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John MacBeath and Sue Swaffield

(University of Cambridge, UK)

Contact

John MacBeath University of Cambridge Faculty of Education 184 Hills Road Cambridge CB2 8PQ. UK Tel: +44 (0)1223 767632 Email: jecm2@cam.ac.uk or

Leadership for Learning Administrator University of Cambridge Faculty of Education 184 Hills Road Cambridge CB2 8PQ. UK Tel: +44 (0)1223 767621 Email: Ifl@educ.cam.ac.uk

http://www.leadershipforlearning.org.uk http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/lfl

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

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This paper tells the story of developments in Ghana, West Africa under the aegis of the Centre for Commonwealth Education in Cambridge. The programme's purpose is to work in collaboration with partners at the University of Cape Coast to support headteachers in adopting a more learning-centred approach to their role, and to help them address many of barriers which currently impede them from focusing on learning and generating a learning-centred dialogue with their staff, with their students and with parents. *A focus on learning* and *dialogue* are two of the five key principles of leadership for learning, developed through a three year seven country research study. These principles are tested, applied and refined in the Ghanaian context. Political developments, the colonial legacy and decolonization provide the backdrop to the narrative.

The story begins

The Leadership for Learning story in Ghana began in Singapore at a seminar in September 2008. Held under the auspices of the Commonwealth Education Trust (CET) the purpose of the seminar was to explore potential collaboration with Commonwealth countries on learning, leadership and their inter-connections as the primary focus. George Oduro (Director of the Institute of Planning and Educational Administration at the University of Cape Coast) 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 CET.

Through further discussion with key stakeholders following the Singapore event the three key aims cited below were identified. Parties to further discussions in Ghana were the Institute of Planning and Educational Administration (IPEA), the University'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 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 Commonwealth 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. All countries involved 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 Ngui 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, Sugrue 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 Eliot 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 we return 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?

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 signalling a need to proceed with caution and critique.

The national context

Ghana, known as the Gold Coast until its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957 - the first Sub-Saharan African nation to gain that status – is widely regarded as one of the most politically stable of African countries and ranks high among sub-Saharan countries with respect to governance, accountability and civil society. Despite its huge natural resources (and recent discovery of oil) just over a quarter of the population live below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 a day. Its two major cities are Accra with a population of 2 million and Kumasi with one and half million. It is approximately 700 kilometers from north to south and 350 Km from east to west.

The country, with a population nearing 23 million, is a divided into 10 administrative regions, subdivided into a total of 138 districts, the latter being the administrative locus for management of schools. The model of decentralization widely adopted in developed countries has been influential in Ghana, along with other African countries. Headteachers and leadership teams are expected to carry the responsibility for, and be accountable for, improvement in their schools, measured primarily by 'outcomes' in the form of pupils' scores on exams.

However, schools sit within a nesting of agencies and authorities who support, direct or constrain their initiative. Education is directed from the capital Accra where both the political policy making Ministry of Education (MoE), and the 'non-partisan' policy implementing Ghana Education Service (GES) are located. In practice however the GES is often pressured by the MoE to change existing policy, especially when there are changes in political personnel. District Assemblies (composed of 70% elected members and 30% presidential appointees), local councils, School Management Committees all play part in either constraining or facilitating decision-making and latitude for initiative at school and classroom level.

Urban, Zonal, Town and Area Councils, 'provide mechanisms for political participation and representation, enabling demands, which could be human rights claims for instance, to be transmitted from the grassroots upwards to the DA, and, in principle at least, onwards to the national Parliament and President (Crawford, 2010:120).

Although it is estimated that over 80% of Ghanaian children attend schools, that still

leaves half a million children who do not, or cannot, go to school because of lack of school buildings and resources. Access to ICT is highly inequitable as between children who live in cities and those who live in rural areas, particularly in the North.

Ghana shares with other African countries an AIDS epidemic but is, nonetheless, well down the league table of infected adults compared with other African countries. USAID estimates around 320,000 adults as being HIV/AIDs positive, mainly affecting sex workers, prisoners (and their prison officers) and married women. The infection levels are highest in middle income and middle educational groups, in cities and along major transportation routes. This impacts on vulnerable and orphaned children with an estimated one in five children having lost one or both parents to AIDS. (www.usaid.gov/gh/)

Education and school: a turbulent history

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president is credited with helping to transform the country from a colony to a state, introducing free education and other social interventions that built the human resource capacities of Ghana. The establishment under the Nkrumah regime of the Ghana Education Trust schools, state corporations, roads, hospitals and factories were all aimed at making the country self-sufficient, less reliable on foreign countries and assisting in creating employment opportunities for Ghanaians. The dilemma for the Ghanaian government from Nkrumha onwards was to rework the colonial legacy. His was a dream of a new independent nation, forging its own identity, away from the colonial past, but one that didn't succeed in 'decolonisation of the mind'.

The overthrow of Nkrumah in a military coup in 1966 set back the clock for two decades of political instability, corruption, general macroeconomic turmoil and resulting mismanagement of many of the public services (Mfum-Mensah, 1998). The dramatic increase in the number of elementary and secondary schools during the Nkrumah presidency and the momentum for free universal and compulsory education, established by the 1961 Education Act was lost. For the five decades following the Act there were to be a series of political changes as successive administrations tried to cope with the conflicting demands of a globalization agenda and Ghana's own national cultural traditions, attempting to resolve the tensions between economic and social goals. Much of this was driven by donor agencies and their conditionalities, impossible for cash strapped governments to resist.

Many of the dysfunctions were not addressed until the 1987 Education Act reducing schooling from 17 years to 12 years together with a national literacy campaign for school drop-outs and adult learners. The extended period of school attendance, it was recognized, was penalising poorer rural children as parents could not afford to have the children in school for that length of time, given that children were vital to the family economy. In addition, the Common Entrance Exam for secondary school required extra classes and tuition in order to gain entry to secondary education, something only affordable by the rich (Sefa Dei and Opini, 2007).

School has been described as serving both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' functions, on the one hand building stronger ties and capital within family and community and, on the other, offering a ladder of opportunity to leave behind the ties that bind. The tensions between these two functions are largely a legacy of a colonial system, extending its import of schooling for the elite to a school which would be for all.

When the British officially colonised Ghana (then the Gold Coast) writes Segura (2009), they used school to educate intermediaries for colonisation, essential to their policy of indirect rule so as to impose superiority of knowledge, language and culture, cutting off pupils from their families in order to create new breeds of indigenous elites who aligned themselves with the culture, values and world view of the colonizer.

The tensions between globalization and localization, 'progress' and tradition continue to be played out as formal school education, on the one hand, and informal family and community education, on the other, remain largely unresolved. Up until the last quarter of the 19th education there had been an informal process through which Ghanaian communities prepared the next generation. The first 'school' was the home: the 'teachers' were the parents and the elders in the family. The 'curriculum' was life, learning was by observation and the first major purpose of such education was the inculcation of good character and good health in the young members of the community. The second was to give them adequate knowledge of their history, beliefs and culture, thus enabling them to participate fully in social life (McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh, 1975).

The collectivist nature of education in traditional communities, writes Antwi (1992) encompassed the total way of life of the society. Education as a shared responsibility ensured that the learning of all children was the responsibility of the community. The whole community benefitted from the education of the child, individual success was a success for all and shame was equally distributed. Male and female roles were passed from fathers to sons and mothers to daughters. Far from 'liberation' of girls and women in the colonial era, according to Obeng (2002) the education of girls and young women was primarily 'to help turn out suitable wives for the European merchants who desired to marry African women. One unspoken aim was to have a Mulatto who would act as a go-between between the Africans and the Europeans' (p.19) as well as intermediary for the emergent male clerks and church officials.

While there is a danger of romanticizing traditional practices, there is substantial evidence that the introduction of formal schooling in the Western mould did little to counter the disenfranchisement of families and children, in particular girls. When education is no longer sited within the community but located in a building seven miles distant, requiring fourteen miles a day walk, sometimes dangerous and with the possibility of there then being no teachers when you get there, the payback is of dubious currency. In these circumstances girls are less likely than their brothers to be sacrificed to the cause of schooling.

There is a constant complaint among headteachers that parents expect their children to help with their housework or other chores and so arrive late for school. However, as Segura (2009:43) comments, 'parents may not see the sacrifice of sending their children to school everyday as worthwhile. They may consider other work to be more practical'. And she adds, 'Their labour is much needed in the morning, and in what situation is it necessary for my child to learn that she has to be somewhere at 7.45 am?'.

Many students continue to be marginalized and disenfranchised, at least in terms of the failure to work with their lived experiences and social realities in everyday school practice (Sefa Dei and Opini, 2007:481).

Enter CCE

Following discussions with policy makers, academics and practitioners at different levels within the system we took as the entry point for the research and development work in Ghana a cadre of headteachers who would be the change agents in their schools, communities and networks. In a sense headteachers are only the middle layer within the nesting of discretion and accountabilities. Despite their upward 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.

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 designed to enhance their learning, leadership and professional development skills, described as 'training the trainers'. This is essentially what we needed to put in place but we wanted a better descriptor for their role. Their designation as PDLs, - Professional Development Leaders - was both symbolic and a statement of their leadership role. 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. On this basis 15 Professional Development Leaders were recruited by the Cape Coast University staff following wide range discussion within the University and with District Offices.

In order to assure a broad base of expertise and perspectives the 15 (PDLs) were selected 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. In each case the selection of individuals involved senior staff (for example the Director of Teacher Education and some Regional Directors were instrumental in the identification of the PDLs from the GES).

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. Modeling was a central feature of the PDLs' preparation, with PDLs experiencing many different activities designed to facilitate learning so that they were well prepared to use these approaches

subsequently with the 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 the 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 is 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 pragamatic 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 are perennial issues: it could be argued that seeking out high quality committed individuals can lead to an overly positive view of the effectiveness of the programme.

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 the early adopters would become leaders and catalysts for the subsequent extension of the programme, so again the calibre of the first participants was important.

Expectations and motivators

The headteachers demonstrated high expectations of applying the knowledge and skills obtained from the leadership for learning workshop back into the 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 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 is not seen as a common feature of classroom life nor even rated as a very high priority.

Table 1	practice	importance
Headteachers' views of pupil autonomy (n = 125)	ranking	ranking
Pupils sometimes have opportunities to decide what they	30	30
want to learn		
Teachers encourage pupils to be responsible for their own	27	28
learning in school		
Pupils are helped to plan the next stages in their learning	28	24
Teachers consult pupils about how they learn best	26	21
On the whole pupils enjoy learning	24	19

We learn how deeply these are embedded in the system when the views of heads, circuit supervisors and directors are compared.

Table 2 Views of headteachers (n =120) Circuit Supervisors (n = 25) and Directors (n =8) compared				
HT	CS	Dir	Rating of importance	
29	25	25=	Teachers encourage pupils to be responsible for their own learning in school.	
18	26	20=	Teachers suggest ideas or approaches for colleagues to try in class.	
21	27	25=	Teachers consult pupils about how they learn best.	
25	28	30	Teachers regularly plan their teaching together.	
30	29	25=	Pupils sometimes have opportunities to decide what they want to learn.	

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 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 attitude 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 revisited

Interviews with headteachers throw further light on these data. Interviews were held during the first workshop in Ajumako and then again during the second workshop, interviewing the same heads that we had talked with six months earlier. It was the second set of interviews that provided evidence of changes in thinking and practice that had occurred in the intervening period. The following anecdote exemplifies the adoption of the second Lfl principle – dialogue- which encouraged heads to adopt a more open approach to listening to the differing perspectives of children, teachers and parents. One head tells the story of bringing in the father to talk about his son's continual latecoming. He 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 head teacher 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.

Involving the 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, the 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 very important to headteachers, and can carry significant consequences in terms of promotion and access to resources. A workshop for circuit supervisor 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 100 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 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 heads as well as with one another in groups focused primarily on their own professional issues.

Working up through the chain of command a one day workshop for regional directors was held to present them with feedback from headteachers and circuit supervisors and encouraging them to consider 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 became precious.

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 in the UK and proved to be an ideal candidate, having just finished field work for his Bristol PhD and was due to return to his home in Cape Coast, so allowing him to be supervised directly by George Oduro and other of 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.

Next steps

The long term future shape of the programme is yet to be determined. It will depend in part on the continued support of the Commonwealth Education Trust, the ability of the Centre for Commonwealth Education in Cambridge to ensure sustainability of finance and support and the commitment and long term investment by Cape Coast staff. The immediate next step is a three day workshop for directors in February 2011. This is seen as a crucial piece in the jig saw, connecting the disparate parts to create a complete picture. From the evidence to date, particularly from the testimony of headteachers, Leadership for Learning principles are highly applicable to basic schools in Ghana, and provide a framework for building the capacity of headteachers in order to improve the quality of learning. 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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