

Preparation of School Heads in Ghana: Making a Case for Theoretical Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper examined the preparation of school heads in Ghana. It looked at the academic and professional credentials of the school heads and the criteria for their appointment. The paper also looked at the nexus between the role expectations of school heads and school improvement. It explored the career path to school administration and the knowledge base of school head preparatory programmes in some selected countries from a discourse analytic perspective.

The paper identified the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and core technical skills in leadership and management by aspiring school heads as sine qua non for practitioners to meet the expectations of their job. Policy recommendation included the revision of the criteria for appointing school heads in Ghana to include the requirement for formal academic preparation in educational administration. The paper recommended a comparative study of the administrative styles and problem-solving techniques of school heads who took courses in educational administration and those who did not.

Keywords: School administration, preparation programmes, theoretical knowledge

1. Introduction

Literature is replete with findings of researchers showing how student achievement, in particular, and school improvement, in general, is linked to the leadership in the school. Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) examining the works of various authors (e.g., Hallinger, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) concluded that there is accumulation of evidence to suggest that school heads make a difference. The emphasis on the school leader as key to achieving the mission of the school was given credence by Bennis and Nanus (1985), who argued that the factor that empowers people and ultimately determines which organizations succeed or fail is leadership. In reference to schools, the above statements are applicable to school heads.

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. School heads play a key role in school improvement, because they influence the quality of the educational programmes, teacher professional growth, and school climate. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) suggest that the leadership of the school head is critical for assisting individual teachers to improve their performance.

McEwan (2003) observes that while researchers have generated slightly different set of descriptors that characterize effective or excellent schools, one variable always emerges as critically important—the leadership abilities of the school head. It is the daily leadership activities of school heads that set the tone for the school climate. Kimball (2011) intimates that the school head is expected to harness the teaching talents in the school in a manner that will produce instructional improvement strategies to result in improved student learning.

The school head is expected to facilitate the attainment of instructional excellence and set the agenda which determine the persons to be involved in making important decisions concerning the school, and the optimum level of stakeholder involvement. According to Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010), school heads play three inter-related roles that are essential to improving the performance of schools: (a) focusing the mission and goals of the school, (b) supporting trust and collaboration in the building, and (c) actively supporting instruction.

The normative role of today's school head has changed from primarily manager to primarily instructional leader, facilitator, and communicator. Kowalski (2010) observes that society now places a premium on school leaders who can collaborate with others to create a vision of success for all students, and who can use their skills to communicate effectively and build a learning community. For example, in highly effective schools, top-down decision making is replaced with democratic decision making—a process that gives teachers, parents, and other stakeholders opportunities to plan school-improvement initiatives. The operational model of a hierarchical structure in these schools has been replaced with intersecting spheres of influence (Hanson, 2003). The paradigm shift found in effective schools requires cultural change in traditional schools.

The urgency for the new paradigm is summed up by a member of the task force on “Reinventing the Principalship” constituted by School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, DC in 2000, who intimated that “no one can say for certain how the schools of the new century will differ from those of the past century, but there can be little doubt that these schools will require different forms of leadership” (p.1). This new paradigm puts the school head at the front and center of school

reform; leading change in the school and involving the community. The school head is responsible for identifying stakeholder expectations for promoting the development of competencies necessary for staff to meet the expectations. The school head is expected to be the agent of change—the fulcrum of the change process. Fullan (2003) suggests that it is the school head who introduces the change agenda and then adapts it continually in response to those who will have to live with it. Moreover, this administrator is expected to give equal attention to enabling others, especially teachers, to be leaders in the school.

2. Career Path to School Headship

Although those who are appointed school heads are usually selected from the ranks of teachers who are thought to be especially effective, after their appointments, they engage very little in the technical aspects of teaching that earned them their reputations (Oduro & Bosu, 2010). Owens and Valesky (2007) argue the skills needed to do the work, and the outcomes by which one's success is judged are so different, that one literally leaves teaching when appointed as school head and enters a new and different occupation.

Cowie and Crawford (2007) posit that there should be no argument among policymakers over the need to develop the capacities of those who aspire to become school heads. The argument should rather center on the type of preparation programmes that are needed. Upon appointment as school head, leaders acquire power and cachet, and are therefore, inevitably pulled and hauled from many different directions by those who want to enlist that power and cachet in support of their causes. Preparation for such conditions is in part cognitive—learning basic principles of organization and the behaviour of people who work in them (Hanson, 2003).

Stein and Gewirtzman (2003) argue that if high quality school leaders are so important, it must be determined where they come from and whose responsibility it is to develop them. According to Lashway, Mazzarella, and Grundy (2006), every job requires mastery of certain ideas and processes, and in education, they are addressed in professional preparation programmes. The professional preparation programmes are designed to equip aspiring school heads with the relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions for the position. Prescribed courses to prepare school heads focus on concepts and procedures school heads must know and use to increase student achievement and to meet the demands of new accountability systems.

Many countries (e.g., Tanzania, India, Malaysia, USA) require formal academic preparation in educational administration (or principalship) as prerequisite for appointment as school head. For example, Tanzania requires aspiring school heads to attend the Agency for the Development of Educational Management (ADEM), which is designated government agency to provide preparation in educational leadership, management, and administration. The ADEM offers prescribed courses in organisation theories, management and administration; management and supervision of curriculum implementation; human resources management; educational action research; financial management and economics of education; management of material resources; school management and leadership; educational policy and legislation; guidance and counseling; and development studies.

The Institute of Principalship at the University of Malaya, Malaysia, offers a graduate programme in principalship to provide prospective educational leaders with the knowledge and skills essential in leading and managing educational institutions. The Institute runs courses in school governance and management; research and statistics for principals; theory and research in school leadership and management; school leadership and instructional supervision; curriculum leadership and pedagogy; human resource management in educational organizations; school financial management; and school management and law.

In the US, the aspiring school head should possess the principal's license, which is acquired after going through prescribed courses in educational administration (e.g., organizational theory and practice, principalship, curriculum leadership and development, school law, school finance, human resource management) offered by a university. According to Young and Petersen (2002), the National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation (NCAELP) in the US asserts that school principals need to be well prepared and proposes that the preparation of principals be a shared responsibility of universities and school districts. Herrington and Wills (2005) note that the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in the US argue that professional preparation will equip school principals with the relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions for the position. The NAESP and NASSP postulate that the acquisition of the relevant knowledge, skills, and disposition acquired through formal preparation is the assured means of maintaining the quality of school principals.

Lashway (2006) sees a period of formal preparation as a crucial socialization tool which enables aspiring school leaders to consciously confront the issues they will face as school heads. He identifies the period of formal preparation as providing the opportunity for focused reflection on school leadership dilemma, because once on the job, school heads leaders will find reflective opportunities to be much rarer.

McGough (2003) opines that three broad notions of the school head as technician, as expert, and as craftsman define the curricula and knowledge base of formal academic preparation. First, the technician notion focuses on courses (e.g., organizational development, leadership theories, financial administration, research methods) that

provide aspiring school heads with knowledge in the rudiments to be both managers and instructional leaders. Second, the expert notion focuses on pedagogy (e.g., use of case studies) that sharpens the problem-solving and decision-making skills of aspiring school heads. Finally, the craftsperson notion offers aspiring school heads the opportunity to engage in reflective practice toward a reality based understanding of the role of a school head. Petzko (2008) observes that the core of the knowledge base of formal academic preparation for school heads is driven by the urgency to enhance the knowledge, skills, and disposition in human relations and personnel domains, ability to communicate (e.g., shared vision), resolve conflicts, motivate employees, manage teams, select, evaluate, and further develop faculty and staff.

3. Career Path to School Headship in Ghana

School heads in Ghana are not required to complete a professional standardized preparatory programme in educational administration. The Ghana Education Service (GES)—the body empowered by the constitutions of Ghana to conduct pre-tertiary education—has no requirement for a prospective school head to complete a specified academic preparatory programme in post-graduate studies in educational administration or educational leadership. The Ghana Education Service Council (ESC, 2009) requires school heads in Ghana to meet the following criteria to be eligible as a senior high school head:

1. Be a professional graduate teacher with satisfactory work history and conduct within the GES.
2. Have served at the rank of deputy director for at least 2 years.
3. Have served as an assistant headmaster/mistress, unit head at the headquarters, or an equivalent position for at least 3 cumulative years.
4. Not be over the age of 55 years at the time he or she applies for the position.

The career path to the headship in the senior high school begins with certification as a professional graduate teacher. The GES recognizes two-alternate paths to certification. One path consists of an aspiring school head obtaining a bachelor's degree in education. The alternate path consists of the aspiring school head obtaining a bachelor's degree in a field other than education, and 12 semester hours of prescribed courses in education (i.e., history of education, management of educational institutions, guidance and counseling, measurement and evaluation, psychology of education, philosophy of education, methodology). Both paths require the successful completion of a semester of supervised teaching experience.

The certified graduate professional teacher goes through various ranks—principal superintendent, assistant director II, assistant director I, deputy director—in the GES over the years (ESC, 2009). Progression through the ranks occurs after completing at least three cumulative years at each rank and successfully passing an interview conducted by a panel of eminent educationists. Being a professional teacher with a minimum of 15 years of teaching experience thus becomes a pre-requisite for becoming a senior high school head.

A survey conducted for this paper at the end of the 2012/13 academic year on the academic qualifications of 150 senior high school heads randomly sampled from across the country ($n = 550$), revealed about 15% of the school heads possessed a graduate degree in educational administration prior to their appointment.

Also, the GES requires school heads in Ghana to meet the following criteria to be eligible as a school head in the primary or junior high school:

1. Be a professional teacher with satisfactory work history and conduct within the GES.
2. Have served at the rank of principal superintendent for at least 2 years.

A similar survey conducted at the end of the 2012/13 academic year of primary and junior high school heads revealed that about 7% of 350 heads randomly sampled across the country possessed a graduate degree in educational administration prior to appointment.

4. Implications for Practice

The survey findings showed that majority of the school heads have not gone through a prescribed formal academic preparation in educational administration prior to their appointment and subsequent assumption of office as substantive school heads. School heads are appointed primarily on the basis of their teaching record. The required academic knowledge of school heads remains basically undefined. Because the current requirements for becoming a school head in Ghana are broad and do not include prescribed study in school administration, the extent to which school heads in this country have studied subjects such as educational leadership, school management, school-community relations, law, and finance are essentially unknown. The GES policy of not having specified studies in educational administration as prerequisite for appointment as school head suggests school administration is viewed more as a non-science in Ghana. There is little interest in learning theory and applying it in running schools. School heads rely more on intuition to make important decisions.

The criteria for appointing school heads in Ghana show that the GES has an operating assumption that good teachers can become effective managers and leaders without specific preparation. Kowalski (2008) points out

that teaching experience does not ensure that a person has the technical, analytical, and human relations skills required for school administrators. Theoretical knowledge in educational administration and on-the-job experience are both required for practitioners. However, the criteria for appointing school heads in Ghana emphasize teaching experience and rank over academic professional leadership development.

According to MacBeath, Swaffield, Oduro, and Bosu (2010), the Leadership for Learning (LfL) Ghana programme, a programme aimed at developing the leadership capacities of basic school heads, advocates for school head development as a condition for appointment. MacBeath et al. lament that this dream is yet to be realized. The GES perpetuates policy for the appointment of school heads that appears to be incongruent with demands for school heads to lead school improvement.

Sergiovanni (1987) argues that “one cannot run a school effectively by simply applying theory, but one cannot also run a school effectively without using theory either” (p. xv). Theoretical knowledge is an important segment of the knowledge base of school administration and successful school heads apply them to inform critical decisions. Kowalski (2012) postulates that effective school administrators continuously develop tacit knowledge by interfacing experience with theoretical knowledge. Such administrators over time develop the skill and disposition that enable them to adequately address unique problems of practice that defy textbook solutions.

The debate as to whether school heads in Ghana receive adequate academic preparation is driven by two main reasons. First, the educational reforms (e.g., Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education, 1995; Educational Reforms, 2007) in Ghana demand greater accountability from schools, improved student achievement, increased community involvement in schools, and partnership with non-governmental organizations. Second, the role expectations of the school head as outlined by the Ghana Education Service include (a) creating a vision of success for the school, (b) organizing and evaluating instructional programmes, (c) improving the quality of learning, (d) building and maintaining relationships, (d) providing a safe school environment, (e) managing human resources, and (f) managing school finances.

Taken together, the demands of the reforms and the role expectations require a school head who possesses the knowledge and core technical skills of leadership and management. 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 meet the demands of the reforms. Lashway (2006) observes that there may have been a time in school administration when promising candidates could be appointed and stakeholders patiently wait for them to get up to speed. That kind of grace period no longer exists for school heads in the era of demand for evidence of instant success.

Ghana can boast of at least two well-established universities (i.e., the university of Cape Coast and university of education, Winneba) that have institutes that offer programmes in educational administration. For example, the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) at the university of Cape Coast runs programmes in school leadership, management, and planning and conducts workshops and seminars on effective school administration practices. The courses offered at the IEPA include administrative theory and practice in education, management of educational institutions, human resource management and development, financial administration in education, research methods and educational statistics, and law and politics in education. The absence of the requirement for aspiring school heads to take prescribed courses in educational administration cannot be ascribed to the non-availability of opportunities to enroll in school administrator preparatory programmes.

5. Conclusion

The nature of today’s school environments places new demands on school heads. They are expected to both lead and manage schools to produce students who have essential knowledge and skills to function in information and a technologically-oriented society. The school heads are to lead and manage schools; to engage in continuous school improvements and dramatically improve student achievement. It is imperative that preparatory programmes for school heads be structured in a manner to enable practitioners meet the demands of their job. Broader responsibilities and incessant pressures for deep and lasting reforms require the school head to be well prepared for the job.

The appointment of school heads in Ghana on the basis of their teaching record rather than based on their leadership potential and exposure to theory and practice in educational administration is arguably problematic. One cannot ascertain whether school heads are adequately prepared to carry out protracted school reforms and improvements.

Bush and Heystek (2006) argue that allowing school heads to enter practice without adequate preparation is recipe for personal and system failure; and thus, this decision has ethical implications. Professions commonly stipulate that practitioners must possess necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities (Kowalski, 2008).

This paper recommends to the Ghana Education Service to include in the criteria to become a school head in Ghana certification in educational administration. School heads should be required to take prescribed courses in educational administration prior to appointment. The paper further recommends a comparative study of the

administrative styles and problem-solving techniques of school heads who took courses in educational administration and those who did not.

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