Challenges New Principals Experience During Transition in Colleges of Education, Ghana

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Abstract:

Leadership transition is a critical period in any leader’s tenure. In Colleges of Education in Ghana, the principal’s transition is critical to quality teacher education and training. However, it comes with challenges and complexities. This study therefore investigated to establish challenges new college of education principals encounter during transitions. Phenomenological research design was used for the study and purposive sampling was used to sample the respondents. Ten (10) newly appointed principals of public colleges of education were used for the study. The research instrument was interview protocol. The data collected was analyzed using thematic content analysis method. The study found mainly three categories of challenges in the principals’ transition. The challenges comprised personal, inter-personal and administrative challenges. Also, the findings confirmed that new/beginning principals worldwide encounter similar challenges as they transition. The study therefore, recommended that new and aspiring principals should explore the various transition challenges and plan their way out so that they succeed.

Key words: Challenges; Principals; experience; transition; leadership; administrative

Introduction:

The role of principals cannot be overestimated. A leadership transition is a critical change period for any organization, new team, key stakeholders and especially the new leader (Wolinski, 2010). There is a universal acceptance of the important role that principals play in the quality of education provided (Bagi, 2015). However, research indicates that new/beginning principals worldwide face similar challenges which can be traumatic and stressful as they transition into the role (Earley et al., 2013; Garcia-Garduno, Slater & Lopez-Gorosave, 2011; Wolinski 2010). Garcia-Garduno et al. (2011) posit that becoming a new principal may be exciting and rewarding but for many, it is also quite stressful and possibly traumatic and challenging. Burkhauser et al. (2012) also noted that a new principal is fully responsible for the multifaceted role of the principalship and has to work, adjust to the role and assimilate into the new community. This paper explores the challenges new colleges of education principals in Ghana encounter.

The Problem:

There seems that assumption to principal’s position usually comes with challenges. Dewey (2012)
studied the special nature of leadership change in transition and found that “People are naturally anxious about transition and what it means for their particular job or role. Transitional environments are rife with questions, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown. Similarly, Burkhauser et al., (2012) in a study that examined actions and perceived working conditions of principals in their first-year in relation to subsequent school achievement and principal retention made some observations. Burkhauser et al. (2012) noted that principals who are new to their schools face a variety of challenges that may influence their possibility of improving their schools’ performance and retaining the principalship. They indicated that a clear understanding of the principals’ actions and working conditions during the first year can determine efforts to promote school improvement, but there is limited research on first-year experiences of principals.

Cockley (2011) investigated the principals’ first-year transition practices and experiences but inspite of assertions that transitions are fraught with challenges, Cockley’s study did not explore that area. Bagi (2015; 2016), Gentilucci, Denti and Guaglianone (2013), Northfield (2013), Shooh and Barnett (2010) and Spillane and Lee (2014) studied challenges of principals in transition but the scope did not include the case of Ghana. Abdulai (2012), Atiku (2013), Newman, 2013, Nyarkoh (2016); Osei and Adu (2016) explored challenges encountered in colleges of education in Ghana but they did not tackle the challenges principals in transition face. Dewey (2012) noted that every institution has its unique environment related to transition. This creates a gap to investigate the challenges new college of education principals encounter during transitions. The research question that served as focus of the study was:

What challenges do new principals of Colleges of Education in Ghana experience within the sphere of the transition?

**Literature Review:**

In a systematic review and analysis of two decades of research in the UK and other English speaking countries on the experience of beginning principals, it was noted that beginning principals in different countries and regions face some common challenges (Hobson et al., 2003). According to Hobson et al., these findings have been cited extensively in literature in this field as a basis for continuing investigations in this particular area. Hobson et al., note that apart from various smaller challenges found in the literature reviewed, the result indicated that beginning principals were challenged mostly by multiple tasks, managing time and priorities; implementing new government initiatives, notably new curricula or school improvement projects; professional isolation and loneliness; dealing with the practice, style and legacy of the predecessor; dealing with the school budget; dealing with ineffective staff in areas such as supporting, warning, dismissing; and problems with school buildings and site management.

A study conducted by Atieno and Simatwa (2012) discovered that principals new to their roles experience challenges in the management of teachers, students, support-staff, finances, and parental involvement in school activities. Specifically, the challenges included indiscipline, dropout, failure to pay school fees, staff incompetencies, threats and budgeting among others. Based on their findings, they recommended induction and in-service program focusing on newly appointed principals, and pre-service training courses in educational management.

Earley et al. (2013) established that irrespective of country of residence and the particular school context, beginning principals experience challenges. Basically, the challenges included feelings such as professional isolation and loneliness; managing staff who thought the school was better than it actually was; inaccurate inspection judgments; improving teaching and learning; improving pupils’ progress and raising standards at a rapid pace. In a more recent phenomenology study on challenges facing principals in the first year in Turkey, Bayar’s (2016) findings were coherent with numerous research findings. They include violence; negative
attitudes of families’ towards school; immigrant students/families; teacher unions (syndicalism); teachers’ behaviours and attitudes towards principals; students’ results; and, increasing undesired behaviours in classroom and the school (Bayar, 2016).

In the United States, Shoho and Barnett (2010) investigated the first few years’ experiences of 62 beginning principals in Texas. The challenging nature of being an effective instructional leader was expressed by beginning principals. They could feel the pressure of expectations to champion academic standards. Secondly, administrative issues were a hurdle for beginning principals. These included a series of challenges from managing difficult staff members, through financial budgeting and balancing the enormous workload. Thirdly, school community issues were challenging and took up a considerable part of the beginning principals’ time. The community issues involved the challenge of dealing with the expectations of the principal in leading the school.

A study by Gentilucci et al. (2013) which used 11 beginning principals showed that the beginning principal’s most challenging aspects of the principalship were: creating positive working relationships; coping with stress; managing time; and desiring additional mentorship and support. Coping with stress and managing time owing to enormous workload, the intense and demanding nature of the position seemed to consume the new/beginning principals’ time. That made work priorities difficult to balance. These issues were reflected in a research with beginning principals consistently.

Shoho and Barnett (2010) found that numerous beginning principals find the volume and pace of work and the high expectations placed on them overwhelming right from the first day. A case study of a beginning principal in Canada which threw light on the challenges confronting principals in establishing their leadership role Northfield (2013) revealed that leadership/management tensions; leadership trust; and socialization issues were obvious. Trust between individuals and groups of individuals is essential for the achievement of institutional objectives, since people and groups depend on each other to perform expected tasks (Northfield, 2013). Leadership trust is viewed in areas of interpersonal ability and task ability. This demonstrates that the beginning principals are people of integrity and can perform required tasks. The beginning principals gain self-confidence in their ability to lead in all situations as they learn and utilize the assistance of other professionals (Northfield, 2013).

Another study conducted in Chicago by Spillane and Lee (2014) found that Loneliness, overwhelming workload and the burden of responsibility resulted in increased stress for the new principals. Atiku (2013) studied the transitional challenges facing Colleges of Education in the Volta Region of Ghana. The study revealed that the challenges included inadequate number of staff, inadequate physical and academic facilities, inadequate funds, student’s riots, lack of staff commitment, inadequate administrative structure and lack of distinct conditions of service.

In another study, Atiku (2009) focused on challenges in the administration of Teacher Training Colleges. Both studies were skewed to the Volta Region.

Osei and Adu (2016) also conducted a study on transitional challenges in selected Colleges of Education in Ghana. The authors’ attention was on transitional challenges facing staff development in selected Colleges of Education in Ghana. Osei and Adu noted inadequate institutional sponsorship for staff development programs, absence of staff development policy to guide staff development programs and absence of perceived benefits of staff development programs in Colleges of Education in Ghana as some of the transition challenges.

Abdulai (2012) identified administrative challenges encountered at Accra College of Education. Basically the challenges comprised human resource issues such as recruitment of staff, adequacy of staff and staff development issues; staff appraisal disagreement and problems on issues with promotion; perceived difficulty
with extrinsic rewards; displeasure with salaries for staff; inadequate government funding and internally generated fund (IGF); public perception of the colleges; work overload which affects the practical aspect of teaching and implementation of the curriculum; expansion of physical facilities and maintenance issues; inadequate teaching and learning materials; and issues of autonomy. Though Atiku (2013; 2009), Nyarkoh (2016) and Osei and Adu (2016) delved into transitional challenges in Colleges of Education, the focus was not the case of the principal in transition. Furthermore, they also employed quantitative research designs which did not touch on the personal experiences.

Research Methodology:

Research design:
The study design was phenomenology.

Participants:
A sample size of 10 principals was used. Purposive sampling was adopted to select the ten principals for the study.

Research Instrument:
The research instrument for the study was an interview schedule. This study employed the standardized open-ended interview.

Data Collection Procedure:
The needed permission was sought from the president of the Principals’ Conference (PrinCof) to enhance the data collection process. An electronic mail (e-mail) was sent to the 10 sampled respondents. The e-mail spelt out the purpose of the study and the thematic areas of the data collection protocol (interview). The 10 respondents were pre-informed on how the interview section would look like. The data collection lasted for two weeks. With the degree of contact as regards the individual face-to-face interviews with the respondents, approximately 40 minutes was spent on each participant during the data collection. Ethics of data collection outlined by Creswell (2007) were observed.

Data Analysis:
Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The data collected was transcribed, organized into themes and coded manually. Microsoft Excel for Windows was used to compute the frequency of codes.

Results:

Challenges New Principals of Colleges of Education in Ghana face in Transition:
The result on the challenges found has been presented in themes for easy reading. The study found out that the various challenges new college of education principals encountered included personal, inter-personal and organizational or administrative challenges.

Personal Challenges:
Personal challenges experienced by the respondents with their corresponding number of respondents were work overload (10), limited time to prepare (3), loneliness (3), and anxiety (5). The dominant code was “work overload”.

Explaining work overload all the respondents meant that by nature the role was multifaceted and demanding. This was an issue for all respondents in respect of managing students, staff, community, data, logistics, infrastructure and all other college administrative issues including travels, meetings to attend, and report writing. Sample quotes from respondents are:

“The many responsibilities to cope with in the first year as a new person was huge ... The travels, the meetings, the writings, reports ... You have to protect the government and then mediate among others”. (Sle)

“It is a very difficult and challenging position with all the stuff and lots of responsibilities. Yes, I went through a hell of stress managing staff and students and all that.” (Kum)

“I felt a greater responsibility had been given and I questioned myself whether I was up to the job.” (Bec)

“With the several duties to perform, it was really a challenge.” (Ace)
Five (5) respondents experienced anxiety which was explained as fear of the unknown considering the new environment they had moved into and the changes that were implemented. Here are quotes from respondents:

“The challenge of the many duties ... earning respect and winning their trust.” (Soko)

“Because I knew so much was expected of me. ... new challenges and responsibilities.” (Buri)

“All the administrative duties were many. That was why I said that I didn’t have the luxury of a sweet feeling of the appointment.” (Pon)

“... The position was tasking.” (Roke)

“Hmmm! My headache was the demanding state of this office ...” (Krop)

(The complex nature of the principals’ work ... but man is bound by time and space.” (Mom)

Limited time to prepare as a personal challenge which was identified by three (3) respondents was explained as inadequate time to prepare for assumption of duty. Thus, the period between appointment and assumption of duty was such that one had little or no time to effectively prepare for the office. Quote are:

“My appointment letter was received quite late. In fact, at a time when I should have been at post working. With all sincerity, I didn’t have time to prepare well enough.” (Roke)

“My letter was simply late.” (Krop)

“I was expected to take over immediately because the time had elapsed.” (Sle)

Loneliness was described by three (3) respondents as a situation where they felt isolated by virtue of the position they occupied. Quotes are as follows:

“People around thought I was the boss so they wouldn’t come too close to me. Initially I didn’t have friends here, I didn’t have family here. I was left alone. Just isolated!” (Buri)

“When I took over I was lonely because I didn’t have friends and my family was separated from me.” (Sle)

“It was also a big change for me since I had detached myself from family and trusted friends.” (Soko)

4.3 Inter Personal Challenges:

The respondents faced inter personal challenges. These were challenges that were related to staff and other relevant groups including students and the community. These inter personal challenges and their corresponding numbers of respondents were: opposition (7), managing disunity among staff (2), fee issues (10), transitioning from second cycle to tertiary status (3), and community encroachment on college land (5).

Difficulty in collecting fees from students was the dominant code stated by all the 10 respondents. The respondents claimed that inadequate funding from government was a hindrance to some development projects. Though minimal, Students felt over tasked to support extra charges. This was a challenge as some of the students found it difficult to even pay their examination fees. Here are significant quotes:

“Most of the things were funded internally with students’ fees ... they thought that we were over taxing them. They found it difficult to pay” (Kum)
“Even though some students were challenged financially, others invested theirs in micro-finance and only paid when the investment matured ... with threats not to register them for exams, they paid.” (Bec)

“It was hell getting some students to pay their fees.” (Roke)

“Genuinely, some students had serious financial problems.” (Soko)

“The SRC argued that their allowance from government should settle their fees.” (Mom)

“I begged students to settle their fees.” (Sle)

“The stubborn ones wouldn’t pay their fees until it was time to register for exams.” (Krop)

“There were issues ... financial difficulties.” (Ace)

“You can trust guys. To pay their fees was an issue. We had to plead.” (Pon)

“They paid their fees, but they delayed a bit.” (Buri)

Opposition was the second dominant code. It was expressed by seven respondents as resistance to change in terms of the vision the respondents carried. That brought some changes into the tradition they were used to. Change was unpleasant for those particularly affected by the change. Some people were not very happy. Some saw it as a breach of the status quo and opposed it. Significant quotes are:

“There was some opposition because of the vision I carried which brought some changes into the tradition they were used to... Some staff members instigated students to resist the changes.” (Roke)

“... They were not happy that their own colleague had suddenly become their boss so they found faults with the plans and changes I initiated in the college.” (Mom)

“Change was unpleasant for those particularly affected by the change. Some people were not very happy some saw it as a breach of the status quo ... There was resistance.” (Soko)

“I taught here with some of the tutors. I left and I came back as principal. It was difficult for some of them to accept me. I faced some rejection.” (Buri)

“In my attempt to foster unity and togetherness, control absenteeism ... They tried to resist the change.” (Buri)

“As an old college with high standard, one big challenge was how to achieve results. ... Here some of them tried to oppose.” (Sle)

“In fact, I had no welcome treatment. I was met with hostility from day one ... if they demanded something and you said no ... then irrespective of where or who came (staff or students), you had to be prepared for mob action.” (Pon)

Difficulty in managing disunity among staff was the least dominant of the inter-personal challenges. This was explained by the two (2) respondents as the complexities involved in bridging gaps among staff which was a hindrance to improvement. Quotes are:

“...and back there was a problem between the former principal and the staff. So the staff was seriously divided and it was difficult uniting them.” (Kum)

“One challenge was uniting the staff when I came.” (Sle)

4.4 Organizational or Administrative Challenges:

Managing college administration was with challenges for the individual principals. The organizational challenges and their corresponding numbers of respondents in brackets were: compliance limitations (6), no orientation / training into the position (7), no prior notice of appointment (3), fragmented data/poor filing system (2), and inadequate funding for logistics (10).

The dominant organizational challenge for all the 10 respondents was inadequate government
funding to manage all financial commitments in terms of logistics. Significant quotes are:

“I was challenged by difficulty in securing funding for logistics. This resulted in some projects funded by college with internally generated funds from students’ dues, etc.” (Soko)

“The major challenge was financing. At a point when I came in, I almost went back because I called for the finances of the college and they were in reds.” (Sle)

“Funds to put up offices for the various departments was lacking. Also, funds to develop the recreational and health facility for Physical Education were not available.” (Mom)

“On assumption of office it was identified that we did not have external support as such. All we have to do are done through Internally Generated Funds (IGFs).” (Buri)

“Inadequate funding resulting in slow execution of plans ....” (Kum)

“After I had taken over a lot of people came demanding monies the college owed them.” (Roke)

“We had to depend a lot on IGF.” (Pon)

“Though we managed, there were financial challenges.” (Krop)

“Students contributed a lot owing to the limited government support.” (Ace)

”Funding logistics was a big deal for us.” (Bec)

On appointment issues, three (3) respondents said they had no prior notice of their appointment. They received their respective appointment letters when the time of assumption of duty had elapsed. That limited their time to adequately prepare for the role. Quotes from the respondents are:

“My appointment letter was received quite late. In fact, at a time when I should have been at post working. With all sincerity, I didn’t have time to prepare well enough.” (Roke)

“I didn’t have any prior notice of appointment.” (Krop)

“I was expected to take over immediately because the time had elapsed.” (Sle)

On socialization, some respondents (7) said they did not have any orientation or training to support them on assumption of duty. Here are quotes from respondents:

“Could you believe that I didn’t have orientation to begin this office? That was all.” (Roke)
On data management issues, a couple of the respondents (2) explained it as fragmented data and poor filing system. Thus, data management was weak and not well organized but it was the least dominant of the organisational challenges. Significant quotes:

“Storage facility for data management was a challenge. Old files were just dumped somewhere … Some data were lost. Information on past students was not readily available. Available data was fragmented.”  (Ace)

“I am not comfortable with this questionnaire. It appears I’m speaking bad things. … The filing system was unacceptably poor. I relied heavily on my experience.”  (Roke)

Discussion:

The categories of challenges faced by new college principals in this study affirm Shoho and Barnett’s (2010) findings in the United States and those of Baggi (2015) in Australia that school principals encounter personal, inter-personal, and organizational or administrative challenges. Even though other literature (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012; Bayar, 2016; Earley et al., 2013; Gentilucci et al., 2013; Hobson et al., 2003; Northfield, 2013; Spillane & Lee, 2014) does not state the three categories, Baggi’s (2016) analysis of the various challenges grouped them under personal, interpersonal, and organizational or administrative challenges. This clearly shows that the categories of challenges identified in this study exist and should be noted in the tenure of new principals.

With regard to the personal challenges, Baggi (2015) outlined a number of them. This study did not identify all of them in relation to the college principals’ transition. However, the dominant finding of this study was work overload. In relation to literature (Bagi, 2015; Earley et al., 2013; Hobson et al., 2003; Shoho & Barnett, 2010) work overload is a dominant challenge in a new principals’ tenure. It was elaborated that beginning/new principals find the volume and pace of work and the high expectations placed on them overwhelming right from the first day (Shoho & Barnett, 2010) as identified in this study. Loneliness (Bagi, 2015; Earley et al., 2013; Gentilucci et al., 2013; Hobson et al., 2003; Spillane & Lee, 2014) and anxiety of meeting expectations (Dewey, 2012) and being part of the culture were evident. Of all the interpersonal challenges, issues of failure to pay school fees were the most dominant in this section. This affirmed Atieno and Simatwa’s (2012) assertion that new principals encounter fee issues with students. Noteworthy is students’ charges identified in the study were high owing to partnership in development and probable delay and inadequacy in government subvention for logistics. This calls for a realistic review in students’ charges and the need to impress upon government to release subventions early enough to cater for logistics. Majority of the principals faced opposition, owing to the respective change initiatives in transition. It is not surprising that Bridges (2003) said that transition periods are characterized by resistance owing to the change. Disunity among staff and dealing with ineffective staff (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012; Baggi, 2015; Earley, et al., 2013; Hobson, et al., 2003) and managing difficult staff members (Shoho & Barnett, 2010) were noted. Though the least dominant in this study, managing disunity among
staff and difficult staff members are worth noting in a new principals’ transition. This is because failure to promote unity in ones administration could result in chaos.

Literature (Bagi, 2015) affirms organizational challenges principals’ face. In spite of the assertion that leadership training and preparation for transition is crucial, this study acknowledges challenges such as socialization/orientation (Northfield, 2013) as well as inadequacy and unavailability of principal preparation in Ghana (Afful-Broni, 2015). Compliance limitations in terms of sticking to laid down rules and limitations were one major challenge in the principalship. The new principal had to work within harmonized statutes for Colleges of Education (National Council for Tertiary Education [NCTE], 2015). Any decision taken outside these documents were illegal and attracted sanctions. This put fear in the new principals, thereby limiting their initiatives to perform certain productive actions.

Appointments issues in terms of late notice of appointment and poor data management seemed unique in the Ghanaian college context and did not dominate in the organizational challenges, though identified. It is therefore implied that basically, in the Ghanaian college principals’ context, appointments are made ahead of time as indicated in harmonized statutes for Colleges of Education (NCTE, 2015). Therefore, generally newly appointed principals can had enough time to prepare. Poor data management was the least dominant of the organizational challenges. This was most probably due to the insistence of the importance of adequate data in school management (Afful-Brini, 2006; Cockley, 2011) and measures put in place to ensure data quality and safety at the onset of the role. However, where issues of late notice of appointment and poor data management are considered. It could result in dire consequences during transitions. So, candidates vying for the role should not rule out these issues completely.

Quite a number of challenges were identified in literature (Atieno & Simatwa, 2012; Bagi, 2015; Bayar, 2016; Earley et al., 2013; Hobson et al., 2003; Northfield, 2013; Sipple & Lee, 2014). Relatively, few challenges were noted in this study. This is not to say that those other challenges could not exist in the college leadership transition. The findings affirm that the transition challenges exist (Baggi, 2015). Furthermore, this study affirms literature (Earley et al., 2013; Wolinski, 2010) that new/ beginning principals worldwide, irrespective of country of residence and the particular school context experienced similar challenges. The challenges could be traumatic and stressful as beginning principals transition in the role. However, the key challenges faced by new college principals in transition are work overload in terms of personal challenges, fee issues in the case of inter-personal challenges and inadequate funding for logistics in the organizational context.

Conclusions:

Within the first year of the respondents’ transition in their respective positions, information gathered indicated that the transition period was not without challenges. The categories of challenges were: personal; interpersonal and organizational challenges. Though each category recorded a number of challenges, the dominant challenges which were encountered by all the respondents included work overload, students’ fees issues and inadequate funding for logistics. Closely following these were opposition, lack of orientation and compliance limitations. The conclusion is that key challenges which new principals of College of Education in Ghana face are: work overload, students’ fees issues and inadequate funding for logistics. It is recommended that further studies should explore models for managing challenges in transition to help minimize the issues.

References:


