

**Learning from a national programme
for school leadership development –
Leadership for Learning Ghana:
The contribution of educational research**

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Abstract

Educational research identified the need for a programme of professional development for school leaders in Ghana. A Ghanaian recognized the potential of a framework developed through an international educational research project to address the problem, and research has been integral to the resulting programme, helping both to shape the development work and to evaluate its impact.

'Leadership for Learning (LfL) Ghana' is a research and development programme to develop the capacity of headteachers (the term used here to refer to school principals since this is the nomenclature used in Ghana and throughout the programme). It began in 2009 and has grown from initial work with 15 'professional development leaders' and 124 headteachers to be adopted as national policy.

In line with the theme of AERA 2014, this paper traces and discusses the varied and ongoing contribution of educational research to the LfL Ghana programme. In so doing it gives a summary of the programme to date, outlines ongoing work and future developments, and raises some key issues.

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Learning from a national programme for school leadership development – Leadership for Learning Ghana: The contribution of educational research

Introduction

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In line with the theme of AERA 2014, this paper traces and discusses the varied and ongoing contribution of educational research to the Lfl Ghana programme. In so doing it gives a summary of the programme to date, outlines ongoing work and future developments, and raises some key issues. As background some country contextual detail is given next, before summaries of the two sets of research that are antecedents to the programme. Discussion of the Lfl Ghana programme follows thereafter.

The context: Ghana

Ghana is a country in West Africa measuring approximately 450 by 200 miles, divided into ten administrative regions, further sub-divided into districts and circuits. Its population of over 25 million is concentrated in the coastal south, where the capital Accra is located. Gold and cocoa are major exports, and considerable oil reserves were discovered in 2007, but 29% of the population live below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 a day. By African standards Ghana is relatively stable politically and socially. A British colony from 1874 to 1957, Ghana was the first nation in Sub-Saharan Africa to become independent. English is the official language and other aspects of the colonial legacy are visible not least in the education system where what would now in the UK be termed ‘traditional’ approaches to schooling predominate, albeit with very limited resources.

There are over 18,000 public primary and junior high schools in Ghana (MOE, 2010a), which together comprise basic level education. Many lack facilities as fundamental as buildings, lighting, desks, chairs and books, forcing some classes to be held outside or squeezing groups of children onto benches sharing a single book. Over crowding caused by school provision not keeping up with the growth in population and school enrolment exacerbates the situation, while teacher absenteeism and a severe shortage of qualified teachers compound the

difficulties. Ntim (2013) identified a number of factors for the imbalance in teacher supply and demand in Ghana. Poor remuneration is seen as being particularly problematic, and ironically professional development by teachers can not only increase absenteeism while studying but also lead to higher rates of attrition as teachers find their better qualifications enable them to move into better paid jobs in other sectors (Ntim, 2013).

Antecedent research: Identification of need and a framework

The lack of preparation and support for school leaders in Ghana has been identified as impeding improvements in the quality of education (Oduro, 2003, 2008; Zame, Hope & Respress, 2008). There has been no structured preparation for headteachers, who have tended to be appointed on the basis of their teaching experience and seniority. Oduro (2010) found that from 2002 to 2007 three-quarters of heads had experienced less than one week's training, and this tended to be unsystematic and related to discrete foreign aid initiatives. Headteachers saw their role as administrators and custodians of resources, with few regarding themselves as leaders or responsible for pupil learning.

In parallel with the research in Ghana about headteachers, and initially unrelated, a major international research project projected the connection between leadership and learning. The LfL Carpe Vitam project (part-named after its Swedish sponsor) involved researchers collaborating with school leaders, teachers, pupils, and community members of 24 schools in eight locations in the US, Europe and Australia (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008). A major outcome of the three year project was a conceptual framework bounded by moral purpose and incorporating a set of principles, the headlines of which are:

- A focus on learning
- Conditions for learning
- Dialogue
- Shared leadership
- Shared sense of accountability.

(see also Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009; and <http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/about/>).

These two strands of research first came together at a colloquium, held in Singapore in 2008, to shape the work of the newly formed Centre for Commonwealth Education, based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and funded by the Commonwealth Education Trust. Among those invited to this event was George Oduro, who while studying for a PhD at Cambridge researched Ghanaian headteachers and their professional development (Oduro, 2003). George stayed in Cambridge as a post-doc researcher for a couple of years, attached to the Leadership for Learning team, before returning to Ghana to take up posts at the University of Cape Coast Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA). By the time of the colloquium in Singapore he had been made its Director. His proposal for a programme to build the capacity of headteachers of basic schools in Ghana using the LfL framework was met with approval at the colloquium. Subsequent

discussions with the University of Cape Coast's Academic Board, the Directors of the Ghana Educational Service (GES), the Association of Basic School Headteachers, the Ghana National Association of Teachers and the (then) Ministry of Education, Science and Sports further shaped and endorsed the proposal.

LfL Ghana: a research and development programme

The collaboration among Oduro at the University of Cape Coast, and MacBeath and Swaffield at the University of Cambridge, was key in devising and implementing the programme, especially in the early years following 2008. Resources and politics created many challenges and influenced some decisions, but the form of the programme was largely a result of the combined rich and extensive educational experiences, and research-informed knowledge and understanding, of these three researchers. These deeply embedded resources were drawn upon consciously and undoubtedly also subliminally, and are an example of a significant yet rarely acknowledged way in which educational research contributes to practice and policy.

In Cambridge we were acutely aware that although the suggestion for using the LfL framework to help address the professional development needs of headteachers in Ghana came from a Ghanaian, the framework originated in seven developed western countries and was untried or tested in an African context. This concern influenced aspects of the programme design in two main ways. Firstly, it was conceptualised as research and development, with ongoing research feeding back into the programme as well as creating knowledge to be published more widely. The second aspect was enabling the programme to be led on the ground by Ghanaian educators with a deep understanding of the educational, cultural and political context.

15 Professional Development Leaders

Consultation with key stakeholders led to the identification of 15 educators, including university and college of education lecturers, GES officers and a headteacher. They soon adopted the name 'Professional Development Leaders' (PDLs), and have become the reliable and committed core of LfL Ghana. The PDLs first came together at a workshop in Ghana in May 2009, at which they were introduced to the LfL framework and principles as developed through the Carpe Vitam project.

Other research and ideas about leadership and learning were also shared, notably the conception of both leadership and learning as activity and the centrality of agency. The PDLs' perceptions were gleaned using the 'double-sided' questionnaire from the Carpe Vitam project. This consists of 30 items which respondents rate on Likert scales in terms of perceived importance and frequency of practice – a structure used in earlier research (for example, MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001; James et al., 2007). Subsequently the PDLs helped

modify the items slightly to be more appropriate for the Ghanaian context, and the revised questionnaire has continued to be used throughout the LfL Ghana programme with a variety of participants on different occasions.

During the first workshop the PDLs were also interviewed individually, which was an opportunity to explore the questionnaire items in depth, revealing contextual issues, interpretations and meanings. For example, the PDLs thought it important that 'teachers regularly collaborate to plan their teaching' but it was not happening in practice because it would be seen as a weakness for teachers to collaborate or to be seen to need to learn from others. The PDLs were also asked about their background and professional experiences, which was hugely important for the Cambridge team in understanding context, and for the PDLs in appreciating the varied influences, for better and worse, on their life-long learning journeys.

The second part of the PDLs' initial preparation took place in Cambridge, where they were exposed to other researchers and pertinent research, and continued their studies for a specially created University of Cambridge accredited Certificate of Further Professional Studies in 'Leading Leadership for Learning in Developing Countries'. Part of the requirements was a critical appraisal of the challenges and opportunities of LfL in Ghana, involving them in literature based research and reflection.

Questionnaires and interviews were perhaps the most traditional research instruments used during the PDL workshops, but data were also gathered through more naturalistic means such as posters and written records produced during activities, and audio and visual recordings of proceedings. These research methods have also been used in the many subsequent workshops that began in 2009 and remain a key feature of the programme. The first of these was for the initial group of basic school headteachers.

Leading edge cohort of 124 headteachers

124 basic school headteachers from all over Ghana were invited to form the first cohort to be introduced to LfL. It was decided to invite heads in pairs, a male and a female from the same circuit so they could act as critical friends to each other, and from all ten regions in the country. These were significant decisions as gender equality is an issue in Ghana (Oduro, 2008), and much development and aid focuses on the south of the country where the population, administration, wealth and infrastructure are concentrated.

On the first day of the three-week initial workshop the headteachers completed the LfL questionnaire, slightly revised following PDL feedback. The data from the 30 items on two scales were collated and analysed in situ so that the results could be fed back and discussed with the participants almost immediately, and influence the fine detail of the sessions. For example, the majority of items with the highest 'practice' scores related to the first LfL principle of 'a focus on learning', which enabled the acknowledgement and endorsement of existing

good practice. Another item 'Assessment criteria are discussed with pupils in ways that they understand' was ranked low in terms of both importance and practice (24th and 25th respectively). To stimulate thought and dialogue about the issues behind this item we gave the headteachers a mock test where the assessment criteria were unclear and to some extent unexpected – an activity that immediately provoked an emotional response, shortly followed by serious reflection.

Interviews with the headteachers further deepened our contextual and cultural understanding, highlighting issues such as the value placed on status, the prevalence of corporal punishment, the depth of deprivation and its effects on learning, and factors impeding school attendance by both pupils and teachers. For the headteachers the interviews were an opportunity to reflect on and appreciate the significance of particular people and events in forming their professional identities, and to see the power and potential of their own agency.

The headteachers spent the bulk of the three week residential workshop considering the five LfL principles in detail and implications for practice. They devised action plans to guide them on their return for the beginning of the new school year, and made arrangements for keeping in touch with colleagues in their region and the three PDLs who had led their particular group.

The headteachers reconvened with the PDLs and the Cambridge team six months later in March 2010 during their Easter break, this time for two weeks. They shared and discussed progress, celebrated progress, used problem solving techniques to address issues that had arisen, practised dialogue skills, revisited the LfL framework and principles with the benefit of experience, and collectively drafted indicators of success for their LfL work. 18 months later in November 2011 they again came together, but this time in two groups, one located in the north of the country and the other in the south, and for three days only. At this third gathering there was a focus on what had been achieved through the programme, and how further development could be promoted.

Research integral to the workshops continued as before, including the re-administration of the LfL questionnaire. Repeated use of the questionnaire not only facilitated immediate adjustments to the workshops as before, but also enabled a longitudinal comparison of headteachers' responses (see Jull, Swaffield & MacBeath, 2014). On every occasion the headteachers rated 29 out of 30 items positively on both the importance and practice scales. The one exception was the item 'Pupils sometimes have opportunities to decide what they want to learn', which was reported overall as being absent in 2009. Comparison of the three sets of results showed that there was a positive change over time on both the importance and practice scales, although with a greater increase on the former (20 out of 30 items) than the latter (only 5 items showed significant increase on the practice scale). Our interpretation of these results was that the heads reported a sustained and strengthened commitment to LfL principles and practices, and developed a more critical appraisal of practice in their schools over time. Clearly the LfL framework has been embraced by the initial cohort of headteachers, but whilst more limited reported increases in practice may have

been partly due to the respondents appraising practice more critically with increased understanding, undoubtedly there are significant challenges in enacting LfL practice in Ghanaian basic schools.

A full time programme co-ordinator

As soon as we began planning workshops on a large scale the need for a full-time programme co-ordinator became very apparent. There were many practical arrangements to be made in advance of each workshop, and detailed organization and administration during and after. The Director of IEPA continued to lead strategic decision-making for LfL Ghana, negotiating and liaising with national governmental and professional bodies, alongside his wider role in the University of Cape Coast, but the LfL programme required day-to-day administration.

A full time co-ordinator was therefore appointed, funded by the Commonwealth Education Trust through the Centre for Commonwealth Education at the University of Cambridge, for a period of three years from March 2010. After advertisement and competitive recruitment a Ghanaian, who had recently completed a Doctorate at the University of Bristol and was returning to Cape Coast, was appointed. It was hoped that he would be able to undertake research alongside co-ordinating the programme, maintaining contact with the participants, and being the key point of contact in Ghana, but that was not the case. He was though able to gather stories of practice and news items, and helped produce five newsletters between 2011 and 2013 that were distributed widely. (These can be accessed at <https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/cce/initiatives/projects/leadership/resources.html>)

Circuit supervisors and Directors

It became clear quite early in the first workshop with headteachers that despite GES already having agreed to the LfL programme, the heads were anxious about the reaction of their immediate superiors. Circuit supervisors visit and inspect schools in their circuit and report to district directors, and approval or disapproval can have quite serious consequence for headteachers. A workshop was therefore arranged for the circuit supervisors of the initial cohort of headteachers, as well as sessions for district, regional and national directors. Circuit supervisors also joined the second and third headteacher workshops. They were to prove crucial to the programme, not only in endorsing the actions of the heads who were in the initial LfL cohort, but also by encouraging other headteachers to adopt the LfL principles and practices. For example, when interviewed one circuit supervisor talked about 'arousing schools from their slumber', and described his work with a school in his circuit whose headteacher had not yet been introduced to LfL thus:

I realised the gap between the school and the community. So I went on to revive the School management Committees, bring them on board to help school. Parents agreed to support their children's learning. After practising all these LfL practices, students' performance in that particular school went up from 0 per cent to 74 per cent.

As with the headteachers, we asked the circuit supervisors and directors to complete the LfL questionnaire when we first met them. An additional use of these results was to be able to share with headteachers the perceptions of their line managers and system leaders. There was considerable congruence among the rankings of items in terms of both values and practice among headteachers, circuit supervisors and directors. In particular, heads and circuit supervisors ranked three items in common at the top of the importance table, while there were four common items rated highly by both headteachers and directors, namely:

- In lessons teachers encourage pupils to ask questions in order to learn
- Headteachers communicate to their staff a clear vision of where their school is going
- Teachers help pupils understand the learning purposes of lessons
- Headteachers ensure teachers have what they need to promote learning.

Using the questionnaire results in this way reassured heads and circuit supervisors that the LfL work was approved by and inline with GES directors' priorities.

Dissemination and support

Immediately after the first headteacher workshop the LfL principles and framework began to spread beyond the initial cohort, as the heads returned to their homes across the country and began to share their newly developed knowledge and understanding not only with their own staff but also with other headteachers in the area. Quite a few pairs of heads enlisted help from their PDLs and circuit supervisor to organise sessions for other heads in the circuit. The Teacher Education Division of the GES, with support from UNICEF, also began running sessions thus introducing many more headteachers and circuit supervisors to LfL. Some district and regional directors took the initiative to arrange workshops for colleagues in their area, drawing on the expertise and experience of PDLs and people who had already attended LfL workshops. Through this almost viral spread it was estimated that by 2013 approximately 3,000 basic school heads had been introduced to LfL.

However, it was not until 2013 that the GES District Training Officers (DTOs) were formally incorporated into the programme. The format of the workshop designed for these officers was trialled with the DTOs of the Brong Ahafo region in March, and extended to all the other nine regions later in the year. This is an important piece as the DTOs are the GES officials charged with providing professional development for school staff throughout the country. It represented a tangible commitment to support in practice what had already been committed to in policy.

The Ministry of Education produced a Headteachers' Handbook which they distribute to every headteacher in the country. The first edition had been published in 1994 and the second edition in 2010. The forward makes explicit reference to LfL, as follows:

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; practising shared leadership and encouraging a shared sense of accountability.

(MOE, 2010b: iii)

Section 3 of the handbook is entitled 'Improving the Quality of Learning' and includes a complete section devoted to the detail of LfL, discussed in the Ghanaian context.

The GES, in consultation with colleagues at the University of Cape Coast closely involved with the LfL programme, are also finalising a manual of over 100 pages entirely devoted to LfL. Again, the authors have contextualised the LfL framework and five principles for Ghana.

Sustaining and embedding

The developments and measures mentioned above contribute to embedding the LfL programme in Ghanaian basic schools, and support its sustainability. However, the newsletters, whilst helping to promote and encourage LfL practice in schools, were not themselves sustainable. They required the co-ordinator to elicit copy, and cost money to print and distribute the 1,000 copies produced each issue.

While in post the co-ordinator was able to visit quite a number of the initial cohort schools, but again this is no longer possible now he is employed in a different role.

In March 2012 we began sending weekly text messages to core participants of the LfL Ghana programme, taking advantage of the fact that mobile phones and SMS are the most ubiquitous form of remote communication in Ghana. Experimenting throughout the pilot study, we found that the 175 recipients (mostly initial cohort headteachers and circuit supervisors) really valued the texts, and some were particularly keen to respond. The pilot and what we learnt from it are reported in Swaffield, Jull & Ampah-Mensah (2013); we are currently working on a proposal to extend and develop the use of SMS text messages to support LfL Ghana and its participants by creating virtual professional learning communities.

Another recent development is the introduction of the 'Most Significant Change' technique (Davies & Dart, 2005), a participatory narrative approach to monitoring and evaluation. This has been possible through the 'Cambridge-Africa Alborada' fund which aims to strengthen research collaborations and support the development of research capacity in Africa (<http://www.cambridge-africa.cam.ac.uk/initiatives/alborada-research/>). The technique involves collecting stories of change, selecting those considered by stakeholders to be the most significant, and feedback back those stories together with the reasons for their selection to the programme participants. Thus evidence of impact, including perhaps unanticipated change, is gathered, and used to further shape the programme. Eight of the original PDLs were joined by five colleagues from the University of Cape Coast to learn about the technique in January 2014. They are currently collecting stories of significant change arising from LfL Ghana from around the country, and will be coming together again in June to decide which are the most significant to feed back. Whilst it is hoped the process will help sustain and spread LfL practice in schools, the Most Significant Change technique is also a way of gathering evidence of impact.

Gathering evidence of impact

Despite the range of research incorporated into the programme, as outlined above, gathering evidence of impact has been one of the most challenging aspects of LfL Ghana. Considerable amounts of data have been provided by the headteachers themselves, but with all the caveats of self-report. Unfortunately it has not been possible to secure comprehensive attainment data, despite repeated attempts.

Case studies of four schools (Malakolunthu, MacBeath & Swaffield, 2014) indicated impact in a number of areas:

- headteachers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour
- teachers' professionalism
- pedagogical practices
- pupil attendance and engagement
- pupil attainment especially in reading
- parental and community involvement
- school environment and learning opportunities.

These were illustrated and brought to life by rich qualitative description and quotes drawn from 68 interviewees: students, parents, community members, teachers, headteachers and circuit supervisors.

Conclusion

At the outset it seemed extraordinarily ambitious that Leadership for Learning and its principles might be adopted as the framework for the professional development of headteachers throughout Ghana, yet it has happened. This could perhaps be attributed in part to, in Jerome Bruner's terms, the power and economy (Bruner, 1966) of the LfL framework. However, it is undoubtedly the

continuing commitment of the professional development leaders and key individuals at the University of Cape Coast that has been essential. They have contextualised, adapted, and mediated the LfL framework to make sense to headteachers of basic schools in Ghana. Educational research has informed the work at all stages, and will continue to do so, in the hope of evaluating impact, maintaining engagement, and ensuring fidelity of principles and practice as LfL continues to spread throughout Ghana through leadership development.

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