

Sharing responsibility: student leadership and accountability mechanisms at an urban government primary school in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract. This paper introduces student leadership and internal accountability mechanisms at a government primary school in Ethiopia. The network system (also known as ‘one to five’) is a means of sharing responsibility with students for supporting the academic learning, and regulating the behaviour, of their peers. Another practice, *gim gima*, is a forum for public critique, whereby students, teachers and others in the school community evaluate the conduct of their peers and leaders, with a view to identifying misconduct, learning from mistakes, and making future improvements. This paper draws from ethnographic research undertaken for my PhD research.

Key words: accountability; Ethiopia; evaluation; *gim gima*; network system; participation; primary school; student leadership

The context: expansion, quality concerns and the policy response

The last twenty-five years have seen a popular expansion in primary schooling in Ethiopia, in which time enrolment has increased from three to 18 million students (MOE 2015). In this period, primary schooling has gone from being an institution for the few to a legal requirement for all, and Ethiopia has transitioned from having one of the lowest rates of educational participation in the world, to enrolling 85% of young people aged 7-14 (ODI 2011). The number of primary schools has increased from 11,000 to 32,048 (MOE 2015), up to 10% of which are non-governmental, run by religious organisations, NGOs or private investors (MOE 2012). This threefold increase in schools has required massive state investment, with education accounting for 20-25% of total government spending over the past decade (ODI 2011; MOE 2015: 134). Nevertheless, this only partly-covers the costs of developing and maintaining the school system, and since the early years of this century there has been a policy of raising parental contributions for schools’ running costs (MOE 2005; Jeilu 2009). A recent UNESCO study found that 83% of schools are supported by their communities through cash contributions for books, furniture and maintenance (Jeilu 2009). The varying capacity of communities to contribute to school budgets has resulted in great disparities between schools. At the national level the average number of students per class is 55, 44% of schools have a library, 90% have a latrine, and just over one third have ‘access to water’; but there are wide variations around the country, as Table 1 indicates.

Table 1 Variations in school conditions by region

	Access to water (% of schools)	Library (% of schools)	Pedagogy centre (% of schools)	Average # of students per class
Addis Ababa	92.6	82.5	72.3	38
Amhara	32.6	48.3	48.7	47

Gambela	31.4	8.3	7.9	63
Oromia	35.4	43.7	64.4	57
Somali	26.9	2.1	1.3	93
Tigray	37.4	43.2	45.4	44

(Compiled by the author using data from MOE 2012)

In 2011/2 the national Grade 5 completion rate stood at 74%. The Grade 8 completion rate was a less-healthy 52%, and this figure dropped to 47% in 2013/4 (MOE 2012, 2015), which shows a decline in the proportion of students who are completing the full eight grades of primary school. The MOE is concerned with the declining quality of primary education in recent years as evidenced by the falling completion rate, and the declining levels of student attainment across successive National Learning Assessments (NLAs) from 1999 to the present (MOE 2008, 2015). The NLAs measure the attainment of a sample of students in grade-level assessments. Grade 4 students are assessed in maths, the regional language, English and environmental sciences; Grade 8 students are assessed in maths, English, biology, chemistry and physics. Students' attainment across these curriculum areas is rated as proficient (scoring 75-100%), basic (scoring 50-74%) or below basic (below 50%). Table 2 shows the percentage of students within each performance range.

Table 2 Percentage of students in each performance range in the National Learning Assessments

		Below basic	Basic	Proficient
Grade 4	2008	47%	38%	15%
	2012	57%	26%	17%
Grade 8	2008	62%	24%	14%
	2012	56%	28%	16%

The government has responded to the perceived decline in the quality of the school system by introducing a continuous professional development programme (CPD) for teachers, a revision of textbooks in all subject areas; and decentralising policies for increased community participation in school-level monitoring, evaluation and decision-making, including the school improvement programme (SIP) and the Parent Student Teacher Association (PSTA) (MOE 2004, 2008; Mitchell 2013, 2015a). The effects of this national policy context have not been studied at the school level.

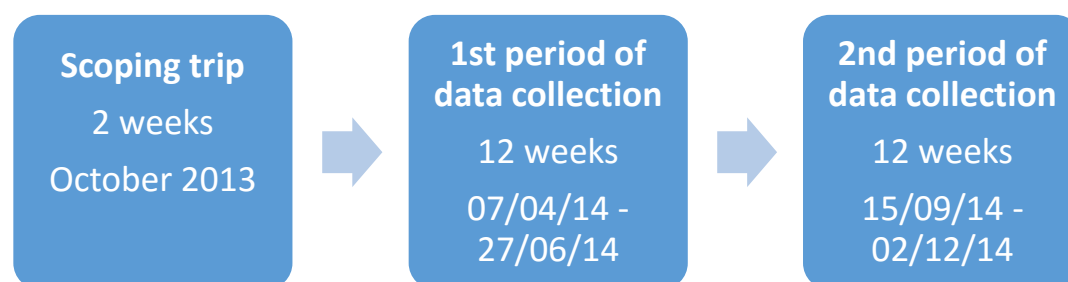
Ethnographic case study

This study aimed to develop theoretical and empirical insights into the purposes attached to the school by constituents of a single school community, and the nature of participation and influence of different groups in school. It was framed by these overarching questions:

RQ1 What range of interests and agendas are pursued through the school by different groups within the school community?

RQ2 How are the participation and influence of different groups achieved and mediated by structures and processes in school?

To address these questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at ‘Ketema School’, an urban government primary school in Tigray Region, northern Ethiopia.



Fieldwork involved collecting data from lessons, exams, meetings and various other social activities in and around the school, as well as focusing on the experiences of a single class (6/7B) of 45 students aged ten to 14 years old as they passed through Grade 6 and into Grade 7. Methodological accounts are reported elsewhere (Mitchell 2015b; Mitchell forthcoming).

This paper now provides a descriptive account of two indigenous practices at Ketema School: the student network system, which is a means of sharing responsibility with students for providing academic and behavioural support; and *gim gima* (public evaluation), which is an internal accountability (Elmore 2004) and decision-making forum.

The student network system: sharing responsibility for academic and behavioural support

The ‘one to five’ network system is used across the country, including in the agricultural, health and security sectors (Seger et al. 2009; Maes et al. 2015). In school, students are ranked in relation to their classmates based on their performance across the academic programme. The highest-ranking students are then distributed around the class, one per desk. These ‘network leaders’ are responsible for supporting the studies of 5 or 6 peers at their desk. Network leaders not only support their peers by sharing their work, answering questions and explaining concepts, but also facilitate group work during the lesson, which teachers told me serves to encourage the participation of their peers. The organisation of seating around the network system means that no student lacks a teacher-identified peer to visually model what it means to be a good student (see Figure 1). Even before the teacher enters the class, network leaders take out their textbooks and turn to the right page; they, stand to greet the teacher; copy the title as it is written on the board; reinforce the teacher’s call for silence, and act quickly upon instructions.

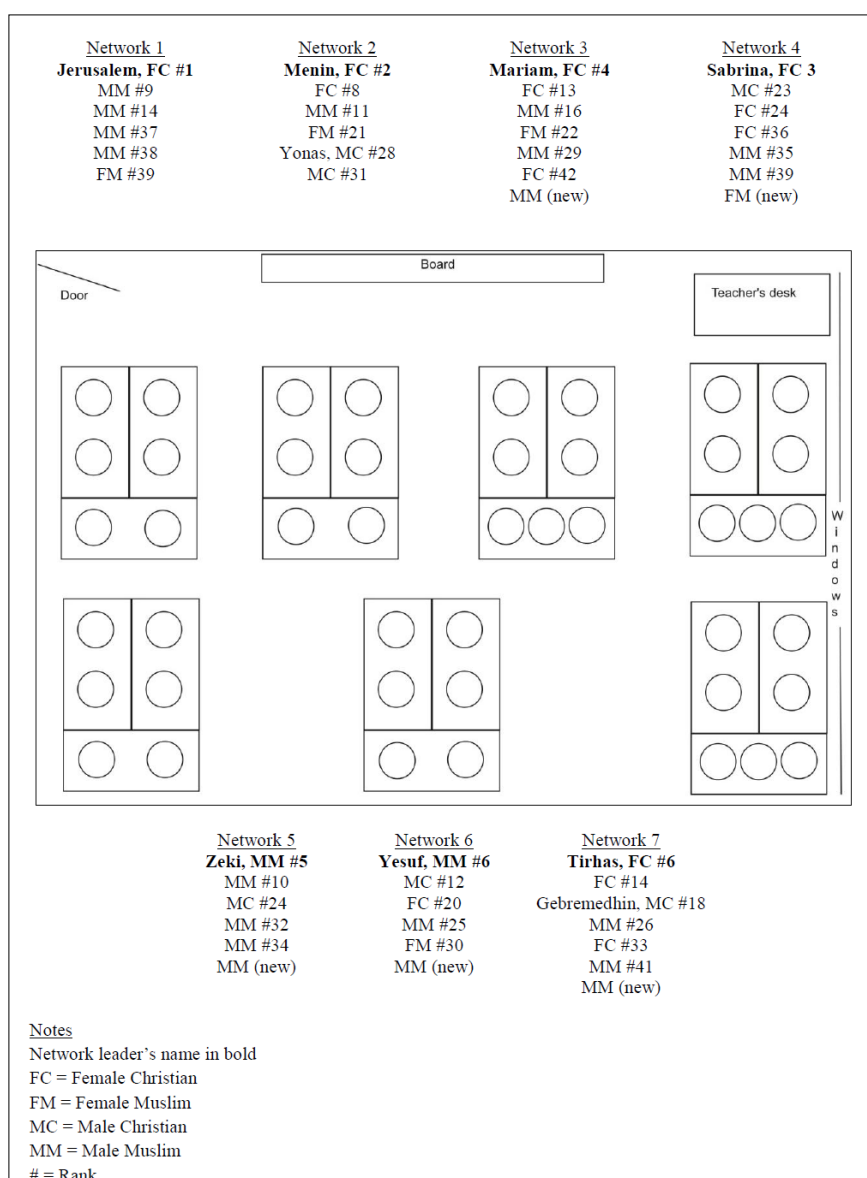


Figure 1 The classroom organisation for 7B in 2014/5.

While teachers tend to describe the network system in terms of academic support, students additionally identify it as a means of controlling behaviour. Asked ‘what is the role of the network leader?’ students explained:

‘the network leader should find ways of supporting a student who fails to understand, and create discipline amongst network members.’ (Male Christian Grade 7 student, interview)

‘As a network leader I support students to help each other to understand what is not clear from the lesson. To support the poor students, and to make the noisy and disturbing students to be disciplined, and to advise them to be a good student.’ (Female Christian Grade 7 student, interview)

In summary, network leaders are:

- *Academic authorities*, supporting the learning of their peers, explaining tasks and content, and providing model answers.

- *Group work facilitators*, managing group discussions, eliciting students' inputs, and encouraging participation in line with teacher expectations.
- *Behavioural models*, demonstrating the behaviour teachers expect of their student and actively seeking to regulate the behaviour of their peers.

Other structures for student leadership include the monitoring system, student parliament and the PSTA, which I report elsewhere.

Gim gima: an internal accountability mechanism

Gim gima is a blend of Maoism, traditional Tigrayan accountability practices, and innovations from the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front). It developed during the civil war in the 1980s as 'a mechanism for promoting accountability and democratic decision-making within the TPLF army, before being adopted by civilian organisations in the Tigray' (Young 1997: 203). At Ketema, staff, parents and students participate in *gim gimas*, which are forums for public critique (horizontal and vertical) for the purpose of making improvements through individual and collective learning from mistakes. I limit discussion here to students' participation in *gim gima*.

Students participate in two types of *gim gima*: grade- and class-level. Grade-level *gim gimas* are formal, teacher-facilitated forums for management consultation of students, in which students are asked to evaluate their peers and teachers according to management-provided criteria, as a feature of the internal supervision system. At one such session I attended, students were asked to evaluate their teachers according to the following management-specified criteria:

- Punctuality of teachers inside and outside the class
- Monitoring students and regularly taking attendance
- Recording corrective measures on the register
- Setting homework, class and group work and giving feedback
- Continuous assessment and feedback given (at least three times, in addition to exams)
- Teachers' readiness to use gown, notebooks, duster and textbooks
- Tutorials and other special support given to students
- Resolving issues relating to ethics as a parent. (Grade 6 *gim gima*, Meeting 18, FN420)

Duly, in accordance with management wishes, students identified teachers who failed to wear their gowns, and those who skipped morning attendance. But the students went beyond management criteria in their criticism of teachers. One issue they raised was the Music teacher's persistent absence, an issue on which they were not formally invited to comment:

Student 1: Teacher A** did not teach us as the exams approached.

Student 2: Teacher A** has a big problem, he didn't teach us Music at all. He didn't give us short tests [i.e. continuous assessment], but only the mid-semester and final exams, so we were not be able to know our results. It should be thought over for the future. (FN420)

In addition to criticising their teachers, students criticised their peers. For example, one network leader was criticised for not helping the students in his network; others were criticised for lateness, truancy, cheating in tests and refusing assistance, when offered.

Class *gim gimas* are less formal. A teacher may or may not be present, and minutes are normally not taken. In 2013/4 I attended a 6B class *gim gima* at which the students debated the punishment for a classmate who was truanting (*forofora*). Yerga, the tutor, facilitated this discussion. Finally, the students began to criticise him, according to the rules of *gim gima*.

A female student says that Yerga had vowed to call the parents of the students who failed the English exam, but had failed to follow this up: ‘You should compel us to call our parents. You are lenient in treating us; you’ve got to take tough measures.’

Yerga explains that 53 students failed the exam, and he wanted to see all of their parents, but was concerned that some might receive punishment at home as a result. ‘Some of the students even begged me to release them from bringing their parents, since they are dependent on their relatives, and if their parents hear of their results then they will be kicked out of the house. None of these students brought their parents, and I preferred to keep silent since I sensed their problems; you should not think that I forgot.’

He is not naturally lenient, he says, but ‘as an English teacher, my facial expression needs to smile, otherwise it is not possible to attract students to the subject matter. If I become aggressive you will not only hate the teacher but the subject matter as well; this is the main problem. If you love the teacher, you will love the subject matter.’

Another female student argues: ‘In [our former English teacher’s] class no-one disturbed and shouted; everyone was attentive and kept silent. But in your class students started to disturb.’

Yerga: ‘I pledge, I will not allow a single student to disturb. I will kick and beat these disturbing students. Even I will kick until their 32 teeth fall out, and then let them bring their parents. Please, sit down! From this day onward, please let me tell you, do not blame me “I was beaten and kicked,” I will show you. There is no freedom from now on. There will not be a minute of freedom...’

A male student argues: ‘You said earlier “Unless I have smooth relationships and a good facial expression,” you said, “you will hate the teacher, and then you will hate the subject matter.” But the reason we come to school is to learn: our goal is education, not for joking. And so you have to be strict and tough in dealing with us.’

Another student chips in: ‘You said “If I make you bring your parents, the parents will put the students in trouble.” But it is the *parents* who will be in trouble if their children’s results are not being communicated.’

Yerga: ‘Keep silent now. I will smack these disturbing students – from next week you will see my behaviour: I will not laugh and be funny anymore...Enough for today, that is all.’

(FN191)

The students in this extract tried to correct their teacher for what they perceived as his misguided leniency. They unpicked each of his arguments to show that he was acting in no-one’s interests by being insufficiently strict, and failing to call the parents of students who were failing. In this way, through *gim gima*, students hold their teachers to account, as well as their classmates.

Conclusion

In this presentation I have introduced two indigenous practices, the student network system and *gim gima*, which are structures for sharing responsibility for leadership and promoting internal accountability in school.

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