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Developing quality schools: A content analysis of principals' practices, stressors, and support factors

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School heads or principals have various roles in developing school quality, which can often be stressful. In this study we investigated principals' perceptions of quality schools, the practices performed to improve quality, and the stress and support factors involved. We adopted a qualitative inductive content analysis approach to analyse the transcribed data collected from 14 principals of senior high schools in the Volta region of Ghana. The findings show that principals perceive quality schools as having high academic performance, quality teachers, and adequate resources coordinated in a well-organised system. Furthermore, the results reveal practices that principals perform to improve school quality, such as promoting staff professional development, supporting students' intellectual and skills development, supervising teachers, and providing resources. On the other hand, supervision, non-cooperation of some teachers, inadequate resources, and administrative bureaucracy were revealed as causes of stress in improving school quality. Facing these challenges, the principals relied on their academic qualifications and experiences when engaging in practices to improve school quality. We recommend further research on the possibility of principals using technology to monitor the presence of teachers in classrooms from their offices.

Keywords: experience; job stress; practices; principals; qualification; quality school; school heads

Introduction

The fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UN-SDG 4) indicates that providing quality education should be the foundation for improving lives and sustainable development. Consequently, the need for quality school development has been on the agenda of many governments (Sampaio & Leite, 2021). Although certain stakeholders, like central governments that are responsible for making policy and providing logistics (human and physical) necessary to improve school quality in the delivery of education, the position of the principal or head of the school stands out as important (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016; Reid, 2021). As stressful (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Queen & Queen, 2005) as the job is, principals play leading roles in improving the quality of education (Huber, 2016); however, perceptions of what quality schools entail seems to vary among stakeholders (Ankomah, Koomson, Bosu & Oduro, 2005). Stakeholders do not unanimously agree on a singular definition of a quality school or the methods for attaining it. In certain instances, educational administrators prioritise various elements of the schooling system, such as school infrastructure, leadership, teacher competence, learning materials, or students' achievements (Dare, 2005). In other cases, administrators prioritise students' acquisition of a well-rounded education and the development of skills necessary for a successful life in society (Ankomah et al., 2005).

Research investigating the practices of school administrators, including studies conducted in Germany by Huber, Tulowitzki and Hameyer (2017), in the United States of America (USA) by Ongaga (2020), in Ghana by Bedi and Kukemelk (2020), and in South Africa by Schulze and Steyn (2007), predominantly relied on self-reported measures. However, these instruments are susceptible to response bias (Demetriou, Uzun Ozer & Essau, 2015). Additionally, these studies did not delineate the precise responsibilities undertaken by school administrators to enhance the quality of their institutions.

Therefore, the purpose with this study was to investigate, through interviews, how principals perceive quality schools, the specific practices performed to achieve quality schools, as well as related stress factors and support resources designed to help build resiliency in the development of schools. The study contributes to the literature by exploring principals' practices in developing school quality, as well as the related stress and resilience factors in the context of a centrally controlled education system. That makes the findings of this study valuable to other countries with a similar education management system. The study was directed by the following research questions:

- 1) How do principals perceive quality schools?
- 2) Which practices do principals engage in to develop quality schools?
- 3) Which practices were stressful when undertaken in developing school quality?
- 4) Which job resources (support factors) were beneficial in carrying out practices to develop school quality?

Literature Review

Job demands-resource (JD-R) of principals

We start by introducing the job demands-resources (JD-R) framework, which is a widely recognised model in occupational psychology (Schaufeli, 2017). This framework distinguishes between job demands (cognitively taxing aspects of a job) and job resources (elements that enhance performance and reduce job demands). In this

section we explain how an imbalance between demands and resources can lead to stress or positive outcomes, setting the stage for understanding the role of job demands and resources among principals.

Every occupation has its own job demands and resources (Schaufeli, 2017). Job demands refer to the cognitively taxing aspects of a job and have a physiological and psychological impact on the individual (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). Job resources, on the other hand, refer to job elements that enhance performance by reducing the job demands and improving productivity (Schaufeli, 2017). When job demands exceed job resources, a stressful situation arises, often including adverse work outcomes such as ill-health, inter-personal conflicts, and low job commitment. However, when job resources exceed job demands, the effect is positive, which results in high motivation, increased performance, and a more positive attitude about the job in general (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli, 2017).

With regard to principals, job demands include, among others, increased workload, uncooperative staff, and inadequate funds to procure learning and teaching materials (Elomaa, Eskelä-Haapanen, Pakarinen, Halttunen & Lerkkanen, 2023), while support from assistant principals, experience, educational background, and in-service training are key examples of job resources.

Practices by principals in developing quality schools

In this section we discuss the critical role of principals in promoting quality education. We define quality education and outline key elements such as learning content, learning environments, and desired outcomes. We also highlight the leadership functions of principals in achieving quality education, emphasising their impact on teaching and learning outcomes in schools.

Principals play significant roles in the development of quality schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Huber & Muijs, 2010). Anderson (2004) asserts that quality education encompasses instructional material designed to furnish learners with fundamental abilities, enabling them to operate autonomously, enhance their circumstances, make well-informed decisions, and participate in continuous learning. In keeping with this, Eze (2009), in determining the features of quality education, indicate that where quality education exists, quality learners, quality learning environments, quality content, and quality outcomes are sure to follow. According to Unterhalter (2019), quality education allows learners to read, write, perform basic arithmetic, develop the capacity to learn, participate fully in society, and thrive in a fulfilling job. Scheerens (2004) compares quality education to a production

line with inputs transformed into outputs. Between the inputs and the desired outcomes lie the leadership functions of the principal.

For quite some time researchers have acknowledged the roles carried out by principals that positively impact teaching and learning achievements within educational institutions (Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Spillane & Sun, 2022). Notably, Ongaga (2020) delved into the allocation of time by high school principals in Missouri, USA, revealing their predominant emphasis on curriculum and instructional leadership in fostering learning and teaching initiatives. The specific activities performed included coaching teachers, planning for professional development of teachers, evaluating teachers, and giving feedback.

In a significantly different context, Bedi and Kukemelk (2020) and Ongaga (2020) conducted an investigation among senior high principals in Ghana. The findings revealed that somewhat similar activities were performed to improve school quality in both Ghana and the USA. These activities included performing subject or class allocations, evaluating teachers' lesson notes, assessing teachers' performance, and encouraging teachers to try new instructional methods (Bedi & Kukemelk, 2020).

Principals and job stress

The literature on job stress experienced by school leaders is reviewed in this section. We acknowledge the stressful burden placed on principals due to their managerial and stakeholder responsibilities in the improvement of schools. Various studies are cited to illustrate sources of stress such as workload, inadequate resources, administrative tasks, and interpersonal conflicts.

Stress has long been prevalent among school leaders, as noted by Wells, Maxfield and Klocko (2011) and further emphasised by Wells (2013). The responsibility of principals as both managers and stakeholders striving to enhance educational institutions (Fullan, 2014), has consistently imposed a taxing burden on them (Steward, 2014).

The practices performed continue to evolve as development in society increases (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos & Riley, 2016). Studies have revealed some practices or factors that contribute to stress among principals. As an illustration, Kendi (2012) conducted a survey on the effects of occupational stress, revealing that factors such as student indiscipline, insufficient resources (including teachers, library materials, textbooks, and laboratory equipment), and delayed fund disbursement were identified as sources of stress for school administrators. In a complementary investigation, Wadesango, Gudyanga and Mberewere (2015) observed that overseeing teachers, managing teacher conduct (such as

tardiness), and financial management added to administrative duties and served as stressors.

Elomaa et al. (2023) found that the leading causes of stress among Finnish principals were workload, interpersonal conflict, internal pressure, and a lack of resources (financial and general). Although current research in the field has identified some sources of stress for school leaders in a broad context, we examined stress factors regarding quality school development among senior high principals in a centrally controlled education system.

Support factors for principals

In the last instance, we review the literature on support factors for principals. We discuss factors that support principals in overcoming stress and fulfilling their roles effectively. We introduce the concept of resilience and emphasise the importance of factors such as education level, experience, personal motivation, and leadership functions in enhancing principals' effectiveness.

Resilience is the ability to overcome or avoid harsh conditions or stressful situations at work (Lazaridou & Beka, 2015). Netuveli, Wiggins, Montgomery, Hildon and Blane (2008) describe resilience as the state where one achieves, maintains, or recovers regardless of environmental adversity. Principals have a significant impact on learners' achievement; they can do this only when they are adequately prepared for the role (Mestry, 2017). Botha (2004) explored the responsibilities placed on school principals in South Africa, which include overseeing curriculum activities, fostering positive staff relationships, handling school finances, and enacting government directives. Consequently, the educational attainment of a principal is crucial, as it shapes the practices carried out in this role (Valentine & Prater, 2011). In their study, Valentine and Prater (2011) examined how the managerial, instructional, and transformational leadership roles of school administrators impact student outcomes.

Their results show that a higher level of education increases the effectiveness of performing the duties associated with the role. Other variables identified as supporting principals' work

effectiveness were personal motivation, experience, and intelligence or dedication.

However, in investigating the challenges that principals face in Africa, Bush and Oduro (2006) found that principals did not necessarily have any formal (pre-service) training or leadership preparation before their appointments to the role. The appointments were loosely based on experience in education service (Bush & Oduro, 2006). Finally, in a quantitative study focussed on expertise, personality, and resilience characteristics among Greek primary school principals, Lazaridou and Beka (2015) observed that principals with experience reported being physically well more often than those with fewer years of experience.

Methodology

Research Design

In this instance, the study design was a qualitative case study. The approach involves studying a problem through detailed and in-depth data collection using various information sources (Creswell, 2013). We used semi-structured interviews as the source of information. The design was suitable, as the focus of the investigation was to understand participants' perceptions (Maxwell, 2012).

Participants and Sampling

Prior to the study we sought permission from the Ghana Education Service (GES) to engage principals to participate in the study. After reviewing the study aims and interview guide, GES granted approval, and we extended an invitation to 50 principals in the Volta region of Ghana to participate in the study. Of the 40 principals that responded, 19 gave final consent, but only 14 were available to participate in the interviews. All of the principals had several years of experience working in schools and were all qualified to hold the position according to the standards of the GES. The selected sample included three females and 11 males with the minimum and maximum number of years working in the education service between 19 and 38 years with a median and modal year of 27 years. To ensure their anonymity, all participants are referred to using pseudonyms (cf. Table 1).

Table 1 Participants and school background

Principals (pseudonyms)	Gender	School affiliation	Location	Years as principal (at current school)	Number (no.) of schools previously led	No. of years in education service	School enrolment
Mr Dominic	Male	Community school (sch.)	Rural	3	1	19	1,046
Mr Francis	Male	Community sch.	Urban	2	1	29	866
Mr Joseph	Male	Community sch.	Rural	4	0	25	585
Mr Richmond	Male	Community sch.	Urban	1	1	19	2,067
Mr Gustav	Male	Community sch.	Urban	1	0	27	698
Mr Godwin	Male	Community sch.	Rural	3	1	24	1,374
Ms Seyram	Female	Mission sch.	Urban	3	2	25	2,123
Mr Richard	Male	Mission sch.	Urban	1	2	27	3,838
Mr Johnson	Male	Mission sch.	Rural	4	0	29	385
Ms Elsie	Female	Community sch.	Urban	2	1	28	1,341
Ms Chelsea	Female	Mission sch.	Rural	3	3	38	1,049
Mr Nuku	Male	Community sch.	Rural	2	1	27	265
Mr Joyland	Male	Community sch.	Suburban	3	1	30	1,127
Mr Nunana	Male	Mission sch.	Suburban	1	1	26	1,040

Data Collection and Measures

We collected the data during the last quarter of 2020 using semi-structured interviews to seek principals' understanding (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) of a quality school, practices performed in the development of quality schools, and the challenges involved. The interviews were conducted in the principals' offices and lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. The questions included items on their perceptions of quality schools and practices performed to ensure the development of quality schools. The principals further responded to how stressful or otherwise the practices performed were in developing the quality of their schools, as well as the resources that supported them in building resilience as defined above. All principals involved in the study were fully briefed on the purpose of the study and were assured of complete confidentiality, along with the option to withdraw from the study without prejudice at any time (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019).

Data Analysis

We used Descript software (version 7.0.4) to transcribe the audio-taped interviews verbatim; the transcripts were then used to reduce the data into an interpretable form (Creswell, 2013). In the analysis, we relied on a qualitative content analysis approach. Patterns, commonalities, and links among participants' responses based on the research questions were developed and coded inductively (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019) with the emerging themes used to answer the research questions.

Credibility Confirmation

The themes and transcribed texts were peer-reviewed to establish their accuracy and reliability. After transcribing the interviews, we repeatedly played and matched the audio with each sentence in the interview text to verify and confirm the text.

Results/Findings

Understanding School Quality

The first aim was to determine how principals understand school quality. Three main themes, with subthemes based on the patterns emerged from the data. The main themes were: student development, resource availability, and school management and organisation.

Students' development

Firstly, most participants perceived quality in school to include students who have a high level of academic performance, graduates who progress the academic ladder to become responsible and valuable in society, and students who are motivated to perform well academically. According to Mr Gustav, "*When we say a school is of quality, we quickly consider students' academic performance. That is where your mind will go first before we*

think of any other thing." Similarly, Mr Francis commented that irrespective of a school's facilities, the interest of stakeholders (e.g., the community) is the academic performance of students.

The next subtheme was the value of a school's graduates to society. The participants measured a quality school by the number of graduates who progressed to a higher academic level, the ability of the graduates to secure job placements, and students' literacy levels. Mr Gustav asked, "*And the school graduates, do they get job placement? Do they proceed to a higher level of education? If yes, then you are providing quality education.*"

The last subtheme was students' motivation. Some principals perceived school quality as a function of students' motivation to achieve success. According to Ms Elsie, in a quality school, the level of students' ambition is critical. If students have low expectations of their future success, their motivation is low, and they lack the motivation to achieve high academically. The academic performance of students who are motivated is better.

Resource availability

Secondly, participants perceived a quality school to be one with adequate resources, both physical and human. Examples of physical resources included access to textbooks, learning materials, and proper school facilities. According to Ms Elsie, "*[i]f every student gets a textbook, it means the student has access to quality education and the school is a quality school, but where the number of textbooks is less than the students' enrolment, we will have a problem.*" In this narration, a quality school is one with enough textbooks available for use by students. Learning and teaching materials were also considered essential in developing quality schools. Ms Seyram and Mr Nuku mentioned that principals should procure learning and teaching materials for use by teachers and students. The last subtheme was school infrastructure. Many participants confirmed that the availability of adequate classroom space, libraries, dormitories, and laboratories indicated quality. As if summarising the views of the others, Ms Chelsea said:

My understanding of a quality school is a school that has all the components needed for teaching and learning in place. [... A] school should have the needed infrastructure, the needed quality staff, the supporting areas of learning like a library, adequate dormitories, adequate classrooms, adequate furniture for it to be called a good school.

Some participants understood a quality school to be one with qualified teachers who have the required skills and attitudes, which has been categorised under the human resources theme. Mr Nuku, for example, indicated that a quality school should have teachers with the required qualifications who

are committed and prepared to teach. Mr Francis noted that *“a quality school has competent teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge.”* Furthermore, teachers’ positive attitudes was recognised as an element of a quality school. Mr Francis said that a quality school had teachers who regularly attended school and were dedicated to performing their duties.

School management and organisation

The third central theme that emerged from the data was school management and organisation, with four subthemes. According to the principals, a quality school has a small population with small classes, encouraging effective interaction among students during lessons. Mr Richmond said that *“[m]y best description of a quality school is one with the least population, a small population. Those are schools I am looking at as quality, not necessarily the structures available, but the small class size.”*

When looking at the theme regarding the quality of examinations conducted, the participants indicated that a quality school was one where assessments were devoid of malpractice. For example, Mr Gustav said, *“Examinations are conducted in a serene atmosphere, where students do not copy or attempt to smuggle foreign materials into the classroom. If these are not happening, you have a quality school.”* Principals also expressed the view that a quality school engages students in extracurricular activities. Mr Joyland said, *“Another thing is out-of-school activities, such as a debate and games. All these together describe a school as a quality one.”* A quality school was also said to have a conducive learning atmosphere, was disability friendly, and was devoid of community distractions. According to Mr Joseph, *“... the general learning atmosphere in [a quality] school counts. If the general learning atmosphere is bad, you cannot achieve high [academic performance].”* Ms Seyram described a quality school as having a safe environment for both students and teachers, where physically challenged students were cared for and everyone felt welcome.

In sum, the participants demonstrated that different factors contributed to a quality school. The totality of these factors – academic performance, the usefulness of graduates, availability of resources, school management, organisation, and extracurricular activities best describe a quality school.

Practices Performed to Develop School Quality

Another aim was to determine which practices principals undertook to develop the quality of their respective schools. In analysing these practices the themes that emerged were related to staff development, student development, allocation of

teachers and supervision, provision of resources, and school management activities.

Staff development

Principals performed three main activities to develop the quality of the teachers under their purview. Firstly, principals sought to support teachers in their professional development, which included supporting teachers as they prepared for promotion interviews, attended subject-based conferences, and kept abreast of current developments in the education system. According to Mr Dominic, *“I helped them [teachers] to go for their promotions to higher levels to enhance their quality.”* Mr Johnson noted that *“... individual teachers are allowed to attend their subject conferences to acquaint themselves with their respective areas.”* Mr Godwin indicated the following: *“[T]he other thing I tried doing is to support my teachers to keep abreast with the system; and so daily, any policy that comes up, I make sure my teachers are informed.”* Secondly, principals encouraged teachers to participate in in-service training to improve teaching quality. The data revealed that principals utilised in-service training to improve existing teachers’ quality. According to Mr Richmond, *“... then for the teachers, because of lack of personnel in the system ... we have in-service training. For example, next academic year mathematics expert will be here [in the school] to take the math department and the students for 1 week.”* According to Mr Nuku, he conducted in-service training by himself – teaching teachers to improve their instructional methods. Thirdly, principals encouraged peer sharing. The data revealed that principals encouraged teachers to share experiences with colleagues at the departmental level. According to Mr Richmond, when he observed a deficiency in a particular teacher, he usually called a departmental meeting for members to support the struggling colleague.

Student development

The following two activities were highlighted: the extra classes and the promotion of skills development in students. The participants offered additional learning opportunities to students to ensure high academic performance. For example, Mr Johnson said: *“We organise morning classes every Saturday ... evening studies Mondays to Fridays, and I assign teachers on duty to supervise.”* The next activity was the promotion of students’ skills development through practical exercises. Specifically, Mr Joseph said: *“We also do a lot of practical ... there is block work after classes. Those offering electricity go to a workshop (outside school) for training.”* However, Mr Nunana noted that he encouraged students to sign up for vocational courses and to engage in physical

education activities to improve their psychomotor skills.

Allocation of teachers to classes and supervision

The principals indicated that they supervised teachers' class attendance and teaching by occasionally visiting the classrooms. Mr Joyland said: "[A]s Head, to have a quality school, apart from posting the teachers to the various departments and ensuring that they are working, you must go to the classrooms to supervise whatever they are doing. If you sit in the office thinking that your teachers are working hard in the classroom you might be disappointed. Therefore, you need to go around checking. So from time to time, I leave my office to check how teaching and learning are ongoing." The next subtheme was the monitoring of teachers' class attendance. According to Mr Johnson, he checked teachers' attendance at school, regularly monitored teaching and learning, and sometimes met or consulted with the deputy principals.

Provision of resources

The majority of the principals indicated that they provided teaching and learning materials and other logistics, requested teaching staff and made efforts to engage stakeholders to provide for the infrastructural needs of the schools. Relating to the provision of teaching and learning materials, Mr Dominic admitted that funding for the school was inadequate, but that he provided these materials for the teachers. Similarly, Mr Richard accepted that it was his responsibility to provide the required teaching and learning materials for teachers with the limited funds available. He noted: "So, as a headmaster, what I am supposed to do is give my teachers the best resources. So, I provide my teachers with the resources that they need in terms of teaching-learning materials." The next activity performed was requesting for teachers. Principals in Ghana do not have the mandate to recruit teachers, so when there was a shortfall in teaching staff, the principals request for teachers from the GES. In keeping with this, Mr Joseph indicated: "I continue to apply for new teachers." However, to assemble experienced teachers in her school, Ms Seyram adopted a different approach. Together with her deputy principals, she identified experienced teachers in other schools and convinced them to transfer to her school. Ms Seyram said:

[O]ne area that I am concerned with is getting experienced teachers. So we have ventured into the poaching of teachers. When we hear a teacher doing so well in a school, we try to bring that teacher to work with us.

Regarding the provision of school infrastructure, the data revealed that funding was mainly provided by the central government with support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Consequently, principals engaged with the government and other stakeholders for assistance. Mr Joseph indicated that he usually followed up with contractors and government agencies responsible for ongoing infrastructural projects in his school until they were completed.

School management activities

The specific practices cited in this regard were developing school vision and mission statements, maintaining discipline, and engaging students in extracurricular activities. Firstly, to build school quality, Mr Godwin developed a vision and mission statement to guide management practices in his school. He said: "[W]hen I came, I did not get any clear vision of this school. So in consultation with the other stakeholders, I developed a vision and mission for the school." Then, to ensure students' high academic performance, Mr Joseph initiated moves to instil discipline among teachers and students: "We are working on discipline because without discipline, results may not be so good ... and teacher discipline is key." The last subtheme was extracurricular activities. The data revealed that the principals organised quiz competitions, debates, and sporting events. For example, Mr Johnson said that they planned a quiz competition (science and maths) and debates among students. Similarly, Mr Joyland referred to the school cadets group, football and hockey games played by students. Furthermore, according to Mr Nunana, such extracurricular activities promote academic success and are indicators of overall school quality.

Stress Factors in Developing Quality Schools

Four themes emerged in response to the third research question: supervision, non-cooperation of staff, inadequate resources, and bureaucracy at the Regional Education Directorate.

Supervision and lack of support

Regarding supervision, the principals narrated their stressful experiences in handling teachers and students to ensure school quality. According to Mr Godwin, he found moving around to visit each classroom to be a daily stressful activity. However, according to Mr Dominic, although supervision was stressful, it depended on the reaction of the teacher concerned. He noted: "[W]hen you are dealing with supervision of teaching, it varies from one teacher to the other, depending on their reaction to your monitoring. But, generally, I can say that the supervision of teaching is stressful."

Lack of support and cooperation

Performing activities related to maintaining discipline among students was also noted as stressful. The data revealed that the majority of teachers lived outside the school premises, unlike

the principals. Therefore, the task of supervising student activities after school was stressful for the principals. Mr Joseph stated, *"It is stressful as teachers do not have bungalows on campus to stay after school to supervise students to maintain discipline."* Principals reported suffering stress in situations where cooperation from teachers was lacking. Mr Joseph, Mr Richmond, and Mr Gustav expressed this sentiment. For example, Mr Joseph said: *"[I]t is stressful when teachers are not cooperating."*

Inadequate resources

The third stress factor noted in performing activities to develop quality schools was inadequate resources. The participants specifically mentioned a lack of funding. Mr Francis said, *"Of course, they are stressful; stressful in the sense that some are financially intensive and the finances are not there. So every day I am thinking about what I have to do to get some money. Thinking makes me exhausted."* Mr Nunana, too, indicated the lack of money to procure teaching and learning materials as his source of stress. Another source of stress was the bureaucracy in transferring teachers to other schools and meeting invitations. The stress in these cases result from the difficulty in securing transfers for teachers and the short timeframe for invitation notices to attend meetings.

Bureaucracy

Regarding the difficulty of effecting the transfer of teachers, Ms Seyram explained: *"Yes, there is stress in it. At times you can get the teacher who is willing to come [to the school], but when it comes to the transfer issues ... it is stressful."* With regard to notice for attending meetings, Mr Godwin indicated that the invitations arrived late; thus, it affected his daily and weekly activities. Most often, he said that he attended such meetings unprepared and, therefore, was a passive contributor to the proceedings.

Job Resources Beneficial to Performing Practices to Develop Quality School

Regarding the fourth research question on which job resources were valuable to performing the noted practices, the data reveal that principals depended mainly on their academic qualifications, experience, and to some extent, the rank attained in the education service field to perform their duties.

Academic qualification

Firstly, to express the relevance of academic qualifications, Mr Dominic stated: *"I can say that my educational background is helping me a lot. I had my master's degree – MPhil [Master of Philosophy] in Educational Administration. So before I became a headmaster, I knew the role – how to administer schools. So that has been helpful."* Ms Seyram corroborated Mr Dominic's

comment, indicating that the courses she studied in educational administration related directly to the duties she was performing as a principal. Furthermore, most principals expressed similar views acknowledging the benefits of academic qualification to their roles. The data reveal evidence to support how educational qualifications helped principals to handle the challenges they faced. For example, the principals' academic backgrounds allowed them to effectively perform critical analyses of issues (before decision-making) and to determine the validity of students' examination items. Regarding developing critical thinking skills, Mr Richmond said, *"[I]t also helps in analysing issues. Someone who had written a thesis before will not just make a hasty statement; he would want to find out the why, what, and how of the way out. So my academics have been beneficial because I learned a lot from psychology and educational administration."* He further commented that his knowledge in psychology and education also helped him determine the appropriateness of examination questions and other test items.

Experience from previous roles

The principals narrated how previous roles as heads of departments, guidance and counselling coordinators, housemasters/housemistresses, and deputy principals were beneficial to their current positions. For example, Ms Seyram, whose previous position was assistant headmistress, said, *"I had much experience when I became Assistant Headmistress, Administration; all correspondence passed through me before major decisions were made with the Head. And anytime the Head was unavailable, I was in charge of the school. So I gathered much experience from this position."* Furthermore, previous roles as class advisor, housemaster, head of department, guidance, and counselling coordinator proved beneficial to Mr Nunana in discharging his duties as a principal.

The data revealed four subthemes in which experience was used as leverage in performing specific roles. These roles were the supervision of teachers, maintaining discipline among students, creating a positive school climate, and building the capacity of teachers to improve their efficiency. Citing how relevant his previous role as assistant director in charge of supervision was in supervising teachers as a principal, Mr Gustav commented that *"[...] as Assistant Director, Supervision, in my previous role, I liaised with Circuit Supervisors to supervise teaching and learning in the schools. Checking regular attendance of heads, teachers, lateness, absenteeism, lackadaisical attitudes. That experience is helping me here very well."* Further, using the experience gained from being a housemistress, Ms Seyram said that she was able to relate well with students, help resolve their

challenges, maintain discipline, and promote good study habits because she had experience working as housemistress. Mr Johnson relied on his leadership and counselling experience to resolve conflict among his staff, thereby maintaining a positive work climate in the school. He commented on how beneficial this experience was to performing his duties: *“I am also a counsellor, so I combine my counselling skills and leadership skills. As of today, I will say my staff is one of the unified staff among others. Both teaching and non-teaching staff are very united staff. Initially, when I came, the staff was not like this. There were divisions here and there, but with my knowledge in leadership, now we are united. So it [experience] is helping.”* Lastly, the experience helped to develop the skills of teachers in leadership positions. According to Mr Nunana, his working relationship with housemasters, heads of departments, and the guidance and counselling coordinators are cordial because he once held such positions and when there is an opportunity, he educates these officers on their roles to improve their work efficiency.

Rank attained in the education service

Our analysis revealed that being appointed as attaining the qualifying rank of a school principal is a function in which prior experience is greatly beneficial. Ms Chelsea said the following: *“Rank wise I have gone through the mill, from the beginning as assistant superintendent, through to deputy director. I know what it takes to teach. I know what it takes to head for the benefit of the school.”* Providing further evidence, Mr Nuku indicated that rising through the ranks he had learnt how to effectively manage a school. Consequently, experience and rank are relevant to effectively and efficiently functioning as a school principal. See Appendix A for a summary of the results discussed in this section.

Discussion

In this section we provide a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions, practices, stressors, and strategies related to enhancing school quality, as perceived by principals.

The findings reveal that the principals who participated in our study perceived quality schools as having high academic performance, adequate resources, and a well-organised system with extracurricular activities. Building on previous research, the results show that the participants in our study had a broad understanding of quality schools and had defined a clear path towards developing such. The principals described a quality school as implying learners of high quality, qualified teachers, availability of resources, and a positive school climate, all of which contribute to the academic and total development of learners. This has also been reported in other studies, for

example, in Anderson (2004), Eze (2009), and Unterhalter (2019).

Secondly, the findings show that the following practices resulted in school quality: promoting professional development of staff, supporting students' academic and skills development, supervising teachers, providing resources, and ensuring a positive school climate for academic work to thrive. These results align with the conclusions reached by Bedi and Kukemelk (2020), Botha (2004) and Ongaga (2020), which show that principals performed practices related to instructional leadership and supported teachers to improve their teaching methods. This shows that to improve the quality development of schools in Ghana and countries with like education management structures, actions should focus more on teachers' professional development and improving instructional methods.

Thirdly, our research uncovered the stressors affecting the enhancement of school quality, including supervision, non-cooperation of teachers, shortages of resources, and bureaucratic processes. These findings align with prior investigations indicating that stressors such as insufficient resources, delayed fund allocation (Kendi, 2012), teacher supervision, attitudes, bureaucratic hurdles (Mahfouz, 2020; Schaufeli, 2017; Wadesango et al., 2015), and limited financial support (Elomaa et al., 2023) burdened school administrators. Additionally, we found that inadequate teacher accommodation escalated the workload for administrators (Wang, Pollock & Hauseman, 2018), particularly when few teachers resided on campus to assist with student supervision in boarding facilities.

Lastly, the findings show that the principals relied on their educational qualifications and experiences as sources of strength to perform their duties. Their reliance on their academic qualifications are reflected in the findings by Valentine and Prater (2011) who found that education improved performance and increased motivation and intelligence. The results regarding the relevance of experience were also found by Lazaridou and Beka (2015) who revealed that principals with experience were more successful than others. Again, the findings show no pre-service training for principals, as Bush and Oduro (2006) have reported.

The implication of these findings for governments in developing countries and principals, in particular, is that positive leadership orientation is significant in developing quality schools. As resources are limited (e.g., infrastructure, qualified teachers, and learning and teaching materials), no one school could feasibly have all the components of the ideal quality school. Therefore, innovation in leadership practices amid these limitations should be the way forward for

continuous development of quality schools and managing the resulting stress.

Conclusion

In conclusion we reflect on the insights gained from school principals regarding the factors influencing school quality, their practices in supporting student development, and the challenges they faced in their roles. However, it is essential to mention the limitations of this study. The principals in this study shaped the findings by sharing their thoughts and practices, which implied that the results might differ with different participants (Reid, 2021). The findings allowed us to conclude that principals had an understanding of what makes a quality school. This understanding was not limited to students achieving high academic standards but it was interrelated with the need for adequate and qualified teachers, sufficient infrastructure, and well-behaved students. Relatedly, the principals performed specific practices to support student development. Although performing the practices were stressful and burdensome (Wang et al., 2018), they relied on their academic backgrounds and experiences acquired over the years as a primary means of support (Valentine & Prater, 2011) to perform their duties.

As educational level and experience were beneficial in providing quality leadership (Juharyanto, Sultoni, Arifin, Bafadal, Nurabadi & Hardika, 2020), we recommend a strict entry grade point for principals and the institution of a pre-service training regime as an additional requirement. Lastly, we recommend further research to explore the possibility of using technology to support principals in the performance of their duties to reduce job stress and improve efficiency.

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Authors' Contributions

IKB designed the study, formulated the research questions, planned and carried out the data collection, performed the analysis and also wrote the manuscript. HK and EB, acting as PhD supervisors, reviewed the manuscript and provided technical suggestions.

Notes

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Appendix A: Summary of Results

Topic	Main theme	Subtheme
School quality	Student development	Academic performance
		Usefulness of the graduates
	Resource availability	Students' motivation
		Access to textbooks
		Learning and teaching materials
		School infrastructure/school facilities
		Qualified teachers
		Competence (content and pedagogical knowledge)
	School management and organisation	Positive attitude of teachers to teach
		Population and class size
Quality of examination/assessment		
Extracurricular activities		
Practices performed to develop school quality	Staff development	Organised learning environment
		Support teachers for promotion/professional development
	Student development	In-service training
		Peer sharing
		Organising extra classes/private studies
	Allocation of teachers to classes and supervision	Practical skills development
		Teacher supervision
	Provision of resources	Monitoring school and class attendance of teachers
		Teaching and learning materials
		Requesting teachers to fill vacant positions
School management activities	Infrastructure development/following up on projects	
	Developing vision and mission for the school	
	School discipline	
	Organising competitions (e.g., quiz, debate)	
Stress factors in developing school quality	Supervision	Performing sporting activities
		Supervising teaching and students
	Lack of support	Maintaining discipline among students
		Non-cooperation of teachers
	Lack of resources	Inadequate funding
		Inadequate learning and teaching materials
Bureaucracy	Delay in transferring teachers	
	The improper organisation of meetings	
	Critical analysis of issues	
	Validation of assessment items	
Job resources (support factors) in developing school quality	Academic qualification	Supervision of teachers
		Maintaining discipline
	Experience	Creating a positive school climate
		Building the capacity of teachers
Rank		Path to gaining experience