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LfL Ghana: Systemic Bottom-up Top-down Change

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InForm is a series of papers whose purpose is to capture significant ideas and events that enhance our understanding of leadership, learning and their inter-relationship. These offer reflections on recent seminars, policy papers and emerging issues nationally and internationally. They attempt to capture the implication for policy and practice in leading the learning of students, teachers and of those who exercise a leadership role in classrooms, schools and communities.

In this issue of InForm we share the journey of the LfL Ghana programme from its inception in 2009 as a discussion with 15 Ghanaian educators acting as LfL professional development leaders to its current place as national policy in 2012.

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Introduction

Days after Dr Alfred Ampah-Mensah returned to his home in Ghana following a week of meetings and discussions with Cambridge LfL colleagues in March of this year, a welcome update was received from the Ghana Education Service. The Leadership for Learning framework and principles had been included within *Ghana Education Service Headteachers' Handbook*, making the five core principles essential guidance for every headteacher and every school in Ghana - over 18,000 schools. This is an impressive return from a programme that began in 2009 with a group of 15 educators who would, as Professional Development Leaders, take responsibility for leading workshops and follow-up work with 124 headteachers, local quality assurance officers and directors at district and regional levels.

The *Ghana Education Service Headteachers' Handbook* is organized in three sections, namely:

1. Basic Education in Ghana
2. Managing your School
3. Improving the Quality of Learning

It was in Section 3 of the handbook, *Improving the Quality of Learning*, that Leadership for Learning was identified as the central feature of Unit 9, *Strategies and Guidelines for Improving Learning, Leadership for Learning (LfL) Model*. Here, we found five pages on LfL, its principles and implications for supporting and taking learning forward.

The choice of language used in the Handbook headings also suggest the systemic impact of the LfL programme in Ghana, on a national scale. In the Foreword, on page iii, LfL is identified as the foundation upon which leadership for learning should be taken forward:

"Headteachers are reminded to make learning the pivot around which all other activities evolve in the school. The handbook also draws headteachers' attention to the five principles that are critical for carrying out their leadership for learning tasks: maintaining a focus on learning; creating conditions favourable to learning; creating a dialogue about leadership for learning; practicing shared leadership and encouraging a shared sense of accountability."



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This is a significant endorsement of LfL. As an initiative that began with just a handful of individuals, in three years it has matured to become nothing short of national policy. The applicability and resilience of LfL's five principles – grounded in fundamental notions of learning and agency – will be put to the test as it is interpreted and applied in, as yet, unexplored rural and urban learning contexts across Ghana. The implications of being appropriated as national policy are entirely unknown. Initial questions that come to mind include, 'What happens to a grassroots movement that is founded in the language of equity, autonomy, and shared authority when it is imposed through educational policy and, indeed, law?'

"To ensure that the headteacher fulfils his/her mandate efficiently and effectively, the handbook provides information on the policies and laws that are key to basic education delivered in the country."

Behind this statement by the GES lie a series of questions. How did LfL become national policy within three years? What does becoming a national policy mean for LfL? What are the implications for the research? How can we begin to understand the application of LfL across 12,130 primary schools, 5,450 junior schools, and 503 secondary schools and the implications for learning?

These questions and others loom large on LfL Ghana's research horizon.

We look forward to receiving feedback from colleagues with shared experiences, insights and cautionary tales regarding programme integrity and sustainability given dissemination and uptake on a similar scale.

How did LfL become a national policy?

Just over three years ago John MacBeath and Sue Swaffield accompanied by Alicia Fentiman, the researcher then attached to the programme, were making their first journey from the congested traffic of Accra (population 2 million plus) to the wide open spaces of Cape Coast at the invitation of former Cambridge PhD student, George Oduro, now Director at the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA), at the University of Cape Coast. This introductory visit was to explore the possibility of introducing a programme of LfL in Ghana.

George and his colleagues at the IEPA had been exploring ways of increasing the capacity of headteachers to effect transformational change and to bring about raised achievement in basic education. LfL was at this time an established leadership framework that had been successfully integrated in schools in the UK and internationally as described in the book 'Connecting Leadership and Learning' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009).

While the LfL framework, principles and processes have been favorably received and adopted in a number of countries, this was to be the first time to test these action principles in a less developed country.

Once Upon a Time...

The Leadership for Learning story in Ghana began in Singapore, September 2008.

Held under the auspices of the Commonwealth Education Trust (CET) the purpose of the Singapore seminar was to explore potential collaboration with Commonwealth countries on learning, leadership and their inter-connections as the primary focus. George Oduro presented a proposal for a collaborative initiative in his country. It was warmly received by those present including consultants from Canada, New Zealand and Singapore and Judy Curry representing the Commonwealth Education Trust.

Through further discussion with key stakeholders following the Singapore event the three key aims



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cited below were identified. Parties to further discussions in Ghana were the IEPA, the University of Cape Coast Academic Board, the Directors of the Ghana Educational Service (GES), the Association of Basic School Headteachers, the Ghana National Association of Teachers and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. Out of these discussions three key aims were identified:

1. To strengthen leadership capacity of basic school headteachers in Ghana
2. To improve the quality of learning through school/classroom leadership
3. To influence policy makers to make leadership development a condition for appointing basic school headteachers

These aims are set within the overall aims and philosophy of the Centre for Commonwealth Education (CCE) which was established in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge following the Singapore event.

Alongside the Ghana initiative, research and development programmes were initiated in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Namibia, and the Caribbean. Common to each of these separate strands of the Centre's work was partnership with national policy-makers, school leaders and academics in order: to impact directly upon policy and practice in classrooms, schools, networks and policy arenas; to develop capacity for learning at pupil, teacher and system levels; and to observe the principles of equity and social justice, collegiality and collaboration, sustainable impact and research collaboration into the implementation process.

It was a fundamental tenet of any such 'intervention' and data collection that any form of research and development process has to have an acute sense of history.





National and Cultural Context:

Ghana and its people are still living the colonial legacy, still wary of short-term projects, caught in the dependency cycle of donor agencies and 'aid'. The term 'decolonization' was used by a special U.N. Committee in 1961 to implement, monitor and identify the progress from dependency to independence but unable to address what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has described as Decolonising the Mind in his 1986 book of that title.

As researchers all our transactions are in English, not only on occasion a barrier to understanding but, in McLuhanesque idiom 'the medium is the message'. In Africa, writes Achebe, 'language contains within it cultural memories and the values through which we come to understand culture. It raises the question 'Can English carry the weight of African experience?'. Can English carry the subtlety and nuance of the many languages through which the English language narratives in this volume are mediated?' (in MacBeath, and Younger, forthcoming)

Donor agencies such as the World Bank and USAID, have, it is argued, actually served to inhibit a country-based understanding of problems and priorities, privileging Western conventions and mores over indigenous cultures. In education British and American models of school, curriculum and assessment often sit uncomfortably in local cultures and can condemn others to relive the mistakes and misconceptions embedded in colonial history. The effect of schools in these Western moulds is very often to drive a wedge between children and their families and their communities, often with a curriculum that offers none of the knowledge and skills needed either for the local or the national economy, nor for enhancing the quality of personal and social life.

We have to bring to encounters with another culture (or cultures) what David Bridges (2008) has termed 'inside/outside perspectives'. That is, neither assuming that the outsider perspective is superior nor that the insider perspective is somehow 'locked away' from the outsider's ken. Can one really understand people rooted in very different traditions, people whose lives are embedded in very different practices?, he asks, and answers that it means being able to listen to their stories with empathic imagination, with 'insight' and to perceive some underlying principles with what Elliot Eisner (1991) terms 'the enlightened eye'. Quoting Winch (1997: 193) Bridges argues that we should not assume that 'Our own culture is not in principle transparent to our understanding; neither are other cultures in principle opaque'.

This raises the question as to what is deeply embedded within any individual culture and what principles and practices travel from one context to another.

As the Ghana initiative was designed to sit within the overall aims of the CCE the Ghana team returned continuously to the questions - What is too deeply culturally rooted to be truly understood or made replicable elsewhere? What travels? To what extent can practices that are effective in one context be implanted in another? Is it that the principles that underpin successful practice need to be tested in another cultural setting? And the corollary to this: How can Ghana learn from what is happening in schools and classrooms in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and elsewhere?

In the words of the Cambridge team, 'We took with us to Ghana as outsiders the five seminal principles of Leadership for Learning to test rather than to evangelise, to discover what meaning they might carry, if any, in a context with its own often inaccessible insider understandings'. These principles had been developed in a seven country research project over a three year period, only emerging over time as people from different sources brought their interpretations and understandings to contesting and shaping those principles. It was apparent that underlying the principles were differing ways of realizing them in classrooms, schools, municipalities and districts.

The enthusiasm of their embrace by the academics and headteachers in Ghana was both welcome while signaling a need to proceed with caution and critique.

Enter the PDLs and Headteachers

Following discussions with policy makers, academics and practitioners at different levels within the system it was decided that the entry point for the research and development work in Ghana would be with a group of headteachers who would be the change agents in their schools, communities and networks.

Development programmes for heads could not be put in place, however, without a cadre of people with expertise in professional development, an understanding of leadership issues and well versed in pedagogy. It was also seen as crucial that these people would themselves be effective leaders of learning with an openness to challenge and a readiness to embrace new ways of learning.

In common parlance these are 'trainers' and programmes



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designed to enhance their learning, leadership and professional development skills, often described as 'training the trainers'. This is essentially what was needed to be put in place but the language of 'training' was seen as an inhibition and in consultation with the 15 prospective 'trainers' the term 'Professional Development Leaders' was adopted. The designation of Professional Development Leaders (thereafter to be known as PDLs) was both symbolic and a statement of their leadership role. The 15 Professional Development Leaders were selected through discussion with GES Directors and University Staff. In order to assure a broad base of expertise and perspectives the 15 were recruited from a variety of educational institutions - the Ghana Education Service Training Unit, Colleges of Education, the University of Winneba, and the University of Cape Coast. The careful selection of these PDLs was considered critical to the success of the programme as they would be the gatekeepers of the developing relationship with headteachers and their schools, and with the other stakeholders to whom heads were accountable.

The preparation of the PDLs was structured as a Certificate of Further Professional Studies from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and entailed an introductory three day workshop held in Ghana, individual study and writing of assignments, and a ten day summer school in Cambridge. The summer school included visits to local primary schools, contributions by other Faculty staff, detailed planning of sessions for the forthcoming headteachers' workshop, and practise in leading sessions followed by feedback.

Modelling was a central feature of the PDLs' preparation, with PDLs experiencing a range of activities designed to facilitate learning so that they would be well prepared to use these approaches subsequently with headteachers. Critical friendship was also an integral part of the preparation of PDLs - among themselves, between the Cambridge team and the PDLs, and as a concept and process to introduce to headteachers.

For organisational purposes the ten regions of the country were paired to form five groups (each representing a zone), and the 15 PDLs were split into five triads, each attached to a group. While the ambition of the Ghana initiative was eventually to reach all basic school heads throughout the country choices had to be made as to which geographical areas to include in the initial stages of the programme. As historically there has been a tendency for projects to privilege areas in the south of the country close to the capital Accra, it was decided that the first phase would involve headteachers from throughout the country. The principle of equity had to be balanced against pragmatic and logistical considerations and in the end meant that many participants in the initial phase of the programme had to travel very long distances on inferior roads and not always reliable transport systems.

District Directors were asked to identify headteachers to participate in the first phase of the LfL programme. They were chosen in pairs, a man and a woman from the same circuit (a subdivision of a district), to create a gender balance and to provide each with a local colleague for support. Headteachers were identified for their leadership skills and commitment to school improvement. As individuals then the first tranche of heads were not representative of basic school leaders across the country in that they were judged to display particular qualities that set them apart from their peers. In terms of programme design the selection and calibre of the first group of participants was critical: seeking out high quality committed individuals was designed to create a cadre of 'early adopters' who would promote the programme and act as critical friends to following generations of headteachers.



In a sense headteachers are only the middle layer within the nesting of discretion and accountabilities. Despite their accountability to district directors and circuit supervisors (quasi inspectors/advisers) and their moral accountability to teachers, children, parents and communities, they are the group with potentially the greatest leverage for change.

There were several reasons for purposefully selecting the first group of heads, one being that the applicability of the LfL ideas and approaches to the Ghanaian context was largely untested (beyond the 15 PDLs), and the programme needed to be approached in a spirit of collaboration and enquiry. It was hoped that the first group would test out and develop LfL practices in their schools, creating multiple illustrations of LfL in practice as well as exemplars of difficulties encountered and ways in which they could be overcome. Also, it was anticipated that this first cohort would become leaders and catalysts for the subsequent extension of the programme, so again the calibre of the first participants was important. The effectiveness of the programme will ultimately be judged by how well less expert heads are able to adopt the principles and adapt them to their own circumstances.

Expansion to Circuit Supervisors and Directors

During the first workshop it had become quickly apparent that the headteachers felt constrained in implementing LfL practices by the extent to which any changes were endorsed or opposed by their immediate superiors, their circuit supervisors. It is the circuit supervisors' role to visit and inspect schools in their circuit, and to report to their District Directors. Approval or disapproval by circuit supervisors is clearly important to headteachers, and can carry significant consequences in terms of promotion and access to resources.

As a consequence, a workshop for circuit supervisors was held in November 2009 to familiarise them with the principles and the process which the heads had been through so that they would be able to work with those heads on a shared improvement agenda. In the event only around 30 circuit supervisors turned up out of an expected 60 plus. This was apparently because what had been simply billed as further training was not appealing given these circuit supervisors' prior experience of Ghana Education Service run events. Those who came were surprised by the interactive nature of the event and, when all were again invited to a second event in April 2010, most attended with enthusiasm. The advantage of the second workshop was that it was held jointly with the 124 heads and the circuit supervisors were able to participate in shared tasks with headteachers as well as with one another in groups, focusing primarily on their own professional issues.



Working up through the chain of command a one day workshop for regional directors was held. With feedback from headteachers and circuit supervisors they considered ways in which they could support circuit supervisors and headteachers in their transformational role.

This multi-layered approach to professional development was eventually endorsed and adopted by the Ministry who began holding their own sequence of professional development workshops led by their own staff. While these were originally jealousy guarded from 'interference' from the PDLs or the newly appointed Lfl co-ordinator (and with some careful diplomacy on the part of George Odoru) in time these workshops became more open and collaborative.

The appointment of a full-time Lfl co-ordinator was a hugely important event by providing the catalyst for sustaining improvement. Alfred Ahmpa-Mensah was among a number of applicants who replied to an advertisement and proved to be an ideal candidate, having just finished field work for his Bristol PhD and due to return to his home in Cape Coast. This allowed him to be supervised directly by George Oduro and to work closely with the PDLs based there. The Commonwealth Education Trust not only underwrote his salary but also paid for the purchase of a Land Rover which allowed him to cover the entire country and visit headteachers and their schools in some of the remotest parts of Ghana.

Outcomes and Experiences



It was apparent that underlying the principles were differing ways of realizing them in classrooms, schools, municipalities and districts.



The 124 headteachers were eager to apply the knowledge and skills gained from the leadership for learning workshop into daily practice in their schools. They were also determined to share their knowledge with other schools in their circuits. A common challenge was how to articulate their visions to teachers, parents, pupils and support staff. They expected support from their teachers but were apprehensive as to whether they would have the support of the District Education Office, and from circuit supervisors in particular. Professional development initiatives in the country have in the past, largely been a top-down activity with headteachers at the receiving end of largely didactic and prescriptive programmes directed from above.

The LfL programme was, for many, a completely new experience – active, exploratory, collaborative, bringing theory to bear on practice, applying, testing and refining principles. The adoption of the title for themselves as ‘school transformational leaders’ (STLs) was symbolic of a resolve to be agents of change on return to their schools. The sandwich nature of the programme – three intensive residential weeks followed by two further weeks after five months back in their schools – allowed an extended period for exercise of agency and embedding of the principles for practice.

The importance of transformation is brought home by responses to the 30 item questionnaire completed by all heads. Asked to respond to each item in respect of its importance and its reflection of current practice, the lowest ranked items on both scales tell a powerful story. In the view of headteachers overall there was no ambiguity in relation to pupil choice, planning and responsibility for their own learning. Even enjoyment of learning was not seen as a common feature of classroom life nor even rated as a very high priority.

Changing minds

Changes that had been made by heads between the first workshop in Ajumako in 2009 and the second in Saltpond, April 2010, included the following:

Professional development

- Staff meeting to discuss and set targets
- Vetting of lesson notes

- Regular INSET for teachers with brainstorming on issues relating to learning
- INSET on the use of critical friends
- INSET on questioning techniques
- Encouraging and supporting teachers' repertoire of teaching strategies

Learner centred activities

- Group work/activity with pupils' active participation
- Ability grouping and mixed ability grouping
- Pupils correcting their own work
- Focus on improving reading ability of pupils and increasing pupils' vocabulary

Beyond the classroom: parents and community

- Raising parental awareness and dialogue with parents
- Bringing the Senior Management Committee and the PTA into discussion of planning and progress
- Bringing in resource persons to help with language
- Excursions out of school to workplaces and exposure to role models
- Book clubs and reading circles

Structural and routine changes

- Ensuring punctuality and time keeping (for pupils and teachers)
- Introducing morning classes
- Phone calls by teachers to be made during breaks only

Asked to write about improvement in their schools, headteachers identified a number of common themes. These were:

Greater engagement, enthusiasm and enjoyment on the part of pupils

- 'Pupils have changed their attitudes to learning, teachers now teach better and lateness is now a thing of the past'
- 'Pupils show positive attitudes towards learning'
- 'Children now participate actively in the teaching and learning process'
- 'Previously pupils did not ask questions on topics treated but now they do'
- 'Improvement in the way children answer questions'
- 'Pupils do their corrections with teachers' guidance and this has made a great impact on learning'
- 'Pupils' performance has improved and they are interested in learning'
- 'Improvements in pupils' academic performance'

Improvement in reading

- 'There is improvement in the reading ability of pupils – it has also increased the vocabulary of pupils'
- 'Dramatic transformation within three months of the Psy/JHS levels in the reading habit of pupils'
- 'More than 60% of the pupils could now read properly'
- 'A good number of them can now read and enjoy reading.'
- 'In the upper primary, most children can read without the aid of teachers.'

Improved pedagogy

- 'Now teachers explore other ways of finding solutions to challenges confronting them in class'.
- 'More varied approaches to teaching and learning'
- 'Teachers vary methods of teaching and use varieties of TLMs'
- 'Lessons are now more practical.'
- 'Teachers have stopped misusing the contact hours'

Engagement of parents

- 'Parents visit school, provide their children with educational materials and ask for their children's performance'
- 'Parents, teachers and pupils have become enthusiastic in every school activity'.
- 'Parents are now visiting the school to know their wards' performance and also to interact with their ward teachers.'

Interviews were held during the first workshop in Ajumako and then again during the second and third workshops, interviewing the same heads that the Cambridge team had talked with at six month intervals. It was the second set of interviews that provided the first evidence of changes in thinking and practice that had taken place in the intervening period.

The following anecdote illustrates the adoption of the second Lfl principle – dialogue- which encouraged heads to adopt a more open approach, listening to the differing perspectives of children, teachers and parents. One head tells the story of bringing in a father to talk about his son's continual late coming. She tells how the father wept when he was told that his child (named Precious) was a habitual latecomer. Precious was staying with a stepmother and the father would get up early and go about his business. The child, left alone in the house with his stepmother had a heavy load of chores to do before coming to school. The headteacher continues the story:

I invited him in and tell him Precious comes to school late. He says' Master it is not true'. I show him the book for latecomers- Precious, Precious, Precious. He said 'why?' I said, 'let us call the boy'. 'Why do you come to school late?' And then the boy said 'Daddy, I do this, I do that every morning. It is Mama. If I do not do the work she will not give me money to come to school'. So the man took a handkerchief and started to wipe his tears. Then I tell him 'The boy has to set a target what he want to be in the near future'. Then the father says, 'I will see to it that from today this boy will come to school'. True to his word the boy is never absent and never late.



Even enjoyment of learning is not seen as a common feature of classroom life nor even rated as a very high priority.



Looking Ahead

The story from here is a familiar one. It describes what happens when an idea takes hold of the imaginations of people who are able to affect change, with implications for their family, community, and country.

LfL in Ghana spread quickly. While burning brightly in some places it was shown to ignite in others. At last count, and prior to the dissemination of the new Ghanaian Headteacher Handbook, 1000 headteachers and schools identified themselves as an LfL school.

LfL appeared to achieve a critical mass during the 2011-2012 academic year with these 1000 headteachers using LfL as the framework for professional development, school management, and learning in their schools. The development and research emphasis of LfL's work has clearly shifted in favour of dissemination and implementation. Keeping abreast of new developments is becoming increasingly difficult given the pace of change and the scale of the challenge. This task falls primarily to Alfred Ampah-Mensah with a little help from his friends – the 15 PDLs.

Presently, in 2012 the CCE team are exploring ways of enabling the final chapter of this research journey with sufficient momentum to overcome the many hurdles that will appear as LfL matures as a sustainable, national policy.

The future shape of LfL in Ghana as a model of sustainable, progressive leadership is unfolding day by day. Its final form and function will depend in part on the continued involvement of the Commonwealth Education Trust, the ability of the Centre for Commonwealth Education in Cambridge to provide support, and the commitment and long term investment by Cape Coast staff.

As with each new development in this research journey, the LfL Ghana team are engaged in open and continuing dialogue, with a view to establishing common ground on which the five LfL principles may express their full purpose, with a potential uptake by as many as 18,000 headteachers.

From the evidence to date, particularly from the testimony of headteachers, the Leadership for Learning principles are proving to be highly applicable for basic schools in Ghana, providing a shared framework for building capacity to improve the quality of learning for all.



LfL originated in dialogue, just as it will be sustained through dialogue.



LfL originated in dialogue, just as it will be sustained through dialogue. We remain hopeful that LfL will become the cornerstone of a new generation of learning in Ghana, with potential applications throughout sub-Saharan Africa. We recognize this can only be achieved if the headteachers, schools and those who administer and support schools at system level are, themselves, focused on learning, creating the conditions for learning, maintaining a continuous dialogue about learning, and sharing in the burden of leadership and accountability for the many successes and failures that are an integral part of the learning journey.

Through the commitment and hard work of many colleagues in Ghana much has already been achieved; the prospect is for much more.



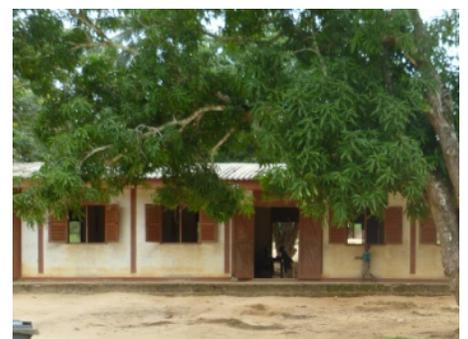
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Stephen Jull

Stephen joined the Centre for Commonwealth Education (CCE) as a Research Associate in 2012, contributing to research investigating the transferability of principles and models of the Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework to schools and education systems of sub-Saharan Africa. LfL was originally developed in partnership with European and North American partners. Prior to the present CCE research, the applicability and effectiveness of the LfL framework had not been explored outside the context of Northern education systems and schools. Stephen is presently supporting an LfL research programme based in Ghana, working directly with colleagues at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana and across the Centre for Commonwealth Education's research and development initiatives.

Links

<http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/cce/initiatives/projects/leadership/>

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