

An Investigation into The Role of Network Ties and The Management of Public Primary Schools in Luweero District

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Abstract: *The study focused on the role of network ties in the management of public primary schools in Luweero district. Three research objectives guided the study thus; (i) To examine headteachers' perceptions regarding their role in the formation of network ties in public primary schools in Luweero district. (ii) To examine factors influencing the formation of network ties in public primary schools in Luweero district. (iii) To assess the effect of network ties on the management of public primary schools in Luweero district. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design using a mixed methods approach. The study population included education officers at the district headquarters and headteachers in public primary schools in Luweero district. A total of 5 education officers and 210 headteachers participated in the study. The study findings revealed that network ties are an important component in strengthening the management of public primary schools in Luweero district. Headteachers perceived their roles in the formation of network ties essentially as initiating ideas to promote collaborations among schools and sensitizing key stakeholders about the importance of network ties. The major factors influencing the formation of school network ties were mainly geographical proximity and religious affiliation of schools. It was noted that network ties are quite influential in the management of schools because they create an enabling environment for headteachers to acquire additional knowledge and skills as well as other resources needed to improve the performance of schools.*

Keywords: Network, ties, management, role, formation, proximity

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the role of network ties in the management of Public Primary Schools in Luweero district. This was premised on the view that developing network ties is essential in influencing the effective functioning of small groups especially those that are engaged in knowledge intensive work (Yuan & Gay, 2006). In the theory of homophily, it is postulated that people are more likely to interact with individuals similar to themselves in respect to a variety of qualities and characteristics such as age, gender, race, education, occupation and values (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2003). Two lines of reasoning have been advanced on the basis of similarity attraction hypothesis (Wetzel & Insiko, 1982) and the theory of self-categorisation (Turner, Onorato, 1998; Turner, 2005; Turner & Reynolds, 2010). The similarity-attraction predicts that people are more likely to interact with those with whom they share similar traits and in the theory of self-categorisation, people tend to self-categorise themselves and others in terms of race, gender, age, education etc and that

they use these categories to further differentiate between similar and dissimilar others. Similarly, due to the fact that similarity increases predictability of behaviour and reduces communication apprehension (Ibarra, 1992), communication among similar others is more likely to occur. Several studies have supported the homophily hypothesis more so in terms of age (Feld, 1982), status (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987), gender (Ibarra, 1993; Leenders, 1996), education (Marsden, 1987) and ethnicity/ race (Mollica, et al, 2003).

In recent years, networking and collaboration have become increasingly popular in educational settings and local initiatives have stimulated a variety of cooperative arrangements from groups of schools that have volunteered to work together to groups that have been induced to do so in the context of incentives (West & Ainscow, 2006). While it is generally agreed that a network is perceived as groups or systems of interconnected people and organisations whose aims and purposes include the improvement of learning and aspects of wellbeing known to affect learning (Hadfield et al, 2006), in this study the concept of network ties encompasses the various collaborations that have been initiated by the headteachers to improve the quality of learning in government-aided primary schools in Luweero district. There is evidence of various collaborations among primary school headteachers in Luweero district and the effect of such collaborations in form of network ties have not been critically investigated. This study aims to close this gap by carrying out an empirical analysis of the existing network ties and later share the results with a wider community of scholars and practitioners in the field of education.

2. Literature Review Perceptions Regarding the Formation of Network Ties in Schools

Hite, Hite and Mugimu (2010) suggested the possibility of cooperation among headteachers for purposes of sharing the limited resources like knowledge and skills. Under this arrangement, headteachers create cooperative network ties with other headteachers for sharing physical, human, and information resources while at the same time competing among themselves for students and finance resources. The development of network ties in education institutions can be useful in acquiring resources such as new skills to improve school performance while the absence or inadequacy of headteacher' ties can inhibit a school's access to resources and consequently its performance (Morris, 2004; Serunjogi, 2018). Despite the fact that traditional research mainly focused on demographic characteristics (Monge & Contractor, 2003), other studies reveal that location and organisational membership (McPherson, et al, 2001) are important contextual factors influencing the emergence of homophilous ties. Group membership breeds network ties because they create foci of activities around which people organize their social relations (Feld, 1981; McPherson, et al, 2001). The impact of group membership on building network ties can be strong enough either to override or lessen the differences that age, race, religion and other individual characteristics can create (Marsden, 1990).

Factors Affecting the Formation of School Network Ties

Morris (2004) opines that geographical proximity supports ties development between headteachers, teachers or schools in the same geographical area owing to the number of opportunities for interactions and likelihood of sharing available resources. Conversely, it is also suggested that headteachers of more established high performing schools can mentor headteachers of emerging schools, reaching out to provide physical and human resources, knowledge and social capital (Hite, Hite & Mugimu, 2010). In the past, network homophily in organisations focused on gender or race (Ibarra, 1992; Mollica, Gray, & Trevino, 2003). Ibarra and Andrews (1993) and Ibarra (1995) developed a framework for network tie classifications and have made a distinction between two types of network ties namely instrumental network

ties and expressive network ties. Instrumental network ties are those developed for information, advice, and resource exchanges that are needed to accomplish tasks while expressive ties are effective ties carrying either positive or negative emotions that are not necessarily task-oriented.

The Effect of Network Ties on the Management of Schools

Studies have revealed that network ties help to create opportunities for on-going exchange and collaboration of education practitioners. Networking among institutions and individuals in education is therefore increasingly seen as a powerful stimulus to organizational learning and development. Education networks differ according to their duration and sustainability –they can be formed to a specific short term goal (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, 2003). Alternatively, education networks can pursue broader aims such as comprehensive professional development for teachers or a process of whole school change. Those networks pursuing long term objectives tend to assume a more stable and permanent form and infrastructure.

A growing body of knowledge also suggests that the promotion by schools of learning through networking can support improvement related activity in schools by widening scope for leaders to access and engage in a wider, more diverse range of practice, ideas, resources and sources of support by increasing opportunities for mutual problem solving, knowledge creation and transfer and through heightened sense of valuing (Little, 2003; Little, 2005; Jackson &Temperley, 2007). Scholars and practitioners in education have become aware that social relationships are essential for successful educational reform and school development (Robinson, Gallagher, Duffy & McAneney, 2016; Robinson, Gallagher, Duffy & McAneney, 2020; Little, 2005; Moolenaar et al, 2014). This notion is supported by empirical results revealing that cooperation, social networks and common goals help educational organisations such as schools to strengthen instructional programme coherence, thereby improving student achievement (Wells et al, 2015).

Teacher networks are increasingly being set up as part of innovation initiatives in which teachers play an active role in collaborative knowledge construction (Coburn & Russel, 2008; Fogleman, Fishman & Krajcik, 2006) and in which school development and professional development are linked (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2006; Little, 2005).

Research Objectives

1. To examine headteachers' perceptions regarding their role in the formation of network ties in public primary schools in Luweero district.
2. To examine factors influencing the formation of network ties in Public Primary Schools in Luweero District
3. To assess the effect of network ties on the management of public primary schools in Luweero district.

3. Methodology

The study employed across-sectional survey design using a mixed-methods approach. This method was chosen because of its cost effectiveness (Maryam, 2015). The study population included education officers at the district headquarters and headteachers in public primary schools in the Town Councils of Wobulenzi, Luweero and Bombo in Luweero district. A total of 5 education officers and 210 headteachers participated in the study. Purposive sampling as advocated by Creswell (2013) was used to select education officers on the basis of their knowledge of network ties while headteachers were selected using convenience sampling

technique. To collect quantitative data, the study employed a closed-ended questionnaire while an open-ended questionnaire, interviews and document review and Focus Group Discussions were used to collect qualitative data. A closed-ended questionnaire was chosen because of its simplicity while open-ended questions offered respondents with an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers (Hyman & Sierra, 2016). In the same vein, interviews helped to generate views through in-depth probing of attitudes and experiences and more so when respondents' words were deemed to be essential (McNamara, 1999; Kvale & Research Methods online, 2008; O'Leary, 2014). The review of relevant documents such as lists of schools and their foundation bodies, workshop attendance lists, training manuals used by CCTs and support supervision reports helped to obtain data that would never be easy to be got from other sources. FGDs were chosen because they allow respondents to talk and debate thus unlocking new insights about the topic that would otherwise remain undiscovered (Krueger, 1998). Data collected was processed through editing, coding and entering it into the computer. Editing was done by examining the interview guides and questionnaires to detect errors and omissions to ensure that the data are accurate. Quantitative analysis was done through the use of descriptive statistics while explanations and content analysis were used to analyse qualitative data.

4. Findings

Table 1: Headteachers' Perceptions of their Role in the Formation of Network Ties

Headteachers' Perceptions of their Roles in the formation of network ties	Frequency	Percent
Initiating ideas to promote collaborations amongst schools	84	40%
Sensitising key stakeholders about the importance of network ties	63	30%
Mobilising resources for effective implementation of inter-school network ties	37	17.6%
Benchmarking to adopt best practices for effective implementation of interschool network ties	16	07.6%
Providing support to collaborative initiatives in the formation of network ties	10	04.7%
Total	210	100

In table 1 above, the headteachers were asked to rank the various perceptions regarding their role in the formation of network ties and the results showed that majority 84(40%) focused on initiating ideas to promote collaborations amongst schools. It was noted that at the cluster and district meetings, headteachers discussed issues related to school improvement – key among such issues included the possibility of creating collaborations with other schools so that improvement plans and best practices in education delivery are shared to improve learning achievements. The views of headteachers also indicated a relative appreciation of collaborative efforts in bridging gaps to promote improved learning conditions in schools as one of them emphasized; *“headteachers have always been very instrumental in promoting network ties at the cluster and district level. They give very useful views especially during headteachers' meetings. These views have helped us to initiate the collaborative ties that we have in place.”* (Interview held on 5th December, 2019). A review of minutes of headteachers' quarterly meetings in selected Coordinating Centres, revealed that there was evidence to aver that issues of collaboration amongst schools had been discussed quite often by the headteachers. Nonetheless, as the study revealed, a significant portion of these ideas persistently remained on paper casting doubt as to whether such constructive initiatives can deliberately be translated into practical and visible interventions for improved management of schools.

Likewise, 63(30%) of the respondents indicated that their role focused on sensitizing stakeholders to understand the importance of network ties. Through FGD of cluster centre chairpersons at Sempa P/S, the discussants agreed that in order to have a successful

collaborative initiative, there was need to create awareness among key stakeholders such as the district leaders, foundation bodies, School Management Committees(SMCs) and parents about the perceived role of network ties in enhancing education initiatives. The purpose of such awareness campaigns was to win the support of key stakeholders in order to create a community-led working environment where collaborative efforts have a wider acceptance and ownership by the public. In an interview, one of the education officers at the district boldly stated, *“it is now widely accepted that in the current working environment, schools can no longer succeed by working in isolation; there is need to collaborate and share ideas* (Interview held on 5th December, 2020).

Results in table 1 above also revealed that a significant number of respondents 37(17.6%) showed that their role hinged on mobilizing resources for an effective implementation of interschool network ties. In FGD at Luweero boys’ school, chairpersons of cluster centres unanimously agreed that it was important for school heads to mobilize and commit resources for successful collaborative initiatives. This was premised on the view that collaborations require sufficient funding to enable the various interventions to be implemented as planned. A similar view was echoed by the District Inspector of Schools (DIS) when he pointed out that, *“collaborative interventions have always faced a challenge of lack of funds. Not so much can be done if the funds are not available. So there is need for the leaders to mobilize resources if such initiatives are to take off.”* (Interview held on 27th June, 2020).

However, a small number of respondents 16 (7.6%) showed that bench marking to adopt best practices for effective implementation of inter-school network ties was necessary. Through a FGD held at Wobulenzi Public School, respondents agreed that bench marking was important because it exposed individuals to new ideas and best practices where transfer of knowledge provided new insights on how collaborations can be managed. Respondents noted that school heads needed to visit organizations where network ties are more developed so that analogous standards and principles could be borrowed to propel the emerging initiatives to greater heights. Similarly, in an interview with one education officer, it was observed that, *“benchmarking provided school managers with an opportunity to get success stories on how collaborative ties operate amidst competing priorities.”* (Interview held on 4th August, 2020).

Table 2: Factors Influencing the Formation of Network Ties in Schools

Factors Influencing the Formation of Educational Network Ties	Frequency	Percent
Geographical proximity of schools	94	45%
Religious Affiliation of schools	63	30%
Academic Performance of schools	27	13%
Age	11	05%
Academic qualifications of staffs	11	05%
Gender	04	02%
Total	210	100

In table 2 above, respondents were asked to state the key factors that influenced the formation of network ties in their schools and majority 94(45%) zeroed on geographical proximity. It was noted through document review that when the teacher Development and Management Systems (TDMS) was introduced in Uganda in 1993, a cluster-centre model of managing primary schools was implemented. In this model, schools are clustered according to their geographical proximity and all activities are coordinated in accordance with the setting of the Cluster Centres or Coordinating Centres which are headed by the Cluster Centre Tutors (CCTs). Each cluster comprises of a group of not less than 20 schools which are grouped according to their

geographical proximity with the Cluster Centre school headteacher as the chairperson of that particular centre. The aim is to promote cohesion and effective implementation of education policies in the primary education sector at that level. Using the Cluster Centre model, schools work together in their clusters to implement government education policies in the areas of Continuous Professional Development (CPDs), Peer Group Meetings (PGMs), extra-curricular activities, assessment and evaluation of learners, community mobilization and knowledge sharing. This was confirmed by one of the education officers at the district in an interview when he stated that *‘through the coordinating centre system we have been able to accomplish a lot in terms of capacity building of teachers and teachers.’* This suggests why geographical proximity was preferred by most respondents in the above analysis.

However, a considerable number of respondents 63(30%) pointed to religious affiliation of the schools. Through a review of a list of schools and their foundation bodies, it was realized that 98% of the government-aided primary schools in Luweero district are affiliated to different religious faiths specifically the Anglican (Church of Uganda), Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church and Islam. The schools have formed associations based on the religious affiliations of their founders. For instance, the association of Protestant schools is called Luweero District Protestant Schools Association, the Catholics also have the Luweero District Catholic Schools Association, the SDA have the Luweero District SDA Schools Association and the Muslims are under the Luweero District Association of UMEA Schools. Through these associations, the schools work together to promote the unity of members and to conduct different school related activities such as joint support supervision and monitoring of learning/teaching process, conducting trainings/workshops, going out for social days and education tours. Other network ties as indicated in table 2 above are based on academic performance of schools 27(13%), professional experience and academic qualifications of staffs each with 11(5%) and gender with 4(2%). Such network ties have continued to inform the overall management of schools in the district due to their distinct role and influence on critical areas in Uganda’s education policies.

Figure 3: Influence of Network ties on the Management of Public Primary Schools

Influence of Network ties on the Management of Public Primary schools	Frequency	Percent
Acquisition of additional knowledge and skills in school administration and management	105	50%
Acquisition of additional knowledge in classroom instruction and leadership	63	30%
Improved learner assessment through joint examinations	21	10%
Sharing of instructional resources among schools	13	06%
Increased social interactions and cooperation amongst staffs	08	04%
Total	210	100%

Results in table 3 above show that majority 105(50%) of the respondents acquired additional knowledge and skills in school administration and management through cluster-based network ties. According to one education officer who participated in the interviews, this was attributed to the regular Peer Group Meetings (PGMs) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) interventions which the headteachers and teachers attended at the coordinating centres on monthly basis. It was noted that during the PGMs and CPDs, headteachers and teachers shared experiences and acquired new skills and knowledge in various aspects of school administration. The study showed that the interventions focused specifically on interpersonal skills, communication skills, instructional leadership, time management, positive discipline, support supervision and monitoring of learning/teaching activities, community mobilization and school resource management. In Luweero district, such capacity building initiatives at the cluster

level are spearheaded by Cluster Centre Tutors (CCTs) from Nakaseke Core PTC whose mandate is to provide mentorship to teachers and headteachers to enhance improved performance in schools.

However, 63(30%) of the respondents showed that from the cluster-based network ties they acquired new skills and knowledge in classroom management and instructional leadership. According to the District Inspector of schools (DIS), it is mainly the classroom teachers who are always targeted when Continuous Professional Development (CPDs) interventions are organized in such areas like classroom management and instructional leadership. The inspector noted that “*this is aimed at helping teachers develop better classroom management and instructional leadership strategies for improved learning and teaching in schools.*” A review of documents in selected cluster centres showed that majority (80%) of teachers had attended CPDs between 2015 and 2020 organised by Cluster Centre Tutors (CCTs). However, 21(10%) showed that they acquired skills in learner assessment, 13 (06%) indicated that sharing of instructional resources had been enhanced among schools in the various cluster centres while 8(4%) showed that there was increased social interactions and cooperation among staffs in the participating schools.

Conclusions

From the above findings, it can be concluded that network ties are an important component in strengthening the management of public primary schools in Luweero district. The role of headteachers in this regard is perceived to be quite significant explicitly in initiating ideas to promote collaborations among schools and sensitizing key stakeholders about the importance of network ties. Key factors influencing the formation of network ties were identified as geographical proximity and religious affiliation of schools. It was noted that network ties have enormous influence in the management of schools specifically in creating an enabling environment for school heads to acquire additional knowledge and skills in school administration and management as well as building their capacity in classroom management and instructional leadership.

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