Ear to the Rough Ground: Why Head Teacher Transfers in Uganda are Going to be Increasingly Controversial

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Abstract The critical challenge, in developing countries, of educational management policy implementation in general, and headteacher transfers in particular, is to force the various paradigms meant to ground them to the rough ground. Even the market-oriented competitive model risks creating new forms of exclusion, corruption and exploitation if not grounded in the personal engagement with daily struggles and ambiguities of lived experience. We propose a harmonization of approaches to headteacher transfers that avoids handling reality through univocal and polarized lenses. Conclusively, beyond World Bank common prescriptions, we suggest a more heteronomous and care-based professional ethics in the wake of Covid-19.

Keywords: *educational management, headteacher transfers, social contract, identity formation, Uganda*

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1. Introduction

In its landmark 1997 Development Report, the World Bank contended that: Many lower income countries have been unable to provide even the most rudimentary underpinnings of a rule-based civil service. Their formal systems often resemble those of industrial countries on paper. But in practice informality remains the norm. Merit-based personnel rules are circumvented, and staff are recruited or promoted on the basis of patronage and clientelism; budgets are unrealistic and often set aside in any case by ad hoc decisions during implementation. At bottom, all these problems can be traced back to weaknesses in the underlying institutions; (i) poor enforceability of the rule of law both within and beyond the public sector; (ii) a lack of built-in mechanisms for listening to, and forming partnerships with, firms and civil society; and (iii) a complete absence of competitive pressure in policymaking, the delivery of services and personnel practices [1].

2. The Social Contractual Model

Recently, the traditional mode of management has widely been condemned for being too entangled with formal, abstract and de-contextualised processes that are out of touch with reality on the rough ground. This is because the legal-rational identity of the modern bureaucrat was shaped via a neo-Kantian 'contrastive self-identification' which put the individual at a distance from the 'contingent' and 'historical-cultural', including past particularistic loyalties accruing to ethnicity or religion [2,3]. Everything in the public sphere, including transfer processes of civil servants, have come to be epistemologically decided on the basis of "eternal and unchangeable laws of reason" [[4], 116]. The formal and legal aspect is foundational for confidence in any modern bureaucrat's judgement. It guarantees the neutrality of a judgement, namely, its lack of tribal or religious bias, objectivity and the 'internal' or epistemic incontestability of its truth. Judgement of events are given in a hierarchical, top-down manner leaving no room for constructive interaction with perspectives of the locals. They presuppose the Kantian epistemological model, where to know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind. For in a formal and objective judgement, between the facts (on the rough ground) and the rational judgements (in the mind) of the government official, nothing cultural-linguistic should any longer intervene. In other words, the bureaucrat may no longer legitimate his/her claim to truth by referring for example to the local traditions, the doxa of community, or "the opinions and beliefs of common understanding" [[4], 116]. One must distance oneself from the vagueness of popular opinion to have a 'clear view of the situation' through neutral criteria and objective procedural laws. The preservation of proper distance from local customs, habits and opinions has been a major motive for modern curricula and pedagogies insofar as they promote a boundary between the global and local. One is reminded of the punishments (corporal and psychological) incurred by learners in Ugandan schools for speaking vernacular, or local languages. This is how costly the formality of practices is.

In his Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol [5] depicts three characters in the Ugandan experience who throw light on patterns of relations between top and lower bureaucrats, and local communities. Not only are the relations hierarchical, but also characterised by hubris. Ocol's attitude towards the local tells us a lot about the Ugandan professional elite [5]. Unlike his uneducated wife Lawino who draws confidence in her judgements from the Acholi legitimating tradition, Ocol has no longer any respect for anything local. As [6] and [4] suggest, in the education of the elite, it was taken for granted that the high literate culture must supplant the low popular culture, the standard language the dialects, the universal standards of truth the local conceptions and misconceptions. In this vein, Ocol is enthusiastic about the urban future of Africa, a future whose foundations were laid by European colonists [5]. Unlike Ocol, however, there is the third character Okot who is not in favour of a total distancing of Africans from their cultural identities. "Why should lawyers and bishops wear long robes like the British do?". He questions the false confidence and uncritical fascination of Ocol in pre-given, standards and procedures. "Why should the African legal system be based on 'English Law Reports'? [[5], p. 155). We suppose he would, in regard to school administration, including headteacher transfer policies, ask: Why should they be top-down, simplistically grounded by procedural laws copied from England? Okot's insistence that an African mould is inseparably needed in the reconstruction and recontextualization of bureaucratic practices is heteronomous and inclusive in intent. By contrast, every rational-legal operation for Ocol is meant to preserve and confirm his autonomous selfhood, and his belonging to a self-legislating elite category system [2,3]. There is an element of self-conceit in such an identity, and for Foucault (following Nietzsche) a link between knowledge and power [7]. The bureaucrat produces rational or law-like judgements (e.g. appointments) that are purported to reflect objectively the 'true nature of things', but in reality, they reflect "the play of instincts, impulses, desires, fears, and the will to appropriate. Knowledge is produced on the stage where these elements struggle against one another." [[7], p. 202].

2.1. Between Informality and Corruption

In Uganda, complaints abound that headteacher transfer processes do not follow 'formal procedural rules', leading to suspicions of corruption (and tribal, religious and gender biases) in public office. For example, a headteacher who has over stayed for more than the recommended seven years by policy has to be transferred to another school. On Saturday January 26, 2019, however, [8] reported that the Ministry of Education and Sports transferred 100 headteachers and Deputies some of whom had overstayed between 15 and 16 years at a station. To the World Bank such a case is evidence of the informality of practices (lack of rule of law). However, informality needs to be qualified since, in developing countries, it is not easy to univocally determine in positive and negative terms.

Within the postmodern paradigm informality would be linked to deregulation and decentralization (levelling of hierarchies) so as to allow room for open and free democratic processes of negotiating compromises between the system world and the lifeworld. But in developing countries, unfortunately, informality is often linked to what according to the World Bank is "poor enforceability of the rule of law both within (and beyond) the public sector" [1]. Uganda has spent a lot of time and effort tightening the existing system up, for example, fighting the phenomenon of 'ghost workers' on government payrolls [9,10]. According to Hughes, things are not so 'clearly given' in developing countries. The issue of corruption and amount of power that government offices wield, renders the assessment of management strategies to be more complex than in developed countries. Hughes quotes Huque who wrote: Public administration itself is susceptible to corruption since officials exercise a substantial amount of power. There are possibilities for acquiring improper benefits by interpreting or bending rules in favour of certain groups or individuals [11].

2.2. Forming Partnerships with Stakeholders

Corruption in developing countries feeds on 'closed bureaucracies' based on political, tribal, gender and religious affiliations. During the industrial revolution, clear boundary maintenance between the political and the economic (the passionate and emotional) and the scientific or objective (intellectual) is what drove the public trust in the professionals. They, unlike marketeers and politicians, "*gain their power through knowledge--not wealth or political prestige", therefore, "professionals are uniquely suited to ascertain what is best for the public as a whole and to suppress their own immediate interests in achieving it*" [[12], pp. 651-2]. However, as we have seen, skepticism regarding the ideal of objectivity in the natural and social science (intellectual) has led to more democratic and pragmatic options. "The individual, pragmatists argued, was always formed and bounded by social context. Our experience might seem like fresh, naïve empirical material, yet Dewey saw that it is filled with interpretations, classifications, due to sophisticated thought. It is already overlaid with the products of past reflection" [[12], pp. 654-5]. There are no non-interpreted norms, procedures, rules and 'codes of conduct' swinging free of particular social-practical, historical-cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

For Habermas, we must correct the modern (misleading) psychology of the autonomous 'thinking self' and the (equally fictitious) 'community of rational interests' answerable to itself alone (professional elite). The self is 'always-already social-linguistic', actively engaged, intersubjective selfhood who is a *tributary to others* [13]. This 'open bureaucrat' is more of a '(wo)man of the people', than a member of an isolated elite. His or her identity formation favours the pedagogy of interactive learning, in view of a complex structure of local conversational groups (head teacher associations and PTAs) locally reproduced, but less centralistic [6]. In relating to others, he or she would strive to create social situations that come across as relaxed and informal, that encourage personal expression, creativity, and choice (of a consumer). He or she can react flexibly to divergent personal desires of consumers [14].

The 'open bureaucrat' would not demand that an explicit hierarchical or authoritarian structure is present

before the conversation takes off. The processes of management, according to this paradigm, cannot be simply top-down, but must respect and incorporate value-judgements, meanings and interpretations from local cultural-linguistic contexts. So, the question would be: Are headteachers in Uganda invited (indeed obliged) to express their opinion about a transfer? Do ministry officials consider that this approach has a positive influence on head teachers' confidence and commitment in a new assignment? Unfortunately, in Uganda (and other developing countries), this seems not to be the case. Ministry officials have largely failed to adopt a different professional self-understanding from the colonial and hegemonic. There is some truth in what the World Bank noted as; "a lack of built-in mechanisms for listening to, and forming partnerships with, firms and civil society" [[1], pp. 79-80]. However, there are also signs of hope.

3. Civil Society and People Power

Headteacher transfers continue to receive a lot of resistance at the grassroot level. It might be that ordinary Ugandan peasants are becoming more conscious of their rights, and according to Oloka-Oloya, their obligation to oppose all kinds of dictatorship especially in the public sphere [15,16]. There has been in Uganda (since the 1980s guerrilla war), according to [17], "a genuine concern for saving the ordinary citizen from political apathy, ignorance, marginalization and manipulation by the ruling educated elite … in favour of freeing civil society, recognizing and enhancing its role in public affairs" (p.168). Like [1], the Ugandan lawyer, [16] has advocated for formal civil society organizations, (i) not born of state initiative, (ii) working publicly on their own for their legitimate interests and ideas, and (iii) able to pressurize the state rather than support it. Their ultimate role is to see to it that government officers are accountable to the people. More recently, the Ugandan newspaper the 'New Vision' of Monday 2nd February 2015 reported that, The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) received more than 100 petitions from stakeholders seeking to halt transfers of headteachers after the reshuffle of headteachers in January 2015. Obviously, there was a lack of communicative action between the MOES officials (system world) and stakeholders (life world) before the reshuffles. However, what is encouraging is that 'the journalist' can bring to light the potential of civil society (a middle space) to expose and fight social injustices. Moreover, in Uganda the proliferation of civil societies (especially for youths and women) up to the rural areas has played a massive role in teaching marginalized people to oppose dictatorial rule and defend human rights. Opposition political parties have interestingly adopted the concept of popular sovereignty, the idea that 'power actually belongs to the people'. [19] calls civil society the fourth arm in the separation of power, after the executive, the legislature, and judiciary [[18], p.169]. It is not farfetched to conclude that civil society is leading to conflicts surrounding headteacher transfers given the growing awareness of the roles of Foundation Bodies (religious and cultural communities), Boards of Governors (BOG) in policy-making, and Parents and Teacher Associations (PTA) in financial support of staff salaries and allowances [[20], p. 216]. As formal civil society organizations, e.g. NGOs, mass media, trade unions, professional associations, political parties, etc., are increasingly educating people, including head teachers and stakeholders, about their rights, abuse of power by top officials is hoped to decline.

4. Competitive Pressure in Policy Making

Lastly, the World Bank refers to "complete absence of competitive pressure in policymaking, the delivery of services and personnel practices" [[1], pp.79-80]. When transfers are not shaped by the preferences and choices of stakeholders closer to the life world, they become instruments of patronage and clientelism. The "power to transfer" can be used as an effective tool of paternalistic control, total subservience to a self-totalizing system that renders corruption, tribalism, religious bigotry and nepotism invisible. The "power to transfer" reduces the other to a child who does not yet know its 'real interests'. When the World Bank referred to the need for "competitive pressure", it was in view of having all decisions and choices shaped by all concerned participants in as open as possible democratic milieus. As 'interest groups' of those concerned with a school get recognized, bureaucrats should be transformed from public trustees to market competitors, and the public interest should be defined by the public's interest. In the absence of this levelling of hierarchies, the World Bank seems to suggest, corruption in developing countries will remains problematic.

The last aspect, complexity and ambiguity is related to the temptation by the World Bank itself to remain 'up there', imposing the marketisation (liberalism) of operations from nowhere in particular. It can be a 'temptation of not getting involved' with the complexities and ambiguities thrown up in different localities and histories—maintaining a safe distance—that lies behind privileging the 'formality of practices'.

4.1. Uganda's Colonial Historical Context

All processes of administration in Uganda should be cognizant of the damage that colonial histories do, not only to the collective mind of a society, but to professional operations despite their claim to serve objective, democratic, or competitive aspirations. The historical and social-cultural context in which a professional operates has a significant influence on how he or she handles certain cases. There is no one size fits all. Uganda's history is not only a narrative of steady progress, but also a largely conflicted and disorderly one. For example, people from a certain tribe (tribe x) are seen by another tribe (tribe y) as collaborators with colonial powers, and disrespecting local customs and mores and rights of natives [5]. Appointing a head teacher from 'tribe x' in a rural school in geographical space of 'tribe y', for example, would resurrect old colonial memories and resentment. Counterbalancing tribal feuds and biases and defusing deeply ingrained anger is no easy fit. Collaborators turned out to be the educated, and the resistors who struggled to remain on or recover their land remained (as subsistence

farmers) in the rural areas where government services are lowest. These realities will continue to render administration of transfers in Ugandan schools to be highly problematic and unpredictable. For one has to locate 'the person of the right tribe' in 'the right geographical region', but after attending to that, this person may view appointment to the rural area as a punishment or demotion. It is only when one comes down into this confused mess, when one learns to attend to small details (instead of ideologies and meta-narratives), that one can see oneself and others realistically and empathetically.

Further, another complexity is related to religious hostilities. Not every person from 'tribe x' will be allowed to head a school founded by Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Islamic, or Evangelical missionaries, for example. Communication with a relevant audience will include not only PTA, Board of Governors, but also with the Foundations Body (managed by a religious leader). Belonging to the right tribe is not enough, one must also belong to the right religious faith community. Religious conflicts, according to Ugandan historian of education, [20] have haunted Ugandan schools since the mutual "suspicion and hatred created during the religious wars of the 1880s and 1890s". Quoting Ocitti, they claim that "football matches between neighbouring Catholic and Protestant schools were not games but battles of breaking legs among players and battles of throwing stones among the warring spectators [[20], p.175]. These conflicted relations might be less common today, but the hostilities still erupt especially when a transfer involves appointing a Moslem, Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Anglican Protestant head teacher to a different (non-corresponding) faith-based school. Other factors like gender may play a role depending on the religious and cultural belief/value-system of the relevant locality. Considering the sheer size and diversity of public sectors in a developing country like Uganda, one can understand how control or coordination of head teacher transfers can be extremely complex and ambiguous [[11], p. 86].

On the technical and legal levels, but also on the market economic level, the ideal would be that transfers are on merit, as objective, neutral, democratic in respecting rules of justice and equality, and competitive. However, on the experiential level, transfers should be sensitive to the history of Uganda in its uniqueness and concreteness. Some critics often refer to the ethical standards characterizing the old regime of bureaucrat with nostalgia. They recount how the university or college student-teacher was trained to serve the public with 'enlightened responsibility', to 'emancipate the African native from backwardness' and to promote Nationalism. They refer to the good old times when, in the name of promoting a national identity (ideology) head teachers willingly served in areas that were distant from their home, tribe and local language. However, there is no going back to the colonial submissiveness and conformism but have to cope with a more democratized and competitive environment. For the sake of 'making learners pass exams' so as to compete favourably with other schools, future school communities might be more willing to ignore tribal or religious backgrounds in recruiting or firing headteachers.

5. A Plea for Interactive Identity Formation

We have throughout referred to the importance of identity formation of professionals and bureaucrats. We have examined various models of identity formation summarized in the table above. We want to finalize by discussing the problem of 'reductionism' in professional training and how it relates to meta-narrative exclusivist violence. What the old model according to Stallybrass and White excluded was the role of emotional engagement of the professional in the 'emerging public sphere'. It required that its spaces of discourse be de-libidinized in the interests of serious productive and rational intercourse. In the public sphere, a meta-discourse of simple laws and procedures to adjudicates competing and conflicting truth claims or opinions characterizing concrete communication contexts. Professional identity formation was accordingly designed to be exclusively intellectualist, bracketing the demands of the (lower) self of desires and emotions [4,21]. When the purpose of education is reduced to 'integration into a system of an elite', it becomes difficult for us to expect open-minded, conversational bureaucrats who are critical, willing to listen to alternative perspectives so as to creatively and innovatively handle particular cases of headteacher transfer in their uniqueness and singularity.

True, in the fictitious machinelike or algorithmic system, the roles of the teacher and headteacher would be relatively unambiguous, systematic, inflexible, impersonal [22]. But then, in such a production-oriented model (where standardization of goods and services is central), personnel changes and headteacher transfers would, like the positioning of one atom from one place to another, seem unnecessary. The democratic model, by contrast, is more convincing since a professional identity is meant to be achieved in interaction with others. The "social contract" is to be worked out through "the social contact", and this means that the facts on the ground are not simply checked against pre-given, stable and inflexible norms and procedures, but cultural-historical and personal characteristics intervene to render administrative processes conversational. The bureaucratic self is a tributary to concerned others (an audience) including government, PTA, Board of Governors, learners and parents. As such, since his or her personal characteristics play a significant role. This self comes on board a service-oriented work place with the relevant tools, (soft) skills and competences e.g. self-expression, persuasiveness, listening, adaptability and flexibility and teamwork. The headteacher who can cope with ambiguities and ambivalence is more marketable than the one who is used to working by simple rules and procedures [4,22].

6. Conclusion: Lessons from the Covid-19 Interruption

Covid-19 has shown us the advantages of training future leaders in a model that needs interruptions. Perturbations and interruptions are not to be avoided since they unearth new energies. [23] in his essay, Education as Socialisation and Individuation, refers to the need for

university professors to employ "the power of strangeness to draw us out of our old selves", thinking outside the box, so to speak, so that higher education prepares the young to positively appreciate the unpredictable as making things better [[23], p.124]. In the competitive market-oriented model, transfers or personnel changes are seen to "increase flexibility so that the most able are rewarded and the inadequate can be removed" [[11], p.69]. However, besides competitiveness Covid-19 has brought the urgency of revisiting the priority of a 'care ethics', of making oneself 'unconditionally available' where one would have chosen to be indifferent. Some headteachers have gone out of their way to link up online with parents and learners to engage learning experiences. This is not a 'disengaged ought' of the Kantian bureaucrat (where as a rational agent, I cannot but…), nor a market-oriented competitiveness (where as a creative agent, I can come up with numerous alternatives…). Covid-19 has opened up professional ethics to a perspective of heteronomy concealed for so long in western discourses. The appeal that ensues 'from the suffering of the other' makes me (as an embodied and concrete person) take responsibility to save the desperate other. Covid-19 shows how we need a professional ethics that can reach beyond 'rational elitism', pragmatism and/or market competitiveness, to personal responsibility or calling. Covid-19 showed how it is still thinkable and laudable after decades of looking at everything, including teaching and learning, through the sole lens of profit-orientation.

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