Profiles of High School Heads and Readiness to Address Problems of Practice

Michael Amakyi

Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

Abstract

An ex post facto design using independent samples *t*-test was conducted to find out if differences exist in the profiles of high school heads in their readiness to address problems of practice. Questionnaire was used to collect data from the study respondents consisting of heads of senior high schools in Ghana who were selected by simple random sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed by testing hypotheses that utilized independent samples *t* test procedure.Major findings reported in the study showed that there was statistically significant difference in respondents' readiness to address problems of practice. Respondents who had taken graduate level courses in educational administration showed more readiness to address problems of practice than those who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration. Also, respondents who have served as assistant heads showed more readiness to address problems of practice that those who have not served as assistant heads. A key recommendation was that the Ghana Education Service should consider including in the requirement to become a high school head a graduate level courses in educational administration and experience as assistant head.

Keywords: Educational Administrator preparation, School administration, Problems of practice, School improvement,

1. Introduction

The role expectations of school heads require theoretical and tacit knowledge in both leadership and management. Theoretical knowledge in educational administration and on-the-job experiences (tacit knowledge) are essential to school heads as they address problems of practice they encounter to operate at optimal level and meet stakeholder expectations. Woodruff (2008) writes that problems of practice are perceived difficulties in performing a professional responsibility regardless of cause. Problems of practice are mostly related to compliance with policies and mandates, staffing issues including teacher quality concerns and evaluation, and decision making with regard to ensuring efficient utilization of time to improve teaching and learning. School heads face problems of practice that are brief, varied, and fragmented. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) identify four problem categories that school heads report much more frequently relating to staff, school routines, students, parents, and school community.

School heads in Ghana report problems of practice mainly emanating from two major areas: (a) having to operate in a rigid hierarchical structure in which reforms are pursued in the context of political-coercive strategy (i.e., the reforms are determined by government officials, and heads are forced to implement them) and (b) inadequate funding to effectively run the school first, due to delinquent national government fiscal distributions to schools and second, due to delinquent payment of school fees. A study conducted by Amakyi (2012) put problems of practice into three broad categories of leadership-related; which refers to what needs to be done and why execute them, management-related; which refers to how and when the issues are to be addressed, and political-related; which pertains to issues involving competition for scarce and limited resources. His study findings showed that political-related problems, especially seeking sufficient funds and other resources to operate the school efficiently, were the most frequently identified problems, while leadership-related problems were the least frequently identified problems. Amakyi intimated that the findings showing leadership-related problems as being less frequent may be associated with inadequate knowledge and skills in educational leadership. According to Woodruff and Kowalski (2009), school heads who have not been prepared to assume certain responsibilities may not be able to recognize and define problems related to those responsibilities.

The knowledgebase, theoretical and tacit, acquired by the school head determines the ability to define and frame problems of practice and subsequently informs the level of readiness to address the problems. Every job requires mastery of certain ideas and processes embedded in the knowledgebase. Such mastery of the essentials of the profession puts school heads in pole position to carry out their daily leadership activities of the school to set the tone for the school climate that facilitates the attainment of instructional excellence. The knowledgebase of the school head is paramount to meeting the demands of stakeholders. For example, school heads face increasing demands from the central office to raise the academic bar while closing the academic achievement gap among disaggregated groups, yet, school heads are to operate with limited resources. Contemporary society places a premium on school heads who can collaborate with others to create a vision of success for all students by developing, implementing, and evaluating innovative programmes.

The prescriptive path to become a high school head in Ghana places emphasis on years as a teacher to

qualify to attain a designated rank of deputy director of education. The deputy director rank is attained ordinarily after a minimum of 12 years of teaching experience. The requirement to become head also includes experience in any of the following: having served as an assistant headmaster/mistress, unit head at the educational headquarters, or an equivalent position for at least 3 cumulative years. However, the path precludes a requirement to complete professional standardized preparatory graduate-level courses in educational administration.

The requirement to headship seems to allude to the assumption that a successful classroom teacher can be an effective school head even when he or she has no academic preparation in school administration.   This operating assumption is at variance with findings of research on effective school administration. For example, Kowalski (2010) intimates that teaching experience alone does not ensure that a person has the technical, analytical, and human relations skills required for administrators and goes on to state that the knowledge base in school administration includes both theoretical knowledge and craft knowledge (or artistry), hence a need for a blend of the two to facilitate the work of the school head. Similarly, Sergiovanni (2005) opines that one cannot run a school effectively by simply applying theory, but one cannot also run a school effectively without using theory either. Both are needed for effective administration.

The requirement to headship also leaves the door open to prospective school heads who have not had experience as assistant heads to become school heads. The position of the assistant head provides initial opportunity to come face-to-face with school administration without the responsibility of the ultimate decision maker in the school. The position serves as the training and orientation for prospective school heads. The assistant head's position is usually perceived as a transitional one to become the school head (Martha, 1998). Various researchers (e.g., Hartzell et al,, 1995; Marshall, 1992; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991) have noted that it is during assistant headship that new school leaders are inducted, formally and informally, into the tenets of school administration.

2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of Study

The broad and ambiguous professional and academic requirements to become a school head bring to fore discussions on the profile of the school head and their readiness to be instructional leaders and change agents. Who are these leaders and what academic and professional preparations did they receive to assume office? The role of the school administrator as key decision maker at the school level to carry out successful school improvement has been given prominence by various researchers who posit that the factor that empowers people and ultimately determines which organizations succeed or fail is leadership. The leadership role in schools rests primarily on the shoulders of these educators. Any type of system change requires the school head to be the implementer of the change. In a feature article by Zubeviel in 2012, *Improving educational outcomes: The leadership imperative,* the writer observes that In Ghana school heads are either appointed or rise to such positions by virtue of long service. According to researchers, no conscious efforts are made to prepare teachers either by way of special educational qualification or some form of induction and initiation into such professional (headship) roles. Given the pivotal role that school heads occupy in the development of the human resource base of the country, the issue of who runs the affairs of all educational institutions in Ghana should be taken very seriously.

Because the current requirements for becoming a school head are broad and do not include a mentorship programme nor graduate study in school administration, the extent to which high school heads in Ghana have studied subjects such as educational leadership, school management, school-community relations, law, and finance are essentially unknown. The absence of these data is arguably problematic in ascertaining whether high school heads are ready to address problems of practice and to carry out school reforms. This study sought to investigate if differences exist in the level of readiness to address problems of practice between high school heads who served as assistant heads and those who did not serve as assistant heads and also between high school heads who have studied educational administration and those who have not.   The study was framed by overarching research question:
Is there a difference between school heads' profile and readiness to address problems of practice?

The findings of the study will provide data to inform policy decisions on qualification for headship and preparation to become a high school head. The profile for school head spans across many variables. However, this study delimited profile of school heads to academic profile of graduate level courses in educational administration and professional profile of years as assistant head.

3. Methodology

An ex post facto design using the independent sample test of differences in means was adopted for this study. Two sets of independent samples were used for the study. The first set consisted of: (a) high school heads who have taken graduate level courses in educational administration and (b) high school heads who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration. The second set consisted of: high school heads who served

as assistant heads and (b) high school heads who did not serve as assistant heads. The high school heads' scores in level of readiness to address problems of practice constituted the dependent variable for the study.

The study population consisted of school heads of accredited high schools in Ghana (N = 75) A simple random sampling technique was used to select the study sample (n =300). This sample size was in agreement with the recommendation by Krejcie and Morgan (as cited in Sarantakos, 2005) that a minimum sample size of 214 is ideal for a population of 475.

The study instrument consisted of 52 Likert-type items, which covered three broad categories of leadership-related, management-related, and political problems. Each of the 52 items was assigned to only one leadership-management-political typology using the following rubric:

Leadership-related items: Items referring to what-needs to be done and why. Management-related items: Items addressing how and when things are done. Political-related items: Items pertaining to issues involving competition for scarce resources and building of social capital.

The statements on the questionnaire elicited responses from respondents of their readiness to address problems. The responses to ascertain the readiness of the school head to address problems were selected from one of three response choices: not at all prepared, somewhat prepared, and well prepared and coded as "I", "2", and "3" respectively. The decision rule to interpret the response choices on a continuous scale was as follows:

$1.0 \leq M < 1.5$: not at all prepared

$1.5 \leq M < 2.5$: somewhat prepared

$2.5 \leq M \leq 3.0$: well prepared

The survey instrument was distributed-in person or by mail -· to the school heads with the assistance of research assistants. The final number of returned surveys used for the data analyses was 242, constituting a response rate of about 80.6 %.

A test of difference of means at 5 % significance level was used to analyse the data collected to ascertain whether readiness to address problems of practice by high school heads who have taken graduate level courses in educational administration (n = 85) differed significantly from high school heads who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration (n = 157). Separate tests were conducted for each of the leadership=management-political typology of problems of practice.

An additional test of difference of means was conducted to ascertain whether readiness to address problems of practice of high school heads who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration but did serve as assistant heads (n= 91) differed significantly from those who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration and did not serve as assistant heads (n= 66).

4. Findings and Discussions

To address the research question, the following hypothesis was tested:

U_1 is the mean score for readiness to address problems of practice by school heads who have taken graduate level courses

U_2 is the mean score for readiness to address problems of practice by school heads who have not taken graduate level courses

H_0: $U_1 = U_2$; there is no difference in the mean scores for readiness to address problems of practice

H_1: $U_1 \neq U_2$; there is a difference in the mean scores for readiness to address problems of practice

The results of the hypothesis test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Difference of means for academic profile

Group Statistics – Leadership-related problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Graduate level courses	85	2.86	.131	6.12	240	.032
	No Graduate level courses	157	2.01	.867			

Group Statistics – Management-related problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Graduate level courses	85	2.81	.131	.517	240	.566
	No Graduate level courses	157	2.80	.111			

Group Statistics – Political problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Graduate level courses	85	2.77	.317	4.33	240	.041
	No Graduate level courses	157	2.36	.670			

The independent- samples *t*-test conducted at 5% significance level showed that the test was not significant, t (240) = .517, p = .566 for readiness to address management-related problems. The result revealed that there is no significant difference between the readiness of high school heads who have taken graduate level courses (*M*= 2.81, *SD*= .131) and the readiness of high school heads who have not taken graduate level courses (*M*= 2.80, *SD*= .111) to address management-related problems.

However, the independent- samples *t*-test conducted at 5% significance level revealed that the test was significant for both readiness to address leadership-related and political problems,

t (240) = 6.12, p = .032 and t (240) = 4.33, p = .041 respectively.

The findings showed that regardless of academic background, high school heads exhibit similar readiness in addressing management-related problems of practice. When addressing management-related problems, school heads are not expected to challenge existing structures and proffer changes (Smith & Piele, 2006), but follow established protocols. This study finding is consistent with the opinion of Woodruff and Kowalski (2009) that school heads tend to envision their task of *how to do things* as maintenance operation; making decisions guided by policy manuals and handbooks that stipulate standard operating procedures and those decisions with known outcomes.

On the other hand, school heads who have taken graduate level courses in educational administration indicated readiness to address leadership-related and political problems than their counterparts who have not taken graduate level courses in educational administration. The study findings suggest that exposure to graduate level courses in educational administration equips school heads with the knowledge and skills to develop clear vision for their school and articulate expectations for student learning while utilizing change opportunities to attain the vision.

Amakyi (2017) opines that the ability to create a vision of success for schools and collaborate with stakeholders for school improvement is an acquired skill that can be taught to school administrators. This opinion supports the argument of Zubeviel who states that research shows in addition to being accomplished administrators who develop and implement sound policies, procedures, and practices, effective administrators are also leaders who shape the school's culture by creating and articulating a vision, winning support for it, and inspiring others to attain it. It is important therefore for school heads to be ready to address problems that may emanate from the execution of this key responsibility. School heads who have not been prepared to assume certain responsibilities may not be able to recognize and define problems related to those responsibilities. Graduate level courses in educational administration provide the school head with such knowledge and skills to define and frame problems correctly (Amakyi & Ampah-Mensah, 2013).

Additional test with the following hypothesis produced the results depicted in Table 2:

U_3 is the mean score for readiness to address problems of practice by school heads who have served as assistant heads

U_4 is the mean score for readiness to address problems of practice by school heads who have not served as assistant heads

H_0: $U_3 = U_4$; there is no difference in the mean scores for readiness to address problems of practice

$H_1:U_3 \neq U_4$; there is a difference in the mean scores for readiness to address problems of practice

Table 2 Difference of means for professional profile

Group Statistics – Leadership-related problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Experience as assistant head	91	2.00	.244	.77	155	.061
	No experience as assistant head	66	1.98	.710			

Group Statistics – Management-related problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Experience as assistant head	91	2.88	.10	.181	155	.629
	No experience as assistant head	66	2.86	.10			

Group Statistics – Political problems

	School Head	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Scores	Experience as assistant head	91	2.43	.111	11.2	155	.008
	No experience as assistant head	66	2.01	.750			

The additional independent- samples t-test conducted at 5% significance level showed that the test was only significant, t (155) = 11.2, p = .008, for readiness to address political problems. The result revealed that there is a significant difference between the readiness of high school heads who have experience as assistant heads (*M*= 2.43, *SD*= .111) and the readiness of high school heads who have no experience as assistant heads (*M*= 2.01, *SD*= .750) to address political problems. This finding is congruent with the assertion that heads who were socialized and mentored into the position understands much better the importance of relationship building and collaboration in carrying out protracted school reforms (Amakyi, 2017;) Zubeviel notes that it is essential that school heads are able to re-engineer broader national vision for education embodied in the policy documents and syllabi at the school level to make it precise, specific, and more meaningful at the school level. The effective head should be able to invite both staff and students to share in the wider national goals for education through school level goals.

5. Conclusion

The role expectations require a school head to possess the knowledge and core technical skills to address emerging problems of practice. On-the-job- training is more likely to equip the school head with the competencies to cope with the job as it exists, and not how to transform it, especially to carry out protracted school improvements. There may have been a time in school administration when promising candidates could be appointed and stakeholders patiently wait for them to engage in trial and error to find solutions to address problems of practice. That kind of grace period no longer exists for school heads in the era of demand for evidence of instant success. Based on the findings, the study concludes that there is a difference between high school heads who have taken graduate level courses in educational administration and those who have not in their readiness to address problems of practice. Also, the study concludes that there is a difference between high school heads who served as assistant heads and those who did not in their readiness to address problems of practice.

Based on findings and conclusions reported in this study, the following recommendations for policy and future research are offered:

1. The Ghana Education Service (GES) should reconsider the academic and professional experience qualifications for school headship. Most notably, the GES should take into account the benefits of requiring

school heads to complete graduate-level courses in educational administration and experience as assistant head that would prepare them to be instructional leaders and change agents. Requiring graduate study in educational administration could improve the likelihood that school heads would assume leadership roles essential to school improvement.

2. This study provides no insights into administrator characteristics of high school heads in Ghana who have taken graduate level courses in educational administration. This topic needs to be explored in greater depth, especially in relation to areas such as administrative style, communication, leadership strategies for change, and dispositions toward school improvement

References

Amakyi, M. (2017). *School improvement: Strategies for effective change*. Accra, Ghana: Wrenco Publishers

Amakyi, M. (2012). Perceptions of problems of practice of heads of senior high schools in South West Ghana. *International Journal of Educational Leadership*, 4 (4), 274- 279.

Amakyi, M., & Ampah-Mensah, A. (2013). Preparation of school heads in Ghana: Making a case for theoretical knowledge. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 4(23), 154 – 158.

Hartzell, G., Williams, R., & Nelson, K. (1995). *New voices in the field: The work lives of first-year assistant principals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kowalski, T. (2010). The school principal: visionary leadership and competent management. New York: Routledge.

Leithwood, K, & Steinbach, R. (1995). *Expert problem solving: Evidence from school and district leaders*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Marshall, C. (1988). Analyzing the culture of school leadership. *Education and Urban Society, 20*(3), 262-275.

Marshall, C. (1992). *The assistant principal: Leadership choices and challenges*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Marshall, C., & Mitchell, B. (1991). The assumptive worlds of fledgling administrators. *Education and Urban Society, 23*, 396-415.

Sergiovanni, T. (2005). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Smith, S. c., & Piele, P. K (2006). School leadership: A handbook for excellence in student learning (4th ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Woodruff, S. B. (2008). Perceptions of Ohio novice high school principals regarding problems of practice .. Dissertation Abstracts International, 69 (02). (UMI No. 3302610)

Woodruff, S. B., & Kowalski, T. J. (2009, April). Problems encountered by novice high school principals: Implications for academic preparation and state licensing. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Diego, CA.