# The missing ingredient

## Headteacher leadership development in Sub-Saharan Africa

### George K.T. Oduro

## Introduction

Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa have, since the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, demonstrated high commitment to achieving Education for All (EFA) by 2015. In collaboration with development partners, a number of initiatives have been introduced with the aim of expanding access to school education, especially at the basic education level.

Major initiatives introduced by Sub-Saharan African governments towards achieving the 2015 EFA target include the implementation of fee-free education. Countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, Cameroon, Uganda and Malawi have abolished school fees at the basic school level (Mingat, 2003. p.133) to ensure that money does not become a hindrance to an individual's access to education. In Tanzania, the government has abolished school fees and all other mandatory parental contributions, and shifted the cost burden effectively to the communities. Ghana has also introduced a capitation grant and a free feeding policy to promote equal access to education. In Nigeria, Okebukola (2008) reports that the country has, since 2005, experienced quantitative expansion in its school infrastructure. For example: '25,399 classrooms have been constructed throughout Nigeria for a total enrolment of 881,594 basic literacy learners' (p.21).

These interventions have made some impact on access because a number of countries in the subregion have *sharply* increased access to and participation in primary education (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2008). As an example, Ghana's Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) increased from 87.5 per cent in 2004/2005 to 92.1 per cent in 2005/2006; while the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) increased from 59.1 per cent to 69.1 per cent (MOESS, 2006). These achievements, though modest, are something that Sub-Saharan African governments should be proud of. Indeed, if the phenomenon of EFA were restricted to quantitative expansion in pupil enrolment, structural changes and infrastructural development in schools, Sub-Saharan Africa, especially Ghana, would have had no cause to worry. One wonders though if we can say the same thing about the subregion in matters of quality education.

## Achieving quality education: Africa's major headache

While Sub-Saharan Africa has appreciably expanded access to education, the same cannot be said about the continent when it comes to quality education. Attaining quality education still remains a major concern on African government agenda implying that achieving quality in education goes beyond quantitative expansion in the number of primary schools, increase in the number of school buildings, changes in the structure of our school system and increase in pupil enrolment (Oduro, in Amenumey, 2008). As Gyekye (2002) writes:

> The desire or enthusiasm to access school education in order to acquire knowledge, skills, and new tools of analysis, is one thing; to actually succeed in acquiring them and showing evidence in having acquired them in concrete terms is quite another … The quality of the products of an institution or a programme is often evidenced in the quality of performance of the products

(Gyekye, 2002, p.28, cited by Oduro, 2008)

Thus no matter the quantum of investment we make in access expansion, if the educational provision and delivery processes lack quality, then such an investment becomes worthless. Investment in access expansion must go alongside investment in quality improvement. Opportunities should not only be given to children to be in school but also participate meaningfully in the process of learning at school. It is in this context that the headteacher's leadership role becomes critical. As a Tanzanian NGO director bluntly puts it,

> Tanzania is on course to meet the UN Millennium Development Goal of free primary education for all children by 2015, but the quality of that education is coming in for criticism … too much emphasis is being placed on achieving 100% enrolment rates and building new classrooms … It's about quality, quality, quality… This depends on leadership but Tanzania lacks the sort of visionary leadership needed to transform schools that are still 'drab, boring places'.

(Rakesh Rajani, the executive director of Hakielimu, an Education NGO)

In this context, African governments should not be satisfied with the increased pupil enrolment rates in schools and the quantity of visible structures developed on campuses of schools. They need to acknowledge that the process of achieving quality education requires effective leadership, both at the school and classroom levels. We need a type of leadership that will effectively manage the increased enrolment resulting from the access expansion initiatives, facilitate the implementation of change initiatives, create conducive teaching and learning environments and provide the needed professional support for teachers and pupils. Within this

context, I argue strongly that headteachers' leadership role as well as headteacher leadership development, particularly in rural schools, is the *critical missing ingredient* in Sub-Saharan Africa's quest for attaining sustainable development through quality education, especially, at the basic level.

## School leadership: crucial to quality teaching and learning

One clear message that emerges from the ongoing EdQual project is that school-level leadership is crucial to creating an enabling environment for teaching and learning, attracting and retaining pupils and staff, and promoting effective teaching and learning. This message confirms existing literature on school effectiveness and improvements which agree that a school's success is largely influenced by the manner in which the headteacher perceives and performs his or her work (Oduro and MacBeath, 2003; Southworth, 1995). The EdQual study suggests that empowering headteachers to lead effectively can indeed enhance the implementation of quality education.

In November 2005 and May 2006, the EdQual project carried out two brainstorming activities aimed at exploring the opinions of policy-level stakeholders and basic school headteachers, in both Ghana and Tanzania, on National School Leadership Priority Needs Analysis. Participants included representatives of the ministry of education, teachers unions, development partners, traditional councils (chiefs) and others. The following were identified as critical needs in the process of implementing quality education:

- Improving the supervision skills of headteachers
- Enhancing female capacity for participation in school leadership
- Improving teaching and learning
- Improving data and information management
- Enhancing school/classroom-level leadership capacity for managing change.

The headteachers also commonly agreed that their role was critical in facilitating the implementation of quality education initiatives. In accomplishing their tasks, however, they said they encountered a number of challenges including dealing with low motivation; managing class sizes; dealing with inadequate and delayed textbook supplies; handling the misuse of teaching time resulting from lateness and absenteeism of teachers and pupils; combining administrative work with teaching; adapting to frequent educational policy changes; managing school funds; handling interference from educational authorities; and coping with inadequate training and professional support. Two of these challenges are discussed briefly below: the misuse of teaching time and combining administrative work with teaching.

### Misuse of teaching time

The misuse of teaching time resulting from teacher and pupil absenteeism emerged as a major challenge for the headteachers. They attributed teacher absenteeism to situations where teachers tend to engage themselves in other income-generating jobs to augment their 'meagre salaries' and attend funerals at the expense of teaching. In a study of rural schools in one district of Ghana, for

example, Oduro and MacBeath (2003) observed that most teachers absented themselves on Fridays to attend funerals. Teachers, especially in rural areas, also often absented themselves when they needed to travel to get their monthly pay. More challenging for the headteachers was teacher absenteeism resulting from the government withdrawing teachers from the classroom to engage in national exercises – such as national elections as electoral officers, polling agents and registration officers – at the expense of pupils' learning. In Ghana, one headteacher in a rural school lamented that:

> The teachers are not many so I teach as well and do my administrative work … but the government does not help. You'll be there and the government will say they need teachers to register people like we had in the National Identification Programme … some teachers were out for two weeks … it does not help teaching and learning.

During such national exercises, pupils tend to be denied access to their teachers. Using teachers for non-teaching-related national assignments unnecessarily disrupts the process of child learning and therefore needs to be reconsidered. Teachers should be encouraged to make optimum use of teaching-learning time to convince the child of the need to stay in the classroom and learn. In a situation where a child feels their time in school is being wasted by regular teacher absenteeism, they will certainly find other things to do to occupy themselves.

### Combining administrative work with teaching

Some headteachers were overwhelmed by their dual role of carrying out administrative work and teaching. In coping with the workload, some occupied pupils with class exercises to enable them to attend to administrative responsibilities. The majority of them had removed pupil learning from their role as headteacher.

This is reflected in one rural headteacher's lamentation:

> You see, I taught for fifteen years before I became a head but they say I should teach as well … I teach and I do administration going to district office, attending meetings, doing many things and teaching at the same time but I'm not paid double pay. It's not fair … We headteachers are cheated … They should make teachers to help children to learn so we heads do the administration

## Leadership development: The missing ingredient

Although challenges facing basic schools have become complex, headteachers are scarcely prepared for their leadership tasks (Bush and Oduro, 2006). In both Ghana and Tanzania, primary school headteachers, especially those in rural schools, are left unsupported once they are offered a headship appointment. Most newly appointed headteachers gain awareness of the nature of their leadership tasks through their own efforts. In Ghana, for example, 60 of the 240 rural headteachers (25 per cent) said they had not received any training since being appointed headteacher. While some gain awareness through observing the activities and experiences of serving headteachers, others derive consciousness of the nature of headship tasks from the personal experience they

gain from voluntarily assisting their former headteachers. One of them commented that:

> I was appointed and posted to this village … no training … so I have to contact other headteachers for support and it has not been easy for me.

In contrast, 180 (75 per cent) of the headteachers said that they had received some training of less than a week's duration within the last five years (2002–07). As a result of the little training given to the headteachers, many of them said their leadership depended largely on the competences they had brought into practice and, at times, on trial and error. Such a situation apparently has an adverse effect on the headteachers' capacity to provide effective leadership because, as Verspoor (2005) observes, '"weak capacity" is consistently identified as one of the main constraints on development in Africa' (p.353).

## Implications for educational policy

Headteachers should be empowered through sustained capacity-strengthening initiatives and motivated to enable themselves to develop the professional and psychological competencies required to meet the complex quality education challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa. Existing quality-enhancing policies have largely focused on management at the ministry, headquarters and district levels of the educational system. It has focused more on the structural set-up of management systems; hence community involvement through, as in the case of Ghana, the school management committees (SMCs).

There is also a need to align teacher education processes with leadership capacity building to promote leadership for learning. The situation where headteachers consider themselves to be custodians and administrators of government property and remove the link with pupil learning does not promote quality teaching and learning.

To address the challenge of teacher absenteeism resulting from national exercises, there is a need for ministries of education in the subregion to seriously think about means of controlling the extent to which teachers' teaching time is interfered with by their engagement in national exercises. If we are really committed to achieving quality education for all by 2015, then we need to encourage teachers to carry out teaching without interference.

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