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Traditions and Tensions in Leadership: the Ghanaian experience

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ABSTRACT *This paper will explore some of the tensions that arise for Ghanaian headteachers in trying to resolve traditional and tribal expectations with 'Western' conceptions of leadership roles and competencies. These are particularly acute in rural communities where expectations of school leaders often reflect, and are constrained by, ascribed status in the tribe or village. Gender issues illustrate these tensions as successive governments initiate strategies to ensure that gender equality concerns are integrated into all their policies and programmes. The starting point for this paper—the process of research itself—sets the scene for an exploration of a complex multi-faceted leadership culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership, it is now widely accepted, is the key to successful organisations and to successful schools. There is also a substantial body of consensus on salient aspects of good leadership and a growing import-export trade in leadership development. Much of this work is premised on competencies or individual qualities of leaders which, it is assumed, travel not only across institutional boundaries but also traverse national and cultural borders. Within this growing corpus of knowledge on the nature and functions of leadership are studies which draw attention to the situational or contextual nature of leadership and which probe the differing interpretations that may be concealed by terminology, sloganising and political agendas. A study of leadership in Ghana (Oduro, unpublished thesis) illustrates the extent to which tradition, culture, geography and politics frame conceptions of school leadership. Understanding what leadership means within a Ghanaian rural or urban school at this point in its historical development reminds us of the fragility of generic competences when they travel west to east or north to south. By framing the context of leadership activity with a wider lens we are able to perceive a complex interlocking system in which history and culture are the centrepiece.

The departure point for this paper is with the process of research itself which, in its efforts to surmount political and cultural obstacles, vividly sets the

scene for the exercise of leadership. The depiction of the physical and emotional landscape, with its powerful urban-rural dichotomies, its reverence for, and subversion of, authorities, and its political turbulence, helps us to understand the particular challenges of leadership within one African country. The images conveyed offer sharp contrasts with other portraits of leadership in this volume.

THE STUDY

The study, which was guided by an interpretive research design, involved 20 primary school headteachers drawn from the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem/Agona (KEEA) Educational district, in the central region of Ghana. Its purpose was to explore the meanings that the headteachers themselves attached to their headship roles, what they had to say about the adequacy and relevance of existing headteacher training schemes in Ghana and what they perceived to be the most appropriate training strategy for equipping them with the competences they require for accomplishing their headship tasks. The data were gathered through individual interviews, focus group discussions and observation.

SURMOUNTING THE OBSTACLES

Research into leadership is never a simple uneventful journey from A to B but in Ghana the barriers to progress present a unique challenge. Some of these are literally physical barriers. One can hardly travel about 60 kilometres without coming across a barrier manned by the police. Unless they are persuaded of the genuineness of one's mission the journey cannot continue. Some individuals are, however, able to cross the barrier without being subjected to the normal scrupulous checks because of political, religious, educational or ethnic affiliations they might share with the officer on duty. Sometimes policemen may have no cause for refusing access but frustrate further progress unless money changes hands. Concession to such demands can give access irrespective of the potential harm that crossing the barrier might pose to social security. Money becomes a crucial factor in negotiating access and establishes contractual relations between the individual and the 'gatekeeper'.

Barriers provides a compelling metaphor not only for the hazardous nature of the research process but for the exercise of leadership in which careful manoeuvring around obstacles is a daily activity. Access to headteachers for the purposes of interview required a sensitive negotiation of the barriers with an acute understanding of the political context. In 2000, during the initial stages of the study, the country was preparing for presidential and parliamentary elections, and in two of the schools visited headteachers insisted on knowing the political allegiance of the researcher before deciding on whether to participate in the study. Insisting on a neutral stance required some delicate diplomacy.

Unequal power relations is of itself an immediate obstacle. Association with an internationally renowned university like Cambridge endows one with what Bourdieu (1994) refers to as 'symbolic capital'. This may work to one's

disadvantage as the majority of the primary school headteachers owe their appointment to long service and experience without any higher academic qualification. The academic gap can be intimidating but a problem which is compounded by some headteachers' need to diminish that gap by conducting the interview in English. Their lack of fluency with the language, however, placed limits on how far ideas could be explored, as they did not wish to expose their lack of linguistic facility.

In recognition of the time and sacrifice of the participating heads each was given a small token of appreciation in the form of Cambridge-inscribed wallet and pen in addition to a travel allowance and lunch for those who took part in focus group discussions. Although the purpose of the incentives was in appreciation of their cooperation, there was also a deeper obstacle to confront—the 'Ye biribi' or the 'brown envelope' factor.

Three of the urban-based participant heads expressed their dissatisfaction with the souvenirs and demanded monetary reward as a condition for granting the interview. One of them remarked in the Akan language '*Ei, obroni krom, enne ehye wo. Me boa wo, na mmom wo beye biribi*' (literally meaning, 'Ei! From the whiteman's land, then you're loaded with money. I'll help you but you'll do something'). The second person readily agreed to participate but also stressed, '*mma wo were mmfi me braon envelopo*' (literally meaning, 'don't forget my brown envelope'). A third, referring to his experience of a previous university-based research project, said that he had resolved never to co-operate in academic research without demanding payment, because it only went to enhance the social status of university lecturers who ride in posh cars while they (primary school teachers) continue to walk.

Adjibolosoo (2000) explains that this contractual relationship is embedded in a situation where salaries are excessively low and yet, people have to survive and to do so need alternative income sources.

Having granted the interview through some form of exchange it establishes a contractual bond between the researcher and the researched; thereby making the subject of the research feel obliged to please the researcher. As noted by the researcher:

After I had agreed to offer them a token to compensate for their sacrifice, one of them, in the process of the interview, asked me to put off the tape recorder, explaining that he wanted to help me and asked me to tell him the answer that I expected to the question I had posed. To him, the monetary demand signified a contract between the two of us. Once I had fulfilled my part of the contract by agreeing to grant him a token of reward, it was his turn to offer me a satisfactory service by giving responses that I desired.

A further issue arose in the selection of just 14 of the 20 heads for the focus group discussion. Just as the discussions were about to commence the remaining six headteachers arrived at the site and expressed interest in taking part in the discussion. They did not understand why they should be involved in individual

interviews but not in the focus group. One of them remarked, 'Oh! Mr. Oduro, you did not try at all. When you needed people for the individual interviews, you were always chasing us up and down. Now that you know this group discussion has some economic benefits for the school heads, you have selected your favourites'. This perception was perhaps influenced by the fact that some schools within the district had been used for piloting some foreign initiated projects for the Ministry of Education with associated funding.

THE RURAL URBAN ISSUE

A crucial factor in understanding headship in Ghana lies in the political geography of the country. Quality of life in urban and rural areas is different and attractive in very different measure to teachers and school leaders. The problem of posting teachers to rural areas is a persistent and growing issue as the urban way of life offers more twenty-first century 'goods'. Most teachers refuse postings to rural areas. As Hedges (2000, p. 12) observes, 'choices reflect a strong preference among trainees throughout the country for places nearest the most developed cities in Ghana: Accra, Kumasi, and Tema'. During the 1998–99 academic year, national newspapers reported that 115 out of 262 newly trained teachers posted to one of the deprived regions in the northern part of the country did not report for work (*The Daily Graphic*, May 1999). One in five newly trained teachers posted to the rural areas in the district of this study did not report, leading to a situation where in some schools, two teachers had to carry out tasks that were meant for six. This, unsurprisingly, led to complaints from headteachers about their overwhelming workload. The head, as well as teachers, would circulate around the classes trying to keep them constantly occupied. This imbalance is reflected in literacy rates, for rural dwellers, 39.9%, urban dwellers 63% (Statistical Services, 1997).

Asked what had motivated him to accept posting to that remotely located school, one teacher responded:

Motivation? What will motivate me to come to this place? For what? I came because I was posted here. If I had my own way I wouldn't have come. Come here for what?

The rural issue has a significant and differential impact on men and women. Of the 17 urban respondents to the survey questions 14 were women but only two out of the 22 rural respondents were women. Hence, the male-female ratio in the sample was 3:7 for urban areas and 4:1 for rural areas. Even the two rural female heads were posted to schools in villages along a highway where they could easily get access to transport. Moreover, they did not reside in the villages. In the course of interview one headteacher stated 'We're all males; they're saying the area is too remote for a female teacher to be brought here so from the records no female teacher has ever been to this place'. This theme was taken up by all ten headteachers in the course of the focus group discussion, expressing grave concern about the gender imbalance of teaching staff in the rural schools.

One of the two female headteachers, opposed to posting female teachers and headteachers to the rural areas, advanced the following argument:

If you're a female teacher, you should not be posted to the interior part because there're problems there. Sometimes, they may get there and may out of necessity marry to a man who already has two wives; they're compelled to give in because ladies are weak.

All of the headteachers made reference to deplorable conditions in rural areas as a reason why females reject postings to the rural areas. Some male heads were of the view that women generally like entertainment and other social activities such as 'watching films, attending concerts, and attending parties, which are not available in the rural areas. Hence, as one head put it, 'in a situation where you wake up and all that you hear is the sound of birds, they would not want to be there'. One head said that it would be 'wickedness' to think of sending a young female teacher to a village lacking many social amenities.

A number of adverse consequences flow from this. Some of the male heads spoke of the difficulties they encountered when there were no women in the school for girls to talk to and to deal with girls' problems. Menstruation and other sex-related matters affecting girls present particularly tricky issues. With particular reference to menstruation, it is traditionally believed that menstrual periods of women carry a bad omen; hence even a husband is not permitted to eat food prepared by his menstruating wife. In a situation, where a woman is found to have concealed her menstruation and prepared food for her husband, it is construed as an abomination and a justifiable reason for divorce. The experience of menstruation may, therefore, be particularly traumatic not only for girls with no female adults present but also for male teachers and heads who have to deal with both a personal and social issue embedded in cultural taboos.

The absence of women has wider effects on girls' attitudes to learning. Some girls felt that it wasn't worth studying hard or even coming to school because the female role models they encountered in the villages were either farmers, seamstresses or fishmongers and housewives who 'give plenty birth'. Female teacher under-representation on girls' attitude to education is seen as a matter of serious concern by the Forum for African Women Educationists' (FAWE) in their study of sub-Saharan African countries (Oxfam, 2000, p. 4).

The issue of women in positions of authority is not, however, simply relevant to rural areas. Fagbemi (1996, p. 47) identified 'uncooperative male subordinates' as a factor militating against the effectiveness of female managers of public institutions in Ghana. He supports his view with Ferrario's (1994, pp. 14-17) observation that 'the main barrier to women in management is that of male attitudes'. Two women heads in this study complained that their initial days in their schools were difficult because they happened to be the first female headteachers in those schools. As a result, the male teachers, especially the older ones, found it difficult to cooperate with them. One of the two women heads said that the School Management Chairman (SMC) did not take it lightly when she expressed opinions contrary to his. The chairman assumed that

she, as the only woman present, would accept whatever the male members agreed on. As a result, she said she was once shouted at by the chairman with a local expression that literally translates as 'Don't forget you're a woman, soften yourself'.

Women headteachers in urban schools, however, claimed that they encountered more problems from female teachers than they did from male teachers. Five of the women headteachers (all urban) complained bitterly about the uncooperative attitude of the female teachers on their staff. In their view, the female teachers were not according them recognition as headteachers, attributing this to female teachers' envy of their status as women in a responsible position over them. One argued that if she were male the teachers' attitude towards them would have been quite different. Another explained that female teachers in her school 'feel I'm a woman so whatever they do, I should understand them'. When she insisted on a disciplined life (no lateness, coming drunk to school, late submission of lesson notes), she said, it was considered rude by the female staff. As a result, some of them said that if they had the authority, they would have replaced most female teachers on their staff with men.

Writing in a quite different context Riehl and Lee (1995, pp. 911–912) enjoin all educational leaders to be 'good stewards of gender' and create 'positive school environments that are gender-inclusive'. This is unlikely to happen in Ghana without systemic change in the distribution of female headteachers but even more fundamentally without coming to terms with and addressing deeply held cultural and tribal traditions of men and women's respective roles in society.

COMPETENCES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The mainstream of leadership study has, for many years focused on the qualities of leaders (Gardner, 1997) and, in more recent times, on individual 'competences', or 'competencies'. With tighter definitions of what good leaders 'are' and 'do' there is a consensual basis for performance management and professional development. The work of Hay McBer in the UK has been influential in developing generic competency framework, arriving at four broad areas of competence indicators. These are *administrative* (problem analysis, judgement, organisational ability and decisiveness); *interpersonal* (leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance); *communicative* (oral communication and written communication) and *personal breadth* (range of interest, personal motivation and educational values).

These four generic competencies tend to be seen as universally applicable, able to surmount cultural boundaries and enhanced through training. The model is, however, premised on competencies as inherent or learned qualities which belong to the individual and travel with the individual into different social settings. Testing the validity and applicability of this model in a Ghanaian context leads us to posit a different theoretical framework, one which focuses on

activity, on what people do, not in isolation but in inter-relationship. Through their day-to-day activity and the ways in which they depict it we begin to see the interconnections among their actions and object of their actions (Engestrom, 1999).

What do school leaders do, and why? And how do they account for their activity? The answers to these questions cast considerable doubt on policies which endeavour to transform headship through addressing and measuring competencies, and devise a system of performance management to hold them in place.

WHAT DO SCHOOL LEADERS DO?

Posed this question headteachers often had difficulty in describing what they typically do. As one head of an urban school put it, 'at times, the head himself does not know what his task will be the next moment'. The complexity and shifting nature of the task, suggested one rural head, would require a lengthy thesis: 'In fact, what I do in a day cannot be spelt out at one sitting'.

At the centre of headship tasks are what might be described as 'instructional leadership', although not easily matching the mainstream conception of that term. Ghanaian heads either teach or supervise teaching or often do both. Leading the school while at the same time trying to manage a full-time teaching load was common in schools, especially in areas where there were staffing problems. Some heads found themselves with combined classes. One rural head, who was already in charge of both Primary 3 and Primary 5, lamented 'quite recently, one of the teachers fell sick and I had to handle that class too'.

Difficulties were compounded by the many unplanned visits, critical incidents in school or its immediate community which meant pupils being left on their own in the classroom while the head attended to other matters. Left on their own, classes were often characterised by noise, fighting and bullying. Heads tried to manage the situation by setting as many exercises as they could on the chalkboard, especially in mathematics, or delegating the class prefect to occupy pupils with singing and story telling. Alternatively children were asked to go out and play outdoor games, the boys playing football, the girls a traditional game called 'ampe'.

A consistent theme running through individual and focus group interviews and across the rural/urban divide was workload; difficulties in combining leadership roles with classroom teaching. This was not simply a matter of capacity but of culture and expectation. One rural head expressed his indignation at having to teach:

It's not fair, it's demeaning. I taught for more than fifteen years before I was made a head and I'm still teaching. How will my teachers respect me as head?

Although, this comment came from only one head the idea of teaching as 'demeaning' appeared to be a common concern. The fact that some heads regarded the performance of a task meant for the classroom teacher to be

degrading is evidence of how authority, power and prestige are factors that pervade both thought and action of the Ghanaian primary headteacher.

Supervision of teaching further complexifies their tasks. Supervision in this context is not directly comparable with current practice, in the UK for example. The head, who generally places great store on supervision, is to some extent duplicating the work of the circuit supervisor who has 15 or so schools in his/her balliewick and is charged, among other things, with:

- Promoting teaching and learning.
 - Interpreting educational policies to teachers, helping them understand educational policy objectives, e.g. the curriculum.
 - Organising 'INSET' for the professional development of teachers.
 - Monitoring the achievement and performance of pupils and staff.
- (Manpower and Training Division, GES, cited by Mensah, 2000)

Supervision by the heads, while on the one hand tending to replicate the job of the circuit supervisor, was also seen as a form of preparation for an impending visit, an expression of their own accountability. Heads described their supervisory role in these terms:

I have to go to the classrooms to find out whether teachers are teaching and the children are learning.

I sit in the class to listen to how he is delivering the lesson and how the children are responding.

I move around to check the pupils' exercise books and advise teachers where there's the need [because often teachers] set exercises and they don't mark.

I see to it that all teachers present their lesson notes. I vet them and then give their lesson notes back to them to go and teach.

Vetting of teachers' lesson notes was, in some cases, simply to confirm that the teacher had written down something, without any rigorous check to see whether stated objectives were achievable, teaching-learning aids were relevant to the lesson, or stated method of presentation were suitable for the pupils. With continuous assessment accounting for 40% of end of term marks, heads had to ensure that teachers, in accordance with the guidelines, made a prompt record of 'marks earned by pupils from time to time in class exercises, assignments, projects, quizzes and quick and easy-to-set formal tests such as short-answer and true-false tests' (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 181).

So, supervision was also a first line of self-defence, ensuring that policies were respected and routines demonstrably observed. The object of vetting was to make a tick with red pen as proof to circuit supervisors that the head was in control. This practice was most prevalent in schools where the academic and professional qualifications of headteachers were lower than the teachers whose lessons notes they were vetting, stemming from a lack of self-confidence on the

part of the head. From their own accounts there is some evidence of heads internalising a mode of supervision which was highly directive, hierarchical and intimidating, and often simply a reflection of their own perceived inadequacies.

This supervisory role may be likened to what Evans (1995, pp. 114–115) in his chapter titled ‘The Supervisor and the Organisation’ refers to as ‘front-line manager or first-line manager’ in the business sector. A frontline manager is often referred to as ‘supervisor’ because he/she ‘operates at close range’ in dealing with his workforce whereas management controls such workforce ‘remotely’ (ibid). In business the supervisor is regarded as a member of the most junior level of management serving as a ‘link-person’ between top levels of management and the workforce. This is not directly equivalent to the school context as circuit officers operate from outside the school while the headteacher operates within the school and has closer day-to-day interaction with teachers. However, it does say something about the perceived status of the primary head who tends not to be seen as a ‘professional’. In Ghana, there is a view that the ability to teach does not depend on any unique skills or knowledge and hence does not qualify to be called a profession, the term ‘professional’ being exclusively used to describe jobs such as medicine, law, accountancy and engineering. But not teaching.

THE DISPARATE TASKS OF THE SCHOOL LEADER

The disparate nature of the head’s tasks may undermine a truly ‘professional’ image. Supervision duties also extended to building projects, with the head assuming the role of watchman or a security officer with the primary duty of protecting materials and products from pilfering. Two heads explained that due to the government’s policy of community participation in school management, communities provide labour, and heads had to be at the site not only to encourage inhabitants of their villages to work, but also to ensure that everybody took part in the communal work.

Supervision also meant monitoring activities of food vendors and ensuring that they maintained hygienic conditions—‘even though I’m not a health inspector, I have to see to it that the food that they prepare is well cooked’. Heads also supervised the process of cleaning and tidying the school campus. As one head explained ‘I come to school very early and see to it that the teacher on duty goes round the children to see that they tidy the school’.

The dilapidated nature of some rural classrooms, walled with bamboo cuttings which could not withstand the storms that normally accompanied rains, meant the headteacher having to declare a holiday whenever rain threatened.

The headteacher was the first and only line of defence on health related issues, required to administer first-aid treatment as appropriate. While first-aid boxes should contain drugs such as chloroquine and paracetamol for treating malaria, as well as bandage, plaster massaging ointment and scissors, of the 20 heads in the study only five had such boxes and only two had received some form of training in first-aid. Eleven heads kept virtually empty first-aid boxes,

while four did not keep any at all. Consequently, some explained that they often asked pupils who fell ill to go home for treatment. In the rural areas, where access to hospital or clinics is problematic this can place significant pressure on the headteacher.

These multifarious tasks are observable in management by 'walking around', manifested in the way heads received visitors, supervised teaching, inspected projects, picked something from the store room, responded to unexpected sounds or noise in the classroom, visited the school garden, attended to sick pupils, and engaged in many other activities which might be described by an observer as unimportant and time wasting. For example, in the course of one 40 minute interview six separate disruptions occurred. In each instance, the head excused herself, got up from her chair, entered the store room, opened a cupboard, picked up, at most, two pieces of chalk, returned to the office, handed them to a pupil to be given to a teacher and then returned to her chair for resumption of the interview. This was repeated each time a pupil knocked on the office door and informed her that a teacher needed chalk. Monitoring the use of chalk was because of its scarcity and expense but nonetheless yet one more non-delegated task.

Another manifestation of what Hagan describes as 'African time' (1984, p. 18) was exemplified in frequent interactions with visitors. Most of the visits were impromptu and casual. Some visited the headteacher with issues that were purely domestic and had nothing to do with school business. In one instance the headteacher, together with two teachers, left their classrooms and spent almost 15 minutes bargaining with a cloth hawker. On other occasions extended families and friends engaged the attention of the headteacher as well as teachers, sometimes just to say 'hello' while passing by the school. Headteachers found it difficult to say 'no' to such visits because in the culture it is considered rude to close one's door to a visitor, especially a member of one's family. In rural areas, in particular, where tradition is deeply entrenched and family issues are hardly dissociated from one's official duties, it is expected that the headteacher would place his/her school time second to the needs of a visiting family member.

Gardiner's (1990) study of managers in some public organisations in the country illuminates this point. While the writer acknowledges the importance of Ghanaians' fervent valuing of the extended family system he argues:

It does have a negative side in that members often come to see the manager in the office asking for all sorts of favours which they fully expect that their uncle or cousin will be capable of carrying out ... Sometimes members of the public who the manager may not even know ... come wanting to discuss very personal matters, ranging from marital problems to difficulties at work. The manager is often made out to be wicked and unfeeling when one does not or cannot offer them assistance. The collapse of many a business in Ghana has been attributed to the inability to manage 'the family' in relation to the business effectively, with the result that the needs and interests of the

organization become secondary to the needs of the family. (quoted in Towers, 1996, pp. 495–496)

Adjibolosoo (2000) observes in a Tanzanian context:

The concept of time seems to be non-existent in Tanzania. As such the value of time does not feature much in the Tanzania economy. People do things when they desire to rather than when they have to. As such scarce time resources are continuously wasted. People seem to have it in abundance and use it as they desire. (p. 14)

Departmental officials were also regular visitors causing headteachers to move away from their planned activities. As one head lamented, ‘You have the district office coming to ask for information here and there, and you have to stop whatever you’re doing ... that takes most of your time if you are not careful’.

AN ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

Irrespective of the size of their schools all headteachers are deeply involved in office work. If there is any difference at all, then it is that heads of large schools with student and staff population of over 500, have more office work to grapple with than those with smaller population. Administrative duties include collecting and managing approved fees on behalf of the Ministry, PTAs, the District Assembly, School Committees as well as monies the school gets through various fund-raising activities and donations (Ministry of Education, 1994). Ministry circulars remind heads of the centrality of this financial task:

Remember that the collection of and accounting for textbook fees are your duty. If you delegate the collection to a class teacher or any person, you do so at your own risk. (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 113)

Keeping these records as required by the Ministry was seen by 14 of the headteachers as beyond their competence in a context where this was simply one of the many tasks they were required to perform. Some of the headteachers explained that their inability to keep proper accounts often placed them in embarrassing situations. One described the cause of his embarrassment, worrying that he had been seen as embezzling school funds when in reality ‘it’s just that you have not been able to put the figures in their proper place’. It was a practice of the authorities within this district to place an embargo on the salaries of headteacher who failed to collect the approved school fees from all pupils whose names appeared in the register. To avoid being asked to forfeit their salaries therefore, some heads admitted in confidence, that they underlisted the names of pupils enrolled in the school.

This pragmatic response to a duty of ultimate importance has to be set within the range of activities in which headteachers are engaged and the concomitant pressure, analogous to their UK or US counterparts, to be ac-

countable for pupil performance. Annual tests in mathematics, English and Science had, for them, high stakes too. It was a matter of great concern to heads that their pupils excelled in the district exams and that their school gained public recognition:

If your school does not achieve your target for the SPAM, you're not respected so I want my children to pass the exams organised by the district education office.

To the parents who brought their children to this school, what they expect is that their children should be able to emerge first academically; so my vision is that the pupils should score high marks in the district exams,

As the major criterion for parents in choosing a school was in terms of academic results, the level of respect accorded to the headteacher was consequent on his/her school's examination performance. The headteacher's desire for academic excellence in terms of public recognition is evidence of their sensitivity and susceptibility to the expectations of their 'clients' or stakeholders.

A WEB OF EXPECTATIONS

The range and complexity of the tasks undertaken by the headteacher may, to some degree, be seen in terms of a response to expectations from multiple sources, from parents, from the Ministry, the local community, teachers and pupils. The visions that heads described were, to a large extent, a mere echoing of government and public expectations. In other words, the headteachers' vision for academic excellence in their schools was often not because such a vision had emerged through personal critical analysis of situation or through any collaborated efforts with their teachers. Rather, as exemplified in the following quotation, the vision was largely driven by external expectations:

Also, the parents of the Moslem children want their children to know how to speak Arabic so it is my expectation that by the time they complete the primary school they can speak some Arabic and also speak the English language well.

Heads tended to respond to with compliance. But this led to some tortuous attempts to accommodate all parties. Some pupils expected their headteacher to play the role of spiritual advocate: 'I want her (headteacher) to continue praying hard for us', while others expected their heads to buy computers for their school. Teachers expected their headteacher to promote their welfare and to indulge their failings. As one head put it, 'as teachers, they expect me to be very lenient with them pertaining to writing of lesson notes, absenteeism and lateness by not querying them'.

If we accept Collins' definition of a client as 'one who employs a professional person' and if we accept too that teaching is a profession, then it may

be argued that the government (who employs and pays the headteacher) and the parent (who pays fees for the school to teach his/her child) are the real clients of the school. These seem to be the implicit assumptions of Ghanaian headteachers, construing their job is to a large extent shaped by expectations which significant others hold of them.

In this respect Ghanaian heads are little different from their counterparts elsewhere. Heads in England, Australia or Hong Kong are increasingly sensitive to government policy, public and parental expectation, because fulfilling these expectations is now closely tied to finance and job security.

PERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES

How then do we understand issues of competency in this complex set of demands on heads, the social and economic context in which they do their job, the cultural legacy of their communities, and an undercurrent of incentives and inducements? Eschewing discrimination and favouritism was, as one head put it, critical yet difficult to achieve. Competences at a premium were in public relations, paralleling industry where customer relations are considered as a viable tool for enhancing the sale of goods. LeBoeuf (1987, p. 46) advises:

In any business, people who deal directly with the customers can make or break the business. Make a good impression and the customer buys, multiplies, and comes back. It's as simple as that. And the more service-oriented the business is, the more crucial it becomes to have front-line people who know how to sell themselves.

Heads sometimes expressed a need for someone else to assume this role:

What the community expects the school to do is so numerous and time-consuming that the headteacher alone cannot meet these expectations.

This head was not a lone voice. In addition to the delicate balancing act of managing external relations these same 'interpersonal competencies' were equally at a premium with respect to internal relationships. Negotiating with teachers, pupils, and food vendors in the school required the skills of a transactional leader. Together with the strong emphasis placed on instructional leadership, in the sense of overseeing and maintaining the status quo, Ghanaian heads in this study may be characterised as transactional rather than transformational leaders.

Were we to examine school leadership in Ghana simply through a competences lens we would fail to see something larger. The tight focus on the individual obscures the landscape and its constantly shifting light and shadow. Leaning on activity theory (Engestrom, 1999), we need to see the interlocking set of relationships in a Ghanaian school as a complex activity system. We may then begin to perceive an 'intelligence' which resides within and between the various players, serving to contain and constrain what leaders can and can't do,

a field of action with boundaries that are implicit rather than visible to the naked eye.

This is not simply an academic exercise, however. It has relevance for recruitment, selection and professional development of school leaders. Heads in Ghana are appointed because they have been good teachers, spotted and persuaded by the authorities to take up the appointment. As Amuzu-Kpeglo (1990, p. 2) points out:

Typically, these administrators are experienced classroom teachers who combine professional experience with academic qualification. Some have as many as 30 years service in the classroom. They are promoted through the ranks and given their new administrative positions without the requisite and appropriate administrative training background.

As one head commented, speaking for many:

I was appointed all of a sudden to be the head, which I wasn't expecting. I didn't know many things involved in it. For instance, I didn't know keeping financial records or preparing for auditing was part of the headteacher's job.

This implies a need not simply for more careful selection but for a more sophisticated approach to recruitment and to allied professional development. The temptation is to cherry pick from existing programmes in the UK and elsewhere, to go down a well trodden competencies route. What policy maker would wish to re-invent the wheel when there is so much evidence, development material and examples of practice already available to draw on?

Patience, careful reflection and a cautious approach to easy answers is a challenge but professional development in this unique context requires sensitive appreciation of context, culture and history. This does not, of course imply an ignorance of lessons learned and mistakes made in other countries. There is much to be learned from the misguided decisions others have made. As we can see from other contributions to this volume policy makers in a number of European countries are riding on the wake of policies that have failed elsewhere. Ghana should watch but not copy.

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