

The Middle Ground of Curriculum: History Teachers' Experiences in Ghanaian Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This study explores Ghanaian history teachers' experiences of the "middle ground of curriculum; a crucial stage of curriculum negotiation and a process, according to Harris (2002), that includes what "teachers individually and collectively perceived and enacted. . . prior to classroom implementation" The study employed the concurrent parallel design (Quant-qual). The researchers collected quantitative data from sixty history teachers in Cape Coast Metropolis through the census method. Six teachers were randomly selected from the sixty to participate in the qualitative phase of the study. The quantitative data was analysed descriptively (means and standard deviations) while the qualitative data was analysed based on emerging themes. The findings revealed that the history departments through departmental relation, subject conceptualisation and governance influence the ways in which teachers negotiate the formal curriculum prior to teaching. More specifically, the study established the interaction of these variables that shape history teachers' decision-making on the middle ground of the curriculum. The study, therefore, showed that the internalisation of curriculum change is a

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dynamic process that is evidenced at all levels of curriculum change – the high ground, middle ground of the curriculum, and lower ground.

Key words: Subject department, middle ground of curriculum, departmental relation, subject conceptualisation, departmental governance.

Introduction

The development of the curriculum is normally the responsibility of policy makers through the appropriate regulatory institution (Ball, 2012; Goodson, 1994). The 2007 Education Reforms of Ghana, for instance, witnessed the production of curriculum materials by the Curriculum Research and Development Division of the Ghana Education Service (GES). The Curriculum Research and Development Division determines what should be taught, the learning experiences to encourage, and the ends that must be sought by all agents of education (Kuyini, 2013). However, the process of curriculum changes in Ghana over the years stressed the provision of resources for teaching rather than a retooling and retraining of the main agents, teachers, to carry out the mandates or specifications of the formal curriculum (Kadingdi, 2006). This has made it difficult for teachers to undertake the gathering, organizing, and deploying of available teaching resources because sometimes they lack knowledge or training for the implementation of new reforms, particularly in the reforms' early years.(Harris, 2005). But it is the school resources and teacher-initiated activities that ensure effective curriculum implementation in the classroom. How teachers understand the formal curriculum and their use of resources to transmit knowledge in the classroom is what Harris (2002) describes as the middle ground of the curriculum.

This study locates the middle ground of the curriculum between the high ground curriculum (the formal construction of the written curriculum) and its lower ground-level (implementation in the classroom). The middle ground of the curriculum acknowledges the dynamic interaction between these varying levels of curricula and the role of teachers as active participants in the interpretation and enactment of the curriculum (Harris, 2002). In the Ghanaian educational context, this space is dominated not only by teachers' decoding of the high curriculum but their ability to deploy scarce resources to meet the goals set out by the formal curriculum in ways which grant them agency to shape practice (Lovat & Smith, 1991). This

space, therefore, serves as a political resource for teachers to interpret and re-interpret the high ground of curriculum at the micro level of practice (Ball & Bowe, 1992; Goodson, 1983).

There are, however, differences in the way teachers understand and perceive the curriculum, and how they implement it in classroom through teaching. Here, the middle ground of the curriculum includes the various consultation teacher make, their choices of teaching resources, recommendations to students and parents on what to read, their relations with each other, and their approach to and understanding of the subject's intellectual breadth, and how to make complex problems easy for digestion by students. Invariably, teachers' ability to engage effectively in all these pre-teaching phase interactions allow for a negotiation to be made with the formal curriculum in ways that enable its implementation within the specific community and the school contexts that teachers find themselves. Harris (2005) identified three factors that define the middle ground of the curriculum namely, sites, contexts and processes. This study is framed within the site variable conceptualized as the subject department. The subject department is the site in which teachers most often form collegial relationships and develop shared social norms (Siskin, 1994). These social norms can promote cohesion and support teachers' understanding of the received (high ground) curriculum. Subject departments shape how the teaching and learning aims of the formal curriculum are addressed, achieved and sustained for generations through the brewing of norms peculiar to the department. So important are these subject departments that Clark (1987) referred to them as "small worlds, different worlds." On his part, O'Boyle (2000) notes that subject departments are places where a strong sense of social and professional ties are built among teachers which reinforce teachers' marquee position in the field of education. The History subject department recognises the workplace as of the greatest significance to history teachers as it "collects teachers of like subject-area interests, expertise and professional language" (Grimmett & Neufeld, 1994, p. 34).

Mulford (2003) suggests that the interaction among teachers in their subject departments shape teachers' curriculum decision-making. Teachers' individual and collective perceptions of the nature and number of decisions available to them are evident in the micro-political processes through which they negotiate the curriculum. These processes are theorized along departmental relations; subject conceptualization; and departmental governance practices. These are, therefore, major starting points for comprehending the middle ground of the curriculum in schools. In this regard, the current study seeks to examine History departments' role in the negotiation of the

high curriculum before classroom implementation. Specifically, an attempt is made to examine how teachers interpret and reinterpret curriculum to suit their understanding.

The Purpose of the Research

A myriad of reasons account for History teachers' individual and collective impression, grasp, and subsequent negotiations of the history curriculum prior to classroom implementation. Firstly, the success or otherwise of history teaching across a country is informed by mediating factors in the process of decoding the nation's curriculum in schools. Secondly, knowledge of the middle ground of curriculum in Ghanaian schools could provide information on what areas of staff capacity building interventions could help improve the teaching of history. This allows for a re-concentration of attention on an important neglected part of curriculum implementation aside from the usual focus of research on the formal and ground level curriculum (Cobbold & Opong, 2010; Goodson, 1994; Kwarteng, 2011). This study thus replicates Goodson's (1994) British and Harris's (2002) Australian examination of the middle ground of curriculum in the context of the Ghanaian school system. This internationalizes the study of the concept for the benefit of the educational systems of developing economies. It also popularizes this process in order to spread awareness and elicit policy responses and interventions for better curriculum enactment in Ghanaian schools. We examine History departments' role in the interposition between the formal curriculum and lower ground curriculum in schools. Hence, how teachers interpret and reinterpret curriculum before teaching is the central focus of this study.

Context

In Ghanaian high schools, the teaching of history is traced back to the colonial school system where much of what was taught was British history. In postcolonial Ghana, the focus shifted to the teaching of Afrocentric history highlighting African and Ghanaian achievements in many areas. Ghanaian senior high school history departments are staff based on the number of students taking the course. Due to low enrolment of students over the past two decades, the number of history teachers has reduced considerably (Cobbold & Opong, 2010). Nonetheless, a history departmental culture and outlook remain pervasive in Ghanaian schools even where there are only two or three teachers (Amengor, 2011). Where there are fewer students taking history, schools tend to combine History departments with others such as Government, Social Studies and Economics to allow for effective collegial bonds, resources maximization, and improvement

of contact hours. Trained history teachers may therefore end up teaching other subjects in addition to history. Within such contexts, teachers are still able to negotiate the history curriculum with other trained history teachers who might not necessarily be teaching the subject due to the small class sizes in recent years. In this sense, the negotiations made of the formal curriculum for history teaching in Ghanaian senior high schools differ from the Australian and British contexts examined by Harris and Goodson where history departments are staffed with teachers teaching the subject throughout the school year. Thus, in Ghana's senior high school system, the middle ground of curriculum implies negotiations of the formal curriculum not just among teachers teaching History but with other teachers who, though trained as History teachers, might not be teaching the subject. And as Eshun and Mensah (2013) note, the mastery teachers make of the formal curriculum impact their choices of teaching approaches and resources. These professional impressions and understanding of the curriculum and the corresponding adoptions and adaptations do, in the long term, become a salient part of the culture of teaching a subject in schools. This means that the middle ground of curriculum in Ghanaian schools invariably draws on interdisciplinary subcultures without diluting the quality of history teaching.

In this study, we used teachers who teach history and other subjects in the same cognate subject department in Ghanaian schools. This gave us insight into how departmental cultures for the teaching of history are established and sustained. This brought us closer to understanding the site and context within which history teaching is done while allowing for generalization about similar sites and contexts to be made about the Ghanaian school system. We focus our examination of the middle ground of curriculum in Ghana on three main points namely, departmental relations, subject conceptualization, and departmental governance. The ways in which history teachers interpret and reinterpret the history curriculum through these three parameters before teaching it in the classroom are interrogated deeply and interpretations made of them.

The middle ground of curriculum

The middle ground of curriculum, as Harris (2002) indicated, is what “teachers individually and collectively perceived and enacted...prior to classroom implementation” of a given curriculum document. As the name suggests, it is located between the high ground of curriculum (the formal or written curriculum) and the lower ground of curriculum (classroom implementation). The

middle ground of the curriculum was first theorized by Ivor Goodson in 1994. Without rejecting Harris' contention that the subject department is the most important site where interaction and reinterpretation of the curriculum occur, we add that the Ghanaian context shows that the middle ground of curriculum can be experienced within an interdisciplinary subject department of cognate areas of teaching such as Humanities, Social Science and Human/Biological Sciences. We also make an important theoretical contribution to the field of curriculum enactment by designing a construct that explains how the formal curriculum is mediated in the subculture before classroom implementation. Whilst it is broadly acknowledged that curriculum change often takes place before classroom implementation (McLachlan, Fler, & Edwards, 2018; Parkay, Anctil, & Hass, 2014), this study will explore how departmental relation, subject conceptualization and departmental governance as salient variables in the middle ground of the curriculum, play significant roles in curriculum mediation. Through the framework shown in figure 1, the dimensions of the history subject department as experienced by history teachers is illuminated. The middle ground of curriculum framework provided here is an emergent design by the researchers. We add understanding to both Goodson's and Harris' examinations of this concept of the middle ground of the curriculum.

Departmental Relation

Departmental relation refers to social and professional interaction and engagements that take place among teachers in the same subject department. Warm interpersonal relationship within the subject department is a subject subculture variable that nourishes the realization of the middle ground of curriculum. For instance, Wang (2015) argued that well-arranged school structures boost teacher collegiality which in turn furthers collective enquiry, responsibility and subsequently guarantee effective teaching. He found that a cooperative relationships among teachers benefit students when such arrangements are not imposed from above but were the result of intentional organization of the school or departmental space to foster interaction among teachers. Similarly, Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, and Grissom (2015) found that a good relationship exists between the breadth of teachers' instructional collaboration and students achievements. While this study does not show how collaboration affected the quality of understanding of syllabi, it shows that teachers improved professionally when they team up with others to address professional needs in the design of instructions. A study by UK's Department for Education and Skills (2002) also revealed that 80% of the teachers felt that support and co-

operation from departmental colleagues had greatly impacted their work as professionals. Reeves, Pun, and Chung (2017) similarly confirmed that student achievement and teacher satisfaction with their job were predicated on how effective teachers collaborated both in designing instructions and observing each other during teaching. Reeves, Pun, and Chung (2017) therefore concluded that not all collaborative activities may produce desirable results. Rather, schools and teachers need to identify the areas of collaboration among them that produce substantial professional results. Deductively, we see that sincere, trustworthy relations among teachers in a subject department constitute an important means by which curriculum documents are decoded through the shared meaning made of them by teachers in deliberation with each other.

O'Boyle (2000) suggested that an absence of discussions and meetings on teaching methods, learning outcomes, and assessment instruments, would result in individualism and could negatively affect departmental success in the implementation of curriculum. The success or otherwise of a subject department in implementing syllabi documents stems from the bonded, interpersonal relationship among teachers and how that relationship supports information sharing, instructional collaboration and other professional engagements. Doppenberg, den Brok, and Bakx (2012) also add that the frequency of dialogue among teachers and the varying aims of those discussions inform the effectiveness teachers perceive of those collaborations. In other words, the frequency of engagement and diversity of concerns resolved from time to time in collaborative teams help deepen teacher cooperation in gaining shared knowledge of the formal curriculum and taking responsibility to implement it well. Siskin (1994) refers to departments with commendable teacher working relations as "bonded departments". And this working bond informs teachers' interpretation and negotiation of the formal curriculum document for effective implementation in classrooms.

Collegiality's role in achieving meaningful middle ground of the curriculum cannot therefore be underestimated. Discussions and interactions among teachers may include teaching methods, instructional resources, clinical observations, supporting roles from other teachers in class, and creating rare teaching and learning resources for curriculum implementation. Respectable, trustworthy and confidential relationships among teachers in a subject department create a social context in that site within which teachers act collectively to realize formal

curriculum objectives. Thus, social and professional interactions in the subject department are a subculture prerequisite which molds the way the middle ground of curriculum is achieved.

Subject Conceptualization

Subject conceptualization specifies teachers understanding and perceptions of the subject they teach. It includes the nature, scope and importance of the subject they teach. These understandings that teachers possess about their subjects constitute a crucial subculture variable that mediates the formal curriculum and ground level curriculum. Beswick (2012) explains that mathematics teachers' "beliefs about the nature of mathematics influence the ways in which they teach the subject." He contends that teachers understanding of mathematics as a school subject differ significantly from the discipline as it is known among mathematicians. This implies that there might exist a gap between what teachers learn in training and what they teach in schools. That gap has huge potential to shape the practice of teaching in the classroom. Where a curriculum document dwells much on the discipline as it is rather than how it might be taught in schools, teacher collaboration is key to supporting the decoding of the document into teachable forms that support students' growth in knowledge of the discipline. And it is that decoding and practicalizing that highlight the curriculum's middle ground occupied by teachers and their subject departments. Also, Douglas (2011) submitted that teachers' perception of the subject, such as its status and scope, significantly tells how they teach it. The decisions on the methods to adopt, assessment tools, and classroom organization are all made based on the perception teachers make of their subject. In a study of teachers' relationship to their subjects, John (2005) concluded that teachers' perception of the subject influences their views of student academic progression and how their subjects ought to be taught. For instance, history teachers may think that the history subject is structured chronologically therefore, if a student fails to understand Form One concepts, the student would find it difficult to appreciate Form Three abstract generalizations. Again, English teachers may think that the content of the English curriculum is too broad as far as the goals of reading, writing and speaking are concerned. These discrete forms of perceptions may inform teachers' preparation and implementation of the curriculum` in the classroom.

Stodolsky and Grossman (1995, p. 6) add clarity to this as they argue that "these conceptions of subject matter create a 'conceptual context' that helps frame the work of high

school teachers and mediates their responses to reform proposals". For example, teachers willingness to employ information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching is heavily influenced by their perception of their subject and its ability to accommodate changes (Prestridge, 2012). In an observation of three English teachers in Australia, Ningsih and Fata, (2015) found that specific methodological choices of teachers emerged from their pre-established views of English as a school subject. Here, the conception teachers make of their subject enable them select resources, tools, and approaches to teaching that work best for them in each circumstance. For this reason, teachers' belief systems about their teaching subject augment how they implement the formal ground curriculum.

In the Ghanaian environment, similar experiences of teacher beliefs about the subjects exist. As Akyeampong (2017) noted recently, the grasp teachers make of mathematics determine their choice of particular methods and approaches in delivering mathematics instructions to primary school pupils. While difficulties remain on how to efficaciously incorporate learner-centered pedagogies in the teaching process, teachers' methods show that certain intimations of the subject ground them in some approaches rather than others. Buabeng-Andoh and Yidana (2015), for instance, add that teachers teaching approaches in Ghanaian schools remain highly teacher-centered. In their study, Buabeng-Andoh and Yidana (2015) discovered that these teacher-centered approach were responsible for the limited accommodation made for information and communication technology in teaching in Ghanaian schools. However, the ambivalence they saw can be explained as emanating from teachers' impressions about their subjects and whether technology could have grave consequence on their ability to transmit intended subject matter. All these calculations form part of the decoding of the formal curriculum teachers do based on their grasp of their teaching subjects. Subject conceptualization, therefore, forms an important part of mediation between the formal and ground curriculum called the middle ground of curriculum. The conceptualizations that teachers make of the subject matter mediate what formal designers of the curriculum think and, how teachers perceive them to be as well as how to teach them based on their grasp of the subject.

Departmental Governance

Departmental governance relates to how subject departments are run for the purposes of academic work in schools. Departmental heads and instructional leadership are used

interchangeably in this paper because they are both linked to leadership in schools. The middle ground of curriculum metaphor is actualized within educational settings when effective departmental governance facilitates teachers' ability to negotiate the curriculum towards implementation. In a large scale study in Kenya, Wanzare (2012) sought to examine how headteachers and supervisors perceived instructional supervision in schools. While there was consensus that internal instructional supervision sought to meet regulatory requirements, there were benefits such as advanced teacher competence and improved students' academic performance. The act of internal instructional supervision serves as a check on how the formal curriculum is decoded and whether other sharers of instructional power mainly headteachers or departmental leaders add to the process of negotiating the formal curriculum before classroom implementation. School leaders also possess inspirational influences on teachers' ability to and actual negotiation of the formal curriculum (Spillane & Kim, 2012). In a study in an American suburban school district, Spillane and Kim (2012) posited that the key position occupied by school leaders empower them to not only share instructional power with teachers but they are also able to inspire relations among teachers in ways that further collaboration and professional cooperation.

A reason for department leaders' effectiveness in shaping curriculum negotiation come from teachers' perception of these leaders as experienced minds in the subject area, according to Leithwood (2016). This is because departmental leaders invariably garner experience in the teaching of the subject over years prior to their appointment in most schools. They expend the legitimacy extended to them by teachers to lead the process of decoding the high curriculum together with teachers in the enactment process (Siskin, 1997). Lochmiller (2016) highlights this in his study which concluded that school administrators' instructional feedback to teachers build on the commentators' own experience of teaching the subject. The effect is that over time, distinct subcultures emerge in those departments that may inspire how particular curricula are received, decoded and implemented. While Lochmiller (2016) found it problematic that feedbacks to teachers emphasized pedagogy rather than content knowledge, the overall act of engaging in conversations about instructional methods buttresses the significance of leadership in the subject department in the negotiation of the curriculum. John and La Velle (2004) suggested that such pedagogical decisions are informed as much by subject departments leaders. Gordon (2008) also made the point that even the choice of pedagogies or methods depend on the

professional leadership available to teachers in the department. When efficient departmental leadership supports teachers' pedagogical decisions, the choices made are invariably a mediation of what a formal curriculum sets down and specific local conditions or contexts within which instructions take place.

Though there is research paucity on departmental leadership in the Ghanaian educational context (Donkor, 2015; Kwadzo Agezo, 2010), Baffour-Awuah (2011) found that instructional supervision guidelines set out under the Ghana Education Service are archaic. Teachers, however, did well to practice instructional supervision and those experiences were useful to improving professional growth in the teachers' estimation. Instructional supervision therefore constitute one way teachers gauge their maturity and grasp of a formal curriculum through the collective feedback from departmental leaders, headteachers and others. Donkor (2015) indicated that school leaders better support the attainment of educational goals when they demonstrate skills and experience of effective classroom practice. This expertise legitimizes their instructional and other professional input that they give to teachers. Clearly, that sharing of professional experience will, over time, embed into the subject department's teaching culture. Such cultures could superimpose themselves on how curriculum documents are read, understood and practiced. That middling in the curriculum implementation process reinforces the power of site and context of the subject department in the negotiation of formal curricula documents.

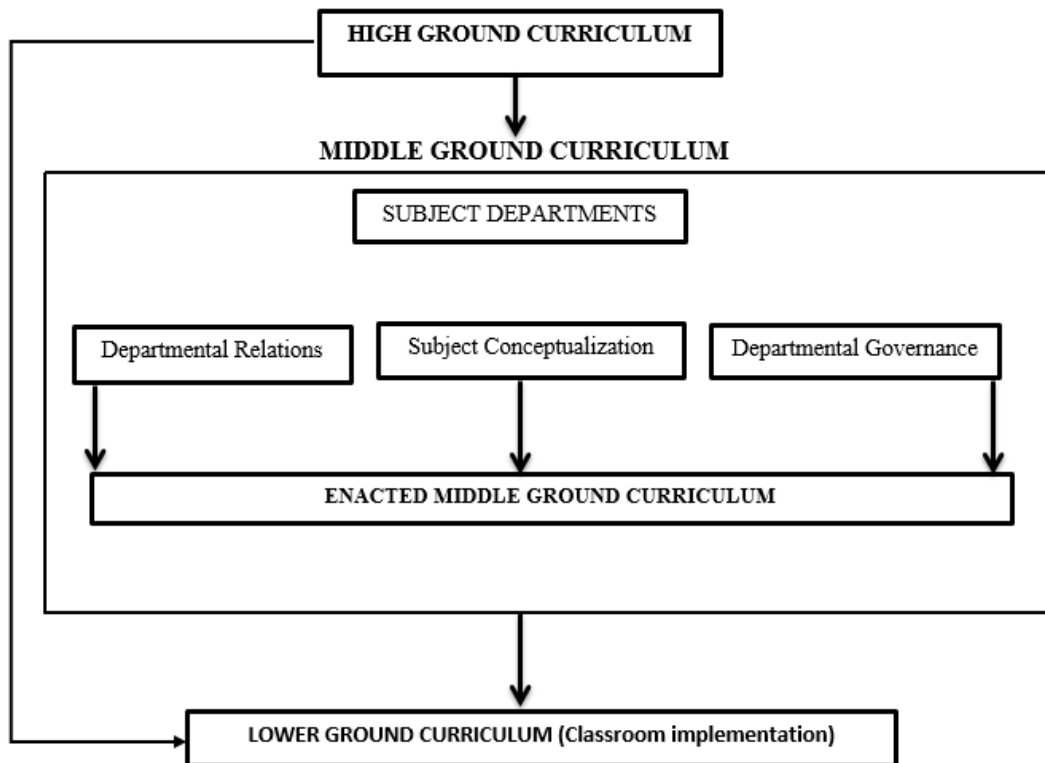


Figure 1: Representation of Curriculum Negotiation between the Middle Ground of Curriculum and the Formal and Lower Ground Curriculum.

The figure demonstrates how the three factors of subject conceptualization, departmental governance, and staff relations mediate the high and lower ground curriculum in the process we have referred to as the middle ground of curriculum. Teachers' conceptual understanding of the subject, teacher relations and the quality of departmental leadership are central to the negotiation History teachers make between the high ground curriculum and the ground level curriculum. Thus, we have theoretically established that three interrelated variables - departmental relation, subject conceptualization, and departmental governance - impact history teachers' interpretations and negotiation of the history curriculum document. A well-structured and responsive subject department is thus, an important step in the middling of the curriculum that facilitate the attainment of curriculum goals.

Methodological Considerations

The mixed method paradigm was used for this study. Specifically, the study employed the concurrent parallel design (Quan-qual). This design was found to be the most appropriate as the researchers sought to triangulate the methods by directly comparing quantitative results with qualitative findings for corroboration and validation purposes. In the collection of survey data, we employ the census method to collect data from sixty history teachers in the Cape Coast Metropolis. Subsequently, six history teachers who participated in the survey phase were conveniently selected for interviews. The six teachers selected represented 10% of the 60 used, and according to Creswell (1998), this is considered as appropriate.

The instruments employed to collect data were questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. The four-point Likert-type scale questionnaire had three sections with 24 items on departmental relation, subject conceptualization and departmental governance. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately. Means and Standard Deviations were computed with the use of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to determine the direction of the quantitative responses. The range for the means score was 1.0 to 4.0. A score from 1.0 to 2.4 represented disagreement on a response while a score between 2.5 to 4.0 represented consensus. Standard deviation scores are from 0.0 to 1.0. There is homogenous response when the score is 0.9 below and heterogeneous when it is above 1.0. The interview data were subjected to a thematic analysis using constant comparison analysis. First, the researchers studied the field notes, transcribed the recordings into manuscripts and carefully read through them. This was done to identify main themes and ideas based on the questions posed to participants..

Findings and Discussion

The results obtained from this study are presented in this section. Three key elements namely, departmental relation, subject conceptualization, and departmental governance, that support the middling process in curriculum mediation were examined.

Departmental Relation

The purpose of this theme was to interrogate how teacher relations in the Ghanaian high school history department contribute to curriculum negotiation in schools. Table 1 contains the data on the above theme.

Table 1: *Departmental Relations*

Statement	Mean	SD
I have regular meetings with colleagues in the Department over matters concerning pre-teaching preparation	2.6	.73
I frequently ask for the aid of colleagues when I encounter a challenge before or after teaching	3.8	1.1
Colleagues cooperate effectively to solve teaching and learning related problems facing the department	2.9	.81
My colleagues' support has greatly improved the way I teach and enact the curriculum	2.7	1.0
My colleagues and I have very friendly disposition and respect for each other which helps me enact the syllabus well through teaching	2.8	1.0
There is frequent discussion in the Department on the syllabus before academic work starts	2.8	.90
Departmental members always review teaching and learning strategies within the term and academic year	2.8	.77
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.9	.90

There was a general agreement, on the average among respondents, that departmental relation influences how history teachers negotiate the curriculum before classroom implementation. This position is informed by the mean scores of the various items. It was observed that all the mean values were within the affirmation range. A mean of mean score of 2.75 added iteration that teacher relations is a major variable in the interposition of the high

ground and lower level curriculum in history departments in high schools in Ghana. Also, the average standard deviation of 0.92 indicates homogeneity of teachers' thoughts that interpersonal relations drive the efforts at decoding the formal curriculum document. It further demonstrates, as Wang (2015) found, that interactions in the history subject departments improved teachers' teaching preparation and grasp of teaching and learning resources. The subject department is, therefore, better understood in negotiating the curriculum when teachers' relationships in the department come under scrutiny.

During interview sessions, all respondents reported that they engaged in various forms of departmental interactions with colleagues from time to time. These exchanges included regular meetings on pre-teaching preparation; solving teaching and learning problems facing the department; discussions of the meanings and demands of the curriculum. Teachers, from these responses, valued how these arrangements in the history department helped them make sense of the intents of curriculum designers as contained in the formal curriculum documents. This adds to the findings of the Department for Education and Skills' (2002) that teachers' quality of practice got a notch higher when they cooperated with other teachers. One teacher stated that "departmental interaction regarding the teaching and learning of history motivates me to be innovative in my teaching. For example, I have been able to get ideas on other methods to help impart knowledge to students." Such discussions on the methods of teaching history among teachers improve quality resource gathering for classroom practice in ways that echo Ronfeldt et al's (2015) contention that teacher cooperation translates into enhanced students outcomes. Other teachers also shared similar views. Another high school history teacher said that:

We consult each other with regard to the teaching of the history subject. These could be lesson preparation, the teaching of certain topics in the syllabus, the use of certain instructional materials. This is normally done on individual level, because it is not all the time that we meet us a department to discuss teaching related issues. Sometimes it could even be at the middle of the term that we may need assistance. And so, the person who needs assistance may have a discussion with those with enough experience.

This means that fruitful teacher relations may even supersede departmental leadership in negotiating curriculum documents because teacher interrelations engender constant dialogue. In

this way, the new teachers tap into the expertise of experienced teachers all the time. This is particularly important in Ghanaian high schools where scarce resources, unequal economic situation of communities, and limited technology demand close collaboration among teachers in key areas of need to successfully decode and practicalize formal curriculum documents in the history classrooms (Reeves et al., 2017). A teacher from a southern Cape Coast high school also held that:

Departmental colleagues' discussions of the History syllabus before lesson preparation help a lot in breaking down the issues for effective classroom teaching. This is because most of the issues are not simple enough for easy understanding. Therefore, when we meet, we are able to discuss for better simplification.

For the Ghanaian high school history teacher, speaking to colleagues about professional opportunities and challenges boosted their effectiveness as professionals. Given the long silences in Ghana's curriculum reform and retraining initiatives, teacher dialogues facilitate proactive curriculum implementation as Doppenberg et al (2012) noted. Teachers' enhanced grasp of the curriculum stems from this collective approach to analyzing it and sharing ideas on how to implement it. In Ghanaian high schools, such interpersonal relations make up for the gap in training between teachers who were trained during curriculum reforms and teachers who enter the classroom long after reforms are implemented without the benefit of knowing completely the curriculum beyond what is written in the syllabus. Departmental interactions therefore engender knowledge sharing and generate social capital which develop enduring teacher professionalism.

Day and Sachs (2004) observed that the subject matter students learn and how they learn emerge from a potpourri of teachers' informal negotiations and conventional professional engagements. This observation presupposes that departmental interaction not only fosters curriculum implementation but also ensures teachers' professional development through the breeding of ideas (Siskin, 1997). Therefore, professional and social dialogue aid the transitional engagement with the formal curriculum towards realizing lower level implementation.

Subject Conceptualization

This theme aims to find out how teachers conceptualize and understand the History subject, and how that understanding helps them to negotiate formal curriculum for classroom implementation. Table 2 presents the data on the above rubric.

Table 2: Subject Conceptualization

Statement	Mean	SD
The subject is very important in the school system so teaching it requires special expertise	3.2	.84
The subject is unique from other subjects in form and purpose so it cannot be taught like other subjects	3.4	.73
My understanding of what the subject is determines how I teach it in class	3.0	.66
My understanding of what the subject is determines the resources I select for my teaching	3.1	.74
My lesson preparation is influenced by my understanding of the subject I teach	3.2	.76
My Attitude towards the subject I teach is determined by my understanding of the subject	3.1	.79
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	3.2	.75

The questionnaire collated yielded mean scores ranging between 3.0 and 3.2. This showed teachers' belief that their understanding of the nature of history as a subject informed how they prepared, organized and executed teaching responsibilities in classrooms. Also, a mean of mean score of 3.13 further reiterated the subject conceptualization's role in decoding and implementing the high ground curriculum in history classrooms. By inference, history teachers' understanding of the subject which they teach facilitates not only their negotiation of formal curriculum content but the teaching methods they decide to use. Such decisions over content, methods, collaborations, and other professional choices form significant part of the middling of the curriculum. The average standard deviation score of 0.78 demonstrate the proximate nature of teachers' responses to enquiries on how critical subject conceptualization is in mediating high curriculum documents before classroom implementation. The findings show that the ways teachers conceptualize the subject tell the way they go about decoding and teaching the formal curriculum. Whereas formal Ghanaian curriculum document requires fidelity to the tenets laid

out in it, teachers in this study show that their understanding of the nature of the subject they teach is a negotiating factor in how the curriculum is understood and taught to learners in schools. In this sense, the grasp of the history subject among teachers in Ghanaian high schools constitute a subculture variable in our understanding of the middle ground of the curriculum.

A major theme in the interviews was how the nature of history as a subject informs the professional decisions of teachers with regard to the formal curriculum. When asked how the understanding of history as subject impacts the ways teachers negotiate the formal curriculum's requirements for teaching, one teacher explained that "*the subject is very chronological and structured in content in many ways. It is sequential.*" For this reason, this teacher adapted topics and subtopics tactfully to the individual capacities and the special circumstances of the school. This is important because "*without a good understanding of one topic, it is difficult for students to understand certain subsequent topics,*" according to another teacher. This teacher explained further that "*it is like Mathematics. You cannot jump some topics.*" This deviates from the largely thematic arrangement of ideas in the Ghanaian history syllabus. The intent of the curriculum designers was to allow students enter the study of history through exposure to African history, world history and then Ghanaian history. However, teachers appear to have adopted far more practical approaches other than those prescribed by the formal curriculum. There is therefore a gap between how professional historians expect history to be taught and what teachers actually do with the curriculum. It recalls Beswick's (2012) observation that professional expectations does not always translate into teaching practice for subjects in schools. Respondents were also asked how their grasp of subject matter content determined their choice of teaching methods. One teacher said that, "*my understanding of the subject content determines how I teach it in class.*" On further probe, the respondent said, "*The subject deals with past events that are remote in terms of time. Therefore, with this understanding, I always rely on the use of current affairs as a springboard when teaching.*" While this may describe entry approaches, this teacher relies on present events to relate the significance of historical facts to learners. It betrays the strictly professional tune and direction of the Ghanaian history curriculum which emphasis training in the art of history at a basic level in preparation for university level work. The declining interest in the study of history (Cobbold & Oppong, 2010) may have compelled a shift by teachers to breath life into teaching history through using modern stories. Content knowledge and the meanings made of that knowledge tell the approaches teachers adopt in transferring nuggets of

information or knowledge to learners in the classroom. Other teachers confirmed this when one recalled that *“lesson preparation and resource gathering are influenced by my understanding of the subject I teach.”* *“The history subject is very abstract so that compels me to assemble a lot of teaching and learning materials,”* he added. Ningsih and Fata (2015) and Akyeampong (2017) emphasized this point when they contended that teachers’ presumptions about their subject determine their choice of methods and resources for teaching. Content knowledge not only inform practice, it also imbues confidence in the teacher about their abilities to lead subject matter learning at the Ghanaian high school level. Overall, teachers’ responses cluster around the imaginative, abstract, critical thinking nature of the history subject (Oppong, 2011), and how these motivate their ways of decoding the formal curriculum. These understandings of the history subject, therefore, inspires history teachers’ interaction with the formal curriculum.

The findings suggest that subject conceptualization determines how the formal curriculum is negotiated through their professional preparation before implementing the curriculum in the classroom. These show a clear tilt toward individual professional understanding of the subject rather than strict adherence to the impositions of the formal curriculum. Also, teachers’ responses indicate that they do not implement the formal curriculum hook, line and sinker. Rather, teachers negotiate the formal curriculum with their professional conceptualizations of the subject as a foundation for the decisions they make about the subject matter and methods needed to make a success of the transmission of knowledge to students. Stodolsky and Grossman (1995) rightly pointed out that teachers’ perception about the subject mediate their response to formal curriculum documents.

Despite the thematic arrangement of the Ghanaian history curriculum, teachers adopt a chronological rather than progressive approach to teaching as the findings here demonstrate. Teachers make practical choices about the quality and complexity of content types, and how to transmit same to students. In the Ghanaian high school, as this study has shown, the tendency to adopt other ways of content organization betrays not only the formal curriculum requirements but also demonstrates teachers’ instructional power over specificities indicated by the formal curriculum (Akyeampong, 2017; Buabeng-Andoh & Yidana, 2015). Another point worth noting is that professional notions and understanding of subject matter among Ghanaian teachers are difficult to erase even if a new curriculum document proposes to do so (cf. Stodolsky &

Grossman, 1995). Teachers' grasp of the subject they teach is therefore a key subculture feature that underlies the mediations of the formal curriculum by Ghanaian high school history teachers.

Departmental Governance

With reference to the above theme, the researchers sought to investigate the role of departmental leadership in mediation teachers made with the curriculum.

Table 3: *Departmental Governance*

Statement	Mean	SD
The department head fully supports effective teaching by teachers.	3.3	.83
The head of department is accountable to teachers on issues affecting teaching in the department	3.2	.92
The leader advocates for the teachers' welfare at school administrative level to ensure teaching efficiency	2.9	.85
The head is a role model in teaching effectiveness for teachers in the department	3.0	.91
The head heavily influences the decisions about how I teach the subject by giving me pre-teaching resource support	2.3	.95
The head use his/her administrative power to influence effective teaching by teachers through role allocation	2.7	.87
The head organizes periodic workshops and seminars for teachers to be educated on the new approaches to teaching and learning	2.4	.83
The head reviews previous teaching and learning before the new term begins	2.8	.87
The head always organize meetings to discuss how the subject should be taught before academic work starts	2.8	.87
Mean of Means/Average Standard Deviation	2.8	.86

Departmental governance within Ghanaian high schools appeared to have been a major instrument for mediating formal curriculum. Perhaps, with the exception of two items: 1) "The head heavily influences the decisions about how I teach the subject by giving me pre-teaching resource support", 2) "The head organizes periodic workshops and seminars for teachers to be educated on the new approaches to teaching and learning" - which both received mean scores of 2.33 and 2.48 respectively, all the mean scores of the other items fell within 2.5 – 4.0. This range (2.5 – 4.0) indicates greater conformity and consensus in responses. The mean of means scores of 2.84 reiterate that respondents were close in their opinions than apart. Overall, respondents concurred that good departmental governance facilitates history teachers' efforts at decoding and making sense of the formal curriculum. Again, the extent of homogeneity of the responses is illuminated by the average standard deviation of 0.86. Both the mean of means and standard deviation scores suggest that respondents agree generally that departmental governance had an influence on how teachers interpret the high ground curriculum for classroom teaching.

Interviews buttressed the intimations gleaned from the questionnaires. One teacher commented that:

There is always departmental meeting at the beginning of each term to discuss how the subject should be taught before academic work starts. Such meetings also review previous term's academic work and how the subject could be handled effectively. The Head of Department usually calls such meetings when normally students' performance is not encouraging, and complaints are also made by students on how the subject is being taught.

A second teacher recalled that: "The Head of Department always assesses pre-lessons preparation and makes suggestions and contributions at the beginning of every term. Most of these assessments are done individually with the teachers." These responses reveal a dialogic line of action among teachers and department leaders to confidently decipher formal curriculum documents, collaborative decision making on teaching methodologies, and collective redress of learners' challenges. These echo the findings of Spillane and Kim (2012) and Wanzare (2012) that school leaders' work enhance teacher professional advancement in areas such as instructional supervision and collaborative initiatives. The more teachers interact at a departmental level with leaders in those departments, their capacity for professional engagement

with the formal curriculum gets better because collective understanding of the subject enables them to decide how to effectively teach content.

When asked what other issues were discussed at department meetings, one of the respondents cited “*scheme of work, unit planning, lesson plans and the instructional materials that would be used*” as driving the agenda. Such comments are incisive in that they demonstrate department leaders' ability to sponsor dialogue that engender mediation of the formal curriculum. Lochmiller (2016) highlights that discussions created by departmental leaders emphasize leadership's critical role in the negotiations made of the content and methodological demands of the formal curriculum. Therefore, decisions made about the formal curriculum after it is received in the department are informed as much by departmental leaders (John & La Velle, 2004). Department and even, unit heads' constant review and check of schemes of work, lesson plans, teaching methods, class journals and subjects' logbooks drive best practices in the classroom in Ghanaian high schools (Baffour-Awuah, 2011; Donkor, 2015; Kwadzo Agezo, 2010). As Masuku (2011) argues, it is unlikely that schools can attain the desired academic standards if cultural patterns and methods to support teaching and learning are not created through departmental leaders.

Department leaders were also noted to have executed their administrative functions to support academic ends. A respondent recollected that “*When there is a new trend like a change in WAEC's way of setting questions, the head of department supplies us books and other materials to keep us abreast of time.*” This additional indicator of leadership support for academic work iterate that arbitrations of the formal curriculum may go beyond the contents of the syllabus. Department leaders' role in recommending resources calls to mind Donkor's (2015) finding that skilled teachers acting as departmental leaders immensely impact classroom practice of teachers in Ghanaian schools. The accumulated years of teaching experience department leaders in Ghana gain before taking up administrative duties in Ghanaian schools make them particularly effective in providing and recommending resources for teachers they manage in the subject department.

Holistically, the three variables explored are the most important subject department subculture variables that make for successful negotiation of the formal curriculum. Siskin's (1994) point that the subject department is the site in which teachers most often form collegial

relationships and develop shared social norms is rightly accepted. This observation is reinforced by Ball and Bowe's assertion that, "The ways in which the National Curriculum is construed are, in part, dependent on existing subject paradigms and subject subcultures" (1992, p. 103). The internalisation of curriculum change is therefore a dynamic process that is evidenced not only at the ground level but is mediated by the subcultures that receive and implement the formal curriculum.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the experience of history teachers in mediating the history curriculum in high schools in Cape Coast, Ghana. Some observations were drawn from this study. Firstly, the social and professional relation and interactions among teachers in the same subject department weigh on teachers' understanding of the curriculum and how to practicalize it in classrooms. Also, professional dialogues enable teachers master the art and act of preparing and presenting curriculum content to students. Therefore, the existence of a cooperative spirit among teachers in a subject department is beneficial to both teachers and students. It is, therefore, important that stakeholders pay critical attention to what goes on in subject departments in schools since departmental relations shapes classroom practices. It is important that education stakeholders pay critical attention to organizing school space in ways that bring teachers together so they can fruitfully engage to shape classroom practices.

Secondly, the way professional teachers conceive History as a subject affects their content preparation and teaching in class. In this sense, the strong interposition of subject conceptualization calls for greater efforts from trainers and government to synthesize teacher training content and high school curriculum that better prepare teachers for both content and pedagogical readiness in schools. Some of the findings here could be extended to cognate subject areas in the Ghanaian high school system.

Lastly, the quality of departmental governance inform the way teachers decode, interpret and implement the formal curriculum. There are salient implications of departmental governance on classroom practices. Firstly, the findings point to the centrality of efficient departmental leadership to the mediation of the formal curriculum for classroom implementation. The criteria for leadership selection should be drawn to take cognizance of coordination, inspirational, and professional experience abilities. Secondly, given that inefficient unit or departmental leadership

derails teacher preparation, the researchers found that such circumstances mitigate successful transition of the curriculum document from the realm of the abstract to classroom praxis. The provision of appropriate training for departmental heads is recommended. The training would help departmental heads foist excellent condition over their departments for efficient teacher output in implementing curriculum documents.

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