DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN NORTH DHAKA SCHOOL DISTRICT, BANGLADESH

SADMAN HOSSAIN

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Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project report to my dear parents, my beloved wife and children, and my caring supervisor Dr. Jamilah Binti Ahmad, whose continuous support enabled me to complete the project.

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ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership is an emerging leadership style that promotes distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities among followers with potential leadership skills and capabilities, in contrast with conventional leadership styles where leadership roles are centered on designated formal leaders. Literature review reveals that distributed leadership represents a paradigm shift from the traditional heroic leadership concepts, and contributes significantly to teaching and school leadership. There is a gap in the research on distributed leadership practices in Islamic schools in Bangladesh. This study investigates the level of distributed leadership practices in Islamic schools in North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and explores the teachers' perception of effects of distributed leadership on teaching and leadership processes. A collective case design with a mixed-method approach was employed to collect and analyze data. The quantitative data was collected from 80 respondents via the DLRS survey questionnaire, while the qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 6 participants selected by purposive sampling. Descriptive frequency analysis and Miles and Huberman analysis were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Data from the survey illustrated that distributed leadership is practiced in School A continually and frequently, in contrast with School B, where it is practiced sometimes or rarely. Qualitative data analysis revealed that teachers in both schools have generally positive perception of the effects of distributed leadership on teaching and leadership. Findings of the study provide valuable insight for principals and school leaders into the leadership practices of Islamic schools in Bangladesh and may contribute to relevant research on school leadership.

ABSTRAK

Kepemimpinan distributif adalah gaya kepemimpinan yang muncul yang mendorong pengagihan peranan dan tanggungjawab kepemimpinan di kalangan pengikut yang mempunyai potensi dan kemampuan kepemimpinan, berbeza dengan gaya kepimpinan konvensional di mana peranan kepemimpinan berpusat pada pemimpin formal yang ditetapkan. Tinjauan literatur menunjukkan bahawa kepemimpinan distributif merupakan sebuah peralihan paradigma dari konsep kepemimpinan kepahlawanan tradisional, dan memberikan sumbangan yang ketara terhadap kepemimpinan pengajaran dan sekolah. Terdapat jurang dalam penyelidikan mengenai amalan kepemimpinan distributif di sekolah-sekolah Islam di Bangladesh. Kajian ini menyelidiki tahap amalan kepemimpinan distributif sekolah-sekolah Islam di Daerah Sekolah Dhaka Utara Dhaka, Bangladesh, dan meneroka persepsi guru mengenai kesan kepemimpinan distributif terhadap proses pengajaran dan kepemimpinan. Reka bentuk kes kolektif dengan pendekatan kaedah campuran digunakan untuk mengumpulkan dan menganalisis data. Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan dari 80 responden melalui soal selidik tinjauan DLRS, sementara data kualitatif dikumpulkan melalui temu bual separa berstruktur yang dilakukan dengan 6 peserta yang dipilih dengan persampelan yang bermatlamat. Analisis frekuensi deskriptif dan analisis Miles dan Huberman digunakan untuk menganalisis data kuantitatif dan kualitatif masing-masing. Data dari tinjauan menunjukkan bahawa kepemimpinan yang tersebar dipraktikkan di Sekolah A secara berterusan dan kerap, berbeza dengan Sekolah B, di mana ia dipraktikkan kadang-kadang atau jarang. Analisis data kualitatif menunjukkan bahawa guru di kedua sekolah pada umumnya mempunyai persepsi positif terhadap pengaruh kepemimpinan distributif terhadap pengajaran dan kepemimpinan. Penemuan kajian memberikan wawasan berharga untuk pengetua dan pemimpin sekolah mengenai amalan kepemimpinan sekolah Islam di Bangladesh dan boleh menyumbang kepada penyelidikan yang relevan mengenai kepemimpinan sekolah.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DL	-	Distributed leadership
TL	-	Teacher Leadership
DLRS	-	Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale
PLC	-	Professional Learning Community

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

This chapter describes the current research on distributed leadership practices and perceptions of its effects on teaching and leadership in Islamic schools in North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Conventional leadership models in the context of education have been centralized, authoritative and bound to ranks and positions involving a limited number of personnel (Elmore, 2008; Reeves, 2009), while emerging practices of leadership roles and responsibilities show a divergence from the traditional concepts towards a distributed, collaborative approach based on skills and expertise instead of rank, years in profession or other factors (Muijs and Harris, 2003). This study investigates the various models and dimensions of distributed leadership practiced in Islamic schools in North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh and examines how the teachers perceive the effects of such practices on teaching and leadership processes.

Leadership models focused on traits, attributes and behaviors of individuals have largely become outmoded and obsolete (Harris, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2006a; Muijs and Harris, 2003). Contemporary studies on leadership practices show a shift from the 'heroic' representation of leadership (Badaracco, 2001) including trait, situational and transformational styles of leadership, towards a conception of leadership that is a collective process established through interactions of several players within and between networks (Uhl-Bien, 2011). Bennett *et al.*, (2003, p. 3) characterizes distributed leadership as "…not something 'done' by an individual 'to'

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others…" but rather as a "…group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual actions."

Researchers focusing on distributed leadership have presented diverse definitions with competing and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Most working definitions of distributed leadership overlap with shared (Pearce and Conger, 2003), collaborative (Wallace, 2002), democratic (Gastil, 1994) and participative (Vroom and Jago, 1998) leadership concepts. Misused and misinterpreted definitions have given rise to misconceptions that distributed leadership means "everyone is a leader" (Harris, 2007). Spillane *et al.* (2004) argues that distributed leadership "is constituted through the interaction of leaders, teachers, and the situation as they influence instructional practice". Organizational activities are led by different individuals taking lead according to arising situations where their skills and expertise are applicable, and influence is shifted from one individual to the other (Spillane *et al.*, 2004).

1.2   Problem Background

The primary role of the principal of a school has been understood by researchers studying school leadership in the twentieth century to be the administrator of the educational process (Berube, Gaston and Stepans, 2004). The principal works from an authoritative position in an established bureaucracy characterized by hierarchy, remoteness from the staff and rigid labor division. This, according to Berube *et al.* (2004), defines top down management that involves delegating organizational roles and responsibilities, directing and controlling staff, academic progress evaluation, and unilateral decision making. The principal's role would not emphasize on school culture development, managing the teaching and learning process or supporting teachers in such areas (Northouse, 2004).

However, since early 2000, a paradigm shift in leadership trends and patterns have emerged (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008a). This view posits that leadership is not bound to a particular position as has been defined by traditional concepts of leadership. The processes of leadership, instead of being concentrated on the reserved rank of school principals or headteachers, are instead dynamically related with interactions between networks of stakeholders – a transformation into multidirectional control. The stakeholders – teachers, parents and even students – share this control. This shift in the way leadership is conceived and the new pattern that has emerged is labelled by Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004, p. 11) as "distributed leadership" or distributed leadership. They define this novel concept of distributed leadership as "leadership practice which is distributed over leaders, followers, and the school's situation or context". Scholars studying educational leadership show interest regarding the dynamics of leadership through the activities and tasks of administrators and how that impacts school improvement, instead of focusing on a few formally labelled leaders. Accordingly, school leadership is increasingly being characterized as a team effort rather than an individual one (Davis, 2005; DuFour, 2002; Elmore, 2000).

Studies on educational leadership, in fact, has distinguished between formal leadership of a school and actual practice and dynamics (Zener, 2011). Literature review suggests a gap in studies, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, that explore the practices relevant to distributed leadership in the context of faith-based schools in Bangladesh. The aim of this study is to look into the practice of distributed leadership in details in two schools located in North Dhaka School District, Dhaka, Bangladesh that implement an Islamic pedagogy and curriculum, and also investigate how teachers perceive distributed leadership and its effects on teaching and learning and how it contributes to effective school leadership.

Salahuddin (2010) argues that despite the emphasis on research into educational leadership and the development of several models of leadership and practices, the concept and application of leadership styles is significantly absent in developing countries such as Bangladesh. School leaders, principals and headteachers are uninformed regarding various leadership styles and often do not reflect on the

benefits of applying these styles in order to achieve school improvement or attain school effectiveness (Salahuddin, 2010). The education sector of Bangladesh is facing a crisis in leadership. Focus is more on the quantitative issues such as student enrolment and teacher retention, rather than school improvement and effectiveness (Salahuddin, 2010). Studies on emerging models and dimensions of leadership practices, whether formally or inadvertently implemented, may elucidate as to whether educational leaders in Bangladesh are participating in the paradigm shift, and may also provide insight into strategies for developing distributed leadership practices for the development of the education sector of the country.

A study on Bangladeshi primary school teachers' perception about distributed leadership finds that a positive perception among teachers regarding distributed leadership is due to the undertaking of several government and private initiatives and programs and professional development activities and training (Mullick, Sharma and Deppeler, 2013). The findings indicate that teachers and leaders informed about distributed leadership are more likely to practice distributed leadership in their work. Salahuddin (2011), studying perceptions of effective leadership in Bangladeshi schools, find that principals and school leaders acknowledge the importance of task distribution and delegation in school development. But due to a lack of formal leadership trainings, they don't have theoretical knowledge of approaches and concepts, and hence fail to change existing norms and practices.

1.3   Problem Statement

Researchers such as Elmore (2008) and Reeves (2009) argue that the current forms of leadership practiced are antiquated, patronizing and dependent on and validated by obedient followers. Reeves (2008) argues that leadership cannot be limited to the jurisdiction of the principal or headteacher. Proponents of a top-down system would present the immediate benefits of such an approach, but far greater and enduring success is observed in leaders who involve themselves in facilitation,

encouragement and support of teachers and their instructional efforts, expertise and activities (Senge *et al.,* 2000).

Leaders in the field of education face increasingly complex environments. They have to keep up with government policies changing rapidly. There is an absence of the coveted charismatic leader. As a result of these factors combined with a lack of effective contribution to school improvement and capacity building, a heightened interest in distributed leadership is being observed by researchers (Harris, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2006a; Muijs and Harris, 2003). Studies strongly advise principals to turn towards distributed leadership practices in order to address these issues (Davis, 2005; DuFour, 2002; Elmore, 2000; Northouse, 2004; Wright, 2008). Hence it is incumbent to examine the extent to which such practices are implemented by principals in Islamic schools in Bangladesh.

In addition, a study conducted by Bell *et al.,* (2002) suggests that, although effective leadership is considered a key factor and a central component in establishing sustainable school improvement and hence school success (Bell, Bolam, and Cubillo, 2002; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006b), the connection between the two aspects is largely indirect. However, a positive perception that leadership is important for school success and schools need effective leadership at all levels is evident from several studies (Elmore, 2000; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Lambert, 2002). PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) claims that regardless of school structures or models implemented, there is a greater impact on student performance and school success created by leader behavior. Studies have also shown confidence in the effectiveness of distributed leadership in producing school improvement (Leithwood *et al.,* 2006b). Based on these arguments, and the central role of teachers in the instructional process, it is appropriate to study the perception of teachers on distributed leadership as well.

## 1.4	Research Objective

The study aims to investigate the distributed leadership practices and explore the effects of distributed leadership on teaching and leadership processes in Islamic schools in the North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh. This research has three objectives as follows:

1. To determine the level and differences of distributed leadership practices in Islamic schools in the North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh.
2. To explore the teachers' perception of the effects of distributed leadership on teaching in Islamic schools in the North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh.
3. To explore the teachers' perception of the effects of distributed leadership on leadership in Islamic schools in the North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## 1.5	Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study as stated above, the following research questions are designed to direct the study:

1. What is the level and differences of distributed leadership practices in Islamic schools in the North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh?
2. How do the teachers perceive the effects of distributed leadership on teaching?
3. How do the teachers perceive the effects of distributed leadership on leadership?

1.6   Theoretical Framework of the Study

Despite acknowledgement of distributed leadership by researchers, scholars and practitioners of leadership studies, there is no consensus on its origin. Oduro (2004a, p. 4) traces distributed leadership back to around 1250 BC and remarks that distributed leadership is "one of the most ancient leadership notions recommended for fulfilling organizational goals through people". The formal theorization of distributed leadership, argues Harris (2009), appears in the mid 1920's or some time before that. According to Elmore (2000), the origin of distributed leadership is linked to Karl Weick's (1976) Loose-coupling theory (Lucia, 2004), which redistributes the arrangement of the core fundamentals of education. This theory posits that it is in the individual classroom where the processes of teaching and learning, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessment takes place rather than in the organization of the school as a whole (Elmore, 2000; Lucia, 2004).

Elmore (2005) corrects the misconception that distributed leadership somehow means rejecting responsibility for the organizational performance as a whole. Instead, distributed leadership involves the creation of a "common culture of expectations" by the leader, in terms of skills and knowledge, and individual accountability with respect to their input into the cumulative outcome (Elmore, 2005, p. 38). Five dimensions of distributed leadership are identified by Elmore (2000). They are: school mission, vision and goals; school culture; the decision-making process; performance evaluation and professional development; and leadership practices.

These five dimensions are reduced to four by Gordon (2005) in a factor analysis. Professional development and evaluation were merged into the new dimension of shared responsibility, leaving the other three dimensions intact. These four dimensions are associated with how leadership is distributed in practical school settings. The current study is based on Gordon's (2005) distributed leadership model.
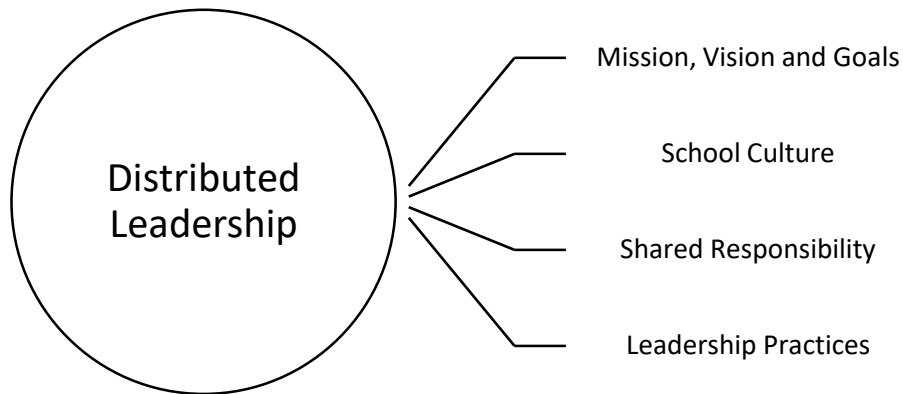
Figure 1.1 Four Dimensions of Distributed Leadership (Gordon, 2005)

1.7   Conceptual Framework

Leadership practice can be framed as the interaction between three elements: leaders, followers and situation (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Figure 1.2 depicts this framework (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). Spillane posits leadership activity as the result of the social distribution of leadership functions and tasks between members of the organization, both formally designated and informally designated into leadership positions, interacting with the situation where the activities are taking place (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane & Camburn, 2006; Spillane, Camburn, Lewis, & Pareja, 2007).
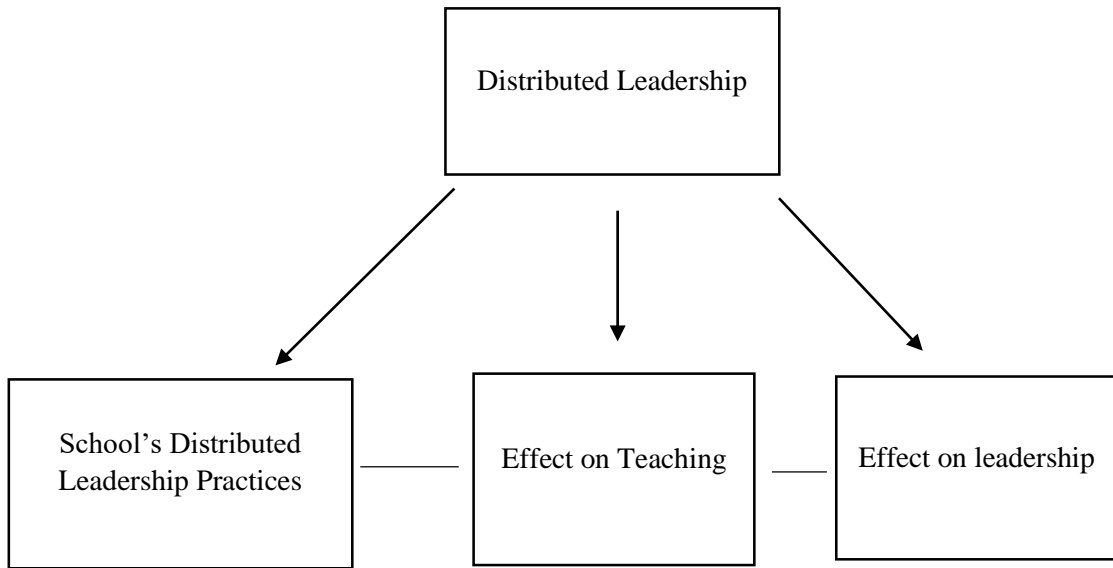
Figure 1.2 Conceptual framework for distributed leadership practices and effects on teaching and leadership

In line with these definitions, this study conceptualizes distributed leadership as the interaction between the school's distributed leadership practices (situation), leadership (formal leaders) and teaching (informal leaders), involving collaborative leadership activities and actively participating in processes of decision making.

1.8   Scope of the study

This mixed-method study aims to determine the practices of the four dimensions of distributed leadership (Gordon, 2005) in Islamic schools in North Dhaka School District of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and to explore how teachers perceive distributed leadership and its effects on teaching and leadership practices in the schools. The study is conducted on two schools selected on the basis of their implementation of Islamic curriculum, located in the school district of North Dhaka. These two schools are the only ones in the particular school district, that implements

Islamic curriculum. The leadership practices in these schools are determined in the context of Gordon's (2005) four dimensions of distributed leadership. The study population is the teachers of these two schools, who have various levels of experience in teaching and instructional process. Survey questionnaire was used to collect data to determine the leadership practices in the schools. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for qualitative interviews in order to explore the teachers' perceptions of effects of distributed leadership on teaching and leadership in the schools.

1.9   Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study are described as factors that define the boundaries of the study and contribute to it (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; McManus, 2019). Dusick (2014) also noted that limitations are factors that are not under control of the researcher.

Considering the framework and timeframe of a master's program, of which this study is a part, several factors limit its scope and expanse. Due to the study being conducted during the global Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, and the associated movement restrictions in place in order to curb the spread of the virus, unfortunately face to face interviews, onsite observations and surveys cannot be used as instruments. All surveys and interviews must be conducted virtually over the internet. This potentially limits the quality and scope of the data and the data collection process.

In addition, data analysis and results may be affected by bias due to the researcher having close collegial working relationships with the principal and teachers of one of the two selected schools.

1.10   Delimitations

Data was collected from two Islamic schools located in North Dhaka school district only, leaving out other Islamic schools in the city and other school districts of the country. Hence findings cannot be generalized to other Islamic school systems, and a broader perspective may be lacking in the results. Only 80 teachers from the two schools participated in the quantitative survey and 6 teachers were selected through purposive sampling for the interviews.

1.11   Significance of the study

Studies have identified a correlation between distribution of school leadership and the fostering of collaborative culture in the workplace (Day *et al.*, 2000). As a result of this, workload becomes more proportionately and fairly distributed and a positive effect on staff and teachers' self-efficacy is observed (Pont *et al.*, 2008). A comparative review of school leadership at the behest of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] carried out by Schleicher (2012) emphasizes the significance of broadening the locus of school leadership in what is termed as "system leadership". It involves sharing of resources and enhancing network through collaboration across communities. Distribution of leadership tasks and responsibilities appears to be the best approach to achieve this.

The fundamental difference between distributed leadership and conventional top-down management systems is in the absence of centralized control and rigid division of labor (Elmore, 2000; MacBeath, Oduro and Waterhouse, 2004). The authors argue that, even though control is necessary in some managerial areas, it cannot be the sole modus operandi in the process of school improvement. This is because educators involved in the instruction process command a major portion of the skills and knowledge required for improvement, while administrators managing the educators hold less so. Elmore (2000) posits that leadership styles that are hierarchical

and managerial tend to be restricted to a core group of formal leaders who are usually few in number, a small percentage of the workforce in the school.

A school's ultimate objective is to prioritize student learning before all else. Arguably, distributing leadership roles and responsibilities is key to establishing an environment where improvement of the quality of education becomes the priority. Barth (2001) argues that in order to transform schools into professional learning communities, there is no alternative to skill development and taking on leadership roles by teachers. Within the context of emerging leadership styles, distributed leadership appears to be an effective tool for this purpose (Barth, 2001; Blasé and Blase, 1999; Bryk, Camburn, and Louis, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, 2003). Distributed leadership also brings about empowerment and involvement for teachers in the school processes (Fullan, Bertani and Quinn, 2004).

The framework of this study entails an examination of the practices of distributed leadership and exploration of teachers' perception of its effects on teaching and leadership in the selected schools. This provides an insight into strategies for developing distributed leadership in schools, which in turn will benefit principals and school leaders in identifying elements of leadership that contribute towards school improvement processes and necessary areas of reform. In addition, a study in practices of distributed leadership in Islamic schools in Bangladesh may reveal how leadership is viewed in faith-based schools that are traditionally hierarchical. The results of this study can be an exposition and insight into emerging models of leadership in the country's education sector.

1.12   Operational Definitions

Definitions and meanings of significant terms used in the context of the study are provided.

1.12.1 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership as a term was introduced by Gibb in 1969 (Gronn, 2000; Lucia, 2004). Elmore (2000) and Spillane *et al.*, (2001) are the major researchers focusing on distributed leadership in current educational leadership studies. Elmore (2000) argues that distributing leadership roles and responsibilities is the only viable approach to carrying out teaching and learning activities effectively, hence the conventional view of leadership as charismatic and heroic is unsuitable in the context of education. distributed leadership is therefore defined, according to Elmore (2000, p. 15), as "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture". The definition proposed by Spillane *et al.*, (2001, p. 24) delineates distributed leadership as "… grounded in activity rather than in position or role". Spillane notes that observing a set of practices emerging from the activities of key players in the literature regarding school effectiveness and improvement provides a lens through which distributed leadership could be understood.

With respect to this study, distributed leadership can be defined as a leadership approach where individuals collaboratively contribute to the instructional process according to their skills and expertise based on mutual trust and respect, as a result of an open work environment across the organization.

1.12.2 Teachers

Parkay, Stanford & Gougeon (2010) defines teachers as certified educational professionals involved in teaching and instruction in the classroom including those who teach a complete group in a classroom, small groups in a tutoring or mentorship setting, or even outside conventional class settings. It excludes teaching assistants, student teachers or educational workers. Teachers in this study are considered those

who have been working in the selected schools for more than one year and have more than one year of working experience in the field of education.

1.12.3 Islamic Schools

Islamic schools pertaining to this study are defined as schools that implement a stated Islamic pedagogy or curriculum, or both, with the stated objective of developing an Islamic identity and personality in students by means of instilling Islamic beliefs, values and principles. The schools selected for this study implement a Cambridge or Edexcel curriculum framework and integrate Islamic contents and materials into that curriculum. Islamic schools' vision includes reaching the utmost standards in social responsibility, character development as well as academic excellence nurtured within a tailored Islamic setting. (*Islamized School, Specialized Madrasa and New Paths to Islamic Education in Bangladesh - Bangladesh Education Article*, n.d.)

1.12.4 Perception

Perception is defined by Munhall (1989) as a mechanism for grasping reality and experiences using senses in order to determine shape, form, language, action and behavior. Munhall also identifies the role of perception of an individual in shaping opinion, judgement, recognition of the other, interpreting experiences, and deciding on the response to a certain situation (Munhall, 1989). For the purposes of this research, perception can be defined as the process of receiving, comprehending and interpreting an idea or concept.

1.13   Summary

Distributed leadership has emerged as a leadership style widely researched and studied since the beginning of the new millennium. It represents a paradigm shift in how leadership is perceived, how effective leadership is defined and envisioned, and how organizations adapt their leadership orientations in order to face new emerging challenges. Scholars have argued both for and against the effectiveness of distributed leadership, but most have urged educational leaders towards some degree of distribution in leadership roles and activities. Despite the wide interest in distributed leadership, a literature gap is felt in several areas: the practice of distributed leadership in developing countries that face difficult challenges in educational leadership, and how leadership is viewed, practiced and perceived in faith-based schools. Consequently, this study aims to achieve the following primary objectives: determining the level of leadership practices in Islamic schools in North Dhaka School District, Bangladesh, determining the difference in distributed leadership practices in these schools, and exploring teachers' perception of distributed leadership effects on teaching and leadership. In order to achieve these goals, the study applies Gordon's (2005) dimensions of distributed leadership within the conceptual framework of elements of leadership activity (Spillane *et al.*, 2004).

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