COMPETENCES AND COMPETENCIES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE: HOW FAR DO THEY TRAVEL?

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Abstract

The quest for quality in education has necessitated the need for innovative leadership in Ghanaian schools. In pursuit of this, teacher educational institutions have through the traditional and distance education systems revised their programmes to ensure that appropriate leadership qualities are developed in teachers to enable them provide the needed classroom and school level leadership for facilitating teaching and learning in schools. Achieving this feat requires relevant leadership competences. In this paper, we explore some indicators of leadership competences within the Ghanaian cultural context. Drawing on literature from Western authors, and an interpretive study involving thirty Ghanaian primary headteachers, we contrast competences from competencies and conclude with a discussion on the interplay of the two notions in shaping the professional performance of primary school headteachers in the country.

Introduction

In the professional development of managers or administrators or leaders, in both business and learning organisations, 'competency-based training has become the received wisdom on approaches' (Torrington & Hall,

1998 p.422). Similarly, within the educational sector, 'competence' continues to dominate discourses about professional development; yet *'the* language of competence' defies a single definition (Derek 1993 p. 31-34). Derek attributes this misunderstanding to 'spelling variations' that reflect in US-based and UK-based origins of 'competence/y' models. He explains that whereas the US model speaks of *competency* or *competencies,* the UK model uses *competence* and *competences.* Contrary to Derek's simplified US-UK differentiation of the terms, UK-based writers such as MacBeath and Myers (1999 pp.1-22) and Constable and McCormick (1987, cited by Torrington and Hall, 1998 p.418) use both *competence(s) and competency (competencies)* in their literature with differentiated meanings. Unlike Derek, they differentiate between the words in terms of the meanings they convey not simply in terms of a US-UK spelling divide.

In examining competences for enhancing headteachers' leadership in Ghanaian basic schools it is essential therefore that we clearly establish the differences and similarities between the two concepts. In doing so, we explore meanings that thirty headteachers within the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem (KEEA) municipality attach to competences they require for leadership practices; with the aim of establishing the extent to which Westernised indicators of headteacher competences are similar to that of Ghana.

The study

The study was guided by an interpretive research design. The 'interpretive' tradition of social enquiry, according to Denzin & Lincoln (2005), assumes that actions have meaning in relation to the understandings, purposes and intentions of the actor, and the actor's interpretations of the significance of the context of the action. It enables the researcher to put him/herself in the shoes of the individual and by that learn through the process of interaction what individual's perception, interpretations and the meanings he/she attaches to his/her action are (Adler & Adler, 1987). Using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, the study sought

to explore how thirty purposively selected primary school headteachers within the KEEA municipality perceive competences they require for their leadership practices in schools. Data were also gathered from literature drawn from the United Kingdom.

Indicator Anatomy of Headteacher Leadership Competences

As we mentioned earlier in the introduction, the concept of *competence* is very illusive and confusing. The confusion emanates from the different use of language and contrasting points of emphasis. For example, while Torrington and Hall (1998) locate *competence* within an individual's 'general ability to do something', MacBeath and Myers (1999) locate it 'in an organisational context' (p.2). Similarly, the former emphasise a 'specific' process towards achieving competence in their definition of *competency,* while the latter emphasise 'an individual's personal qualities'. Thus, while Torrington and Hall, suggest that *competence* connotes a 'general' phenomenon and *competency* a 'specific' phenomenon; MacBeath and Myers (1999) see *competence* as an 'organizational' phenomenon and *competency* a personal

phenomenon. Following these complex definitional contrasts, we sought to understand indicators that have characterised the notion of competence in related UK-based literature to enable us to formulate a contextual definition for competence.

Leadership competence: The UK indicator model

In the context of the United Kingdom, West-Burham and O'Sullivan (1998p 9-15) assert that the National Educational Assessment Centre (NEAC) has developed a competency framework, under four headings with corresponding competence indicators: *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). The NEAC competency framework, according to the writers, has greatly influenced the current national standards set for the professional development of both headteachers and teachers.

Yet, can we say that these standards could work in the context of every school? The fact that even within the business enterprise, there is no agreement as to what constitutes competence suggests that generic indicators of competences can only provide a framework for the determination of specific competences in organisations. Hence Derek (1998) cautions, 'it is important that you do not leap on this bandwagon *(generic competence framework)* and become a disciple of the movement without a proper assessment of organizational and individual management development needs in your school' (p.115).

The work of MacBeath and Myers (1999) in Denmark, England and Scotland in which primary school pupils' and teachers' as well as parents' views were sought about headship 'competences' seem to affirm the fact that although there is nothing wrong having generic competences for headteachers, the relevance of such 'competences' might differ from school to school and society to society, in terms of emphasis. Table 1 illustrates indicators identified by the writers.

Table 1:
MacBeath and Myers: Headteacher competencies –
a view from the Industrial Society

Clusters	Competence Indicators
'The human side'	• Supporting other people • Recognising individual effort • Promoting other people's self-esteem • Developing other people • Minimising anxiety
Leader as reflective and empathic listener	• Seeking to understand before making judgements • Listening to individual ideas and problems • Actively encouraging feedback
Empowerment	• Giving those doing the work the power to make decisions
Personal modelling of behaviour	• Demonstrating personal integrity • Practising what they preach • Showing enthusiasm
Directive category	• Providing direction • Taking decisions • Agreeing targets • Promoting understanding of the key issues
Managing change	• Looking at possible future challenges • Encouraging new ways of doing things • Treating mistakes as learning opportunities
Teamworking	• Encouraging teamwork

The discussion, so far, suggests that people hold divergent opinions on the concept of competence. Attempts by some writers to resolve the problem by distinguishing between *competency* and *competence* still show divergence in opinion. This seems to suggest that , in practice, the concepts are embedded in an individual. Hence, it may be argued that the dichotomy, which writers have supported with convincing arguments in the literature, constitutes a theoretical abstraction more than something that is distinguishable in day to day practice. We also wonder if the competence indicators listed in Table 1 will be similar to meanings that Ghanaian headteachers attach to the concept.

Leadership competence indicators: The Ghanaian Headteachers' Perspectives

Views expressed by the KEEA headteachers as they talked about skills, knowledge and abilities they considered necessary for efficiently performing their professional task, suggest that they do not differentiate between their personal qualities (*competency*) from their abilities to perform (*competence*). They mentioned sixteen major competences which they thought they needed for accomplishing their leadership tasks. In Table 2, we have categorised these competences under four main clusters. In the categorisation, we have referred to a word, 'capacity', that some headteachers used in place of 'competence'. Merriam-Webster Incorporated (1999) defines 'capacity', among other things, as 'character'; 'ability; 'power of mind'. In this light, the headteachers' association of capacity with professional certification and experience through rank, may imply that they viewed 'capacity' as an embodiment of all relevant personal characters, abilities and knowledge that give the headteacher the confidence to perform. It further implies that, although the word 'capacity' is often used to describe the capability of organizations to satisfy the needs and demands of consumers, it may also be used to describe competences and competencies or either of the two terms. In the subsequent section, therefore, the reader should understand 'capacity' either as an embodiment of both *competence* and *competency* or as synonymous with either *competence* or *competency*. Table 2 presents the competence indicators that were mentioned by the headteachers:

Table 2:

KEEA headteachers' perspectives of primary heads' competences

Clusters	Competence indicators
Administrative capacity	Ability to keep school records e.g. filing documents, maintaining school finance records, keeping admission records, the log book etc.,
Professional capacity	Ability to manage pupil assessment, knowledge of teacher appraisal techniques, knowledge of pupil teaching techniques, knowledge of techniques for teaching adults, ability to vet teachers' lesson notes, knowledge about leadership, acquisition of higher academic knowledge, ability to counsel.
Personal capacity	Fairness and firmness, tolerance, patience,commitment to work
Interpersonal capacity	Ability to relate well with staff, pupils, parents, the SMC, circuit officers. Ability to promote teamwork, ability to conduct successful staff meeting, and possession of lobbying skills.

A critical consideration of the clusters and indicators of competence listed in Table 2 shows some differences. The contents of the first two, *administrative* and *professional capacities* (category A), seem to have direct focus on task-related knowledge, abilities and skills that, from the headteachers perspective, were important in primary school leadership. The third and the fourth, *personal* and *interpersonal capacities* (category B), on the other hand, focus on human qualities that, in their opinion, could influence their ability to succeed as headteachers. Following this observation, we have, through a synthesis of the various ideas emerging from the discussion on the competency-competence debate, defined competence as *an all-embracing concept that describes the*

knowledge, understanding, skills and/or attitudes that headteachers require for successfully coping with, and accomplishing the challenging tasks they have to fulfil in the primary school to guide our discussion of the competences identified by the headteachers. We have no doubt that the reader may find our definition imperfect. Our concern though is not to prescribe the appropriate definition for *competence* but to provide a working definition that clarifies rather than confuses and, perhaps, provokes further debate on the subject.

What goes into Headteacher Competences in Ghana

Although the headteachers in our study suggested that they do not draw lines between their abilities and personal qualities while conceptualising their competences, the categorisation in Table 2 indicates that contents of their conceptualisation focus on two main issues. The first issue focuses on *task-related knowledge, abilities and skills* while the second focuses on *human qualities*.

Task-related Competences for Headteachers

The task-related competences identified that emerged from the study related to administrative and professional capacities.

Administrative capacity, within this context, is limited to competences related to the keeping and maintenance of records towards the achievement of the school's goals. An important competence that was mentioned by the headteachers is the ability to properly manage records, especially financial records, in their schools. The GES' job description for primary heads confirms the centrality of the headteachers' financial task by emphasising: *'as a headteacher you need to be able to manage Primary school funds using modern financial techniques. This means that you should develop the habit of keeping simple books of account in an acceptable way'* (Ministry of Education, 1994 pp.112). Accomplishing this task was however a source of dilemma for the headteachers. Twenty-four (80%) of them expressed great concern about their incompetence in handling financial records in the school. Their concerns are reflected in a remark made by one of them as follows: *'As for the keeping of records, the challenge is too much. We have to keep records on the capitation grant, children's attendance and many others but the capitation grant one is very difficult ... it is really a problem for us'*. This implies that

a headteacher requires skills and knowledge that would enable him/her keep proper records of monies they receive and/or spend in order that they would be able to account for them.

They also require skills in managing non-financial school records. Twelve (40%) of them said they needed skills and knowledge in filing circulars and other correspondence, filing pupils' admission register and recording events properly in the logbook.

The Headteachers' Handbook (Ministry of Education, 1994) identifies *keeping admission records* as an important task the GES requires of primary school headteachers in Ghana. Heads are required to provide accurate information about pupils because it is the document which proves that a pupil has been admitted to the school. Specific indicators of competence that the GES expects headteachers to exhibit in keeping admission records are contained in 'special rules'. The GES expects headteachers to record data on pupils they admit *promptly* and *accurately*. To be able to exhibit the competence of 'promptness' and 'accuracy' in recording the expected information on pupils, the headteacher needs *competency*.

We find these 'underlying characteristics' implicit in the statement, *'an entry should be made in the register for each pupil on the first day on which s/he attends the school'*. In our opinion, the headteachers' ability to fulfil this rule would largely depend on inherent personal qualities such as 'honesty', 'fairness' and 'commitment'.

In terms of professional capacity, the headteacher is required to have the knowledge and skills in managing pupil assessment. Although, in practice, it is the classroom teacher who is directly involved in assessing pupils, some of the headteachers thought it was essential for them, as leaders, to acquire the skills of assessment. This, they said, would help them provide the necessary school-based guidance to teachers on their staff in terms of conducting pupils' continuous assessment. As one headteacher argued, *'though it's the work of teachers, you as head must be skilled in it before you can supervise somebody in doing that'*. The headteacher's role in managing pupil assessment in the school is illuminated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as follows:

As a headteacher you will need to train your teachers on some of the informal and formal assessment methods. They will also need to be informed on the continuous assessment record keeping system. The example you set and your own attitude in this respect will influence them greatly. Remember that well conducted pupils' assessment motivates pupils and teachers. It also has a positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning (MOE, 1994: pp.182, 184)

A parallel of this is found in England. As Dean (1995 pp.127-128) explains, the demands of the National Curriculum's assessment have made it obligatory for every school and every teacher to keep records of each child's progress. This obligation, she further suggests, places much responsibility on the headteacher: 'it is the responsibility of the headteacher to see that adequate records are kept, that appropriate records are passed on to the next stage of education and that parents are informed of their children's progress'.

Competence in pedagogical and andragogical skills (skills for teaching the young and adults) also emerged as an important need for some headteachers. This was evident in comments such as '*you need to know more about teaching methods for student teachers and children*' and '*you must be conversant with the curriculum yourself and know exactly what goes on in each classroom*'. Justifying the need for heads to acquire pedagogical competence, one referred to the Ghana Education Service's practice of making headteachers mentors for teacher trainees in its school-based initial teacher training policy and stressed that they needed relevant knowledge and skills 'in the actual act of teaching'.

One thing that intrigues us is the headteachers' emphasis on the idea of gaining competence in 'teaching leadership' instead of 'learning leadership', when the current thinking about developing school leaders emphasize *Leadership for learning*. Their emphasis on 'teaching' raises two issues: *political* and *conceptual*. Politically, it seems the headteachers' quest for competence in teaching both pupils and adults was not only to enable them perform roles as instructional leaders and mentors efficiently but,

is considered as a developing individual' and that teachers are really promoting learning through their teaching.

Dean (1995. 42) suggests that one way by which the headteacher can effectively 'monitor the progress of each child is by looking at records and reports and at teachers' notes and at the work of children'. Dean's mention of the need for headteachers to look at teachers' notes strengthens the KEEA headteachers desire for appropriate knowledge and skills in vetting teachers' lesson notebooks. It is essential that the headteacher ensures that teachers' lesson plans clearly state objectives that reflect the learning needs of the child as well as the topic and must clearly spell out the learning processes pupils would be going through. Dean further suggests that teaching plans should demonstrate how the following elements interact towards promoting learning: 'the teacher, the pupil (learner), the set of intended learning outcomes (concepts, understanding, skill and attitudes to be learnt by pupils, the learning/ teaching process (activities to be performed by pupils) and context (including resources which may offer as well as limit possibilities for learning and its promotion). Besides, the head needs to ensure that classroom teaching is not carried out merely for its sake, but for the sake of enhancing learning. This point is crucial to the headteachers' monitoring task because, as Tomlinson (1995) observes, 'an activity isn't a case of teaching just because it's done in a classroom or by a teacher – it's whether or not the action is in the service of learning […]'. He/she needs to be guided by the basic fact that 'teaching is activity designed to promote learning' (p.9).

Another strategy, identified by Harrison (in Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham 1999), is the headteacher's ability to inform his/ her work with research findings. This is an issue that we find very relevant to the KEEA headteachers' desire for increasing their professional knowledge. Lessons from a British school, the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School suggests that research methodology is a course that those concerned with the professional development of headteachers should not neglect. This is because pedagogical decisions that are informed by research findings, especially the school's own action research, are more likely to address real pedagogical issues on the ground. Moreover, developing skills in action research may help to create an investigative spirit in the headteachers and thereby improve

their information retrieval skills. Once such a competence is built in the headteacher, we foresee that there would be an improvement in their reading habits that will, in turn, help them to acquire knowledge about other strategies necessary for improving teaching/learning such as appraisal and counselling.

Ways of assisting teachers to learn

'The choice of appropriate techniques to facilitate and support learning' is a major issue in managing professional learning (West-Burnham and O'Sullivan, 1998:65). Since primary school teachers within the KEEA district fall within the category of adults, it implies that they have some experiences that the headteachers need to help them to develop. In this context, the headeachers' ability to promote experiential learning (EL) is important because 'student experience have always been central to adult education' (Brah and Hoy, 1989, in Weil and McGil, p.71). What the headteachers need in order to facilitate their handling of teacher learning is, therefore, a clear understanding of what constitutes EL.

According to Henry (in Weil and McGil, p.27), EL is viewed differently by different people because the term 'experience' is so broad that it becomes difficult to associate the phrase 'experiential learning' with any particular type of learning. Hence, while Gibbs (1987) looks at EL in terms of four types of activities: planning for experience, increasing awareness, reviewing and reflecting on experience and providing substitute experiences, Boud and Pascoe (1978, ibid.) stress the centrality of autonomy, learner control and relevance to activities in the 'real world'. Nevertheless, Henry explains that experiential theorists and educational practitioners seem to agree that experiential learning 'is definitely not the mere memorizing of abstract theoretical knowledge, especially if taught by traditional formal methods of instruction such as lecturing and reading from books' (ibid.). She further suggests that people seem to agree that experiential learning seeks to ensure that individuals can 'do' rather than merely 'know', but 'differ in their emphasis on what skills enable the desired quality of 'do-ability'.

In the light of the problem of definition, we have specifically limited the concept of experiential learning, within the context of this work , *to the type of learning that one acquires as a result of one's*

active involvement in a given activity and utilization of related previously acquired knowledge through a minimal external influence. We must acknowledge that the idea of *minimal* as it appears in our definition is relative because what may seem to be a minimal external influence to teacher 'A' may not be the same for teacher 'B'.

Just as getting a universally acceptable definition for experiential learning is problematic, it is equally difficult to prescribe a particular approach to it. West-Burnham and O'Sullivan, identify action research as one strategy by which the headteacher could improve their teachers' learning. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:27) explain that the purpose of an action research is to improve a situation through active intervention and in collaboration with the parties involved. It does not simply contribute to knowledge, but provides practitioner-relevant information. West-Burnham and O'Sullivan also explain that action research provides a professionally valid technique, which enhances the actual process of work. It does not 'diminish or detract from, the core purpose' of the research; hence they stress 'it is highly cost effective and congruent with the notion of teacher as learner accepting

personal responsibility for improvement'.

Human Quality-related Competences

Of late, employers in both business and service organizations have increasingly attached importance to the type of people they recruit as leaders. This is because, as Thompson (2001 p.357) put it, *'it is people who ultimately determine whether or not competitive advantage is created and sustained'*. Without the right type of people, the writer suggests, organizations cannot meet 'the needs and expectations of their customers more effectively than their competitors'. Hence guidelines for writing references on behalf of job seekers, for example, often emphasise information about the applicant's character, attitudes and other personal qualities. These constitute capacities that exemplify, what MacBeath and Myers (1999p.2) refer to as competencies: *'personal qualities that people bring to their task and infuse the job they do with new meaning and direction'*.

The foregoing discussion underscore the relevance of the headteacher' emphasis on the importance of personal and interpersonal qualities in their work.

Some headteachers in our study identified *fairness and firmness* as well as tolerance and patience as pertinent competencies they needed. Being fair is a competency that emerged in MacBeath's (1998p 91) study into expectations of school leaders as well. The researcher reported, among other things, that most parents and teachers who took part in the study expected the headteacher to 'act fairly at all times'. Gardner's (2000) list of qualities of a good leader also affirms the importance of the personal qualities mentioned by the headteachers. She identified the following as essential personal qualities: firmness, faithfulness, honesty, respectfulness, tolerance, empathy, selflessness, sympathetic, patience, transparency, disciplined, firmness, and visionary. Personal competencies, such as these are very important because they could help the headteacher to build and maintain good interpersonal relations with those he/she interacts with in and outside the school. As the MOE (1994) puts it: *'certain personal qualities will help you build and maintain good relationships'; hence 'it is important that you are friendly with your staff, parents and members of the community. Moreover, you will meet people with different opinions so be patient, tactful and tolerant'* (p.31).

It is, perhaps, in this light that 16 (53%) of the headteachers emphasised that they needed skills that would enable them relate well with the public. One female head explained that relating well with the public was essential because the school could not operate without the support of the community: *'you have to deal with the SMC, the PTA, the Chief so that they can help you in times of need.'* Another emphasised the need for heads to maintain good relations with *'especially those who matter in the community' because they would be in the position of supporting you to achieve your objectives'*. The reasons for which the headteachers required competence in building good public relations, connotes a transactional leadership approach to school-public relations. This trend has a parallel in the business industry where customer relations are considered as a viable tool for enhancing the sale of goods. This reflects in LeBoeuf's (1987 p.46) article on *They'll buy much more when they buy you* in which he 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'.

Thus, dealing with public affairs and maintaining good relations with the public have become integral part of the job of primary school headteachers in Ghana for two basic reasons. First, because the primary school system in Ghana does not have a public relations officer attached to schools. Yet, the head teacher needs to receive parents, interact with opinion leaders in the community, receive visitors and explain school issues that are of public concern. Moreover, basic schools in Ghana have, since the introduction of the 1987 Educational Reform become community-based. The community, through the SMCs, support the schools financially; hence, as the headteachers argued above, it was essential that the school, through the headteacher, initiates and maintains good relations with the public.

Another dimension of inter personal relations identified by the head-teachers is internal human relations. This involves the establishment of relationship between the headteacher and other members of the school: the teacher, pupils, and food vendors in the school. This, according to the headteachers, was necessary because they could not run the school alone. As one male head put it, *'what the community expects the school to do is so numerous and time-consuming that the headteacher alone cannot meet these expectations ... without teamwork, your work will be difficult"*. The importance of building teamwork in schools has been emphasised by writers in the field of school leadership. For example, Dean (1995:74) asserts that *'the school where the staff work as a team taking decisions together is more successful than the school where all decisions are made by the teacher'*. The question however is, 'what should the headteacher do to promote teamwork in the school? As illustrated in Table 3, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991p.3) have suggested the following as characteristics that are necessary for creating team spirit or *interactive professionalism* (as Fullan and Hargreaves put it) in the school:

Table 3:

Characteristics of team-oriented schools

Fullan and Hargreaves' interactive Professionalism	Critchel and Casey's features of properly functioning team
It occurs when:	**When**
• Teachers are allowed greater powers of discretion in making decisions; • Teachers make these decisions with their colleagues; • Joint decisions extend beyond sharing of resources, ideas and other immediate practicalities to critical reflection on the purpose and value of what feelings) teachers teach and how; are reviewed • Teachers are committed to norms of continuous improvement in the school; • Teachers are more fundamentally accountable as they open their classroom doors and engage in dialogue, action and assessment of their work with other adults inside and outside their schools	• People care for each other • People are open and truthful • There is a high level of trust • Decisions are made by consensus • There is a strong team commitment • Conflict is faced up to and worked through • People really listen to ideas and to feelings • Process issues (tasks and

Source: Dean (1995 p.75).

Conclusion

One clear message that emerges from this paper is that the notion of competence vary according to cultural and linguistic contexts. As a result divergent opinions exist on the concept. To some writers competence can be distinguished from *competency*; while others use competence to describe both personal qualities and professional capacities for leadership performance. It also emerged that competence could be understood from two perspectives: generic and specific. The *generic* perspective encompasses both personal

qualities and non-personal abilities while the *specific* perspective limits itself to non-personal abilities, with personal qualities being referred to as competency. The discussion further suggested that although the competence-competency dichotomy simplifies the understanding of the concepts, in practice, the two concepts do not operate differently in an individual. The distinction is therefore, for the sake of convenience and for academic argument. It has also been seen from the discussion that while some indicators of competence are common between Westernised primary school indicators and that of Ghanaian headteachers, differences exist, especially in terms of contents of competencies when indexed to what headteachers do in schools.

Headteachers in our study were concerned with two main competences: those that relate directly to tasks they perform: administrative and professional competences and those that influence their task performance indirectly: personal and interpersonal competencies. Ability to manage school finance, specifically, the ability to keep financial records was given much premium by the heads. In addition, they needed to develop their pedagogical and andragogical skills. School-based research (action research) and teamwork also emerged as important tools by which the processes of learning could be improved by headteachers.

We conlude by arguing that the difference between 'competence's and competencies', as suggested by English Writers does not travel far. Headteachers in our study did not conscionsly differentiate between the two notions in their leadership activities.

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