Research Article

Literacy in Limbo? Performance of Two Reading Promotion Schemes in Public Basic Schools in Ghana

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This paper examines two literacy development programmes in basic school classrooms in Ghana: a books scheme for primary schools, mounted by the Ministry of Education in 1998 with support from the Department for International Development, UK, (DfID), and a reading assessment programme (Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond, 2011) aimed at promoting reading and improving quality of education especially at the basic level. The study reveals that very little is known about the two schemes, pupils' access to the books is generally poor, and teachers interpret and implement the reading assessment programme in a range of ways according to their understanding. The paper recommends a detailed qualitative and quantitative study of the schemes to assist in future book development and literacy programmes.

1. Background and Context

In September 1987 the government of Ghana started a new education programme[1] to reduce preuniversity education from 17 to 12 years, comprising 6 years of primary education, three years of junior secondary school to replace the then four year middle school structure, and a final three years of senior secondary schooling in place of the five years ordinary level and two years advanced level General Certificate of Education programmes.

The events leading to the 1987 major education reform are best understood in the context of the economic development of Ghana since independence, particularly the country's economic depression in the 1970s and 1980s. At independence in 1957, Ghana had a thriving economy and, as of 1960, a per capita national income of £70, higher than many developing countries such as (Egypt £56, Nigeria £29, and India £25) [1–3]. Ghana had "a promising start as one of the richest, most successful and politically mature regions of black Africa, having substantial sterling reserves and well-formulated development plans" [2, page 2]. The relatively buoyant economy was backed by abundant human and natural resources, and these assisted the government of the newly independent country to implement its ambitious plan of industrialisation [3]. But this was short lived.

Barely six years after independence, the economy, which was growing at the rate of six percent and making budgetary surpluses in the early years of independence, started recording budget deficits in the realm of 10 per cent between 1963 and 1965 [2, 3]. The decline was attributed to Nkrumah's overspending to support his political agenda of transforming Ghana into "a paradise" in ten years [3].

The economic decline continued at a breakneck speed especially between 1972 and 1983 [1, 4, 5]. In fact from 1972 to 1983 has been described as "a long period of acceleration towards the abyss; these eleven years are Ghana's nightmare" [2, page 16].

As a result of these challenges, financing of social services, the key to which is education, fell. Between 1975 and 1983 the gross national product (GNP) per capita fell by 23 percent and government spending on education reduced from 6.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1976 to 1.4 percent in 1983 [4, 5].

Akyeampong and Stephens [6, page 3-4] summarise the effects of the ailing economy on education

> *Teachers were not paid promptly, there was little supervision or inspection, schools were in disrepair, and there were few textbooks or instructional materials. The deteriorating economic climate*

and working conditions prompted an exodus of trained teachers to find better paid work in other countries. Untrained teachers were employed to avoid disintegration of the education system. . . Consequently, the quality of teaching deteriorated and gross enrolment rates at the primary level decreased.

Further, following a long period of challenges and virtual neglect [4, page 88] the educational system was seen as

Running inefficiently and unable to justify the huge costs incurred in it by the state. Pretertiary education was seen to take an unnecessarily long time, which added significantly to the costs. School children were found to be acquiring knowledge which was not always the most relevant for developing future careers. Access to education facilities was highly skewed in favour of urban groups and males.

At the insistence of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international donor and development agencies, Ghana launched an Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) in 1983 to attempt to rebuild the country's tattered economy [4]. In 1987, as part of the economic reform programme, the government of Ghana introduced a new educational reform programme, which became known as the Junior Secondary School (JSS) programme, to reverse the continuous decline of quality and standards in the education system and to reorient education towards relevant, more cost effective, and practical outcomes.

The main goals of the reform were to expand access to and improve the quality of basic education, and to make education relevant to the needs of the country by introducing technical, vocational, and agricultural studies as core subjects at the basic education level [4, 5, 7].

A major study which evaluated the reform over the first decade of its implementation noted, however, among other things that ". . . there have been few significant gains in either access to, or quality outcomes from, the education system" [8, page 68].

The research cites specifically the lack of teaching and learning materials as one of the key factors affecting the success of the reform programme and recommended improvement in books provision and literacy development programmes in basic schools.

Following this, the government of Ghana instituted a number of literacy and numeracy schemes and other interventions to address and to improve on the quality of basic education especially [8, 9]. Two such schemes are the "Books Scheme for Basic Schools" in 1998, under which the Ministry of Education, Ghana, with the assistance of Department for the International Development, UK, (DfID), bought about four million supplementary readers and distributed to about 11,000 public primary schools nationwide [8, 10], and a reading assessment programme popularly referred to in the schools as the "Reading Ability Chart," in which pupils' performance is recorded periodically and displayed on the walls of their classrooms as a way of encouraging reading.

2. Developing and Assessing Reading Abilities

As Askerud [11] indicates, the extent to which books and reading matter are readily available has an important bearing on how improvement in learning can be achieved. Neuman [12], on her part, makes a strong case for the importance of books in children's early literacy development when she says "Although many experiences are said to contribute to early literacy, no other single activity is regarded as important as the shared book experience between caregivers and children." In Neuman's [12, page 1], view as children interact with books and other print resources, they acquire an enormous amount of topical knowledge. They learn that the written language has its own rhythms and conventions, and through that children learn the values and the conceptual tools associated with reading.

Studies in book famine communities such as in most of Africa, and the developing world, indicate that one way of improving literacy is through the "Book floods" approach [13, 14]. Elley [13] argues that the learning of a second international language, though essential for better world integration and economic growth, is still froth with difficulties especially for developing countries whose first languages are multi and very different from the second languages targeted. Among these difficulties are the lack of motivation or the lack of connection between pupils' everyday living and books available, teachers who themselves do not possess a positive outlook on reading and are themselves weak in the targeted languages, the complete absence of or very limited time provided for reading within the school period and at home, and the absence of reading materials in schools and at home.

To raise literacy levels then means tackling these problems, and there have been success stories in some places using different books strategies [14]. One such strategy is the "Book Flood" programme where selected schools are "flooded" with interesting, colourful books on a wide variety of subjects. The book flood is based on the *whole language principle of literacy* [15] learning, spiced with aspects of the *critical literacy* principles [16], where pupils are encouraged to do group and shared reading, and, to discuss points raised by the teacher in the stories pertaining to their lives, to answer questions and to write down their views and alternative stories, which they then share with the group. Because the book floods programme is not geared towards examination, pupils are relaxed and feel no pressure to excel and therefore seem to enjoy the reading discussion and sharing activities more. As part of the programme teachers are given the needed training and motivated to share in the programme, time is also allotted to ensure a reading activity everyday for some time in school and at home.

Examples of the book flood programme as used in Fiji, Sri-Lanka, South Africa, Singapore, and, in New Zealand [13, 14] have shown its effectiveness based on the idea that if a child reads a lot they are bound to improve in both oral and written in that language and also in other subjects of the school curriculum. In the programme, pupils had already acquired the mother tongue or L1 and the improvement measured shown also in their L1.

Various evaluation studies showed marked improvements in the language and literacy abilities of the pupils in these book-based programmes. They also point to a possible success in solving the high illiteracy levels in schools and among teachers.

Based on these findings and recommendations from books donor communities and language and literacy development interest groups such as UNESCO, DfID, and World Bank, many developing countries including Ghana implemented their version of the book flood programme.

A key aspect of literacy development is the need to frequently assess performance of the pupils. Studies indicate that the key aim and objective of an assessment programme tends to determine the approach and the issues to be emphasized. For example the criteria for a project meant to monitor reading ability would be different from one meant to diagnose reading difficulties. Reading ability is assessed variously, however, assessments concentrate on five broad areas: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension [17, 18]. For example an assessment of fluency would look at accuracy in speaking, right use of phrases and expressions, and, generally, the ability to speak at the appropriate pace to ensure that listeners understand [19]. On the other hand phonological awareness assessment programme may assess pupils' ability to identify, blend, and, or segment, phonemes, rhymes, words, syllables, and onsets and/or rimes.

A brief description of one of the commonly used reading ability programmes: the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) could help our understanding. The Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) involves three major steps; measurement of word reading accuracy, by getting pupils to read aloud while counting the number of word reading errors, measurement of reading comprehension which involves answering of questions after the read aloud exercise, and the measurement of reading rate which looks at the time taken to read a story [17].

Generally, reading ability assessments tend to monitor progress in reading, to detect and diagnose reading difficulties, subsequently devise strategies to remedy the challenges, and to test psychological theories on reading and literacy [17, 18]. In developing and implementing a reading ability programme, however, Rasinski's [19, page 5] suggests:

> The assessments must be efficient in administration, scoring, and interpretation. Assessments should be as quick and easy to use as possible. If they are not, teachers may not find time to use them or may use them in ways that are inconsistent with their intent. Moreover, time given to assessment is usually time taken away from instruction. Thus, quick and easy assessments will allow teachers to gauge students' progress and maximize teaching time so that academic progress can be made.

3. The Purpose and Rationale of Study

This study was carried out to assess the performance of the two literacy schemes in a cluster of schools—two primary streams and a junior high school in Kumasi, the second largest city of Ghana. The review was to help identify the progress made so far, the constraints and setbacks of the schemes, and make suggestions for the improvement of the schemes and similar ones in the future. It is a pilot study aimed at serving as a platform for a larger study by providing the measurable indicators and the framework within which to conduct a larger study to evaluate the schemes and also provide policymakers, donors, educational authorities and publishers, with preliminary but equally relevant information to assist in effective decision making especially in the area of book development and reading promotion.

4. Methodology

The ethnographic case study design was used, and it involved classroom *observation* as the main data gathering procedure, supported by data from *interviews*, to provide an in-depth picture of the perspectives of teachers and pupils as far as possible from an insider point of view [20]. Observation is key to social research, and it forms the core of ethnographic case studies [21] and was particularly appropriate for data collection in this study; through observation we were able to gather data on aspects of school and classroom life, such as nonverbal interactions, which other methods are not able to note and record. Observing school and classroom events or activities at first hand also helped to bridge the difference between what participants *say* they do and what they *actually* do. The tendency for research participants to present themselves and their institutions in a favourable way to the "outsider" is always strong sometimes because of participants' lack of experience in making normative judgements and sometimes merely to please the outsider [22]. As "outsiders" we were able to "see" what participants could not from a more independent position and with "trained eyes" [20]. For example in our initial interview with the primary "A" headteacher she indicated that there were enough readers for library lessons. However, our classroom observations showed the contrary (see discussions findings below).

The literature on participant observation identifies various degrees of participation in observation research. Contemporary ethnographic research, however, tends to place more emphasis on "membership roles" in the communities. P. A. Adler and P. Adler [23] categorise the researcher's role as either *peripheral, active,* or *complete-member researcher.* Peripheral-member researchers are those who strive to gain insider perspective but with less-extensive contact with the group. Active-member researchers on their part participate fully in the core activities of the group, assuming responsibilities to advance the course of the group, as for example, a researcher volunteering to teach in a school [21]. Complete-member researchers are those who study settings in which they are already members or affiliates by virtue of the research. We entered the research community as complete-member researchers to observe and also participate in a familiar social situation. However, as Burgess [24] indicates, these roles and categories are ideal types and in the course of the fieldwork all the social roles were used.

In addition to the observation, we used interviews. The ethnographic interview format was used mainly to derive interpretations and meaning of actions and experiences of respondents. Ethnographic interviewing is a dynamic interaction between participants and the researcher, and a product of the values, attitudes, and experiences of the group, directly influenced by the role of the researcher, the interview schedule, and the aims of the study [25]. The interviews used both unstructured and semistructured questions. While classroom observations are enlightening, they are easily amenable to misinterpretation, and therefore teachers' explanations of their uses of textbooks and other materials during interviews tend to be more revealing.

According to Athanases and Heath [26, page 273]

> Teachers have reasons for what they do, whether articulated or tacit, that reflect "wisdom of practice." An ethnographer must tap this wisdom through acts of reflection that reveal teacher thinking. Such thinking provides essential framing for and insights into teaching and learning.

Interviews were therefore used to "capture teacher wisdom" [26] and also to obtain additional data from the headteachers and education officials.

We held one formal interview with each of the eleven teachers in Primaries A and B as well as with the three headteachers of Primary A and B and the Junior High Secondary School. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. We also interviewed three education officers, one in charge of books and logistics, schools supervising officer, and an officer in charge of literacy projects. Their interviews focused mainly on clarity of some aspects of policies in use in the schools which teachers had either interpreted or applied in a range of ways according to their understanding. They also supplied information on the rationale for the introduction of the "books for basic schools programme."

The classroom observation and interviews data were transcribed and analyzed using the *HyperResearch*, a qualitative data analysis software package designed to create datasets and also to establish patterns and plausible associations and relationships in the data. The first stage of the analysis involved the reading of relevant portions of the data gathered to identify key issues and concerns raised by respondents. This initial familiarisation also helped to identify themes and cases for analyses of the data. A thematic framework was developed and refined at subsequent stages. Codes were then developed to identify specific pieces of data which corresponded to differing themes. The findings and conclusions are reported in the sections that follow.

5. The Books Scheme for Basic Schools

The main objective of the books scheme for basic schools was to ensure that every primary school pupil has access to at least two supplementary readers at any given time to be used appropriately under the guidance of their class teacher. Information from the Kumasi Metropolitan Education Office showed that all public primary schools at the time, including our case study school, were supplied with the supplementary

readers under the scheme. The records show that all the schools had received their consignments by September 1999.

Though the logistics officer could not give the exact number of books supplied to each school, he explained that the number of books depended on the population of the school and "as the aim was for each student to have at least two books, a school with a population of say 50 had about a hundred and twenty books."

The scheme made provision for the training of teachers to handle the books. Workshops were held in all ten regional capitals in the country, for selected teachers. The teachers were expected to go back and organize similar training programmes for their colleagues in the districts. The overall objective of the training programmes was to develop and improve teachers' ability to use, care for, and store library books. It was expected that teachers who had the opportunity to participate in the training workshops would assist their pupils to develop favourable reading habits, set up class or school libraries and maintain, care, and store the books appropriately [27].

A special manual on the use, care, and storage of supplementary readers was also prepared and distributed to all schools. The manual gives guidelines on teaching reading and how to encourage the pupils to read and make the best use of the books. For example, it is suggested that, for maximum effect, pupils must be allowed to pick books, using the title and cover illustrations as their guide. They must be allowed to read the summaries of books in the blurbs on the back cover before reading them. In some cases they must be told the stories and be allowed to decide which books they want to read. The manual also suggests that children should be allowed to borrow books to take home to read in their own leisure time [27].

According to the Logistics Officer, the GES introduced library time on the official school time table for primary schools "so the teachers would not have any excuse for not allowing pupils to use the readers." Data gathered from the case studies schools however indicated that teachers have not been properly orientated towards the book scheme programme. None of the eleven teachers remembered evertaking part in any teacher-librarian training programme. They also indicated that they have no knowledge about the said manual. "If there is any manual then it may be in the headteacher's office... I have not seen any such thing," the primary 2B teacher said in an interview. She further complained that sometimes for reasons she could not explain, and the headteachers keep some of "these so called "important documents" from the Ghana Education Service or Ministry of Education under lock and key."

Even though the headteacher of Tomso Primary A acknowledged that there were 150 copies of supplementary readers consisting of 100 English and 50 Twi (local language) story books in the school, she could give no further details and was unclear as to whether they were supplied under the 1998 scheme. The Ghana Education Service (GES) has a policy under which teachers who have stayed in a school for up to ten years are transferred to other schools and the current head teacher took over at the beginning of the 2005/2006 academic year.

She explained

> *The outgoing head teacher did not do any proper hand over to me and there are lot of things I'm still trying to find out myself. A lot of the teachers here are new because of the GES' "no more than ten years in a school" policy.*

The primary 1A teacher, the only teacher who had stayed for almost ten years, remembered that some books had been supplied in metal boxes some time ago but "I don't know whether they were part of this scheme you're talking about, because no one told us anything about that and I don't remember the last time any teacher used them." She also did not remember whether any training programme was held for teachers on how to use the books. Another teacher could only provide information on how the scheme worked in her previous school where the books in "metal boxes" were shared among the classes according to the number of pupils. Teachers were given an exercise book to keep records of the children borrowing.

The headteacher, however, gave assurance that she would let the teachers start using the books as soon as possible though there was no evidence of progress to this end by the time the fieldwork period had come to a close. The period for library on the timetable is often used for other subjects, or to allow the pupils to finish up exercises; in practice, for a greater part of the fieldwork period, the pupils sat in the class unoccupied during the library time. On two occasions during afternoon sessions when the room felt extremely warm and uncomfortable, the teacher asked the pupils to go out to play.

Another important component of the scheme was that provision was made for both internal and external monitoring. Internally, teachers, and headteachers were expected to monitor the scheme. External monitoring was to be done by district assembly members, schools inspectors, and publishers. No credible records on monitoring were available either at the Metropolitan Education Office or the case study schools.

6. Assessment of Reading[2]

The challenge of teaching and assessing reading was also made evident in classroom observation studies and verification interviews with teachers and education officials on the meaning and import of, and what exactly teachers are supposed to do with a "Reading Ability Chart" displayed in the classrooms (see[28]). Different reasons were given by the respondents for the introduction of the reading ability project. However as Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond [28] noted, some teachers assessed fluency while others assessed phonological awareness, and other comprehension as evident in these extracts from the teachers [28, page 98]:

> …A "*very good pupil s able to read fluently with meaning [sic]*".
>
> "*The very good pupil when reading is able to pronounce the words correctly, identify key words and read and answer questions correctly.*"

The trend of explanations for the other levels—good, average, and weak—tended to be the same. For example Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond [28, page 98-99] note the following different explanations of good, and average readers given by teachers.

Good Readers

> *Teacher A:* "They are those who can read but sometimes they stop when they come and meet difficult words, they can't pronounce unless the teacher help them."
>
> *Teacher B:* "Good pupils are those who make some little, little mistakes which the teacher has to come in and help in the pronunciation."
>
> *Teacher C:* "You have to answer at least three comprehension questions correctly as good student."

For average students, these were how according to Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond [28, page 98-99] teachers classified them.

> *Teacher D:* "Average pupils they're sometimes off and on. If they are asked to read they will start well and then in the middle you see some pauses coming inside and making mistakes in pronunciation of certain words, all the time the teacher has to come in."
>
> *Teacher E:* "The average pupils are those who can recognise sentences and words and read simple sentences."

These differences were also observed in the views on the significance and relevance of the programme. Though many of the teachers accepted the importance of the programme in improving reading ability of pupils, even many more agreed that the display of the Ability Chart in the classroom may be a source of disincentive for some pupils and therefore not relevant to the programme.

Some teachers expressed the belief that if properly implemented, monitored, and evaluated from time to time the programme can help identify reading difficulties among pupils, and these mitigated with tested remedies. Some were of the opinion that the grading system does motivate some pupils and when streamlined could serve to ginger all pupils to do better at reading so their grades improve. Few teachers of a dissenting view agree to the importance of a reading programme but believe that exposing the chart to all pupils and visitors to the classroom shows the "below average" pupils in a poor light and dampens their spirits and wills to learn. One such teacher said she knows the pupils' abilities in her class and helps all to come up from where they are in their reading abilities and reiterate that she does not need a chart to help pupils read better.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Findings from the study on the books scheme for basic schools tend to support the view that in many schools in the developing world, school authorities keep books locked

up in order not to fall prey to official regulations which warn that teachers will be surcharged for lost and damaged books [29, 30]. Alternatively, teachers may be reluctant to use textbooks because their interests and experiences, and those of their students, are not reflected in the content.

Kraft [29, page 23] makes a similar observation about the "Books Scheme for Basic Schools" project

> *Schools continue to suffer from a dearth of reading materials. In schools with metal cases of donated books, they can be found in perfect condition, having never been read. Teachers have not been sufficiently trained to have a real understanding of how to use books and the importance of class, school or community libraries. To just place books in the school, without a pedagogical shift, will be a major waste of scarce resources.*

The decision by government to purchase and supply supplementary reading books to basic schools and the introduction of the reading assessment programme were thus relevant and in the right direction. However, as this study reveals that the two literacy promotion schemes raise difficulties in our case study schools. The pupils' lack of access is likely to influence the degree of familiarity with book language and the benefits associated with reading. Differences of this kind help to explain the achievement gap between pupils from economically disadvantaged homes and those from middle income families.

On the other hand the inconsistency in the grading systems used by individual teachers in assessing children's that reading ability means that pupils of the same grade level and of equal reading abilities may be assessed differently by different teachers, while pupils of different abilities may be assessed equally. This is problematic as it would be difficult to determine the real competencies of the pupils. Further it makes it difficult to design any credible reading programme to assist the pupils.

It is obvious, however, that qualitative data from two primary schools cannot be used to draw general conclusions about the schemes, and it is important that a nationwide study to evaluate the scheme is carried out as early as possible. The study has, however, helped to unveil some key problems undermining the schemes: teachers' lack of understanding of policies regarding literacy, the complete absence of monitoring and supervision of schemes to ensure effective implementation and sustainability, among others. It is hoped that the findings would engender further debate and research to explore the issues raised. Both qualitative and quantitative studies, to find out how the schemes are fairing in the very remote and economically disadvantaged communities of the country, would serve as a useful source of data for policy and decision making. Equally, a study to find out the impact of the schemes on reading habits of children would be highly useful to the book community.

Endnotes

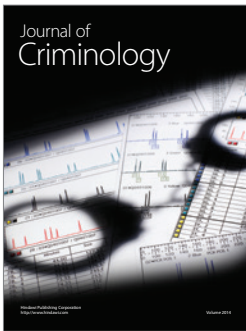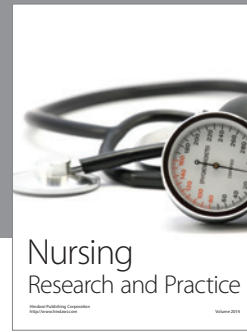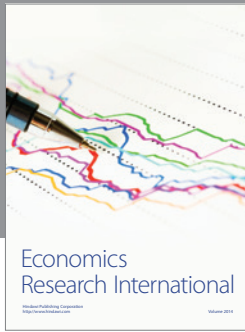1. The entire content and structure of 1987 education programme changed in the 2007/2008 academic year which commenced in September 2007. A new education programme changes the structure of preuniversity education from 12 years to 15 years. For the first time the government has made preschool education compulsory, and every child of four years of age is expected to have two years of nursery/kindergarten education. The new education programme maintains the 6 years of primary education as well as the 3 years of junior secondary education but increases senior secondary education by a year-to-four years. The government also proposes to change the name of the current junior and senior secondary schools (JSS/SSS) to junior high and senior high schools (JHS/SHS) (Government of Ghana, 2004).

2. The findings reported in this section are based on findings initially reported in Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond [28]: see reference below.

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