ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Breaches of integrity in teacher administration in Ghana

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Abstract

The study examines one type of breaches of integrity, namely using one's authority in public office for personal gain (Hallak J & Poisson M. Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: what can be done? 2007), in the administration of teachers in Ghana. It was executed using an embedded mixed methods design with a population of 667 teachers employed by the Ghana Education Service (GES). A sample of 270 respondents was chosen by simple random sampling for the study. The questionnaire containing open-ended and closed-ended items was administered to the respondents. Data generated by the close-ended items were analysed using frequencies and percentages and data obtained from the open-ended items were analysed in themes. The study found that integrity breaches were prevalent in GES and occurred under the watch of superior officers in the service. It was more pronounced in teachers' requests for upgrading and promotion, and salary processing. Victims did not report the act because they believed nothing would happen and because they fear victimisation. Integrated Personnel and Payroll Database (IPPD) coordinators and Human Resource Managers at the district and regional levels of GES were found to be the most corrupt officers in the service. It is recommended that character references on GES staff be sought; the processing of salaries, transfer, upgrading, promotion, among others, at the GES offices should be automated; and effective whistleblower hotlines should be instituted.

Keywords: Corruption, Ghana, Teacher administration, Global south, Bribery, Integrity compromise, Academic integrity, Africa

Introduction

Although integrity breaches that take the form of using one's authority in public office for personal gains (Hallak and Poisson 2007) permeate almost every human endeavour, they are more endemic and pronounced in developing countries because they are often counted as indicators of underdevelopment (Deliversky 2016). However, Denisova-Schmidt (2021) maintains that integrity breaches in education affect developing and developed countries without discrimination of any magnitude. In countries where integrity breaches thrive, indications are that laws and their subsequent enforcement are weak (Agbodohu and Quarmyne 2014). Perpetrators may go unpunished to continue such unrestrained fraud as it affords them the incentive to exploit for self-aggrandisement and personal enrichment at the expense of others or the state. Where punitive

measures are harsh on perpetrators of integrity breaches and enforcement of same is executed with national pride, the propensity to steal, cheat or misappropriate might be profoundly curtailed. For example, most of the corruption-related offences that warrant capital punishment in China might rather be glossed over or at best be trivialised in some developing countries (Cohen 1982; Smith and Jiang 2019). Integrity breaches strip a nation of its resources and exploit the citizenry by enriching and satisfying unscrupulous parties rather surreptitiously. That is, parties may illegitimately demand favours before executing an action or initiating and completing a process. Consequently, integrity breaches have been tagged the world over as a scourge that needs to be dealt with to ensure fair distribution of wealth. However, the blight of integrity breaches continues in almost every facet of operations.

Even though integrity breaches in Ghana Education Service (GES) are mainly petty corrupt acts if they are not kept in check they can degenerate into grand corruption of high proportions. Notwithstanding these perceived, actual and alleged integrity breaches, little empirical evidence exists on its typology and prevalence in GES. Except for Agbenorku (2012) who empirically assessed integrity breaches in the health sector, prior studies (Pabia 2013; Osei-Tutu et al. 2010; Seniwoliba and Boahene 2015; Sarfo-Kantankah 2018; Agbodohu and Quarmyne 2014) mainly centred on theoretical and conceptual interrogation of integrity breaches in various sectors of the country. The purpose of this study was to examine the incidence of integrity breaches teachers suffered in their dealings with GES officials to provide solutions for the future.

In Ghana, integrity breach serves as an impediment to the development of the country, and for that matter, more convincing measures must be fashioned to deal with it (Sarfo-Kantankah 2018). Agbodohu and Quarmyne (2014) points to weak legislative procedures and the porous nature of the judicial system as the shoulder on which integrity breaches thrive in the country. Studying integrity breaches in procurement, Pabia (2013) attributes poor contract management to weaknesses in the legal system, weak sanctioning regime and improper disposal of assets. Integrity breaches in the delivery of procurement of infrastructure projects in Ghana take the form of conflict of interest, bribery, embezzlement, kickbacks, tender manipulation and fraud (Osei-Tutu et al. 2010). Also, Agbenorku (2012) observes that integrity breaches have engulfed almost all units in the healthcare industry. In all these, it is the poor that suffers from the effects of integrity breaches and, for that matter, the public must be sensitised to fight it (Seniwoliba and Boahene 2015). In contrast, Oana et al. (2017) observed that curbing corruption limited the chances of poor students getting placement in an elite university.

Education is supposed to help reduce the incidence of corruption (Persists 2021; Jetter and Parmeter 2018). However, recently, attention has been drawn to inroads integrity breaches have been made in the education enterprise, particularly the Ghana Education Service (GES) which oversees second cycle education (i.e. primary and secondary education) in Ghana. For instance, Asamoah (2020) had long perceived educational workers in Ghana to be corrupt and that students who are trained in such a corrupt system may encounter corruption and end up being corrupt. This is an example of what Kidd (2019) described as epistemic corruption, and for that matter, ethics intervention in teacher education curriculum is critical to developing the morality of the teacher (Maxwell et al. 2016). The observation of Asamoah (2020) has been strengthened by the opinion

poll conducted by GhanaEducation.Org (2021), which found 72% of respondents perceive GES to be a corrupt institution. Several credible news portals in the country have reported pockets of evidence validating these perceptions. For example, Citinewsroom (2020) reported the interdiction of the Upper West Regional Director of GES following allegations of illegitimate sale of school property and misappropriation of the proceeds, bribery in appointments of senior high school heads, and dubious deductions from allowances due to teachers in the Upper West enclave. Furthermore, GhanaWeb (2021) news portal reported the detection of the fraud in the form of incorporation of illegitimate names in the GES teacher register to benefit from the Ghana Government initiative of one teacher, one laptop computer. Furthermore, Kwafo (2021) filed a report on moderghana.com that state investigators had initiated investigations to alleged corrupt acts involving some school heads, bursars, and accountants in the administration of the school feeding programme. It appears integrity breaches have seeped deeply and been institutionalized in GES to the point that even parents also alleged paying bribes to facilitate the placement of their wards in the choicest senior high schools in the country (Opera News 2021).

This study makes significant contributions to scholarship and practice. The study measured teachers' direct experiences with integrity breaches, which according to Sabic-El-Rayess and Heyneman (2020) is rare and more difficult to undertake and thus provided ready and authentic evidence about the phenomenon in GES. It generates scientific evidence about the prevalence or otherwise of integrity breaches in GES to facilitate prevention, detection and remediation. Further, it details the typology of integrity breaches, services, offices and officers who are mostly involved in such phenomenon. The rest of the paper is structured to present a review of related literature, the methodology adopted, results obtained and the associated discussions and the recommendations proffered to address the findings. The review of the empirical literature on integrity breaches in education across the world is presented first and followed by the theory that underpinned the study. The method used details the research design, population, sample and sampling procedure, instrumentation, fieldwork, and data analysis procedure. Results are presented in tables, bar graphs and themes with follow-up discussions based on which recommendations for policy and practice are provided.

Integrity breaches in education

According to Hallak and Poisson (2005), "Corruption in the education sector can be defined as the systematic use of public office for private benefit, whose impact is significant on the availability and quality of educational goods and services, and, as a consequence on access, quality or equity in education." This is simply the abuse of authority for material gain (Deliversky 2016). According to Hallak and Poisson (2007), corrupt practices in education include bribes and pay-offs, embezzlement, bypassing criteria, academic fraud, favouritism, nepotism and traffic of influence, which constitute abuse of power for private gain. It also includes illicit payments in recruitment and admissions, nepotism in tenured postings, grading, the manipulation of job placement data, among others (Sweeney et al. 2013). These practices occur in education planning processes, in school management, in student admission and examination, in teacher administration and in teachers' professional conduct (Deliversky 2016).

In Ghana, integrity compromise is common in higher learning institutions and manifested through admissions, procurement, leadership that influences recruitment, promotions/appointments, academic dishonesty, cheating, leaking examination papers, plagiarism, favouritism, and many more (Seniwoliba and Boahene 2015). These appear to be proportionately endemic than the bribery and favouritism in students assessment that Zhllima et al. (2018) reported being prevalent in the Albanian education system. Although higher education may provide avenues to engage in integrity breaches and escape punitive actions, Munzert (2010) found that as an individual's tertiary education increases, integrity breaches decrease. Meet and Narayan (2014) stress that the wider and equitably spread the education, the fewer integrity breaches. Therefore, bridging the gap in education between the average citizen and the highest country leadership will provide a meaningful measure for future integrity compromise reduction in developing countries. Apart from the foregoing factors, poverty is also cited as a cause of integrity comprises. According to Hallak and Poisson (2005), among the main factors leading to corrupt behaviour, one can mention poverty and the low salaries earned by public officials and civil servants. Thus, it seems that the poorer a country, the higher the level of petty corruption. As seen in very poor countries, petty corruption are sometimes considered as a normal pattern of behaviour or as a norm for buying services (Deliversky 2016).

Subtly, integrity breaches can be numbered among the various forms of workplace incivility (Cahyadi et al. 2021). Surveys conducted in the past suggest that bribes and payoffs in teacher recruitment and promotion tend to lower the quality of public school teachers (Hallak and Poisson 2005). For example, the results of Atashak's (2011) study of corruption among teachers in Tehran point to evidence that integrity breaches among teachers are in the fields of recruitment, appointment and promotion, teacher remuneration, among others. Therefore, if any of these systemic arrangements are dysfunctional, they can serve as impediments for employees to remain ethical (Reedy et al. 2021). Sabic-El-Rayess and Heyneman (2020) maintained that participants in corruption research often hesitate to report their experiences to avoid victimization. However, in Afghanistan, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC 2010) study of bribery reported by victims revealed that corruption erodes trust in public officers, as most (72%) of the respondents believed that a bribe is always needed to obtain a public service. Therefore, payments are sometimes initiated by people, whilst in most cases, the bribe is demanded by the officers as if it is their right.

In Kenya, Taaliu (2017) observed that notably, there are alleged integrity breaches in forms of recruitment, promotion, transfer and deployment of teachers, and supply of materials to the schools. There is robust evidence that integrity breaches afford incentive in getting things done expeditiously (Olken and Pande 2012). The motivation for the payment of bribes is to speed up a procedure and therefore, only a few people who fall victims to such corrupt acts report them to authorities (UNODC 2011). Apparently, the incentive integrity breaches afford them might not give them the moral justification to report it; also, they fail to report such acts because they think authorities do not care to take any actions (UNODC 2011). UNODC's (2011) report on a study in Bosnia and Herzegovina give credence to the foregoing findings that everyone who reports the payment of at least one bribe, on average, actually pays five bribes because it is almost the norm

in paying bribes to get things done. However, globally, in 2020, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranks Ghana 75th, Albania 104th, Bosnia 111th, Afghanisatn 165th and Kenya 124th least corrupt country, suggesting that Ghana is supposed to have reduced incidence of corruption compared to those reported in those countries (Albania, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Kenya) with higher corruption perception indicators (https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/albania?redirected=1).

According to Duerrenberger and Warning (2018), corruption reduces the incentive to invest. Existing literature shows that integrity compromise has connections with the stability of political systems, the existing legal frameworks, the transparency of public information, the level of accountability of individuals and institutions, the efficiency of the mechanisms of governance in place and the importance and characteristics of foreign aid (Deliversky 2016). Mahmoudi and Majd (2021) also identified the potency of positive organisational politics in curbing corruption education. Therefore, a holistic approach to combating corruption is recommended to tackle the canker from all angles (Jahic and Cinjarevic 2017) to increase the prospects of donor support for education, especially in developing countries. However, it should be noted that strategies for combating integrity breaches should be context-bound and responsive to the locale (Glendinning 2021).

Theoretical underpinning of the study

The theoretical basis of the study is Kantian ethics known as the categorical imperative, which was formulated by Kant in 1785 in Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1994). The categorical imperative theory was chosen to determine whether corrupt acts are routinised and institutionalised in GES so as to gauge any possible epistemic corruption for timely intervention. This is critical because teaching is considered a moral activity, and for that matter, all teachers are supposed to be ethical in all their dealings (Bullough 2011). Therefore, if teachers accept that corruption is the only means to get things than, they would pass this universal phenomenon (as stipulated by the theory of categorical imperative) to students and the chain of corruption will be difficult to break.

The basic argument of this ethical theory is that there is a set of rules that guide human behaviour at all times. For that matter, we are obligated as humans to behave in such a consistent manner at all times and in all circumstances (Kant 1994 (1785)). This is summed up in what Kant referred to as the theory of duties, which is adjudged to be the basic procedure to address ethical problems. This implies that a standard is set to become a universal code for dealing with all similar ethical problems in the same manner.

It is important to understand that imperative has to do with something that needs to be done. At this point, Kant ((1994) (1785)) distinguished between and described two types of imperative: the hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is something you need to do, but only in certain circumstances. In contrast, a categorical imperative is something you need to do at all times. Therefore, the categorical imperative is not dependent on any circumstances but universally applicable to all such situations.

The first expression of the categorical imperative was that people should act in a way that the rule for their action could be universalised. Implicit in this is that only virtues should be exhibited to be universalised. Therefore, immortality cannot find any place in

the world where everyone stands by moral uprightness. After all, "For a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects that its general observance can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the particular interests of each person affected must be such that all affected can accept them freely" (Habermas 1996, 566). This implies universalization which expresses the underlying consistency principle of categorical imperative results to force people to ask themselves how things would work if everyone did what they are doing.

The second expression of the categorical imperative is to treat people as an end, but not as a means to an end. "The categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself, without reference to another end." Kant ((1994) (1785), 25). Therefore, the categorical imperative warns people not to profit from others or take undue advantage of them. This expression of the theory is summarised as the dignity principle which suggests that we should treat others with respect, decorum and worth. According to Kant ((1994) (1785)), one is ethical when one does not accept the temptation of treating others as a way to get something else or profit out of them.

Kant's conception of ethical duties provides clear guidance on how people should behave in all situations, but at the expense of inflexibility. Even though it might be difficult to operationalise categorical imperative in everyday dealings, the theory provides objective discourse in addressing ethical problems. It warns of the possible repercussions of inappropriate behaviours that are exhibited and might help check moral decadence.

Methodology

Research design
The study adopted the mixed-methods embedded design to study the prevalence and typology of integrity breaches in GES. The design was deemed appropriate as the variables (prevalence and typology of integrity breaches in GES) pursued in the study were not clearly defined. The need to provide comprehensive data was identified using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The qualitative data yielded provided further explanations to the quantitative results generated to foster a better understanding of the issues explored.

Population, sample and sampling procedure
In Ghana, basic school is made up of kindergarten, primary, and Junior High School. Therefore, basic teachers are teachers who teach at any of these three institutions. The population was made up of 667 basic school teachers. These teachers were people who held Diploma of Education certificates and had enrolled in Bachelor of Education programme run by a university (name of university withheld for anonymity) in Ghana. They specialize in accounting and/or management their teaching courses. Bachelor of Education (Accounting) and Bachelor of Education (Management) as the programmes are called equip students with knowledge, skills and competencies to take up roles as teachers, accounts administrators, auditors, secretaries, administrators and general office workers in the GES.

It should be noted that all the 667 basic school teachers in the population had already been employed in GES to teach. They come with diverse backgrounds because they are pooled from all over the country. After all, the OLA campus is the only location in

Ghana where Bachelor of Education (Accounting) and Bachelor of Education (Management) were run for the said basic school teachers. Therefore, they came with the diversity of schools and school district contexts to offer the opportunity to access a pool of relevant respondents to provide the requisite data to execute the study.

At a significance level of 5% and for categorical data, a population of 700 requires a minimum of 249 sample sizes to ensure representativeness (Adam 2020). Consequently, this study used a sample of 270 for a population of 667 teachers. The sample of 270 GES teaching staff was selected by a simple random sampling technique to provide evidence, if any, on the state of integrity breaches in the service detailing the prevalence and typology of integrity breaches in GES.

Demographics of the respondents selected have been presented in Table 1 which shows that male respondents were about 6% more than the female. This fair balance in the gender might ensure balanced perspectives of both groups in illuminating the state of integrity breaches in GES as encountered. Most ($n = 196$; 72.6%) of the respondents were newly qualified teachers. Although there are teachers with varying levels of experience in the service, newly qualified teachers were the majority of the respondents.

Instrument, fieldwork and data analysis

A questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended items was used to collect data. It was structured to contain informed consent letter and the survey items. The informed consent letter was part of the ethical procedures ensured in the research (see Additional file 1 for a copy of the survey). Of the 11 items in the questionnaire, 9 were closed-ended. The closed-ended section elicited quantitative data on the frequency and typology of integrity breaches in GES, while the open-ended items allowed respondents the opportunity to vividly describe the incidence of integrity breaches they had ever encountered in the offices of GES. The questionnaire was piloted using 25 basic school teachers in a basic school.

The questionnaire was administered to the respondents through their class respondents during the school session at the university campus where they were found studying. Contacts of Class Respondents of those selected for participation in the study were taken once the questionnaire was handed to them. This was to ensure that all the questionnaires completed were returned. It took 3 days to retrieve the completed questionnaires and the return rate was 100% because respondents were enthusiastic to partake the study since they considered it a rare avenue to share their ordeal.

Ethical clearance was sought from the Institutional Review Board, University of Cape Coast, Ghana to undertake the study. Before participants responded to the

Table 1 Demographics of the Participants

Variable	Subscale	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	143	52.9
	Female	127	47.1
Years in teaching service	1 to 5	196	72.6
	6 to 10	32	11.9
	Above 10	42	15.5

questionnaire, they were asked to check the consent letter attached to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Participants were further alerted that if they wished to decline to respond, there was no penalty for doing so. Neither would they suffer any penalty for accepting to respond but later opting out of it. They were asked not to provide any distinctive identification that could link their responses to them. Also, in reporting the data, no linkages were made to any participant. These were to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis tools were used to analyse the data generated. Data generated by the closed ended items were entered into the SPSS version 22. Frequency counts and associated pereecentages were generated to determine the position of the majority of the responding teachers on the prevalence, kind, nature and frequency of occurrence of integrity breaches they suffered in the GES. Also, bar graphs were extracted from the open-ended data after counting cases in the responses to pictorially present the services which requests saw the GES officials breaching their integrity as well as to showcase the identifty of the GES officials involved in such breaches. The qualitative data was generated from the open-ended items and were captured electronically through computer typesetting, after which the transcript was manually analysed into themes and sub-themes. Relevant themes which emerged included; incidence of integrity breaches in GES and reasons victims failed to report them to authorities. These were critical to gauge any possibility of institutionalisation of these consequential acts as espoused by the theory of categorical imperative.

Limitations of the study

According to Guo (2008), it is not possible to completely expose corruption in a system. Consequently, this study was limited in its capacity to thoroughly expose the totality of corrupt acts in GES. To the extent that the study focused on teachers, only minor infractions in the GES insofar as corruption is concerned were covered. Therefore, grand corruption could not be revealed given the respondents used and the affordances related to them. Also, as in all studies using self-report data, the issue of honesty and subjectivity could be limitations of this study.

Results

The extent to which integrity breaches has permeated GES was studied and the results obtained from the respondents are organized in Tables 2 and 3. Although not all respondents indicated that they paid GES officials money to process documents, 207 (76.7%) of them intimated that they had paid money to influence some procedure at the GES office. Of these 207 respondents who paid money to influence a procedure, only 26 (12.6%) of them offered the money due to frustration. Some 90 (43.4%) others offered it because they were hinted by their friends that it was the norm and the only way to get things done, whilst another 91 (44.0%) respondents indicated that the GES officials made demands from them before getting their requests processed. According to 64.3% ($n = 133$) of the respondents, this practice of paying money to get requests processed in the GES offices happens every time they visit the office with their requests.

Paying the money did facilitate the processing of the request, as the majority ($n = 170$; 82.1%) of those who paid a bribe to the officials revealed that their requests

Table 2 Frequency and Typology of Integrity breaches in GES

Variable	Subscale	Frequency	Percentage
Have you ever paid money to any GES official for your request to be processed?	Yes	207	76.7
	No	63	23.3
Frequency of paying bribes at GES offices	Once a while	74	35.7
	Every time	133	64.3
How was it done?	Offered due to frustration	26	12.6
	Offered on the advice of friends that it is the tradition	90	43.4
	Demanded by the official	91	44.0

Table 3 Prevalence of Integrity breaches in GES

Variable	Subscale	Frequency	Percentage
Did you ever attempt alerting any superior officer in GES about the demands made?	Yes	11	5.3
	No	196	94.7
Do you think the corruption in GES will continue even if the official at the section is changed?	Yes	187	69.3
	No	83	30.7
After the bribery, was the request honoured?	Yes	170	82.1
	No	37	17.9

were successfully processed after paying monies to the officials. Therefore, the majority ($n = 187$; 69.3%) of the respondents believed that the integrity breaches in GES will persist even if the current corrupt officials are changed. Accordingly, of the 207 respondents who paid a bribe, 196 (94.8%) refused to alert any superior officer in GES about the demands.

Some incidents of integrity breach in GES

Several incidents were provided by the 207 respondents who indicated that they had ever paid their way through to get things processed in GES. Such incidents have been put under three themes: validation of integrity breaches in GES; the utility of integrity breaches in GES; and indiscriminate application of integrity breaches in GES.

Validation of integrity breaches in GES

The wanton taking of a bribe in GES creates the impression that integrity breaches are almost formalised in the service. Bribes are demanded with impunity, which carves an image as if the wrongful act is legitimate. For example, as one respondent recounted,

> *I gave the money physically (cash) as the person demanded. Paid in cash at the accountant's office and signed in your name. It was to facilitate my upgrade and promotion. We were asked to pay for quick access to our upgrading. It was demanded as part of processing the documents. It was very hostile on the part of the departmental heads involved. Even with force and threats, they took the money. (Male Basic School Teacher)*

Some other officers ensured that they took from everyone, so a person was put in charge of the collection of the bribe. The dedication of a person to taking the bribe from patrons

creates the impression that integrity breaches were well engraved in the operations of GES. Evidence in the support of this phenomenon was found in the responses of a respondent, "They make it a must and therefore select someone to collect all the money and name and give it to the IPPD coordinator. This was when I was going to get confirmation and so I needed him to send my documents to the controller in Accra to process the salary."

Utility of integrity breaches in GES

Teachers are sensitized to believe that integrity breaches are the safest way to get documents processed. If no payment is made, the opportunity of getting documents processed is lost. The following is an illustrative quote by one of the respondents:

> We were asked to pay money before our documents would be taken to the Controller and Accountants Generals' office for our salaries to be processed. Very terrible. Everyone was paying and I remembered I decided not to pay and about four months, I didn't receive my pay but the very month I paid indeed the money came. (Female Basic School Teacher)

The utility of integrity breaches in the offices of GES is furthered by another teacher who recounted his experience:

> When I completed College of Education, … our allowance ceased for a while but I couldn't get mine when our accounts were reactivated. So I had to consult him [Integrated Personnel and Payroll Database (IPPD) Coordinator] for the necessary processes to be done and that caused the whole mess. Since it was a tradition there, I paid him money before my allowance was reactivated for me. (Female Basic School Teacher)

Once the bribe is paid, the payers are rest assured that their requests would be successfully delivered. This expectation fuels integrity breaches to endure without any palpable attempt to curtail them. For this reason, a respondent shared his frustration: 'I have been trying to change my bankers for about 8 months now using the formal system and it is yet to be done.' (Male Basic School Teacher).

Indiscriminate integrity breaches in GES

Officers in GES were not selective in the demand for and receipt of money to process requests of patrons. They took from almost everyone no matter the requests made, even from the poor. A teacher described this phenomenon as

> … very difficult because, at times, you may not have money on you but you will still be forced to pay it. The money is put in an envelope and given to him at his/her office. The money facilitated the very process without adhering to the worth of the action, I think the electronic process will help rather than the manual if we want to address this issue. (Male Basic School Teacher)

It is not only those who did not have that they forcibly took the money before processing their requests. Even when school heads went to take delivery of supplies government had earmarked for each school, monies were demanded by the officers in charge

of distribution of such supplies. One respondent revealed that "Money was demanded when I went to collect materials like chalks, school uniforms etc. from the office". (Male Basic School Teacher).

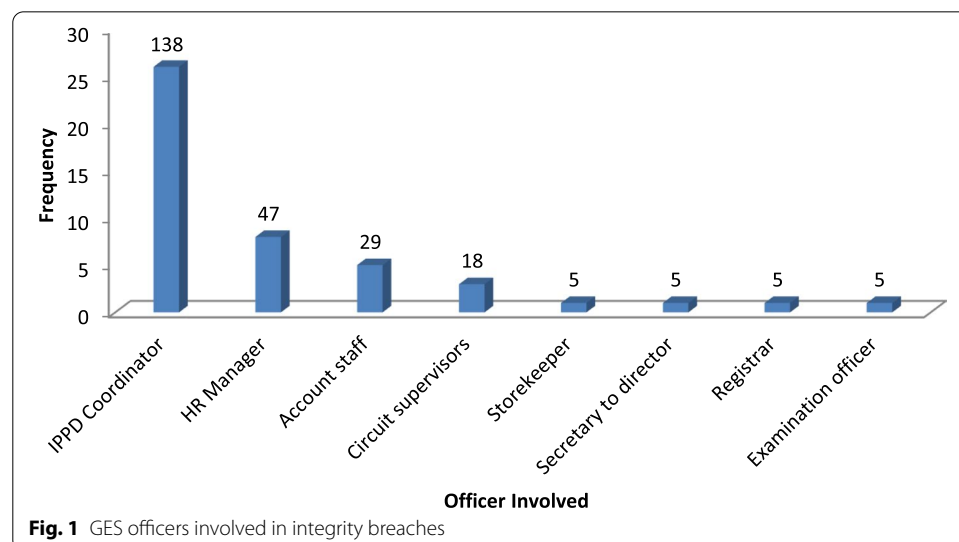### Officers involved in integrity breaches in GES

Having noted that there were integrity breaches in GES, the study delved deeper to find GES officers involved in cases of integrity breaches. Figure 1 shows the results.
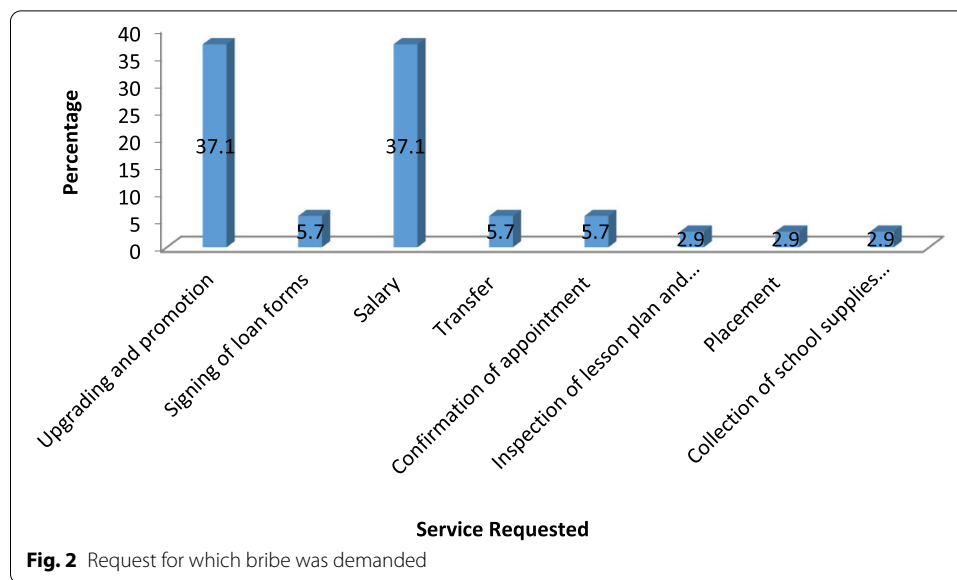
Of a total of 252 cases of integrity breaches pointed out by the 207 respondents who ever paid a bribe to GES officials, the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Database (IPPD) Coordinator, who is the IT expert, was cited 138 (54.8%) times. This was followed by the human resource managers with 16 (18.7%) cases cited to have involved them. The accounts staff (29 cases) and the circuit supervisors (18 cases) followed in close succession. The storekeeper, secretary to the director, registrar and examination officer had five cases each cited to have involved such officers.

In addition to the offices and officers involved in the corrupt practices in GES, the services requested that triggered the corrupt acts were examined. The results have been presented in Fig. 2. The highest on the list were the processing for upgrading and promotion (37.1%) and the processing of salary (37.1%). Beyond these is the insensitivity of officials to take money to sign loan application forms (5.7%) to allow teachers to secure credit facilities to meet some needs. Also, there was a case where an officer took money before releasing office supplies that were to be legitimately released to schools.

Explanations of failure to report incidence of integrity breach to superior officers

When explaining why teachers who were victims of extortion in the GES offices did not report incidents to superior officers of the service, three themes emerged. These were the respondents' conviction that superior officers were already aware of the situation; the respondents feared they would be victimised; and the fact that respondents wanted unhindered processing of their request.

Fig. 1 GES officers involved in integrity breaches

Fig. 2 Request for which bribe was demanded

Officers are already aware

Teachers believed that it was normal for bribes to be paid willingly or on demand before one's request was processed at the GES offices. It is believed that such has been the trend and that is how things are done. With such institutionalisation of integrity breaches in the service, it was uncovered that paying monies in GES offices

> *… is the norm there and alerting them would not bring any change. … it is the norm and has been the custom of the day and even the director himself knows about it; Most teachers are aware of the phenomenon. It seems to be the way things are done. I felt it wasn't necessary since the supervisors may even be aware which lead to victimisation and haunting. After all, I was not forced to do it, I did it on my own. (Female Basic School Teacher)*

Another teacher's comment was more damning on the superiors to the point of accusing the officials of having been instrumental in such corrupt acts. Therefore, there was no need to alert them of things those superiors were superintending because "They are all the same because the then Director had already asked me to pay so I didn't see the need to report it again. If I alert anyone of the superior officers in GES, nothing will be done about it, and I may be pointed out by the officer". (Male Basic School Teacher).

Fear of victimization

Intimidation and victimisation have been one of the deterrents to the investigation of victims of integrity breaches in GES in reporting such cases to authorities. Some of the teachers exploited by officers in GES are keeping it to themselves for fear of being noted and victimized. This has permeated every nook and cranny in the service to the point where it was observed that

> *Paying to get things done in the GES office is a tradition that goes on in the district and I was afraid to reveal anything to lose my job. The official will pen you down so*

that any time you need help from them, he/she will not grant you that help so I don't complain but just obey and go away. I feared that I would be exposed to the Director and that they would note me down for unfavourable consequences. I didn't want to be an enemy and face any challenges at work. You will be tagged and eyes will always be on you. I will be victimised. (Male Senior High School teacher)

It is the fear of victimisation that intimidates victims of integrity breaches and extortion to report such occurrences to authorities.

Facilitate processing of requests

The other reason why some teachers failed to report acts of integrity breaches suffered by them to superiors was their quest to get their requests processed without any interruptions. Since it had been noted as a tradition in GES, teachers often have to bribe their way through to get things done. As one respondent intimated,

It is a tradition in a office to pay for the processing of any documents. Because I needed it and also because I was aware that before they will process your document, they have to demand money from you. I knew alerting the superior that my document could be delayed so I didn't say it because I was seriously in need of getting the document processed. (Male Basic School Teacher)

This was reiterated by another teacher who had to pay money to facilitate the desire to process transfer to another school. This teacher noted that "It was something that often happens in the district office for quicker processing of documents. I wanted to transfer and if I reported him I would not have got it. I was afraid that my request will not be granted. If I complain and later go there with a problem, no one will mind you". (Female Basic School Teacher).

Even some superior officers who were supposed to clamp down on the perpetrators of such corrupt acts gave further credence and legitimacy to the wrongful act. In the name of lack of resources, some officers had given illicit backing to integrity breaches in the service. A teacher recounted the ordeal she went through to the extent where " … the District Director said they had no money for the IPPD coordinator. Because he always said that [the bribe] is his transportation fee to send the documents to Accra [controller] to be processed". (Female Basic School Teacher) In such an instance, the only plausible thing to do is to comply to get the request processed. After all, the superior who should act to exact obedience and sanctity in the service is encouraging the practice.

Discussion

Integrity compromise is highly prevalent in GES because it facilitates the processing of requests of teachers. Teachers believe that once they pay the bribe requested, the services sought are rendered to them without any undue delay. This is similar to the finding of Olken and Pande 2012) that integrity breaches afford incentive in getting things done expeditiously; and that of UNODC (2011) that the motivation for the payment of bribe is to speed up a procedure. So they end up paying bribes without thinking about the moral implications of their actions. Of course, the average teacher pays bribes to access upgrading, promotion and salary. This has caused morality to be far removed from their reasoning as all that matters to them is having their quest fulfilled. Accordingly, integrity

breaches are routinized and institutionalized in GES as it is a piece of common knowledge among officers and teachers in the service. This reinforces Kant's (1994) (1785)) categorical and hypothetical imperatives for some of the teachers made it a habit of paying the bribe at all times whilst others only pay when they suspect that without they bribe they will receive the particular service requested. This confirms the evidence generated by Deliversky (2016) that integrity breaches are sometimes considered a normal pattern of behaviour. The officers have created a pseudo-fee charging credo for services to be rendered at a cost. This leads to exploitation and unfair treatment of those who cannot or cannot afford to pay. To facilitate the processing of official requests made by teachers, all teachers are compelled by the GES officers to pay such illicit fees disguised as transportation fare and other unofficial payments that have almost been sanctioned by even the superior officers. This finding is consistent with that of Hallak and Poisson (2007) that bribery and pay-offs and traffic of influence are cases of integrity breaches found in education. It further corroborates the observation of Sweeney et al. (2013) that illicit payments are prevalent in education.

The Integrated Personnel and Payroll Database (IPPD) coordinators and the Human Resources Managers in the GES offices were found to be the most corrupt officers in the service. This is the result of their job description such as recruitment, promotion, upgrading, salary processing, among other significant activities. This finding confirms those of Deliversky (2016) that corrupt practices in education occur, among other things, in teacher administration; and that of Seniwoliba and Boahene (2015) that integrity breaches is highly evident in promotion in education. Also, the findings confirm the observations of Atashak (2011) and Taaliu (2017) that integrity breaches in education were high in appointment and promotion, teacher remuneration, among others. Often, patronage of these activities are higher than the current capacity can accommodate hence some officers may be pressured whilst others may cash in to take a bribe to process such requests as the limited resources may allow. Therefore, the opportunity afforded them to act in such offices could corrupt even the frail but pious characters acting in those capacities.

Wilfully or otherwise, IPPD coordinators and Human Resource Managers in the service may be compromised for the fact that they are duty bearers whose services are much patronised by teachers. This confirms the findings of UNODC (2011) that payments are sometimes initiated by people, whilst in most of the cases the bribe is demanded by the officers as if it is their right. The morality of the officers has dissipated to the point that they even take bribes from the poor teachers who are yet to earn some cash income from their engagement in the service before these officers process teachers' salaries. No wonder upgrading and promotion, and processing of salary were the requests for which incidence of integrity breaches was highest. Therefore, the more such officers come into contact with teachers, the higher the chances of being given or demanding bribes to execute teachers' requests.

Even though most teachers have ever been victims of integrity breaches in GES offices, they fail to report the act to superior officers in the service because they believe nothing will be done and for fear of victimisation. This is consistent with Sabic-El-Rayess and Heyneman's (2020) observation that victims fail to freely share their experiences for fear of victimization. Also, UNODC (2011) found similar evidence in Bosnia and

Herzegovina to the effect that people fail to report acts of integrity breaches because they think authorities do not care to take any action. This simply implies that integrity breaches are surviving under the watch of superior officers in the service. Therefore, victims of integrity breaches in GES offices may lose trust in and respect for the superior officers and the GES as a whole as UNODC (2010) observed that integrity breaches erode trust in public officers. This is a sign that connotes either one or two of the following cases. First, it could be the case of the collapse of the chain of command in the service or the superiors superintend over the integrity breaches in the service. In either case, it is a sign of poor leadership and governance structure. There is a possibility of the continuation of the acts of integrity breaches once teachers who were once victims of integrity breaches rise to positions of authority. They might rationalize that they suffered integrity breaches, so it is their time to recoup the bribes they suffered. This validates Kidd's (2019) assertion of the potency of epistemic corruption in cultivating and accentuating the menace. Therefore, if integrity breaches in the service are left unchecked, with time, GES may lose credibility not only locally but also globally where aid to the country in support of education may be cut by donors because corruption reduces the incentive to invest (Duerrenberger and Warning 2018).

Recommendations and conclusions

In the light of the findings obtained the following recommendations are made to inform policy and practice. Although these recommendations are specifically for the Ministry of Education in Ghana which is directly responsible for GES, they might have applicability to other countries where corruption in the primary and secondary educational systems is prevalent to ensure that:

1. background checks and due diligence is done in the selection of officials who run the offices of GES at all levels. Character references should be entrenched in the recruitment of duty bearers in the offices;
2. processing of salaries, transfers, upgrades, promotions, etc. at the GES offices are automated so that human interventions in the process would be reduced. This would help check the incidence of integrity breaches in the service;
3. effective whistleblower hotlines are instituted and managed by anti-integrity breaches personnel at the various offices of GES. This should be a separate function from the internal audit office to check familiarity threats. It should be noted that the only way patrons would have confidence in such a whistleblowing system is where offenders are duly prosecuted. Anti-integrity breaches personnel as part of their duty should give teachers education that teachers do not have to pay to access official requests;
4. anti-integrity breaches content is incorporated in the school curriculum and made compulsory at all levels from the basic school through to the tertiary level;
5. character references and due diligence on teachers is run so that only incorruptible teachers are engaged. This is necessary to ensure that corrupt teachers do not find themselves in the service to infest students as they model behaviour and thus avoid what Kidd (2019) referred to as epistemic corruption; and
6. GES allow teachers to freely discuss any ethical dilemmas they have encountered or perceived in their profession. This would create a greater sense of awareness of the

ills and associated harms caused by such integrity breaches. Such fora would grant teachers the audacity of hope to resist any actual or potential egoist from pursuing their parochial agenda of extortion.

Failure on the part of authorities to deal with these breaches of GES officials' integrity to facilitate processing of teachers's requests may suggest to the latter who are to uphold morality that petty corruption is permissible. This might then lead to epistemic corruption to worsen the already fragile and weakened incorruptible cultural traits of the traditional Ghanaian. This situation, if not addressed quickly, could have unpleasant consequences for Ghana as a developing country and cost its reputation as one of the exemplary leaders in democracy in Africa. Dealing with it calls for concerted efforts of all relevant stakeholders in education including academia, industry, teacher unions, politicians and traditional councils to ensure the effective implementation of the recommendations proffered.

Abbreviations
GES:: Ghana Education Service; IPPD:: Integrated Personnel and Payroll Database; UNODC:: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; CPI:: Corruption Perception Index.

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Additional file

Additional file 1

Author's contributions
I am the sole author of the paper. The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

Availability of data and materials
The data on which the conclusions of the study are based are embedded in the manuscript.

Declarations

Competing interests
There are no competing interests in this study.

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