

Examining the Virtual Needs of Senior High School Headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana Amid Covid-19

Dandy George Dampson
University of Education, Winneba

In the era of COVID-19, school leaders require special skills and abilities to navigate their administrative roles. However, literature seems unclear on the virtual needs of Senior High School (SHS) headteachers in this era of COVID-19. Therefore, this study investigated the virtual needs of SHS headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana. The explanatory-sequential mixed method design was adopted, where 187 headteachers were conveniently and purposively sampled for the study (quantitative phase=180; qualitative phase=7). A researcher-designed questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were used for data collection. The quantitative data were analysed using means and standard deviation, while the qualitative data were analysed thematically. The study found that headteachers possessed low virtual administrative skills and abilities in performing their duties. The study concluded that low virtual skills of the headteachers could be caused by the over reliance on the traditional method of educational administration practiced in most Ghanaian SHSs prior to the pandemic. Therefore, headteachers require purpose-driven training in virtual administrative skills and abilities in order to perform their duties.

Keywords: COVID-19, outbreak, pandemic, virtual, headteacher

INTRODUCTION

Leaders in educational institutions have long been seen as playing a pivotal role in maintaining the learning environment while also helping to ensure that students are provided with good education (Day, 2017). According to Hallinger, Hosseingholizadeh, Hashemi, and Kouhsari (2018), competent school leaders who foster cultures of high standards and create settings that help teachers develop their skills and abilities are crucial to a school's success. Influential school leaders foster a learning and development-friendly culture by providing ample chances for rigorous professional growth and collaboration (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020).

Deducing from the above, it can be inferred that the quality of teaching in schools has a substantial impact on students' achievement and well-being. Based on this, school leaders who focus on teaching and learning may make a significant difference in the day-to-day management of the school's administration. While influential leaders have a mix of social, cognitive, and emotive talents, it is argued that the workplace's complexity is outpacing their leaders' abilities (Lahl & Egan, 2012). Effective school leadership requires more than just instructional and administrative skills. According to Bennis and Thomas (2002), a leader's effectiveness is related to how he or she leads people to deal with obstacles and opportunities.

Furthermore, the workplace and institutional culture characteristics present new problems for school leaders in the information technology era (Chua & Chua, 2017). As a result of school leaders' preoccupation

with meetings and responsibilities outside of the institutions, one of the new issues is that the institution's workforce is geographically separated. School leaders cannot devote their full attention to leading and managing schools. Hence the need for leadership which uses information and communication technology to influence people and groups inside an organization to modify their performance or behaviour.

Undoubtedly, educational systems throughout the world have been affected since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, most schools were closed to prevent the spread of the pandemic (Mahama et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2020). In this regard, stakeholders in education have intentionally controlled the situation to keep the educational system running. Despite these efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic is still lurking with diverse mutations across the globe. Currently, several countries, including Ghana, are experiencing their worst rates of infection and death due to the virus (Karpati, Elezaj, Cebotari, & de Neubourg, 2021; Tuffour, Cobbinah, Benjamin, & Otibua, 2021). To this end, school leaders who are usually referred to as head teachers in Ghana have been compelled to adopt virtual means to manage their schools.

Even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it had been reported that high-quality professional learning opportunities for headteachers, such as preparation programmes, induction supports for early-career head teachers, ongoing training, one-on-one support through coaching and mentoring, and peer networks were needed to build educational leadership capacity (Levin, Leung, Edgerton, & Scott, 2020). However, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic where institutional heads are expected to lead virtually, virtual leadership has been identified as "tougher," "more difficult," "harder," and "time-intensive" than leading in typical face-to-face educational environments (Westberry, Hornor, & Murray, 2021). As a result, head teachers need professional development in areas like improved presence and communication, projecting calm in the face of uncertainty, exhibiting flexibility, empathy, and patience, knowing technical capabilities, and taking a systems approach to long-term instructional leadership. In a study conducted by Johnson, Clegorne, Croft, and Ford (2021), it was found that differentiated professional learning and instructional and operational leadership remain critical needs of school principals in the 21st Century. In another study, Levin et al. (2020) found that head teachers had access to professional development content, including topics in leading equitable schools. However, most of these headteachers appeared not to have had the opportunity to participate in authentic, job-embedded professional learning. In addition, most of the headteachers reported that they needed professional learning in areas that support their continuous improvement. As nations struggle to find a lasting solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, it continues to test human and institutional resiliency. In high, middle, and low-income countries, the pandemic has caused significant disruptions in schools (Al-Balas, Al-Balas & Al-Balas, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Vaterlaus, Shaffer, & Pulsipher, 2021) where headteachers are faced with the challenge of finding responses through virtual leadership to keep educational institutions on track (Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson, & Childs, 2021). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, virtual leadership has become the norm for most school headteachers in Ghana. The reason for virtual leadership in Ghanaian schools on the part of headteachers is to curb the spread of the pandemic while keeping their schools running. However, a study conducted by Dampson et. al, (2021) found that majority of the school headteachers appear to possess zero to low administrative skills and abilities to manage their schools virtually.

According to Abernathy (2018), self-efficacy is one area that supports effective decision-making in virtual leadership. Maddux and Gosselin (2012) defined self-efficacy as the confidence in one's ability to organize and arrange skills and abilities in fluctuating and stimulating situations. Morgan (2018) asserts that self-efficacy positively impacts the general practice of school leadership. The volatility of epidemics makes school leaders' preparation predominantly perplexing. Therefore, headteachers must develop a strong sense of self-efficacy to make effective instant and long-term decisions in the COVID-19 pandemic (Money & Pacifici, 2020). According to Bandura (1994), feeling confident about an individual's ability to make effective decisions during a crisis significantly affects those decisions. Undoubtedly, when head teachers have issues with their self-efficacy, it may mean that their professional needs are not met as they perform their duties virtually. As a result, they are likely to experience frustration, stress, and burnout. However, to prepare headteachers adequately, there is the need to identify their professional learning needs

to proffer the necessary recommendations. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the virtual needs of SHS headteachers amid COVID-19 in the Central Region of Ghana.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Globally, the 21st Century presents a paradigm shift in school management and administration. The situation has further been compounded with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case of Ghanaian educational leaders is not entirely different. Headteachers and other school administrators are expected to manage their institutions virtually. Again, it is undoubtedly clear that managing educational institutions amid COVID-19 has become virtually oriented due to the established preventive measures and protocols. In this regard, many headteachers appear to have no alternative but to accept and use the virtual environment in executing their administrative functions (Black, Ferdig, & Thompson, 2021; Owolabi, 2020). However, most of these headteachers and the other school leaders were trained to lead their schools from the traditional face-to-face educational administration system. School leaders are expected to manage their schools from their offices on campus. These new demands have exposed the gap between the traditional training received by SHS headteachers in Ghana without virtual leadership training which to a large extent affected their effective management of the schools (Suaka & Kuranchie, 2018).

The Ghanaian case is further heightened by the processes of appointing and selecting headteachers, which are influenced mainly by cronyism and longevity in service coupled with other factors such as religious affiliation of the school and political affiliation of the headteacher (Dampson, 2019). In this regard, many headteachers are yet to appreciate and adapt to the virtual means of educational administration for their managerial roles despite the value of this administrative and managerial shift. The lack of appreciation and use of virtual platforms for administrative purposes in Ghana is attributable to logistical challenges (Özüdoğru, 2021) and lack of expertise in using such platforms by most educational leaders (Khlaif, Salha, Fareed, & Rashed, 2021). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, using virtual platforms for educational purposes such as educational management, teaching and learning, and administrative roles has always been a challenge for headteachers. In alleviating such challenges, many studies have been conducted to find the best way to manage the challenges (Afriyie, Asare, Amponsah, & Godman, 2020; Dampson, 2021; Mahama et al., 2021). However, these studies showed skewed focus, emphasizing challenges students face at the expense of head teachers who manage students' learning.

Furthermore, a cursory interaction with some headteachers in the study area suggests that most of them have virtual needs that have not been met. Possibly, these needs are not well-identified from the Ghanaian perspective through extant literature. Even on the global stage, it appears that few studies (Westberry, Hornor & Murray, 2021) have been conducted to ascertain the virtual needs of headteachers and principals. The current study, therefore, sought to examine the virtual needs of headteachers in the Senior High Schools in the Central Region of Ghana by answering the following research questions:

1. What virtual leadership skills and abilities do SHS headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana possess amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What professional developmental needs are required for effective virtual leadership by SHS headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana amid COVID-19?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the pragmatist research philosophy. The dominant explanatory sequential (Quan+qual) design of the mixed methods approach was adopted for the study. The main intent for the adoption of this design was to help explain initial quantitative design with qualitative data (Hanson et al., 2005). The population for this study was 180 headteachers. The headteachers were drawn from the 3 (three) administrative zones in Ghana (southern, northern and eastern). These three administrative zones have over 200 Senior High Schools scattered across the length and breadth of the zones. Therefore, a quota of 60 headteachers was assigned to each zone. Within each zone, all 60 headteachers were used through census, where the researcher conveniently engaged any headteacher available in school as of the time of data

collection until the quota was exhausted. The researcher’s adoption of convenience selection was based on the fact that COVID-19 pandemic was surging with its latest Omicron variant, hence the need to limit extensive movement and interaction to prevent contraction. Among the one hundred and eighty (180) headteachers sampled for the quantitative phase of the study, seven (7) of them were subsequently sampled for the qualitative phase of the study. The researcher developed a questionnaire on the virtual needs of headteachers based extensive review of literature to collect quantitative data from the respondents. After the analysis of the quantitative data, an interview guide was designed based the findings from the quantitative data. The analysis of the data collected from the field was done in two phases. First, with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as (Means and Standard Deviations). In the second stage, the researcher studied the field notes, transcribed the audio interview data, and categorized them into themes using Miles and Huberman’s thematic analysis procedure (1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Question One: What Virtual Leadership Skills and Abilities Do Senior High School Headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana Possess Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic?

This research question sought to find out the virtual leadership skills and abilities are possessed by SHS headteachers in this era of COVID-19. To ascertain the virtual needs of the headteachers involved in the study, it was considered prudent to first establish key skills and abilities possessed by head teachers. The views of the headteachers are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND ABILITIES POSSESSED BY HEADTEACHERS

Statements	Disagree	Agree	Decision
1. I am able to execute my administrative functions online.	89.6	10.4	Low Level
2. I have the technical and conceptual skills and abilities to run my office.	93.5	6.5	Low Level
3. I have the technical and interpersonal skills and abilities to operate administratively online.	90.9	9.1	Low Level
4. I have the technical and administrative skills and abilities to operate my office online.	89.6	10.4	Low Level
5. I have the conceptual and interpersonal skills and abilities to operate online.	87.0	13.0	Low Level
6. I have the conceptual and administrative skills and abilities to execute my functions online	86.4	13.6	Low Level
7. I have the interpersonal and administrative skills and abilities online	87.0	13.0	Low Level
8. I have the technical, conceptual and administrative skills and abilities online.	87.0	13.0	Low Level
9. I have the conceptual, interpersonal and administrative skills and abilities	89.0	11.0	Low Level

Source: Field Data (2021)

Table 1 displays information about headteachers’ knowledge in virtual leadership skills and abilities amid COVID-19. It can be observed from the table that, although few headteachers possessed knowledge about several leadership skills and abilities, generally, majority of them had low levels of virtual leadership skills and abilities. For instance, 93.5% of the disagreed that they had technical and conceptual skills and abilities to run their offices while 89.6% of the respondents disagreed that they are able to execute their

administrative functions virtually. Again, 89.6% of the respondents disagreed that they possessed technical and administrative skills and abilities to operate their offices online while they also disagreed that they had the conceptual, interpersonal and administrative skills and abilities to manage their tasks virtually. This was further confirmed in the interview with the teachers: One of the headteachers said:

I wouldn't rate myself on top of what I need to perform effectively in this COVID era. I wish to know more than what I know now (HT2).

Another headteacher said:

As a head teacher, I initially thought my roles were limited to the physical space. But unfortunately, I feel incapacitated with the demands of this virtual era I find myself (HT1).

Another headteacher also lamented:

It is not easy working these days; I wish I had prepared for this COVID era. Most of the things I have learnt seem not to work (HT5).

The findings indeed show that headteachers are bedeviled with challenges regarding their virtual administrative skills and abilities in the era of COVID-19. The findings seem not to be surprising because none of the educational institutions in Ghana had made prior preparation before the pandemic started. Notwithstanding, Westberry, Hornor, & Murray (2021) argue that it is equally important for headteachers to upgrade themselves technologically so that they can adapt to the new administrative demands in the era of COVID-19. The findings of this study means that the abrupt and unexpected transition to remote learning has raised fresh awareness of the need for school leaders to ensure that high-quality; fair education is delivered remotely as well as in the classroom (O'Keefe, Rafferty, Gunder, & Vignare, 2020). As such, the skills and abilities they possessed prior to the emergence of COVID-19 had virtually become inadequate, hence virtual as another option of the need to acquire relevant knowledge and skills to complement the face-to-face administrative style.

Research Question Two: What Professional Developmental Needs are required for Effective Virtual Leadership by Senior High School Headteachers in the Central Region of Ghana amid COVID-19?

The question aimed to identify the professional development needs of SHS headteachers as it has become eminent to engage their staff and stakeholders virtually as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 shows results:

**TABLE 2
VIRTUAL LEADERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

SN	Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
1	I would be glad if I have virtual instructional leadership skills.	3.20	.86	Agree
2	It will help me if I could develop a virtual systems perspective for my school.	3.12	.93	Agree
3	I will be glad if I could use all elements of instructional leadership to include alignment, assessment, and observation in the virtual world.	3.31	.87	Agree
4	I wish I had the ability to understand how to Implement a successful multi-dimensional	3.11	.81	Agree

	system of support programme in the virtual world.			
5	I wish I had the ability to understand how to effectively monitor progress as a virtual administrator.	3.54	2.39	Agree
6	I wish to understand how to deal with difficult teachers virtually.	3.19	.87	Agree
7	I wish I had the understanding of how to manage school budgets virtually.	3.22	.79	Agree
8	I wish I had the understanding of how to staff a school virtually.	3.32	.67	Agree
9	I wish I had the ability to understand how to deal with building and resource needs virtually.	3.40	.63	Agree
10	I wish I had the ability to understand how to bring together a community in a virtual environment.	3.20	.82	Agree
11	I wish I had the ability to understand how to communicate with staff and students in a virtual environment.	3.38	.77	Agree
12	I wish I had the ability to understand how to manage my time effectively as a virtual administrator.	3.30	.77	Agree

Source: Field Data (2021)

Table 2 presents results regarding leaders' virtual leadership needs. It was found that all leaders felt the need to develop themselves professionally in virtual management of their various educational institutions. For instance, respondents agreed that they would be glad having virtual instructional leadership skills ($M=3.20$, $SD=.86$) and as well wish they had the ability to understand how to effectively monitor progress as a virtual administrator ($M=3.54$, $SD=2.39$). These findings were reiterated in the interview with the headteachers. For instance, one of the headteachers said:

In this era, I'm not able to follow exactly what my teachers are teaching. Unlike before the COVID period where I could just walk to their classrooms, this time, I don't know what they usually do online. The only thing they tell me is that they have gone online to meet the students (HT1).

Another headteacher said:

I wish I could follow the activities that are usually conducted by my teachers. Unfortunately, I don't I have the required skills to do that. You know I was born before the computer. It is not easy (HT3).

This means that the effectiveness of the headteachers in this COVID-19 era particularly, monitoring by virtual mode is in doubt. The lack of virtual instructional leadership skills coupled with the skill of monitoring the progress of their subordinates implies that they cannot model best practices and behaviours in their schools. As indicated by Lunenburg (2010), the lack of instructional leadership among headteachers presupposes that most schools led by these headteachers might miss out on important school development variables such as encouraging collaboration; analyzing results; providing support; and aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It was, therefore, not surprising that the head teachers agreed that they wish had the ability to understand how to communicate with staff and students in a virtual environment ($M=3.38$, $SD=.77$). Furthermore, respondents agreed that they wish they had the understanding of how to staff a

school virtually ($M=3.32$, $SD=.67$) and as well wish they had the ability to understand how to manage their time effectively as a virtual administrator ($M=3.30$, $SD=.77$). This was further confirmed in the interview with the headteachers. One headteacher said:

Before COVID-19, I could just interview teachers who have been posted to this school and make a decision whether to accept or reject them. But now, I don't even know what to do. In fact, I don't have any control of the recruitment process anymore (HT6).

Another headteacher affirmed:

When I go to the office these days, I have nothing to do because everything is online. However, I don't even know how I can control the online environment like I used to do before COVID came (HT1).

In this era of COVID-19 where teachers and students cannot be assembled within a short period, the lack of communication with students especially might lead students to abandon their study at a certain level (Asrar, Tariq, & Rashid, 2018) whilst the teachers are likely to experience low morale, conflicts and job dissatisfaction, which contribute to a deterioration of the culture of learning and teaching (Khweswa, 2015). Again, respondents agreed that they will be glad if they could use all elements of instructional leadership to include alignment, assessment, and observation in the virtual world ($M=3.31$, $SD=.87$) and as well wish that they had the understanding of how to manage school budgets virtually ($M=3.32$, $SD=.79$). Evidently, the SHS headteachers in the central region of Ghana have not been prepared adequately for a 21st Century world. The lack of specific soft skills that relate to their routine practices imply that majority of the headteachers lack the skill of leadership required for a 21st Century educational management (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017). More so, respondents agreed they wished they had the ability to understand how to bring together a community in a virtual environment ($M=3.20$, $SD=.82$) and as well, respondents agreed that they wished to understand how to deal with difficult teachers virtually ($M=3.19$, $SD=.87$). Finally, respondents agreed that they will gain and manage their schools effectively if they could develop a virtual systems perspective for their school ($M=3.12$, $SD=.93$) and as well wished they had the ability to understand how to implement a successful multi-dimensional systems of support programme in the virtual world ($M=3.11$, $SD=.81$).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

It is evident from the study that majority of the headteachers possess low skills and abilities in performing their duties virtually and so are unable to effectively supervise staff and students' activities virtually. Furthermore, the study has established that headteachers lack knowledge, skills, abilities and competence to mentor, supervise, guide and manage their staff and students using virtual mode. This means that staff and students in SHS were therefore poorly supervised, mentored and guided during the COVID period. This could be as a result of the over reliance on the traditional method of educational administration practiced in most Ghanaian educational landscape. Again, it is also possible that most of these headteachers assumed their roles by virtue of other reasons such as politico-religious appointment and educational promotion but not necessarily through technical leadership training that require technology-based leadership practices for the 21st Century. However, existing empirical studies on virtual leadership have found that traditional leadership factors often do not have the same impact comparable to virtual leadership (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Furthermore, it can be said that most headteachers require professional development training so that they can perform their duties as leaders using online platforms. It is important to note that virtual administration is one of the novel strategies that can be used by leaders to manage resources efficaciously in times of pandemics and difficulties. In this regard, an educational organisation can reduce expenditure of face-to-face meeting when virtual platforms are adequately embraced students, staff and management.

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