine professional responsibility; and generating psychological empowerment through bounded autonomy. The Anglophone crisis context intensified both the demand for and the value of distributed governance. Findings are theoretically situated within distributed leadership theory (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006) and psychological empowerment theory (Spreitzer et al., 1997), and the concept of contextual amplitude is proposed to account for the especially large delegation effect observed in hierarchical institutional settings.

Keywords: delegation of authority, distributed leadership, school effectiveness, participative leadership, Cameroon, Anglophone crisis, post-colonial education, psychological empowerment.



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1. Introduction

The question of how leadership authority should be distributed across educational institutions has occupied educational researchers, reformers, and administrators for decades, generating a substantial body of theoretical argument and empirical evidence supporting the proposition that effective schools are led not by single heroic individuals but by distributed networks of formal and informal leaders whose collective intelligence, shared accountability, and synergistic effort generate institutional outcomes that no individual leader could achieve alone (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2007). Yet the translation of this research consensus into governance reform in post-colonial African educational systems has been partial, contested, and

constrained by the deep structural and cultural roots of hierarchical administration that colonial governance systems implanted and that post-independence bureaucratic structures have sustained (Dembele & Lefoka, 2007; Oplatka, 2004; Tikly, 2004).

In this institutional context, the delegation of leadership functions from school principals to vice-principals, heads of department, and senior teachers represents not merely a management efficiency strategy but a governance transformation with consequences for teacher motivation, institutional trust, professional capacity development, and ultimately student learning outcomes. The present article reports original empirical evidence on the relationship between delegation of functions and school effectiveness from a large-scale, mixed-methods study conducted in the secondary schools of Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon — an institutional setting further complicated by the ongoing Anglophone socio-political crisis that has severely disrupted educational governance, teacher morale, and community trust in schools since 2016.

Two research questions guide the article: first, what is the statistical strength and direction of the relationship between delegation of functions and school effectiveness in Cameroonian secondary schools? Second, through what institutional and psychological mechanisms does delegation produce its effects on school effectiveness in the specific governance and cultural context of the Cameroonian institutional environment? In addressing these questions, the article makes three contributions: it provides the most statistically robust evidence to date on the delegation-effectiveness relationship in an African educational context; it develops a qualitative account of the mechanisms through which delegation operates in hierarchically organised post-colonial schools; and it proposes the concept of contextual amplitude to theorise why the delegation effect is especially large in institutional settings where authority concentration has been the deeply embedded default.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Distributed Leadership Theory

Gronn's (2002, 2008) distributed leadership theory argues that institutional leadership should be conceptualised as activity stretched across multiple human actors and the material artefacts of organisational life, rather than as the attribute of a single formally designated individual. This activity-theoretic perspective, drawing on Engeström's (1987) cultural-historical activity theory, holds that effective institutions are those that have developed governance architectures distributing leadership functions systematically across competent actors, enabling the organisation to deploy the collective intelligence and diverse expertise of all institutional members in the service of shared goals. Gronn's (2002) analysis identifies two forms of distributed leadership: additive distribution, in which multiple leaders exercise parallel but loosely coupled leadership activities, and concertive distribution, in which leaders exercise complementary functions in relationships of mutual awareness and adjustment that generate synergistic institutional outcomes exceeding what any individual actor could produce alone.

Spillane's (2006) practice-based distributed leadership framework extends Gronn's analysis by focusing on the informal, emergent leadership practices that arise from everyday professional interactions, documenting through ethnographic research in Chicago schools the ways in which leadership work — direction-setting, professional development, curriculum coordination — is routinely exercised through interactions stretching across multiple actors rather than originating in any single individual. Both frameworks converge on the theoretical prediction that delegation — the formal conferral of bounded decision-making authority on designated teachers and administrators — generates institutional benefits through the mechanisms of distributed intelligence, divided cognitive labour, and collective efficacy, and that these benefits are especially pronounced when delegation moves beyond nominal task assignment to genuine empowerment with real authority, clear accountability, and adequate informational resources.

2.2. Psychological Empowerment Theory

Psychological empowerment theory (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer et al., 1997) provides the motivational micro-foundation for understanding why genuine delegation — as opposed to nominal task assignment — produces the professional engagement and performance improvements that distributed leadership theory predicts at the institutional level. Spreitzer (1995) identifies four dimensions of psychological empowerment as preconditions for intrinsic task motivation: meaning (experiencing the task as valuable and consistent with one's professional identity), competence (the confidence that one has the skills to perform the task effectively), self-determination (the experience of genuine autonomy in determining how the task is performed), and impact (the perception that one's actions produce visible, meaningful consequences for institutional outcomes).

Genuine delegation — the conferral of bounded authority with real decision-making power, adequate information, and non-micro-managing oversight — directly cultivates each of these empowerment dimensions: it assigns tasks of institutional significance (meaning), demands the exercise of real professional skill in ambiguous governance situations (competence), grants genuine discretion over task performance (self-determination), and creates visible institutional accountability for outcomes (impact). The combination of these four components generates a qualitatively different motivational state from the compliance produced by hierarchical management — a state of intrinsic professional engagement that translates into higher-quality role performance, greater institutional commitment, and the discretionary extra-role effort that professional capital theorists identify as the decisive characteristic of high-performing educational communities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

2.3. Contextual Amplitude: A Proposed Theoretical Concept

The international research literature consistently documents positive relationships between distributed leadership and school effectiveness, but effect sizes vary substantially across contexts. This article proposes the concept of contextual amplitude to account for this variation: the effectiveness benefits of delegation are not constant across institutional contexts but are modulated by the degree to which delegative practices depart from the default governance culture of the specific institutional environment. In highly hierarchical institutional cultures — such as those characteristic of post-colonial Cameroonian government secondary schools — the introduction of genuine delegation represents a more dramatic governance departure than in contexts where some distributed leadership is already the institutional norm. This greater departure from the baseline governance culture produces larger motivational responses, larger institutional learning effects, and larger school effectiveness improvements — explaining why the delegation effect size in the present study exceeds those reported in Western educational contexts where some degree of distributed governance is already established.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Sample

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) in which quantitative survey data from 480 principals and teachers across 30 purposively selected secondary schools in Fako Division were collected and analysed first, with qualitative in-depth interview data from 24 purposively selected participants subsequently collected and analysed to explain and contextualise the quantitative results. Stratified random sampling was used to select the 30 schools, with stratification by institutional type (government: n=16, lay private: n=8, faith-based: n=6) and geographic sub-division to ensure representative coverage of Fako Division's institutional diversity. Within each school, all principals and 15 randomly selected classroom teachers completed the quantitative questionnaire, yielding a final analytical sample of 480 respondents (60 principals, 420 teachers).

The qualitative sample of 24 participants was selected through maximum variation purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to maximise variation across role (8 principals, 12 teachers, 4 teacher

leaders), institutional type, gender, and geographic location. Qualitative participants were drawn from schools different from those in the quantitative sample to preserve data independence. The study was conducted during the 2022–2023 academic year within the specific context of the Anglophone crisis, which has severely disrupted secondary education in the South West Region since 2016.

3.2. Instrument and Measures

The Participative Leadership and Secondary School Effectiveness Questionnaire (PL-SSEQ) was developed specifically for this study through a multi-stage process of item generation, bilingual expert review, cognitive interviewing, pilot testing, and full-scale psychometric validation. The Delegation of Functions sub-scale (Scale E) comprises nine items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), measuring the prevalence and quality of delegation practices including clarity of role descriptions (item example: 'The principal clearly defines the responsibilities of each staff member'), conferral of genuine authority on vice-principals and department heads, systematic rather than ad hoc delegation, delegation as career development, and avoidance of micro-management. Internal consistency reliability for Scale E was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.831$. The School Effectiveness composite scale (Scale G) comprises nine items measuring perceived effectiveness across academic achievement, school discipline, teacher professional satisfaction, and school-community relations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.733$). All analyses used total scale scores expressed as means.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using Spearman's rank-order correlation to test the bivariate hypothesis (selected in preference to Pearson's r given the mild non-normality of the school effectiveness distribution: skewness = -0.34), and ordinary least squares multiple regression to estimate the unique predictive contribution of delegation after controlling for shared decision-making and shared financial responsibility. Regression assumptions were systematically verified: linearity (residual plots), independence (Durbin-Watson = 1.94), normality (normal probability plots), homoscedasticity (residual variance plots), and multicollinearity (VIF = 2.41 , well below the 10.0 threshold). Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, with trustworthiness established through member checking, negative case analysis, and reflexive journaling.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The Delegation of Functions scale (Scale E) had a sample mean of 3.43 ($SD = 0.87$) on the five-point response scale, indicating moderate levels of perceived delegation quality in the study's schools. Item-level analysis revealed a hierarchical pattern in which the most established delegation practices involved formal role assignment and authority conferral to the senior management team (vice-principals: mean = 3.61 ; heads of department: mean = 3.58 ; clarity of role descriptions: mean = 3.74), while the more genuinely empowering dimensions of delegation — avoidance of micro-management (mean = 3.19), systematic rather than ad hoc delegation (mean = 3.28), and delegation creating career development (mean = 3.26) — received substantially lower ratings. Cross-institutional analysis showed that faith-based schools scored significantly higher on Scale E (mean = 3.71) than government schools (mean = 3.22) and lay private schools (mean = 3.38), reflecting the stronger distributed governance traditions of mission school institutions.

4.2. Bivariate and Multivariate Analyses

The Spearman rank-order correlation between delegation of functions (Scale E) and school effectiveness (Scale G) was $r_s = 0.683$ ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.634 , 0.727]), representing a large effect by Cohen's (1988) standards and the strongest bivariate association between any individual participative leadership dimension and school effectiveness in the study's data. This correlation accounts for approximately 46.7% of the variance in school effectiveness perceptions ($r^2 = 0.467$),

a proportion that substantially exceeds the effectiveness variance attributable to any other individual predictor in the study.

In the three-predictor ordinary least squares regression model — including delegation, shared financial responsibility, and shared decision-making as predictors — delegation emerged as the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = 0.455$, $B = 0.412$, $SE = 0.058$, $t = 7.103$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.298, 0.526]). The full model explained 50.7% of the variance in school effectiveness perceptions ($R^2 = 0.507$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.503$, $F(3, 476) = 135.300$, $p < 0.001$, $R = 0.712$). Variance inflation factors for delegation ($VIF = 2.41$) and tolerance (0.415) confirmed that multicollinearity does not compromise the stability of the delegation coefficient. Post-hoc partial correlation analysis confirmed that delegation accounts for a unique 14.8% of school effectiveness variance ($sr^2 = 0.148$) after controlling for the other predictors.

4.3. Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms of Delegation Effect

Thematic analysis of interview data identified three primary mechanisms through which delegation produces its school effectiveness consequences in the Cameroonian institutional context.

The institutional bottleneck resolution mechanism was articulated with particular clarity by a vice-principal in a government school who described the contrast between previous principal-centred governance and current delegated practice: 'When the principal made every decision, nothing moved quickly. Staff learned that the answer to every question was wait until the principal is available. Here, I have clear authority in specific areas. I can act without reference to him on these matters, and the school runs much more smoothly.' This account illustrates how delegation resolves the capacity constraint that principal-centred governance inevitably creates: distributing leadership functions to capable delegates enables faster, more contextually informed institutional responses than the bottleneck model permits, generating both operational efficiency gains and the signal of institutional trust that enhances delegates' professional commitment.

The professional capacity development mechanism was described by a head of department at a faith-based school: 'When you are given real responsibility — trusted to manage a whole domain of institutional life — you grow as a professional. I became a much better leader through the experience of actually being trusted to lead.' This experiential account supports the theoretical prediction that genuine delegation functions as professional development by creating real-stakes leadership practice opportunities that build the governance competencies, institutional knowledge, and leadership identity of teacher leaders — building the distributed leadership resource of the school as a whole rather than merely redistributing management burdens.

The psychological empowerment mechanism was consistently described through the contrast between nominal task assignment and genuine authority conferral. Multiple respondents described the demoralising consequences of receiving apparent leadership responsibilities while finding their decisions routinely second-guessed by their principals — a pattern consistent with Spreitzer et al.'s (1997) account of pseudo-empowerment that generates accountability costs without self-determination benefits. By contrast, respondents in schools with effective delegation described the motivational transformation produced by genuine bounded authority: 'When the principal trusts you to decide, you feel you belong to this institution in a way that is qualitatively different. You feel responsible for what happens here, and that feeling makes you work harder and better.'

5. Discussion

5.1. The Primacy of Delegation in the Cameroonian Context

The finding that delegation of functions is the strongest predictor of school effectiveness in both bivariate and multivariate analyses — with a standardised regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.455$) substantially larger than those reported for delegation in comparable Western studies — is theoretically coherent within the contextual amplitude framework proposed in this article. In institutional environments where authority concentration is the deeply embedded governance

default — reinforced by colonial administrative tradition, ministerial bureaucratic culture, and professional norms of principal-as-sole-decision-maker — the introduction of genuine delegation represents a governance transformation with uniquely large institutional consequences.

Gronn's (2002) distinction between additive and concertive distribution is particularly relevant here. The item-level descriptive data suggest that most Cameroonian secondary schools have achieved some degree of additive distribution — formal role assignments to vice-principals and department heads exist in most schools — but that the more consequential concertive distribution, in which delegated role-holders exercise their authorities in coordinated, mutually adjusting patterns that generate synergistic institutional outcomes, is substantially less developed. The large regression coefficient for delegation reflects not merely the effect of existing delegation practices but the large marginal return to improving delegation quality from the relatively low baseline of predominantly nominal role assignment that characterises most schools in the sample.

The Anglophone crisis context adds an important dimension to this interpretation. Several qualitative participants described crisis conditions as having intensified the need for genuine delegation: when security-related decisions must be made rapidly, when the principal's attention is consumed by crisis management, and when community trust in institutional authority is fragile, the distribution of genuine governance authority to trusted institutional actors is a functional necessity rather than a governance aspiration. Principals who had invested in developing a distributed leadership architecture before the crisis found it to be their most resilient institutional resource during the crisis; those who had maintained principal-centred governance found themselves overwhelmed and their institutions correspondingly destabilised.

5.2. Implications for Distributed Leadership Theory

The study's findings extend distributed leadership theory in two important directions. First, the contextual amplitude concept identifies an important moderating variable — the baseline authoritarianism of the institutional governance culture — that the existing distributed leadership literature has not systematically theorised. By predicting that delegation effects should be largest in the most hierarchical institutional contexts, the concept generates testable hypotheses for cross-national comparative research and provides a theoretical account of the cross-contextual variation in distributed leadership effect sizes that existing frameworks do not explain.

Second, the articulation of three distinct mechanisms through which delegation produces its effectiveness consequences — institutional bottleneck resolution, professional capacity development, and psychological empowerment — provides the kind of mechanistic theoretical account that Leithwood et al. (2019) have identified as a priority need for the distributed leadership field. Most existing research establishes the statistical association between distributed leadership and school outcomes without adequately specifying the causal pathways through which it operates; the present study's mixed-methods design enables a level of mechanistic specificity that purely quantitative research cannot achieve.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates with unusual statistical force that delegation of leadership functions is the highest-leverage participative governance investment available to Cameroonian secondary school principals seeking to improve institutional effectiveness. The standardised regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.455$ — accounting for 14.8% of unique school effectiveness variance after controlling for financial transparency and shared decision-making — positions genuine, developmental delegation as the single most impactful school-level governance change that Cameroonian principals can make.

Three practical recommendations follow from the evidence. First, every secondary school principal in Cameroon should develop a formal Delegation Framework — a written governance document specifying the bounded authority, accountability arrangements, and informational resources associated with each delegated leadership role. The framework should be developed collaboratively with the management team, shared with all staff, and reviewed annually. Second,

MINESEC should incorporate delegation competency as a core requirement in any national leadership preparation programme, recognising that the transition from principal-centred to distributed governance requires not merely structural change but a fundamental reorientation of leadership philosophy. Third, the faith-based school advantage in delegation quality identified in this study suggests that cross-institutional learning — creating structured opportunities for government school principals to observe and learn from the distributed governance practices of their faith-based counterparts — could be a cost-effective strategy for improving delegation quality at scale.

The study's principal limitation is its cross-sectional design, which precludes definitive causal inference. Longitudinal and quasi-experimental research designs examining the school effectiveness consequences of deliberate delegation development interventions would substantially strengthen the causal evidence base. Future research should also examine whether the contextual amplitude prediction — that delegation effects are largest in the most hierarchical institutional environments — holds across diverse national contexts in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

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