

## FULL-LENGTH ARTICLE

### **Primary School Principal Empowerment and its influencing variables: The Case of Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia**

Tesfaye Gemechu Gurmu<sup>1\*</sup> and Jeilu Oumer<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Planning and Management, College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

\*Corresponding author: [tesfaye2412@gmail.com](mailto:tesfaye2412@gmail.com)

#### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this case study is to look into how empowered primary school principals are in Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia, and what causes their empowerment or lack thereof. Five primary school principals and two education officers from the teachers' and principals' development and deployment core processes of two education offices participated in the study. The study purposively involves individuals who are capable of providing rich information and whose job roles are relevant. The data for the study is primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, which are informed by the data gleaned from document analysis. The study discovered that the principals in the study context are not as empowered as they should be. Professional incapacity, scarcity of resources (particularly teachers), lack of professional and informational support, and a shortage of deputy principals are found to be major issues that make school principals less empowered. As a result, woreda and town administrations and education offices need to work to empower principals by offering leadership and management development, resources, and professional and technical assistance to help them provide school leadership.

**Keywords:** Impacting factors; primary school principals; principals' empowerment; policy provision; school leadership influence; having control over school leadership

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

School principalship is often regarded as one of the most critical elements in student learning achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020; Bush, 2018). School principals enhance student accomplishment, among other things, by establishing clear goals, promoting high expectations, and increasing teachers' motivation and commitment (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, it is only if school principals are empowered to carry out their duties and responsibilities that they can have such an influence in practice (Mosoge & Matabog, 2021).

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, to empower is "to give somebody the power... to do something" or "to give somebody more control over... the situation they are in". The situation in which leaders, including school leaders, reside is primarily one of influence (Northouse, 2016; Yukl, 2010). Hence, empowering school principals can be conceptualized as a process whereby principals gain power, control, or effect to do the good deed of influencing school situations (Mosoge & Matabog,

2021; Heffernan, 2018; Neeleman, 2018; Adamson, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012). The question, then, is what equips school principals to have power, control, influence, or effect. The primary source of school leaders' influence is inevitably connected with having formal authority or power (Cordiner, 2022; Heffernan, 2018) as it "is part of the influence process" for them (Northouse, 2016, p. 10), without which leadership cannot materialize. Principals' lack of formal authority or power denies them not only the ability to influence but also the legitimacy to exercise school leadership.

Nonetheless, empowerment resources are not limited to formal power. Cordiner (2022), for example, states that power is only "one of the many branches of the 'empowerment tree'" (para. 14). School principals' professional capability is one of the empowering variables that can be seen in this circle. This is about the importance of professionally qualifying school principals to help them have control over school leadership (Gurmu, 2020; Qaralleh, 2020; Mestry, 2017; Eacott & Asuga, 2014). Professional capability in school leadership is "more likely to encourage proactive, agentic leadership" that can shift students' learning accomplishments (Sugrue, 2015, p. 117). It is because of this that Eacott and Asuga (2014, p. 919) contend that "government initiatives aimed at building [functioning]... education systems are unlikely to succeed without significant attention to the [professional] preparation and development of school leaders".

Empowering elements for school principals also comprise educational resources (MoE, 2021; Oumer, 2009). The empowerment of principals is about enabling them to attain educational goals. Savasci and Tomul (2013, p. 114) assert that "the level of attaining educational aims and objectives is directly related to educational resources". Hence, the level of school resources correlates with the extent of school principals' empowerment. The availability of resources "provides sufficient flexibility for principals to manage their schools" (Gobby, 2013, p. 279) and helps them have control and influence over their school leadership endeavors (Gobby, 2013; Savasci & Tomul, 2013). Educational resources are not limited to just financial and material resources but also encompass human resources such as teachers, support staff, and deputy principals. School leadership is a collective endeavor that is delivered with the cooperation of different individuals (Johnson, Dempster, & Wheeley, 2016; Miller, 2018). Hence, the availability or lack of school human resources in adequate quantity and quality can greatly affect the school principal's ability to have control over the school's situation (MoE, 2021; Miller, 2018; FDRE, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Principals also need to be provided with technical and professional assistance and must have informational support if they are to be empowered to perform their school leadership jobs effectively (Heras & Chinchilla, 2011; UNESCO, 2009; MoE, 2006). Despite the frequent emphasis on formal power as a source of empowerment for principals, the elements provided demonstrate empowering variables that exist both within and outside the framework of formal authority, although it cannot be claimed that the variables presented are exhaustive (Cordiner, 2022; Qaralleh, 2020; Noruwana, Chigona, and Malanga, 2018). The problem is that principals around the world are not empowered to the extent necessary (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007), which can limit the amount of control principals have over school situations.

The Education and Training Policy in Ethiopia gave educational institutions autonomy in terms of internal administration as well as the formulation and execution of educational programs (FDRE, 1994). The autonomy is relevant to empowerment since it is about "having more... decision-making power over staffing, budgeting, and

resourcing," etc. (Heffernan, 2018, p. 380). Hence, the specified institutional autonomy is essentially a question of the principals' autonomy, since institutional autonomy without the leaders' having the agency is meaningless. It is also stated that educational institutions be provisioned to the greatest level, their institutional, physical, and human capabilities be enhanced, and the relevant rules and regulations be provided (MoE, 2013a, b). Educational leadership (including school leadership) is also specified as a professional career (Gurmu, 2018; Tekleselassie, 2002; FDRE, 1994). This is about equipping principals so that their professional capabilities can yield the needed leadership influence. Thus, it can be argued that Ethiopia's education system is willing to empower school principals in a variety of ways.

However, authorities assert that educational quality in Ethiopia has crossed a threshold (Ambo, Dabi & Chan, 2021). For example, scores of the Early Grade Reading Assessment [EGRA] of grade 2 students were 60.1% in 2016, and then decreased to 53.3% in 2018, worsening over time, where "70% were expected to reach [a] 'basic' or higher level of proficiency in reading and comprehension, by language" (MoE, 2021, p. 18). Data from the same source similarly indicates that the composite scores for Grades 4 and 8 were 33.6% and 25.2% in the NLAs (National Learning Assessments) in 2015/16, respectively, when the target was 50%. These data show the serious problem the education system is entangled with, for which Telila (2010, p. 67) seems to conclude that "Ethiopia's educational system is in deep crisis". Hence, it is appealing to focus on how empowered primary school principals are to change the course and what influences their empowerment or lack thereof.

Hence, the study attempts to answer the following basic questions:

- 1) How empowered are primary school principals in the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine in Ethiopia's Oromia Regional State?
- 2) What makes primary school principals empowered, or lack thereof, in this study context?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Study Design:** The case study design is used to conduct the study. The case that the study addresses is the empowerment of school principals. The study collects extensive data from primary school principals and education officers on how empowered principals' are and on factors of empowerment or disempowerment.

**Study population:** The study targets a town geographically located in the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine (Addis Ababa) but administratively accountable to the Oromia Regional State and a woreda under the jurisdiction of the zone itself. This context is chosen purposively because of its unique characteristics. For example, experienced teachers and principals are used to transferring to localities such as the current one, mainly in search of a better life (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022; Ariko & Othuon, 2012; Ethiopian Teachers Association, 2006). This has an impact on the empowerment of principals since professional experience is among the empowering variables. Teachers and principals are also relocated to, say, Addis Ababa City, the capital city of Ethiopia, from the study area (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022). Private schools located in Addis Ababa also used to attract from this particular locality capable teachers and principals (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022). This can rob the study context of experienced educational personnel, who can act as empowered educational leaders. These may make focusing on school principals' empowerment an interesting exercise.

**Sample Size:** The participants in the current study are five school principals and two education officers. We are forced to limit the sample size to seven participants due to limited resources and time pressure. Of course, the qualitative nature of the study should be considered in determining the sample size in which a small sample size is acceptable (Neuman, 2014).

Of the five principal participants, one is female and the remaining are males. The percentage of female participants (20%) can be considered low, but it is well above the overall 11% female principals' workforce in the education system (MoE, 2020). The service years of participants range from 14 to 32 years. All of the principals have been in school leadership positions for at least seven years. While the four principals are BA degree holders in management, geography, biology, and educational planning and management (EDPM), the remaining principal is a diploma holder in Afan Oromo (the local language) who hasn't even received any relevant training. Geography and Biology graduates attended the Post-Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PGDSL). While the PGDSL is not required for EDPM graduates, a principal who graduated in management does not take the training. Hence, three of the five principals (60%) are considered qualified at the required level to lead primary schools. Both education officers are BA degree holders in EDPM and have served for more than 15 years. This may show their significant experience, which can enable them to provide competent support to school principals.

**Sampling Technique:** All participants in the study are selected using purposive sampling, in which we focus on those participants who can provide us with rich information (Yin, 2016; Neuman, 2014). We first contacted two education officers of teachers' and principals' development and deployment core process (work section), who are considered knowledgeable and hence capable of providing rich information on the subject matter. Then, we chose five principals from the woreda and town where the officers are chosen so that the data can be cross-checked.

**Data Collection Instruments:** A semi-structured interview is an instrument for data collection that is informed by data obtained from documents. Semi-structured interviews focuses on investigating participants' views on how principals are empowered or disempowered and what makes them empowered more or less. The interview items are prepared and revised numerous times; two individuals with appropriate expertise revise them, and the final version of the instrument is written by incorporating their comments. The interview was originally prepared in English, and then it was translated into Afan Oromo and administered in the same language. To obtain more information, policy documents on the degree to which school principals should be empowered, as well as the Job Evaluation and Grading Proclamation and the Wage Structure Directive are reviewed.

**Data Collection Procedure:** To collect data, secured permission, contact participants and obtain their permission to participate in the study and be audio recorded. Then, interview sessions are scheduled with each participant. The data is collected at the participants' respective work locations to provide a sense of a natural work environment. The interview sessions are audio taped, and notes are taken alongside the audio recording. The data collection process takes place from January 2022 to February 2022.

**Data Analysis Technique:** The audio-recorded data is transcribed, the transcription is studied carefully, and the data is gradually reduced at several stages. After the data reached a manageable level, it was translated into English. Then, codes are produced; each chunk of the data that is geared toward a particular idea is assigned specific codes. Then, similar codes are pooled together according to their relevance and their association, which has helped the data analyzed thematically.

## RESULTS

The current study seeks to explore how empowered primary school principals are in the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia, and what makes them empowered, or lack thereof. The five school principals are represented by the pseudonyms P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, while the educational officers are represented by O1 and O2. The information acquired from the materials reviewed is given by referencing each one. The study uncovers two significant themes: school principals' empowerment and what makes them empowered, or lack thereof. The next sections will go through each of these themes in detail.

### How empowered primary school principals are?

Participants are asked if the primary school principals in the study setting are empowered to carry out their school leadership roles and responsibilities. When the data provided by them is seen in a nutshell, participants appear to believe that primary school principals are not empowered to the level they need to be. For example, P5 has the following to say:

It is assumed that principals have full authority and capacity to lead schools... [However], various factors impede us from performing the job to the needed degree. I do not feel I am equipped to handle school leadership at the needed level (01/03/22).

The participant appears to have claimed that several impediments prevent school principals from performing. Such sentiment appears to be shared by other study participants, including P2. He explicates that "It's difficult to imagine having leadership influence when your options for school leadership are so limited... This prevents you from attaining" (22/02/22). This participant's argument is also about being constrained to provide school leadership, which means being less empowered to provide it. P2's argument extends to the difficulty of imagining the deliverability of school leadership beyond its actual impossibility owing to school principals' limited possibility to influence change. This is related to a lack of conviction in the task's deliverability beyond its practical viability. Belief leads to action (Miller, 2018) and "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" and act (Bandura in Lovell, 2009, p. 12). If principals' imagination or belief about the deliverability of school leadership becomes awkward, there is less probability for the action to be straightforward.

P4 likewise explains the following:

I may not have all of the facilities to carry out my responsibilities as a school leader... Each day has its own set of challenges rather than many opportunities... Keeping the school going while resolving issues requires means and resources, both of which may be in short supply (28/02/22).

P4's statement is about school principals' having little opportunity to lead their schools since their days are packed with more challenges than opportunities. The argument

appears to be about having fewer means and resources even to maintain the school leadership's usual routine. This may indicate the school principals reduced extent of influence over the situation of school leadership.

P1, the other principal participant in the study, has an account that is not fundamentally different from the accounts of the other principal participants. He accounts the following:

People wonder why schools cannot thrive to the levels at which they are supposed to succeed. While the inquiry is legitimate, it is also reasonable to inquire about the likelihood that we school leaders have to lead schools. We are working extremely hard to make our school a success since it is the primary goal we are striving towards. However, despite our concerted efforts, a number of difficulties prohibit schools from reaching that level of excellence (21/02/2022).

While P1 recognizes the strong demand from educational stakeholders to see schools thrive, he also highlights a number of limiting obstacles that prohibit schools from reaching that level of excellence despite school principals' best efforts to provide school leadership.

P3 is the only principal participant who reports some sense of empowerment for school principals. "I am empowered in school leadership to the extent that circumstances on the ground allow me to be so," she explains (25/02/22). However, exercising school leadership to the extent permitted by the circumstances is about exercising school leadership until a certain limiting boundary. From this vantage point, the participant's account reflects a sense of not being fully empowered, despite her claims to be empowered. This is not different from the view of other participants, who assert that school principals are less empowered than they should be.

The description offered by educational officer participants regarding school principals' empowerment is not fundamentally different from the account presented by principals about school leaders' limited empowerment. For example, O1, who is one of the two educational officers who take part in the current study, does not seem to believe that school principals are empowered to the level to which they need to be. He asserts the following:

Principals are used to asking for a number of supplies... But some of the issues they request are beyond the reach of the office because they are tied to budgets over which the office has no control. When they do not receive a response to their demand, principals become upset (10/03/22).

As evidenced by his narrative, O1 recognizes the problems that principals face, as well as the sense of lack that they experience when the office unable to fulfill their demands. O2, another educational officer, has a roughly identical notion. "It cannot be stated that school principals give leadership in a circumstance when everything is functioning well, they have a lot of challenges in delivering leadership", he says. The participant description is about school principals going through ups and downs in providing school leadership, where at least some situations are difficult to manage. Overall, participants in the current study feel that there are obstacles that hinder principals from having complete control over school leadership. This shows that

principals' are less empowered to provide school leadership due to a lack of a number of empowering resources which will be addressed in the next theme.

Participants present said that principals are not empowered as they should be. Then it is interesting to know the extent to which they should be empowered. In the Ethiopian education system, principals are empowered to lead schools and create conducive conditions for student learning (Gurmu, 2020; MoE, 2002, 2006, 2012; FDRE, 1994). A "primary school principal must have a bachelor's degree in one of the school subjects" (MoE, 2013a, p. 4) and must have completed a "one-year school leadership program" (Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership, PGDSL) (MoE, 2013a, p. 5). In addition, "educational institutions need to be equipped and empowered to perform their functions at the highest level and to utilize the available material, human, and financial resources" (MoE, 2021, p. 78), which can empower school principals. Currently, primary schools receive a block grant of 10 and 15 birr per student in the first and second cycles, respectively, from the internal budget and a school grant of 50 and 55 birr per student for project-based support to first and second cycle primary schools, respectively, through the government budget channel (Kelil, Jebena, & Dufera, 2014; MoE, 2002). A primary school with less than 999 students, between 1000 and 2999 students, and more than 2999 students is required to have 1, 2, and 3 deputy head teachers, respectively. Support staff required for full-cycle primary schools include a laboratory coordinator, a librarian, a campus guard, a property officer, a records officer, a cashier, a buyer, and a secretary (Educational Quality Assurance Core Process, 2009). A teacher's normal weekly workload is approximately 33.75 hours per week, in addition to other school-related activities. Normally, more teachers are needed to handle the additional load. However, local practice may differ significantly from this rule for a number of reasons.

### **What makes School Principals to be Less Empowered?**

Principals' empowerment, or lack thereof is based on factors that make them empowered or not empowered (Cordiner, 2022; Mosoge & Matabog, 2021; Heffernan, 2018; Mestry, 2017). Four other major issues strongly surface as making principals less empowered: professional capability; resource availability; professional and technical support; and a lack of deputy principals.

**Professional Capability:** Participants in the current study maintain that principals in the current study setting face a skill and knowledge gap in undertaking school leadership (P2, P3, P5). For example, P3 states that "it does not mean that we have professional capability for every activity that we have to handle" (25/02/22). The description of the participant seems to reflect the idea that school principals are facing a skill constraint to handle school leadership activities completely, despite her assertion about being empowered to the extent conditions allow. This means the school principals are facing a knowledge and skill gap in making school activities completely under their control. P2 also reflects a similar idea. He explains this:

There are various moments when you face problems figuring out how to handle things ... This becomes perplexing when combined with the pressing necessity to complete the assignment, for which there is no time for consultation, reading, or serious consideration (22/02/22).

From the perspective of the participant, school principals are having difficulties leading school activities, perhaps owing to their complexity. When combined with a

lack of time for referring to sources, they appear to be in a difficult situation that occasionally causes confusion. The participant seems to think that his professional capabilities and knowledge are no longer enough for the job. Other participants also reflect similar ideas (P1, P4, P5).

Some participants blame the skill and knowledge gaps they experience on the inadequacy of the training they received (P1, P2, P3). For example, P1's account is as follows:

The position of school principalship is becoming more difficult. However, I do not believe that the training regimens provide the resources required for that degree of toughness. Training undoubtedly assists in certain areas, but you will confront skill problems in others (21/02/22).

The account of the participant is about the deficiency of school principals' training to fully equip them to discharge their school leadership responsibilities, as can be revealed from the account provided. While the participant acknowledges the support that the training provided in certain areas, he also highlights its inability to equip him at the appropriate level. The participant's argument is about the inadequacy of school principals' training to evolve to the degree to which the school principalship job is evolving.

Others attribute their skill and knowledge gaps to a mismatch between the curriculum they were taught and the one now in use. P5 elaborates on it. "During the previous curriculum, I attended the training. However, it appears that things have changed recently. Many of the previously un-addressed concerns are now incorporated into the present curriculum" (01/03/22). The participant is talking about the training program provided in educational planning and management for primary school principals, which is currently stipulated to be a Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PGDSL). Despite P5's assertion, graduates of the latest curriculum are unable to affirm the appropriateness of what the PGDSL program is teaching, as evidenced by earlier accounts. Hence, P5's concern may be related to the mindset of lack rather than its practical occurrence.

Participants have explained not only the inadequacy of the training programs they have attended but also the lack of additional short-term and/or long-term training to capacitate them (P2, P3, P5). P5 asserts that "a range of training, some of which had the capability of at least refreshing our memory, used to be given previously. It is now difficult to obtain such training, even for an entire year" (01/03/22). The account of P3 also explains the same thing. "It is doubtful that we will retain all of the skills and information gained from past training" (25/02/22). While the participant's account may focus on the limited human capacity to retain everything taught in a given training, it also emphasizes the need for newer training. Such accounts seem largely related to requests for short-term training, but others point to the necessity of raising their current qualifications too (P1, P2, P4, P5). "Things are changing at a breakneck pace. The education level you achieve may not serve you for very long. It has to be supported by continuous training and advanced education", according to P4 (28/02/22). This account is about the necessity of raising the qualification of school principals in line with the fast development that is happening in the sector and elsewhere, even beyond what is considered appropriate for primary school leadership.



However, the profile inventory of principal participants indicates the unlikelihood that their request for long-term training will be granted. Their qualifications range from a diploma in Afan Oromo (a local language) to a degree in Management without PGDSL and from a degree in Geography and Biology with PGDSL to a degree in Educational Planning and Management. A diploma-level qualification is therefore considered a lower-level qualification for primary school leadership (MoE, 2013a). This may justify the request for a higher level certification at the degree level. Other participants' qualifications are at the degree level, and hence, their request can be for a master's degree level education.

**Availability of resources:** Resources can either limit or enhance principals' ability to give school leadership depending on their availability or scarcity (Gobby, 2013; Savasci & Tomul, 2013). There appears to be a scarcity of resources in the study context, which participants in the current study regard as restricting principals' ability to provide school leadership. P1, for example, states the following:

The task of teaching children necessitates a massive amount of resources. Almost everything in education is centered on resources. Nothing can be accomplished without resources. The existing resources, however, are insufficient to satisfy the demands. This, I feel, is the reality that every school must deal with (21/02/2022).

The accounts of the participant reveal a shortage of resources that schools experience, which he asserts is a reality in every educational institution, despite the fact that resources are critical to the success of schools' operations. P2 also states the following:

There is a lack of reference books and teaching materials that we couldn't fulfill. We couldn't also respond to the resource requests from departments, clubs, and other work sections. The resources at hand cannot provide an opportunity to fulfill all of these. We restrict our spending depending on the availability of resources, and we occasionally skip certain necessary tasks due to a lack of budget (22/02/2022).

The participant describes a shortage of financial resources, which prohibits him from fulfilling reference books and instructional material, as well as responding to budgetary requests from departments, clubs, and so on, despite his best efforts to use the existing resources in the order of priority. What appears to be critical in his explanation is the dismissal of some basic tasks due to resource constraints, which might have an impact on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. P4 (28/02/2022) similarly explains that "scarcity of resources is the usual constraint we face as school leaders". The assertion of the participant can be that resource constraints are what principals usually encounter in school leadership. This implies that resource constraints are the problem that school principals should adapt to living with. While other participants, including educational officers, also have comparable views (P3, P5, O2), participants in the study anonymously agree on the scarcity of resources in the study area, which they assert as limiting principals' capacity to do the job.

However, it is necessary to ask what causes the scarcity of resources. The participants' accounts in this regard follow two lines of argument: whether schools are or are not resourced to the level authorized for them, and whether the resources are enough regardless of whether schools are or are not resourced to the level permitted to them. In terms of whether or not schools are equipped with what is permitted, which is the first line of argument for participants, some interviewees report favorable practices. For

example, O2 states that "the education office is supplying the schools with the necessary resources as much as it is possible for the office and to the extent the guidelines allow" (15/03/22). This is to mean that schools are receiving what the guidelines say should be supplied to them. P4, a principal from a town school, likewise explains that "we are getting a students' block grant to the utmost extent that is authorized for us" (28/02/22). The account of this participant also indicates the schools' receiving all the resources permitted to them.

However, other participants, particularly principals from rural areas, claim that they are receiving fewer resources than they are authorized. When talking about block grants, O1 (10/03/22) states that "The town schools are directly provided with money, whereas the rural schools are supplied with equipment". This means there is a distinction in how schools in towns and rural areas are furnished. But P1 (21/02/22) complains about "receiving material resources that cost less than the monetary resources they would otherwise have to receive" and P2 (22/02/22) states that "the money [they] need to receive and the goods that are arriving for [them] do not balance". Participants complain about receiving less than what has been allocated to them, as evidenced by their verbatim. However, the narrative about the schools receiving less than what is allowed for them contradicts the notion that schools get what is permissible for them, which is articulated by other participants. Hence, it is important to investigate the sources for the difference.

The genesis of the disagreement appears to be attributable to a supply of materials to schools, which causes some participants to complain that they are receiving less valuable materials than the block grant they would otherwise receive. In this regard, four interrelated factors may be considered: if the process is acceptable, if the material provision is made according to their need, if the material is delivered in a timely manner, and if there is a match between the resources provided and the money the school should get. First, the Ministry of Education promotes and even dictates regarding the acceptability of the procedure that "those items which are acquired in big amounts are purchased at the woreda level," enabling modest purchases to be handled by the schools themselves (MoE, 2002, p. 83). This can benefit schools through bulk purchasing, which allows them to receive more resources with their available funds, relieves them of responsibility connected with the purchasing process, avoids duplication of effort and resources, and saves time. As a result, the engagement of the education offices in material supply to schools cannot be labeled illegal, except to question whether the procedure is empowering or not for schools. This can be related, for example, to whether the purchase is made with the approval of schools. In this connection, O2 (15/03/2022) states that "there was an agreement reached between the school and education office before the current year", though he couldn't specifically indicate a particular year. If this is the case, the education office may purchase the material and deliver it to schools without violating existing regulations.

Second, principals claim that supply in kind is preventing them from allocating resources in line with their top priorities. For example, P1 explains that "the education office supplies the materials we have at our school when we have an urgent need for other supplies" (21/02/22). In this connection, the Ministry of Education prescribes the collection of needs before the purchase is handled (MoE, 2002). Hence, the discrepancies may stem from grounds such as the education office's making purchases based on trends rather than thoroughly collecting schools' needs or schools' inability to communicate their needs properly for a variety of reasons. P3 states that the need is

collected from schools before the procurement is handled. If this is the case, the issue may be largely with the schools themselves in communicating their needs clearly. However, problems of discrepancy can still stem from conditions such as the lack of a requested item on the market, which can force purchasers to redirect their resources toward the acquisition of other items, which may make the school complain about receiving the resource they did not request. For example, O1 complains about principals' preferences for certain brands of items when the brand is unavailable on the market for practical reasons.

Third, participants complain that items arrive late. For instance, P2 accounts for the fact that "items are coming after we shortened the school years to the degree that we are confronted with a lack of such basic materials as chalk" (22/02/22). This is a complaint about not receiving items in a timely manner. The delay can stem from the nature of the purchase process, which involves a number of time-consuming activities such as documentation, handling bids, and acquiring and dispatching materials. However, the problem can also be attributed to the principals themselves when they become hesitant to receive the material, to the point where some purchased material for schools remains in the storeroom of the woreda education offices for an extended period of time (O1). Whatever the origins or sources, the school's complaint about a delay in receiving the material appears to be genuine.

Fourth, principals complain about receiving less valuable material than the money they should otherwise receive (P1, P2). If this is the case, the reason may be that the town's schools are small in number, visible to outside visitors and supervisors, and subject to mandatory demands such as bill payment. This may necessitate providing town schools in cash and at the approved amount when there is no such force to push the supply of schools in rural areas. However, principals themselves may not take the skyrocketing inflation into consideration when complaining about receiving less than what is authorized for them. Kelil et al. (2014, p. 7) report that "parents, teachers, and students were not aware of... criteria, either for the block grant or the school grant. Mixed feelings were observed among school directors about the criteria". This means that school principals are unaware of the criteria used to award grants. This implies they have trouble knowing the exact amount of money they receive, which can be a source of their feeling of receiving less. When all these are taken together, the school's complaints about receiving less may not hold true.

Concerning whether or not school resources are enough, which is the second line of argument for participants; they definitely accept a scarcity of resources, regardless of whether or not schools are provided with resources at approved levels. For example, P4 (28/02/22), a principal from a town school who is supplied with authorized money, outlines his endeavor to augment expenditures for telecommunications, water, electric power, and other utilities with funds generated from sources such as the school's shop rent. This is about the inability to cover compulsory expenses with the money that comes from the government, even if the schools receive the sum of money that is allowed for them. O2 (15/03/22), who is the education officer, himself asserts that "even schools that are supplied with what is authorized are not resourced in such a way that enables them to completely implement their plan". This might suggest a lack of resources that schools face regardless of whether they are equipped or not to the level to which they are authorized.

The resource problem schools face is not restricted to finances and physical material but also encompasses human resources and even fundamental inputs like teachers. For example, principals in the current study report a severe scarcity of support staff despite the existence of the permitted structure (P2, P3, P5). P5 claims that "the absence of administrative employees is wasting my time, restricting the extent to which the school has suitable data, and preventing me from finishing the task on time because I have to handle the tasks that would otherwise be handled by them" (01/03/22). The participant appears to be complaining about a lack of support staff within the approved structure, which he explains as preventing him from completing the assignment on time and to the required quality by denying him the help he would otherwise receive from those individuals. Recall that empowerment is about having control over situations (Mosoge & Matabog, 2021; Qaralleh, 2020; Adamson, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012), and the participant is complaining that the absence of those position holders prevents the principals from having that control.

The lack of teachers even appears to be a pervasive problem throughout the woreda and town, to the extent that principals are forced to act as full-time teachers. P4 emphasizes that "I am teaching a class because teachers are in limited supply" (28/02/22). There was a periodic shortage of teachers in the system, which used to occur as a result of delays in the hiring process and, on occasion, funding limits. The usual ways of handling the problem are by getting other teachers to teach classes for which extra teachers are necessary or by having principals conduct the classes on occasion. However, this is the first time we've seen school principals teach full-time after principals were relieved of teaching duties two decades ago (MoE, 2002). The 2002 guideline has been provided as its replacement. What is surprising about the scenario is that it is happening at a school located not only in a rural area but also in the neighborhood of the education office.

It seems that "the load for which teachers are unavailable is beyond what can be managed by available teachers" (P5, 01/03/22). The added problem is also that, as described by P1 (21/02/22), "teachers are not willing to teach subjects other than their area of qualification". According to the participant, "some teachers are... hesitant to teach even related fields [he talks about, for instance, the teaching of mathematics by a teacher of physics] due to worrying about their competence, let alone willingly teaching unrelated fields" (21/02/22). The refusal of the teachers to comply with the request to teach irrelevant subjects appears logical. This is because teachers may lack the knowledge to teach subjects other than the ones they are trained for. But their refusal can be challenging administratively for school principals since it leaves students without even the teaching of teachers from irrelevant fields. Hence, conducting classes becomes mandatory for principals in such conditions if they are, as P4 describes, to "avoid blame from society and contribute to the learning of students in certain ways" (28/02/22). The gravity of the issue, as well as their feeling of responsibility for students' education and the necessity of resolving the problem to the best of their abilities, may compel them to do so. Nevertheless, this may prevent principals from becoming effective in either school leadership or teaching, since both tasks require full-time operation (Tekleselassie, 2002).

**Professional and Technical Support:** The other issue that makes principals feel less empowered in the current study context is the deficiency of the support they are being provided with. O1 (10/03/22) explains that "the woreda education officers divide cluster resource centers among themselves and consistently support schools and

principals", thus casting the support to its fullest extent. The principals themselves acknowledge that woreda education officials are assisting schools by splitting clusters among themselves (P1, P3). Nevertheless, the frequency and quality of the support do not receive such accord from principals.

For instance, P3 states that "the frequency is not at the desired level and is even decreasing from its prior intensity" (25/02/22); the participant's story is about not just the lack of essential help but also its diminishing regularity. Again, P2 explicates that "the support most of the time is focused on gathering data. It usually aims at achieving the check list they [educational officials or supervisors] come up with and does not focus on the problem we are facing" (22/02/22). If it is based on a checklist, the support is conducted based on a similar procedure, concentrating on the same point of emphasis across schools. Under such circumstances, the support may not consider specific problems at the schools or the unique conditions of the principals. This means it cannot be helpful in assisting principals with specific problems they face. While education officers who participated in the current study partly disagree with this viewpoint, they also partly agree with it. O2 has the following to say:

The woreda education officers are doing everything they can to give great support to schools. However, how you support them will differ depending on who you are. To avoid such a scenario, the office is doing everything in its capacity by combining officers where capacity issues are suspected to exist (15/03/22).

The officer explains the attempt the office made to provide support and acknowledges the capacity problem the education office faces in providing optimal support at the same time. He also elucidates the strategies the offices use to overcome the problem, such as combining individuals at different developmental levels. While the office's effort to combine individuals of different capacities to overcome the shortcoming is commendable, that effort does not appear to enable the offices to provide the service that the principals require. This may point to the necessity of its further radical readjustment.

If principals want to lead successfully, the support they receive should improve not only their skills but also their informational capability, which also seems to be deficient in this area. For example, P1 explains that "they [woreda education authorities] generally demand us to submit a report but do not offer us enough information on how things should be" (21/02/22). Likewise, P4 states that "we are occasionally expected to report on topics about which we have no information at all, let alone the sufficiency of the information" (28/02/22). This is equivalent to saying that principals hear about some of the issues that should be handled by them when their report is required by education offices. P3 also reflects a similar idea. She maintains that "we used to lack a lot of information that should have been delivered to us. We used to get some of the information from colleagues who are located elsewhere" (25/02/22). The accounts of the participants also illuminated the fact that the principals obtained their effort information from elsewhere due to their lack of information on certain dimensions of school or school leadership. The account provided by participants indicates that principals are experiencing a lack of information as they go about school leadership.

Participants' complaints about a lack of information are not confined to the lack of ordinary, one-time information but also include a deficit of such essential resources as directives and regulations. "The only directive I have at my school is educational leadership organizations, community participation, and finance guidelines," according to P1 (21/02/22) despite the target of the fulfillment of appropriate laws, directives, and guidelines on the school front by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2013b). The availability of relevant directives can equip principals to make informed decisions and take rule-bound actions. However, participant testimonies indicate that the goal has not yet been met, at least in some schools. This can deny them the control they should have over those dimensions of school leadership.

Of course, no strong scenario can demonstrate the seriousness of principals' lack of information more than their terrible lack of information about their own career progression. P2 explains this.

The career progression as a school principal is not particularly appealing. For example, it takes four years to go from the initiation stage to the next. Waiting four years for a promotion in such a difficult situation as the principalship is unjust. Allowing principals to be promoted every two years is reasonable (22/02/22).

In the story, the participant complains about the infrequency of professional advancement and the unfairness of having to wait so long to get promoted. Unfortunately, the principals' career structure was removed three years ago as part of the JEG initiative, and the five career structures of school principals and deputy principals are reduced to just one (Civil Service Commission, 2019). But the principal is unaware of this development. This might illustrate the severity of a lack of information by principals, even on aspects that are directly related to their own benefit. The argument then is that nothing ensures the reach of other school-related directives at the school site if a directive on a highly sensitive matter involving principals is not able to reach there. In general, the lack of appropriate support, whether technical, professional, or informational, can lessen the empowerment of principals and school staff as well. This is due to the fact that a lack of support prevents them from asserting control over school settings and becoming influential in their leadership (Tsegaye, 2018; MoE, 2021; UNESCO, 2009).

**Lack of Deputy Principals:** Lack of deputy principals also emerges as a limiting factor for principals' empowerment. Data from the study reveals that there is a lack of deputy principals in the current study setting. For instance, P4 explains that "my school needs three deputy principals, but only one of them is in place" (28/02/22). This is about the reduced deputy principals' workforce. P1 also concurs when he explains that "The deputy principal was made to leave towards the end of the last academic year. We repeatedly asked to have the position filled, but the education office was unable to respond" (21/02/22). As can be seen from the provided evidence, principals in the current study unequivocally affirm the shortage of deputy principals in the study context. This is agreed upon by education officers, who even explain its intense prevalence. For example, O1 gives details about how the lack of deputy principals is not limited to certain schools but is manifest throughout the woreda. He explains that "there are 13 vacant positions for deputy principals, which the woreda couldn't fill" (10/03/22). This clearly depicts a severe shortage of deputy principals in the study context.

The participants, especially the principals, voiced that the lack of deputy principals is preventing them from completing their school leadership responsibilities on time and to the required level. P5, for example, explicates this: "I am carrying the entire leadership responsibility myself... But I am being challenged to do all that is appropriate to be done since I am an individual who is acting as two" (01/03/22). This could include, for example, performing a task alone that would normally be performed by two people and for which one person's time and resources are insufficient. P1 also states that "due to a lack of deputy principals, we are responding to urgent requirements rather than strategically focusing on school leadership" (21/02/22). The participant's accounts may also be about dealing with emergencies rather than working actively toward the fulfillment of educational goals. The participants' idea can be that the lack of deputy principals is preventing them from doing the needed activities, completing the job on time, or performing it to its quality level, making them disempowered.

The lack of empowerment among principals due to a lack of deputy principals should come as no surprise, as the position's function is to empower them. Normally, doing school leadership alone or with a reduced workforce when the job requires more individuals does not allow principals to have control over school leadership and facilitate job completion. When presented with such a circumstance, principals may choose to handle administrative responsibilities such as recording and reporting since they are visible but overlook instructional activities such as class observation, which can be damaging to students' learning (Gurmu, 2020; Tekleselassie, 2002).

At this juncture, it may be appropriate to question what caused the lack of deputy principals. According to the obtained data, the lack of deputy principals is caused by three interconnected variables, indicating the complexities of the situation. Firstly, the data reveal that the demotion of the job grade of deputy principalship, which comes with fewer salary benefits, dissuades individuals from taking on the position (P2, P3). Participants argue that the demoted job grade of deputy principalship makes potential candidates uninterested in the position due to its unappealing perks package, making it difficult for education offices to fill vacant positions. The data obtained from official documents also testifies to the same truth. The Ethiopian Government released a Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 1064/2017 (FDRE, 2017), which is intended for evaluating and grading jobs across the public sector, among other things, to make jobs comparable and assign similar remuneration to comparable jobs. As a result, the job grades across sectors, including those of principals and deputy principals, are determined. Unfortunately, the grade of deputy principalship has been demoted by one level from its previous equal status with the job grade of principalship (Civil Service Commission, 2019). This frustrates potential candidates and makes them uninterested in taking on the post, leaving the position of deputy principal unfilled at a number of schools. "[D]eputyprincipalship is the major part of the whole arena of school leadership—a task with its own huge responsibility" (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022). Hence, the lack of deputies challenges the ability of principals to have control over school leadership.

Secondly, the JEG endeavor also sets the number of years of experience required for the position, which also seems to affect the effort of filling the deputy principalship position. Previously, five years of service were required to assume both principal and deputy principal roles (Gurmu, 2020; MoE, 2013b), but the JEG brings that up to 14 years (Civil Service Commission, 2019). However, the necessity of having 14 years of

experience to assume both the principalship and the deputy principalship is unexpected given the lower job grade for the deputy principalship. The JEG may employ different logic to determine job grades and experience needed to achieve principalship and deputy principalship, such as estimation of workload (Civil Service Commission, 2019). The increase in the number of service years needed for deputy and principalships can be seen positively since it has the potential to bring in people with a considered year of experience to leadership roles, which school leadership can benefit from. Nevertheless, the requirement of the same year of experience for two jobs of different levels and benefits may not entice individuals to assume and stay with the lower-paying job of deputy principalship (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022; Gurmu, 2020). This can make school leadership positions vacant, which challenges school principals to have control over their jobs.

Thirdly, the mismatch between the locations of the schools for which deputies are needed and the availability of potential candidates who can fill the position is found to be another cause of the shortage (O2, P3, P4). For example, O1 has the following to say:

If the school for which a deputy is required is closer to the woreda center, has transportation access, or is nearer to the highway, there is a possibility of getting an individual to be appointed as deputy principal. It becomes a little bit more challenging to find individuals if the school is far away (10/03/22).

The participant's testimony is about the ease of staffing nearer schools and the toughness of staffing schools located far away. This is because, as stated by participants, individuals who can staff the post are concentrated in and around towns and nearer to highways and are not willing to go back. For example, O2 explicates the following:

Experienced individuals are concentrated in or around the town, but deputy principal positions are frequently available at schools located outside of this setting since there are few schools nearby or in town. But most candidates are hesitant to return to the places from which they were transferred after a prolonged request (15/03/22).

It is described elsewhere that individuals with 14 years of experience or more, or alternatively, teachers, who are at "lead teacher" level or above, are needed for the principalship or deputy principalship. Such individuals have a capacity to get transferred to towns or near towns as a function of the length of their year of service (Civil Service Commission, 2019; FDRE, 2017). On the contrary, because schools in towns or near towns are scarce, the majority of schools for which deputies are required are located outside of such context. Hence, potential candidates have to return to the areas from where they were transferred to town and nearby areas to assume the deputy principalship. Nonetheless, returning to areas with weak communication infrastructure and restricted access to health and other social services by assuming the deputy principalship may not provide potential candidates with motivation, energy, or power. This may result in unfilled deputy principalship posts, which can challenge principals to fulfill their job.



Of course, there is a "shortage of two deputy principals" (P4, 28/02/22) in a school located in a very small town where the education office is located. This may show that the availability or lack of deputies is not purely a function of schools' locations or the availability of potential candidates. This circumstance calls into question, among other things, whether the budget is accessible in the first place or available to be used for the stated purpose. O1 explicates that "the lack of deputies is not connected with budget since it is readily available for them" (10/03/22). The word of participant O1 indicates that the vacant position of deputy principalship cannot be attributed to a lack of budget. Hence, the reason for which the deputy principalship is not staffed can be the education office's reluctance to act promptly, given that the school has at least one deputy principal. However, the opposing argument is that the school is large and urgently requires more deputies. In sum, the demotion of the job grade of deputy principalship, the extension of the year of experience required to achieve the role, and the mismatch between the location of the schools for which deputies are needed and the availability of potential candidates are found to be factors that caused a shortage of deputy principalships that left some deputy principalship posts unstaffed. The lack of a deputy principalship means the school principals assume school leadership alone or with a reduced workforce. This makes school principals assume more roles and responsibilities for which they may not have time, energy, or other resources. This is about having less possibility, control, and influence to deliver a school leadership job.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study addresses how empowered primary school principals are in reality in line with policy standard, and what influences their empowerment or lack thereof. Regardless of the existence of policy standards on the extent to which school principals should be empowered, they are found to be less empowered than they should be. The skill and knowledge gap, the shortage of resources, the inadequacy of professional and technical support, and the lack of deputy principals are found to be major variables explaining why principals are less empowered.

Regardless of the existence of a policy standard on principals' empowerment, what matters most is how much school principals have been empowered in practice which is found to be problematic (Cordiner, 2022; Mosoge & Matabog, 2021; Heffernan, 2018). Adamowski et al. (2007, p. 5) adopt the term "autonomy gap" to indicate "the difference between the amount of authority that district school principals think they need in order to be effective leaders and the amount they actually have". However, the finding of the current study is more about school principals' being less empowered in general than a specific deficit of authority or power (Mosoge & Matabog, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012). Hence, the declaration regarding the current study can be about the "empowerment gap", which can be defined as the difference between the extent to which 'participants think' that school principals are needed to be empowered and the extent to which 'participants think' principals are actually empowered. "Empowerment enables individuals... to be in control of their circumstances, [so that they can] realize their goals" (Noruwana et al., 2018, p. 171). Hence, being less empowered as a school principal deprives them of the control they should have over school leadership, undermining their leadership and limiting the delivery of educational outcomes (Qaralleh, 2022; Mosoge & Matabog, 2021).

One of the variables identified by participants in the current study to explain the school principals' lack of full empowerment is the gap in professional qualifications. The

Ethiopian education system is lauded for forging ahead of many industrialized nations in professionalizing school leadership (Bush, 2020). Increasing the academic knowledge and practical skills of school leaders through arrangements such as the PGDSL project is also implemented (Gurmu, 2018, 2020). Despite these commendable developments, there are also criticisms in connection with the school leadership development in the Ethiopian education system. Prior studies and official data indicate to two significant issues in this area, the first of which is gaps in the existing training, which is consistent with participants in the present study's argument regarding the gap in existing trainings (Gurmu, 2020; Oumer, Dabi, Demissew., Tafere, Hailu & Bekele, 2017). For example, Oumer et al. (2017, p. 92) assert that "giving due regard to short-term training... and post-graduate diploma as an adequate level of qualification for leading schools" are challenges. Also, the PGDSL is known to focus on generic leadership abilities, which may not equip school principals for the complexities of school leadership (Bush, 2020; Gurmu, 2020). Again, both new and seasoned teachers and principals, regardless of their level of development, will attend the same CPD module (Dalelo, Asfaw, Wole, Mekonnen, Duferra, & Tuli, 2017). This may prevent certain principals, particularly those at higher levels of development, from taking full advantage of the program.

Even only just 30.2% of principals have obtained the PGDSL qualification (MoE, 2021) which means 69.8% of primary school principals have no access to even the resources the PGDSL has to provide (Gurmu, 2020). The school principals' skill and knowledge are largely obtained from their preparation and development, and the presented evidence shows that the preparation and development programs' experiencing problems serving their purpose. It could be because of this that Tekleselassie and DeCuir (2021, p. 20) assert that "Ethiopia's leadership preparation program... failed to yield the expected outcomes".

Hence, the participants' affirmation regarding the principals' experiencing skill and knowledge gaps should come as no surprise. The Ministry of Education itself states that "school leaders... face a lack of expertise in improving school quality and in identifying the inputs and actions that will lead to the results they seek. They also do not know how to "convert... resources into... learning outcomes" (MoE, 2021, p. 68). The Ministry further elucidates that school principals have no "capacity to conduct informed classroom observation and provide appropriate and constructive feedback to improve teacher performance" (p. 68).

The emergence of school resources as one of the elements associated with school principals' lack of full empowerment also merits its own investigation. In terms of resource allocation, education is the Ethiopian government's priority sector. This may reflect the government's commitment to education (HoF, 2017). However, this does not always imply that schools are well equipped. For example, the money given to schools through a program like the Block Grant is based on the rate adopted two decades ago (MoE, 2002), which has nothing to do with the present market condition. Though the Ministry of Education plans to boost its rate (MoE, 2021), no modification appears to have occurred yet, and hence the school receives resources based on the rate that brings them meager resources. Obviously, the insufficiency of resources that come through government channels is recognized, and the necessity of supplementation from other sources is stipulated (MoE, 2002, 2006, 2021). Nevertheless, the opportunity at schools' disposal to find adequate additional sources can be limited. This causes schools to face resource constraints. Schools are not in a position to receive even the

money they are allowed (MoE, 2006). Inflation is also soaring both nationally and worldwide (The Economist, 2022), which may hinder school money from buying what it is meant to buy. These prevent schools from using the resources for their intended purpose, which can limit the influence principals have over educational delivery.

A shortage of human resources is also among the variables found to explain why school principals in the current study context are less empowered. By definition, principals deliver school leadership in collaboration with others, and the availability or scarcity of administrative, teaching, and support staff can deprive or provide principals with control over school leadership delivery (Miller, 2018). Apart from their availability in needed numbers, the skill and experience of schools' human resources can also greatly affect whether school principals have control over school leadership (Miller, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016). For example, if members of school work groups such as teachers, support staff, and deputy principals are skilled and at a higher developmental level, they can handle the task independently and skillfully without, at least, much intervention and support from the school principal (Northouse, 2016). This is empowering for school principals since it enables them to have better control over job accomplishment. In such a situation, principals can refocus their resources, effort, and time where more assistance and close support are needed, which can help them leverage their leadership influence.

Regular assistance and backing from education offices and supervisors is also an "indispensable catalyst of the change process" and productivity at the school level (Schifter, Russell & Bostable in Nemomsa & Mijena, 2018). However, participants in the current study reported on the absence of sufficient professional, technical, and informational assistance for school leaders. Similar to the claim of participants in the current study, Tsegaye (2018) reports a lack of support from top educational officials as a factor that deters principals from delivering instructional leadership. Tekleselassie (2002, p. 63) also cites "lack of input on prescriptive and bureaucratic roles delegated" to school principals as one source for school principals' disempowerment. The problem is also that the principals' lack of support can be translated into a lack of support for school communities from the school principals. Heras and Chinchilla (2011) write that "when a person feels supported, he or she can provide support to others, and when a person has the proper space to grow, he or she can create space for others to do the same" (p. 259–260). This may show that a lack of sufficient professional and technical support by school leaders is likely to translate into a lack of support from principals for teachers, which can result in a lack of support from teachers for students. This may indicate the far-reaching consequence of the lack of technical, professional, and informational support by school principals. The problem is that there can still be certain factors that constrain the provision of such support. For instance, it has been noted that there is a lack of capability at the woreda level to give optimum professional assistance to school principals (Gurmu, 2020; Bush, 2008). Furthermore, cluster supervisors are no more professionally competent than school principals and face a professional understanding problem in converting school resources into school outcomes (Gurmu & Fetene, 2022; MoE, 2021). This may undermine the provision of professional assistance to principals and hinder their capacity to be empowered as school leaders.

Overall, authorities (Abebe, 2012; Tekleselassie, 2002) assert that school principals in Ethiopia should be empowered to a greater degree by allowing them both more formal power and equipping them through other empowerment resources. However, as seen

by the data supplied, participants in the current study do not place emphasis on the sufficiency or insufficiency of their formal power. They instead concentrate on forms of empowerment that exist beyond the framework of formal authority. This may show their emphasis on one dimension of empowerment (empowerment resources) while they do not give enough attention to the other dimension (formal power) (Cordiner, 2022; Qaralleh, 2020). A similar partial emphasis on empowerment resources can be found in the literature. For example, it is claimed that school principals are given little true authority over aspects of school leadership (Heffernan, 2018; Adamowski et al., 2007) regardless of the variation of the aspects over which they are needed to be empowered in each educational setting (Neeleman, 2018; Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016; Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2013). This is about the insufficiency of the power or authority bestowed upon school principals. There is also criticism that policies meant to empower school principals go unimplemented (Honig & Rainey, 2012). This is about the principals' denial, in practice, of the power they are promised in official documents.

The concentration of participants in the current study on other resources without stressing principals' formal power might be due to the scarcity of those resources, which can severely constrain principals' leadership (MoE, 2006, 2021). Primary school principals in Ethiopia are also graduates of one of the school subjects (Gurmu, 2020; MoE, 2013b), who may lack much awareness about leadership agency. Awareness definitely connects with claiming rights, and a lack of awareness may prevent the principals in the current study from asserting more formal authority. Beyond the specific situation of the current study context, there is a general misunderstanding when it comes to the issue of empowerment. For example, Cordiner (2022, para. 6) states that there is a "lack of clarity" when it comes to what we mean by empowerment, particularly in education". Of course, the usual trend is to equate principals' empowerment with their formal power. But this is irrelevant to the current study since the participants' emphasis is on empowerment resources that lie outside the framework of formal power. The other reason for putting emphasis on power is that resources accompany power, and whenever there is power, resources cannot be a problem. It is true that "position gives an individual the power to make significant" (Kolzow, 2014, p.34) control over resources. Individuals in positions of authority, however, may nevertheless lack resources. We can witness from history that even some powerful kingdoms are lost because of resource constraints. When it comes to school resources, principals in the developed world are in a better position, which may prevent authors in the developed world from viewing school resources as the principals' empowering stockpile. However, in the impoverished world, resources are always a restraining issue for school leadership (Gurmu, 2018; Bush, 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study seeks to uncover what policy standards apply regarding the extent to which school principals should be empowered, how empowered primary school principals are in practice in Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine, in the Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia, and what makes them to be empowered or lack thereof. Data for the study is derived from in-depth interviews supplemented by document analysis. The data indicates that empowerment resources are not in a good shape and mode to fully empower principals. For example, the study reveals that school principals are facing skill deficiencies to deliver school leadership. Schools are also found to experience resources scarcity such as dearth of financial and material resources, and shortage of human resources such as support staff and deputy principals. The support

provided to principals is also found not to satisfy them. The primary purpose of empowering principals is not to make them unchallenged, sovereign tyrants; rather, it is to assist them in providing school leadership. Hence, their less empowerment indicates that the delivery of school leadership is in danger. The sense of being less empowered also contradicts core principles of instructional leadership, such as envisioning. When principals faced practically with roadblocks of fewer possibilities and feel less empowered, it becomes difficult for them to have a clear image of what is best for students in some distant and abstract future.

The majority of the variables identified as less empowering for principals fall under the purview of either lower level education systems (e.g. supporting principals) or the top echelons of the education system (e.g. improving availability of resources through the improvement of budget formula) or both (e.g., developing principals). However, educational officers and principals are unable to consider what they can do to change the situation and they externalize the source of the problem. For example, education offices attribute the deficiency to budget shortage rather than looking at what they can do to appropriately support principals to empower them. The principals also do not recognize the possibility of empowering themselves through avenues such as continuous professional development. This indicates the low readiness of key stakeholders to solve some of the challenges which makes it less likely for the situation to change at least in short time. It is also controversial if some of the actions adopted by principals to address problems, such as mandating teachers to teach unrelated courses or conducting class by themselves, have significant academic value that extends beyond keeping students in schools.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study's findings and conclusion reached, the following actions are suggested:

- In order to improve the professional capability of principals to empower them, woreda and town education offices have to support principals with short-term leadership and management training that can be supplied at school, cluster resources centre and possibly at woreda and town education office levels.
- Education offices and principals must focus on resources available at their disposal in empowering principals in addition to looking at resources beyond their circle. For example, the implementation of continuous professional development that is implemented at school level should get attention and the resource it provides should be exploited to its maximum level rather than simply waiting for training resources that come from outside.
- Woreda and town education offices, as well as woreda or town administration have to also make an attempt to provide schools with necessary resources at least to the level to which schools are permitted, and at best, to the level that provides school principals some degree of flexibility to influence school situations. Though the regular education budget comes from the above educational structure, these parties have a capacity to help the mobilization of resources from different stakeholders including community and help to augment school resources.
- The Town and woreda education offices have to also provide principals with adequate informational and technical support to empower them to the needed level.
- Principals' leadership effort also needs to be supported by availability of deputy principals. Since deputy principals seem to be lacking due to lack of individuals who

are willingly assume school leadership, woreda and town education offices have to make their effort in supporting potential candidates and encourage them so that they can retain deputy school leadership. Though the problem of potential candidates' lack interest may connect with issues that extend beyond their boundary of possibility, their making such effort can improve the situation to certain extent.

- The current study undertaken in a zone with unique features. As a result, generalization to a broader educational context may not be appropriate. Furthermore, the study is a qualitative study with a small sample size and few variables. Future studies may use a quantitative or hybrid design, involving more participants and considering more empowerment variables for school principals.

**Note:** After the collection of data for this study, the administrative jurisdiction known as "Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine" in Oromia Regional State is replaced with "Sheger City".

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