

# PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE BY HEADS OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN SOUTH WEST GHANA

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## Abstract

*This study, using survey research, examined the perceptions of heads of senior high schools in South West Ghana regarding the frequency and severity of problems they encountered and their preparedness to handle the problems. Problems of practice identified in the study were categorized as leadership-related, management-related, or political. Political problems were more frequent and more severe than those in the other two categories. Respondents, however, felt most prepared to handle management-related problems. Policy recommendations included adopting incentives for heads of schools to receive continuing education for school improvement. Research recommendations included replicating this study in other designated regions in Ghana and exploring factors that influence how heads of schools perceive problems.*

## Introduction

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), the factor that empowers people and ultimately determines which organizations succeed or fail is leadership. In reference to schools, the above statement is applicable to heads of schools. The leadership role in schools rests primarily on the shoulders of these educators. Any type of system change requires the head to be the implementer of the change. Today's school is changing rapidly and serves a more technologically-oriented society in which students are expected to have essential knowledge and skills. School heads are expected to have the knowledge and develop the skills to create and manage the type of infrastructure needed to support institutional improvements. The school head's normative role has changed from primarily manager to primarily visionary leader; a facilitator and communicator.

Tucker and Coddling (2002) intimate that the job of the school head requires people "who can lead and manage the school to much higher levels of student achievement at little or no increase in cost, in an environment in which they have much less control over the key factors that determine the outcome than similarly situated leaders and managers in most other fields" (p. 4). The readiness of school heads to address challenges facing the headship vis-à-vis problems of practice provides the basis for an enquiry into who leads the schools. Crawford (2005) opines that most stakeholders and professionals involved in education would agree that without competent leadership, schools may be ineffective and efforts at school improvement are unlikely to succeed.

## Problem Statement

The assumption that the quality of the school head is directly linked to the quality of instruction and student learning has been embedded in nearly every major school reform strategy of the past decade. Fullan (2001) argues deep and lasting reforms require a paradigm shift in the way principals function. School heads now have broader responsibilities and face incessant pressures for reform literally forcing them to pay more attention to instructional leadership and school improvement. Expectedly, who becomes a school head has come under scrutiny. The debate centers largely on whether the knowledge base of many current school heads is adequate in terms of providing essential leadership for change and school improvement. Because the current requirements for becoming a school head in Ghana are



broad and do not include graduate study in school administration, the extent to which school heads in this country have studied subjects essential in informing the knowledge base to carry out protracted reforms are essentially unknown. For example, the extent to which heads have studied subjects such as educational leadership, school management, school-community relations, law, and finance are not known.

The absence of these data is arguably problematic as one cannot ascertain whether school heads are properly prepared to carry out school reforms. Instead of heightening requirements for school heads, the Ghana Education Service (GES) perpetuates selection policy and requirements that appear to be incongruent with demands for school improvement. This condition is unlikely to change unless more is known about the problems of practice the heads encounter and their preparedness to deal effectively with the problems.

### **Purpose of Study**

The population examined in this study consists of all heads of senior high schools in South West Ghana (i.e., Western and Central regions). The study addresses two overall goals:

1. To describe and quantify the frequency and severity of problems of practice encountered by senior high school administrators in South West Ghana
2. To ascertain perceptions regarding preparedness of senior high school administrators for dealing with problems of practice encountered.

Specifically, the study is framed by three research questions:

1. What is the frequency of the problems of practice identified by the study population?
2. What is the severity of the problems of practice identified by the study population?
3. To what extent do members of the study population believe they were prepared to deal with the problems of practice they encountered?

The study was limited to heads of public senior high schools in South West Ghana ( $n = 79$ ). The study instrumentation also was limited to measuring the perceptions of school heads.

### **Review of Related Research**

For school heads to operate at optimal level, they need to adequately address the problems of practice they encounter. Woodruff (2008) writes that problems of practice are perceived difficulties in performing a professional responsibility regardless of cause. Woodruff further reports that various studies have identified problems of practice as related to (a) work load, (b) compliance with state and federal policies and mandates, (c) time commitment and time management, (d) staffing issues, including teacher quality concerns and evaluation, (e) paperwork and meetings, and (f) decision making. Problems of practice also are related to personal dimension of the school head in the areas of time and work load, effects on family and personal life, and insufficient compensation (Kruger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005)

Portin and Shen (1998) report that increased administrative requirements associated with accountability measures were problematic for school heads and as a result, they compromised leadership effectiveness. Consequently, school heads sought ways of meeting just the minimum requirements and focused on short-term gains. Lending credence to the report of Portin and Shen, McBride (2008) posits that school heads face problems that stem from increased demands by central office to raise the academic bar while closing the academic achievement gap, nevertheless, school district officials did not always establish an environment for pursuing them. As examples, some school heads have had insufficient resources, unrealistic timelines, and threatened sanctions. School heads rarely were consulted by central office administrators about new programmes or policies, yet they are considered part of the management team and are held accountable for the objectives of the programmes.



According to Fullan (1997), school heads face problems of practice that are brief, various, and fragmented and characterized the heads as victims of the moment.

Whitaker (1995) writes that the school head is buffeted by conflicting requirements and resource shortages. He notes that school heads expressed frustration at their inability to get focused on student learning due to the stress of unfunded mandates, threats of litigation, the need for endless negotiation to make substantial progress, and unbridled bureaucracy. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) identify four problem categories that school heads report much more frequently relating to teachers, school routines, students, and parents.

Sayed, Akyeampong, and Ampiah (2000), observe that school heads in Ghana report problems of practice mainly emanating from 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. Sayed et al. further intimate that additional problems identified by heads are politics and bureaucracy – school heads 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). On one hand school heads are relegated to being implementers, and on the other hand, they are evaluated for their performance as leaders.

## Methodology

Members of the study population were identified from the GES regional directories in South West Ghana. The researcher conducted a non-experimental design using survey research to collect data about school heads' perceptions of the frequency and severity of problems and the extent of their preparedness to adequately address the problems of practice they encountered. The study instrument consisted of 34 Likert-type items, which covered three broad categories of leadership-related, management-related, and political problems. Each of the 34 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 participants in the following categories: (a) perceptions of frequency of problems, (b) perceptions of severity of problems, and (c) perceptions of preparedness to address problems. The responses to ascertain the perceptions of frequency of problems were selected from one of three response choices: never, sometimes, and often and coded as "1", "2", and "3" respectively. The responses to ascertain the perceptions of severity of problems were selected from one of three response choices: not serious, moderately serious, and serious coded as "1", "2", and "3" respectively. The responses to ascertain the perceptions of preparedness of the principal to address problems were selected from one of three response choices: not at all prepared, somewhat prepared, and well prepared coded as "1", "2", and "3" respectively.

A panel of experts reviewed and provided feedback on the survey instrument to assure judgmental validity. Also, using the standards outlined in the Ghana Education Service Headteachers' Handbook (1994) and the High School Principal Survey (2008) as a basis for designing the questionnaire conferred a high degree of construct validity on the instrument. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated for the three sub areas were as follows: leadership-related sub-construct was .893, management-related sub-construct was .822, and the political-related sub-construct was .838.

The survey instrument was distributed—in person or by mail—to the school heads of the study population (n=79). The final number of returned surveys used for the data analyses was 61, constituting a response rate of about 77%. Descriptive statistical analyses were used



to analyze data collected. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the responses to each possible problem. The means were rank-ordered from highest (e.g., signifying most frequent problems) to lowest (e.g., signifying least frequent problems). The 10 most and 10 least severe problems were then analyzed to determine if they were leadership-related, management-related, or political.

### Results

The 10 most frequent problems were equally divided between political problems (50%) and management-related problems (50%). However, leadership-related problems constituted 40% of the 10 least frequent problems. Management-related problems also constituted 40% of the 10 least frequent problems while the remaining 20% was political. Of the 10 most severe problems, 6 were management-related, 3 were political, and only one was leadership-related. Among the least severe problems, 6 were leadership-related, 4 were management-related, and none was political. Of the 10 problems respondents were most prepared to address, 60% were management-related and 20% each were leadership-related and political. Forty percent of the 10 problems respondents were least prepared to address were management-related, while 30% each were leadership-related and political.

Group means and standard deviations based on the management-leadership-political typology were calculated and the results are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3. As a group, political problems were the most frequently reported (see Table 1). Also political problems were slightly more severe than the other two categories (see Table 2). The respondents generally felt most prepared to handle management-related problems and least prepared to handle political problems (see Table 3).

**Table 1: Frequency of Problems and School Leadership Dimensions**

Potential Problems	Frequency	
	M	SD
Political problems	2.70	.28
Management-related problems	2.45	.32
Leadership-related problems	2.23	.26

**Table 2: Severity of Problems and School Leadership Dimensions**

Problem Categories	Severity	
	M	SD
Political problems	2.51	.30
Management-related problems	2.45	.41
Leadership-related problems	2.33	.27

**Table 3 Preparedness to Address Problems and School Leadership Dimensions**

Problem Categories	Preparedness	
	M	SD
Management-related problems	2.20	.34
Leadership-related problems	2.09	.39
Political problems	2.01	.32

### Conclusion

This study found that political issues, especially seeking sufficient funds and other resources to operate the school efficiently, were the most frequently identified problems. This outcome is not uncommon; public schools in virtually all countries have to overcome problems caused by limited resources. Specifically in Ghana, the finding suggests an over-reliance on subvention from a central government with a struggling national economy.



Oplatka (2004) intimates that private partnerships and community involvement in providing funding for schools were limited in this country; and the central government, to a greater extent, is the sole provider of resources for education. Other sectors, for example, health, defense, and energy, compete with education for the meagre government subvention. Sufficient resources to embark on meaningful reforms are non-existent in developing countries, Ghana included.

This study also found that political problems were more severe than either leadership-related or management-related problems; differences in means for responses for problem severity were substantial. Findings that leadership-related problems were less frequent and less severe may be associated with a lack of knowledge and skills in educational leadership. School heads who have not been prepared to assume certain responsibilities may not be able to recognize and define problems related to those responsibilities (Woodruff & Kowalski, 2009).

Respondents in this study felt more prepared to handle management-related problems than they did either leadership-related or political problems. This outcome could be ascribed to three conditions:

1. Limited academic preparation: School heads without academic preparation in either education or educational administration may be viewed by teachers as managers rather than instructional leaders. This perception arguably makes it difficult for them to challenge existing structures and proffer changes (Smith & Piele, 2006).
2. A highly centralized governance system: School heads in Ghana work in a highly centralized system where policy manuals and handbooks stipulate standard operating procedures. Consequently, these administrators tend to envision their major task as maintenance operation; making only decisions with known outcomes. Hill and Bonan (1991) write that “bureaucracy hampers professional judgment, innovation, and creative capacity” (p. 65). Oplatka (2004) contends that instructional leadership functions are relatively rare in Ghana schools, because most school heads are socialized to behave as managers.
3. The effects of the reward system for school heads: According to Oplatka (2004), the reward system for school heads favours failure avoidance over risk taking and management over leadership.

## **Recommendations**

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

### **Policy**

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 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. The GES should revamp its compensation policy for school heads and create supporting systems for heads to be innovative. Most notably, rewards should be provided for completing graduate study in educational administration and for engaging in school-improvement initiatives.

### **Potential for Future Research**

1. This study provides no insights into differences between school heads in Ghana who have completed graduate degrees in educational administration and those who have



not. This topic needs to be explored in greater depth, especially in relation to areas such as administrative style, communication, and dispositions toward school improvement.

2. Possible associations between perceptions of problems and personal characteristics of the school head (e.g., years of teaching, years as assistant head, years as head) were not addressed in this research. Nevertheless, this topic has obvious importance, and therefore additional study is needed to determine whether such associations exist and are relevant to revising policy.
3. This study should be replicated in other GES designated regions in Ghana to determine if findings reported here are typical for the entire country.

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