

Examining the Lived Experiences and Identity Construct of Selected Headmistresses of Senior High Schools in the Kumasi Metropolis: A Mixed Method Study

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Abstract

Leadership roles are crucial in the sustainability of public institutions since it is the engine room for nurturing future leaders. Despite the granting of equal opportunities for females to assume leadership roles in academic institutions in Ghana compared to their male counterparts, there still remain some institutional challenges that female headmistresses have to grapple with. Using the mixed method technique, this study examined the lived experiences and identity construct of selected headmistresses of senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana. The cross-sectional study design with purposive sampling was conducted on 14 female headmistresses from 14 senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis. Interview-based structured questionnaires with one-on-one interviews were used. Study results indicate that 71% of challenges that headmistresses are exposed to are internally generated, especially in gender stereotyping by undermining female heads. On areas of headmistress' lived experiences, 57% of respondents agree that most efforts are geared towards women advocacy, with 64% demonstrating for ambition and drive. Again, this study reveals that through disciplined leadership experience, female school heads are able to mould students to become good adults as future leaders. The study recommends for future looking studies should consider these lived experiences of female heads in relation to the demands of policymakers to make lasting resolutions which are academically and environmentally friendly.

Keywords: Ghana, Headmistresses, Identity Construct, Lived Experiences, Mixed Method, Senior High Schools.

Introduction

Leadership is vital in the field of academia as it establishes the circumstances and expectations for good instruction and the development of a culture of continuous learning for both educators and students [1], [2], [3]. According to [3], effective school leadership is critical for improving school efficiency and equity. Expectations for schools and school leaders are shifting as countries strive to adapt their education systems to the requirements of modern society [2]. Many nations have shifted toward decentralisation, giving schools more autonomy in decision-making and holding them more responsible for outcomes [4]. In such

cases, leadership and leadership practices play a critical role in uniting the ranks to adopt policies and strategies to meet the concerns of stakeholders, as well as issues pertaining to both curriculum and pedagogy [2].

The importance of school leadership has increased on the global agenda for education policy. It has a significant impact on teachers' capacities and motivations as well as the culture and environment of the classroom, helping to improve educational outcomes [5]. Effective school leadership is crucial to increase the effectiveness and equality of education [4]. According to [6], strong leadership is crucial in educational institutions since it improves the

workforce's quality and encourages schools to support one another in making improvement.

Hence, effective school leadership, should exhibit strong accountability principles to boost confidence in leadership administration and develop quality standards to direct the actions of subordinates and students [3]. [7] argued that, as a result, the position of school leadership is becoming more and more characterized by a demanding set of responsibilities, including administration of finances and human resources as well as leadership for learning. In order to assist in developing quality and operational standards, leadership in educational institutions should be broad and provide advice and directions in a variety of formats. The focus of leadership study has shifted between leadership as a person and leadership as a position or process, making this vital [8].

Women leaders have different viewpoints on leadership than their male counterparts. They therefore employ more open communication options, set a good example, motivate people to achieve their best, and are more ready to make errors [9]. Furthermore, female leaders are more attentive to the requirements of their followers or subordinates [10], [11]. Despite these advantages, women executives confront several hurdles [11]. Ref. [12] has found that, due to the prevalent relationship between male features and leadership, women leaders feel a need to balance their feminine and masculine attributes in order to be viewed as suitable for a leadership post. Furthermore, male leaders advance quicker into leadership roles/positions than female leaders [13], [12]. When compared to male leaders, women leaders are more likely to have gender preconception affecting their performance appraisals and related awards while in a leadership position [13].

The SHS education in Ghana is divided into grades based on students' performance on the West African Examination Council's standardized exams: Grades A, B, C and D, as well as mission and non-mission schools. The

student body is divided into mixed-sex, single-sex (boys), and single-sex (girls) students. The ownership structure is divided into public and private. Any one of these classifications has a significant impact on the school heads' real-world knowledge, inventiveness, leadership style, and functional abilities. This study gravitates towards exploring the lived experiences and how headmistresses construct their identity in their world of work.

Even though female academicians are increasingly visible in leadership positions in secondary schools, the experiences they cope with in order to achieve this prestige are not for the fainthearted [14]. In contemporary research in female leadership in Ghana, there has been limited research on women in educational leadership with no research on lived experiences on female headmistresses in Ghana. The work from [15] in the Tano North Municipality of Ahafo region of Ghana exclusively hovers on female teachers in general while that of [16] hangs on educational equity. The work of [3] borders on educational leadership and quality education in disadvantaged communities in Ghana and Tanzania while that of [17] only reviews Ghana's educational policies and its implication for educational leadership in developing countries. A more classic work is that of [2] which focuses on the involvement of female educationists in the effectiveness of schools, however, it was conducted at the junior high school level. There is therefore the need to further explore women's lived experiences towards school effectiveness at the senior high school level, hence, this study is aimed to bridge that gap. Thus, this study is a direct reaction to the empirical expectation that leadership practices examined, with a focus on female school leaders. The study explores the experiences of female heads of selected senior high schools as a reaction to filling the gap vis-à-vis the challenges they are exposed to in determining their duties in a Ghanaian educational setting. The study also explores the

ways on how female senior high school heads manage the demands of their jobs. In addition, the study further explores how leadership experiences in second cycle institutions shape the identity of female leaders. It is in this light that the study, therefore, explores the lived experiences of female heads of senior high schools in Kumasi Metropolis and how headmistresses construct their identity in their world of work.

Methods

Study Settings and Design

The study was conducted in the Ashanti region of Ghana and was part of a broader study titled lived experiences and coping strategies of selected headmistresses of senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis. This region was purposively selected due to its geographical location (middle belt), which has diverse representation of the 16 regions of Ghana. The study was conducted between March 1, 2022 and March 31, 2022. This study instigated mixed method of research inquiry to explore and examine the views, opinions, and experiences of study respondents, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research question [18], [19], [20]. Thus, the purpose of using mixed methods was to make the study complete and more trustworthy that a single method cannot achieve [21], [20], [22].

Design

The study, therefore, employed the case study design in the accomplishment of its research objectives. The case study design helps provide the opportunity to solicit information from female headteachers' lived experiences in their leadership practices. The experiences of participants are interpreted based on the meaning found among the participants. The research was framed in a constructivist theoretical framework to understand how female headteachers handle educational leadership. Therefore, the goal of the research was to understand and interpret

how the female headteachers conceptualized the meaning of leaderships roles and how they manage the difficulties associated with educational leadership. As the phenomenological approach is constructivist: the goal was to explain the essence of the lived experiences of a phenomenon or concept, under a study of individual. Due to the nature of the research, the data collection and analysis could be continually adjusted to the emerging results [23], which will lead to understanding the lived experiences and how headmistresses construct their identity in their world of work.

Population

The study consisted of all female headteachers in the Ashanti Region and focused on 14 heads of senior High schools in the Kumasi Metropolis. In terms of the leadership structure of the schools, the school heads are at the top and are in charge of overseeing and managing the day-to-day operations of the schools. As a result, the leadership strategy, direction, and vision of the heads have an impact on the substructures' leadership practices and styles as well as the success of the schools. This influenced the choice to include the SHS administrators in the study. Female SHS school heads with at least two years of continuous experience in such a leadership role were used in the study.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study adopted the multistage sampling process involving simple random sampling, cluster sampling and purposive sampling. The study then selected, randomly, one administrative region out of the sixteen regions of Ghana. In the selected region, cluster sampling was used to group senior high schools in the administrative districts of the region, and one metropolitan was considered. Then 14 female headteachers of senior high schools were purposively selected. The researcher then arrived at the desired sample size after saturation for selection was reached.

The choice of female headteachers as the study subjects is due to the fact that the study's target population was the female headteachers of the chosen SHSs. Because the researcher believed that the headteachers of the SHSs had in-depth knowledge and expertise in leadership methods for the efficient administration of their schools, purposive sampling was used in the procedure. As a consequence, direct feedback on the important concerns raised in the study requires purposeful engagement of the school heads. Hence, the study aimed to perform a thorough analysis of headmistresses' lived experiences and their identity construct as far as leadership roles of women concerned.

Data Collection Procedure

The study data were collected between March 1, 2022 and March 31, 2022. Study consent was sought from authorities of selected Senior High Schools and respective respondents. The interviews were conducted to gain the perspective results of the topic on the lived experiences and identity construct of selected headmistresses of senior high schools. Again, the identities of study respondents, along with the responses from interviews and focus group discussions were kept confidential. As a result, measures were taken to protect the intellectual interests of study respondents and their involvement in this project somehow did not endanger their overall well-being. The interviews were conducted for a period of not more than 30 minutes and done in safe and convenient environment according to the choice of the selected participants.

Data Analysis

In addition to tables, bars and pie chart used to analyze quantitative data, the phenomenological analytical framework, through themes using Colaizzi's eight-step strategy was used to describe participants' lived experiences (1978). The steps applied to analyse the study are as follows:

1. Read transcripts several times to get a sense of whole content.
2. Add to bracketing journal any thoughts, feelings, and ideas gained due to connection with topic.
3. Identify significant statements and phrases from transcript.
4. Aggregate formulated meanings from significant statements.
5. Provide categories, clusters of themes from meanings.
6. Integrate resulting ideas into exhaustive description of phenomenon.
7. Reduce exhaustive description to fundamental structure.
8. Return to participants for member checking and
9. Validate exhaustive description and its fundamental structure.

Study transcripts were read severally throughout the coding process and formulated meanings from significant statements were generated from responses and provided categories for these statements. The researcher then integrated the results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Steps 7 and 9 were combined where the researcher reduced and validated the exhaustive description to a fundamental structure. Finally, themes were audited and checked against sampled transcripts to ensure consistency of narratives and themes.

Results

The management routes of the headmistresses within the Kumasi Metropolis showcase a valuable depth of experiences and routes to power. Tracing their journeys provides rich levels of professional development, considering individual aspirations with general conventions set by the Ghana Education Service (GES). The findings of the background information of study participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Background Information of Participants

Participant	Year in Leadership Role	Previous Role(s)	Method of Progression
1	3 years (Headmistress) + 3 years (Assistant Headmistress)	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, moves due to family
2	+ 3 years Headmistress	AD II, AD I, Assistant Head	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and Interview
3	1 year (Headmistress) + 5 years (Assistant Head)	1 year (Headmistress) + 5 years (Assistant Head)	Progressed through management, became head of a newly absorbed school, faced challenges of establishing the school from scratch
4	+4 years Headmistress	P.S, AD II, AD I, Assistant Headmistress	Sequential promotions through GES ranks: P.S. to AD II, AD II to AD I, then Assistant Headmistress
5	+4 years Headmistress	Guidance and Counselling Coordinator, HOD, Senior Housemistress, Assistant Headmistress	Rising through GES ranks, needed 3+ years in previous roles to apply for Assistant Headmistress, then 2+ years to apply for Headmistress
6	1 year (Headmistress) + 3 years (Assistant Head)	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress	Progressive promotions through GES ranks: P.S. to AD II, AD II to AD I, then Assistant Headmistress
7	3 years Headmistress	Head of Department	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, push by old students 'recommendation
8	3 years (Headmistress) + 4 years (Assistant Head)	Housemistress, HOD, Assistant Headmistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and interview
9	6 years (Headmistress)	School chaplain as well as Assistant headmistress	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, and church structure
10	1 year (Headmistress) +3 years (Assistant Headmistress)	Guidance and Counselling Coordinator, Senior Housemistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and interview
11	3years Headship +5years Assistant Head	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and

		Senior Housemistress Assistant Headmistress	interview, and church appointment
12	2years Headmistress 3years HOD, 5years housemistress	Housemistress, Head of Department Assistant Headmistress	Ambition and motivation GES ranks, exams, and interview
13	7yeas HOD 3years Headmistress	Head of Department, Headmistress	Rank, Interview, and Luck
14	2years Headmistress, 5years Assist 5years HOD	Housemistress, Head of Department Assistant Headmistress	Ambition and motivation GES ranks, exams, and interview

Themes

The themes identified in the study is are outlines and presented below:

Theme 1: Impact on Teaching and Learning on Leadership

The narratives underscored a profound belief in discipline's role as a cornerstone for academic success. Far from viewing discipline as mere adherence to rules, the headmistresses perceived it as an ethos that cultivates a conducive environment for learning.

Participant 6 pointed out,

"I myself am a disciplinarian. And I have the conviction that if I have a group of students under me, together with myself, I will be able to discipline them. And then mould them into good adults. And then you should know that if students are disciplined, they are academically good. Because a disciplined student will obey all school rules and regulations and will sit down and learn. So that is my main reason for becoming a headmistress."

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Notwithstanding the above expressed views, the headmistresses' accounts clarify that while their roles come with empowerment, authorization and influence, they're also rife with a spectrum of hurdles—ranging from internal dynamics and external societal constraints to the emotional nuances of being at the helm of affairs. (see Table 2 and Fig. 1).

Table 2. Headmistresses' Challenges in Leadership

Coping mechanism	Value	Percentage (100%)
Internal obstacles	10	71%
External obstacles	4	29%
Total	14	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

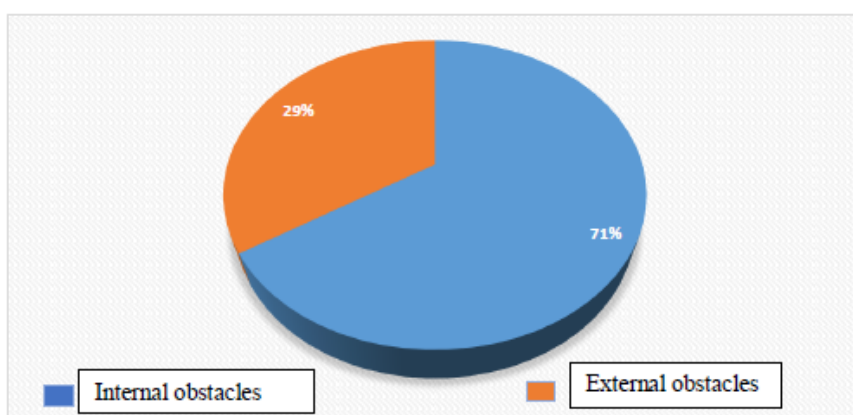


Fig. 1. Headmistresses' Challenges in Leadership

Source: Field survey, 2023.

Theme 2: Gender Dynamics In Leadership

The intricacies of gender dynamics in leadership form a pivotal aspect of the headmistresses' experiences. While their journey to leadership undeniably speaks volumes about their competence, tenacity, and resilience, the lens of gender paints a distinct picture. In the midst of leading educational institutions, the headmistresses found themselves at the intersection of leadership expectations and gender roles. The societal tapestry often wove conflicting images of how a woman leader should be.

Participant 1 noted, *"You know in our society, in our cultural settings as blacks, Africans, Ghanaians, most people see teachers, women being teachers as head leaders, they don't appreciate women as heads."*

Participant 5 candidly expressed, *"Some also think that female headmistresses, we are too knowing. We behave as if we know everything."*

So, at times, they don't like us as they like the males. Some of the males are very free-going and they think that the females should also be the same" These experiences mirror the broader societal struggle to fit women leaders into preconceived boxes.

Despite their accomplishments, gender biases often clouded perceptions and judgments. Participant 3 share, *" And even managing men. You know, in our part of the world, it is not so easy. You know, per culture, men are the very bossy type, you know, detatorial type and all."*

Echoing similar experiences, Participant 7 lamented, *"With my internal challenges, like male teachers feeling that they are superior, that ladies shouldn't give them rules, ladies shouldn't manage them"* The shadows of bias, subtle yet persistent, often required them to work doubly hard to earn the same respect and recognition.

Table 3. Leadership Experiences of Headmistresses

Study Variables	Advocacy for women	Ambition and drive	Formal progression	Interview process
Headmistress' coping mechanism	8 (57%)	5 (36%)	6 (43%)	5 (36%)
Headmistress' experiences	6 (43%)	9 (64%)	4 (29%)	4 (29%)
Total	14 (100%)	14 (100%)	10 (72%)	9 (65%)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

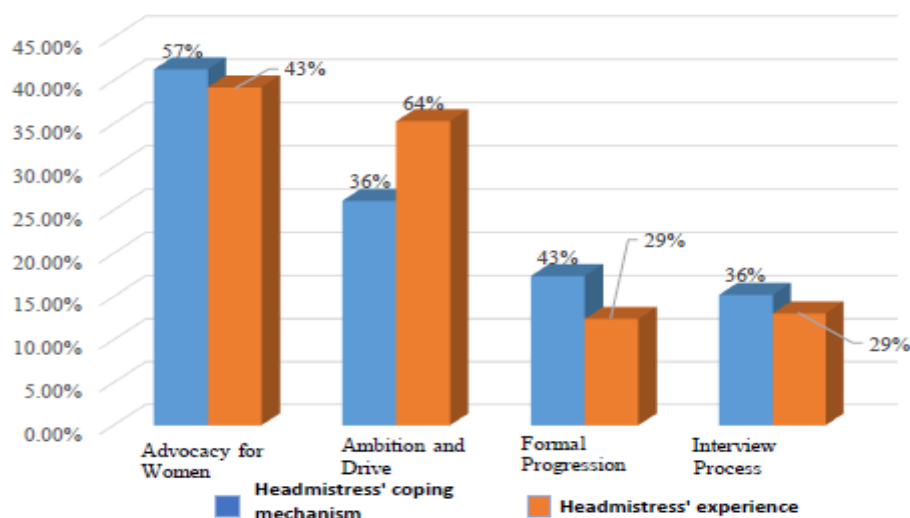


Fig 2. Leadership Experiences of Headmistresses

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Discussion

Leadership Experiences of Headmistresses in the Kumasi Metropolis

The leadership experiences of headmistresses in Senior High Schools (SHS) in the Kumasi Metropolis, as garnered from the presented themes, offer deep insights into the intricate nuances between formal expectations and personal motivations, styles, impacts, and the role of effective communication in the leadership domains of study respondents (See Fig. 2 and Table 3). Study results indicate that formal progression highlights the structured and procedural steps that these educational leaders' traverse, reflecting the global trend where institutions rely on tried-and-true systems to identify and groom potential leaders [1]. The interview process offers a more detailed lens into the selection mechanisms, emphasizing the meticulous nature of appointing leadership positions (See Table 3). Interestingly, as identified by [24], such meticulous processes correlate with better institutional outcomes, validating the rigorous

approach within the Kumasi Metropolis. Nevertheless, beyond the formalities, the Ambition and Drive theme accentuates the inner motivations fuelling these headmistresses. In line with self-determination theory posited by [25], intrinsic motivations are pivotal for sustaining leadership roles in challenging terrains. These findings are in consonance with the works of [26], [27].

Constructing Headmistresses' Identity

Constructing a leadership identity is a transformative journey, a complex interplay of experiences, reactions, and reflections that shape leaders over time. The narratives of headmistresses from SHSs offer a profound understanding of this intricate process, uniquely blending theory with experiential insights (See Fig. 1). Drawing from their stories, a multi-dimensional tapestry of leadership identity emerges, providing valuable insights to the academic and practical realm of leadership and this is evident in responses from participants A, B and C above (see theme 2). Hence, the emphasis on Adaptive Leadership resonates with [28] and [29], that perspectives with

effective leadership hinge on the ability to recognize and adapt to varying contexts. By acknowledging the fluidity of situations and tailoring their leadership style, headmistresses construct an identity that's not just position-centric but contextual. This is further underscored by their authoritative approach, echoing the findings of [30], that sometimes autocratic leadership is imperative, especially when swift decisions are pivotal. Contrarily, their empathetic leadership approach underscores the essentiality of emotional intelligence in leadership, a quality that [31] posit as crucial for understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others. Lastly, Inclusiveness in their leadership style accentuates the collaborative spirit, resonating with [32] transformational leadership theory, as collaboration and collective decision-making forge stronger, more resilient teams.

Limitations

The current study has limitations regarding the participants, scope and data collection instruments. The study was limited to only senior high school headmistresses, without the perspectives of their male counterparts. The experiences of female headmistresses in the selected senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis could possibly influence their responses to the interviews and affect the validity of the strength of the conclusion. Similarly, the study purposively selected 14 headmistresses in the Kumasi metropolis. The interview guide was a self-developed instrument based on previous literature and theories. That notwithstanding, the study employed several scientific scrutinise such as developing of interview guide with previous literature, pre-testing of tools, informed consent as well as methodological and interpretive rigour of analysing qualitative data [33], [34].

Conclusion

The leadership position within the Senior High Schools of the Kumasi Metropolis, as

delineated through the experiences of headmistresses, provides a multifaceted glimpse into the dynamics of educational leadership in a gendered context. It amalgamates not only the challenges and triumphs intrinsic to the role but also the broader implications for leadership paradigms in educational institutions. In essence, the leadership journey of the headmistresses in the Kumasi Metropolis is emblematic of a larger narrative of change, resilience, and evolution. It stands as a reflection of the changing face of educational leadership in the region and offers invaluable insights for future research, policy-making, and leadership training endeavours. As we look forward, it is imperative to acknowledge, celebrate, and learn from these narratives, for they provide the compass for future generations of educational leaders.

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Consent to Publish

Not applicable

Data Availability Statement

All data supporting findings are available upon request.

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