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Examining activity-based learning (ABL) practices in public basic schools in the northern region of Ghana

Hope P. Nudzor^{a*}, Albert Dare^b, George K.T. Oduro^c, Rosemary Bosu^a and Nii Addy^d

^a*Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana;* ^b*Spiritan University College, Kumasi, Ghana;* ^c*College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana;* ^d*Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University, Montreal, Canada*

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Background: Ghana has been the testing ground for many teaching and learning initiatives over the past 15–20 years. These initiatives, largely funded by donors, have sought to improve learning by introducing and reinforcing valuable teaching skills, materials and approaches, most of them child-friendly, learner-centred and involving activity-based learning (ABL). However, a problem in Ghana, also true of other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, is that whereas efforts over the past few decades have improved access to basic education in both pupil enrolment rates and teacher numbers, educational quality as measured by standardised test scores in key subject areas remains rather low.

Purpose: This article reports on an aspect of a DfID (Ghana) – sponsored research project which examined how the quality of teaching and learning in Ghanaian basic schools could be improved through the utilisation of ABL pedagogy. The current article examines three overarching themes relative to ABL pedagogy, namely how participants conceptualise ABL; ways in which ABL practices reveal themselves in classrooms; and challenges of ABL practices in Ghanaian schools.

Sample: Participants (comprising representatives of Colleges of Education, District Directors and frontline Deputy Directors of Education, headteachers and teachers) were drawn using purposive sampling technique from eight schools from within four districts of the northern region of Ghana.

Design and Methods: A case study approach was adopted for the study. Data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions and observation of ABL practices and lessons in selected schools. Data analysis was undertaken using a ‘processual analytical approach’ with the view to catching realities of ABL practices in the Ghanaian educational setting.

Results: Our analysis reveals that whereas the literature on ABL emphasises multi-tasking and group work as essential ingredients of ABL pedagogy, the respondents conceptualised this as meaning pupils working on the same activity-related tasks at the same time in groups. Similarly, we found that, ideally, ABL practices reveal themselves through classroom practices such as display of pupils’ work in classrooms, organisation of the seating arrangements of pupils in groups, use of teaching and learning materials, formative assessment and activity-oriented lessons among others. However, in almost all the schools and classrooms we visited, these essential ingredients were missing owing to congestion and lack of furniture and logistics.

Conclusions: We conclude against the backdrop of our findings that ABL techniques can be utilised more effectively in Ghanaian schools if its practices are initially promoted in model schools, for lessons to be learned, and then scaled-up as expertise is established in these model schools.

*Corresponding author. Email: hnudzor@ucc.edu.gh

Keywords: ABL pedagogy; active-learning pedagogies; teaching and learning; classroom practices; teaching strategies; Ghanaian education system

Introduction

Ghana has been the testing ground for many teaching and learning initiatives over the past 15–20 years. These initiatives, largely funded by donors, have sought to improve learning by introducing and reinforcing valuable teaching skills, materials and approaches, most of them child-friendly, learner-centred and involving activity-based learning (ABL).

Education initiatives in Ghana, exemplified by those profiled in this article, have usually included the development of curricula, teaching guides, and other teaching and learning materials (TLMs). Teacher training has been part of these initiatives, along with curricular and teacher standards, alternative forms of assessment, out-of-school educational programming and home language initiatives. However, a problem in Ghana, also true of other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, is that these new initiatives are not adopted nationwide and sustained after the donor-funded projects end. Similarly, with various governmental and non-governmental organisations conducting interventions, there are always challenges in coordination, information-sharing and consistent application of standards and curriculum. To sum these up succinctly, while Ghana's efforts over the past few decades have improved access to basic education in both pupil enrolment rates and teacher numbers, educational quality as measured by standardised test scores in key subject areas remains rather low. Teachers in general do not appear to have changed their teaching behaviour significantly.

Given a range of country-specific experimentation with ABL approaches in Ghana, it is worth asking what elements of these methods are best suited to the Ghanaian educational context. To this end, the literature and research on the formulation and implementation of active-learning pedagogies in the African context is also sparse, and often grounded in analysis that is difficult to link to learning outcomes.

This article emerged from a DfID (Ghana)-sponsored ABL project. The original DfID-sponsored research project on which this article is based employed reviews of national and international literature, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with education officials and teachers, classroom observations, teacher surveys, and students' assessments to examine the ways by which the quality of teaching and learning in Ghanaian basic schools could be improved through the utilisation of ABL pedagogy. This current article recounts the findings and observations of the team of researchers (from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana) who worked on this project in schools in the northern region of Ghana. The article focuses on examining issues emanating from analyses of interviews conducted with educational authorities (i.e. representatives of Colleges of Education, District Directors and frontline Deputy Directors in the case of one district), headteachers and teachers, and observation of ABL practices in schools selected from within the northern region of Ghana relative to overarching themes, namely how participants conceptualise ABL; ways in which ABL practices reveal themselves in classrooms; and challenges of ABL practices in Ghanaian schools. Thus, the findings reported in this article are intended to consolidate learning from the DfID-sponsored ABL project and are aimed at enabling leaders in the Ghanaian Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ghanaian Education Service (GES) to better leverage the existing body of knowledge and experience with new pedagogical approaches. It is hoped that this knowledge will help them take informed and strategic decisions about how systematically to improve the

quality of teaching and learning in basic schools principally through the utilisation of ABL teaching techniques.

The article is organised as follows. The section following this explores reasons why prior ABL efforts have not changed teaching and learning practices in Ghana significantly and, through that, highlights some key lessons learned from an analysis of literature on national and international experience of child-centred and ABL interventions. This is followed by a brief presentation of the methodological approach adopted by the research team in pursuit of the research agenda. Thereafter, the findings, in the form of issues that have emerged from the research activities, are presented before the summary of conclusions.

Re-examining Ghanaian ABL practices and issues: insights from the literature

A review of relevant literature suggests that the principles underpinning ABL are not new in Ghana, although detailed accounts of ABL being successfully practised in the Ghanaian context are limited, so that we turn to the international literature for examples of how it has been applied successfully to the benefit of students, allowing us to hypothesise about issues that we focus on in our study. Thus, this review sets the stage for our exploration of (i) ABL conceptualisation among the study sample, (ii) its practice and (iii) how to overcome challenges faced.

First, our point of departure in conceptualising the principles underpinning ABL, including in the Ghanaian context, is ‘constructivism’, in which learners construct their own knowledge through collaborative engagement with peers, teachers and the environment (Piaget 1950, 1973). This perspective suggests that pupils and their teachers come into classrooms with existing and/or prior knowledge. Each individual has a different set of life experiences which means that learning, whether by adults or children, is a ‘personal’ process. In this sense, both pupils and teachers are influenced by their prior knowledge and by what happens to them in the classroom learning environment. We find in our review of relevant literature that new learning is linked necessarily to previous learning and experience, and this process of integration reinforces or replaces previous knowledge. Essentially, when pupils work together collaboratively or with the teacher, they ‘co-construct’ knowledge.

In a second aspect of our review, multiple studies on Ghana’s education sector indicate that since the advent of 1987 Education Reform Programme, many child-friendly policies have been formulated and implemented. These include, but not limited to: UNICEF’s Child Friendly School initiative (Miske et al. 2012; Mooijman, Esseku, and Tay 2013); National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) (Leherr 2009); Whole School Development Programme (Baku and Myers 1994; CRDD 1994; Nudzor 2012); and Leadership for Learning (Lfl) (Macbeath et al. 2013). The review of these programmes and projects suggest further that components of ABL already exist within the current Ghanaian system in some forms. Multiple TLMs – including syllabi, teachers’ guides and textbooks – have been developed; assessment procedures have been modified; and administrators, teacher trainers and teachers in various parts of the country have been trained at either the pre-service or in-service levels on how to implement ABL approaches (Akyeampong, Pryor, and Ampiah 2006). However, despite some conceptual knowledge of ABL in Ghana, its practice is limited (World Bank 2004).

Third, the literature unearths a number of useful lessons that can be learned from successful international ABL programmes which have gone to scale. A review of relevant literature from successful ABL implementation, including in India (National

Council for Educational Research and Training 2011) and South America (Chesterfield and Rubio 1996; Kline 2002; Kraft 1998; Schiefelbein 1990), indicates three related sets of factors that we hypothesise may partly explain why efforts to embed ABL in Ghana have failed to bring about change in classroom practices. First, agreement in the conceptualisation of ABL is a factor for success, so that a lack of agreement in the Ghanaian context may be problematic. In cases studied in India and other countries, policy dialogue led to agreement on the purpose of education and ABL by all stakeholders (Barrow and Leu 2006), and otherwise abstract ABL concepts were made real for teachers, supervisors and administrators through project-related activities (Leu 2004). Second, successful ABL is scaled up from pilot programmes or projects and incorporated into the education system, over multiple years (Kline 2002; Mogollon and Solano 2011; National Council for Educational Research and Training 2011), with devoted resources (Bajpai, Dholakia, and Sachs 2008; Chesterfield and Rubio 1996), teachers leading the creation of TLMs (Mogollon and Solano 2011), professional development that includes academic and pedagogical support (Kline 2002; Rojas 1994) and school-based training, which incorporated videos so that teachers could observe best practice in ABL in each subject area at each grade level (Kraft 1998; Mogollon and Solano 2011). For example, 'Escuela Nueva' in Colombia was scaled up over a 15-year time frame: it was piloted in a few schools in 1973, with step-wise expansion to 18,000 schools nationwide by 1989 (Rojas 1994). In the Ghanaian setting, we hypothesise that such lack of continuity in developing ABL over time may adversely affect its adoption. A third set of factors identified in the literature concerns structural challenges to ABL implementation in schools, including the classroom space, which may not be conducive (National Council for Educational Research and Training 2011), and incentives and assessments that align ABL objectives with teaching and learning (Sterbinsky and Ross 2005). We hypothesise that in the Ghanaian context, there is misalignment of assessments and incentives for adoption of ABL.

We must emphasise that in the case of Ghana, one challenge to the adoption of ABL is the focus on easily quantifiable outcomes such as test scores (Akyeampong, Pryor, and Ampiah 2006). While Ghana traditionally measures learning outcomes by student attendance figures and scores on nationally standardised tests, intermediate outcomes, such as student and teacher behaviours and attitudes, have received little attention. It is assumed that Ghanaian teachers, like their fellow educators around the world, participate in professional development to gain specific, concrete and practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms (Fullan and Miles 1992), such that professional development in ABL approaches will expand teachers' knowledge and skills, contribute to their growth, and enhance their effectiveness with students. Our scrutiny of literature indicates that reform efforts fail partly because this theory of change differs from the actual processes by which teachers change their behaviours and attitudes (Guskey 1986). Professional development leaders in Ghana, for example, often attempt to change teachers' beliefs about certain aspects of teaching or the desirability of a particular curriculum or instructional innovation. Countless 'sensitisation' workshops are held to convince teachers why they should not lecture, but rather use ABL approaches. Yet, where such workshops do not model the ABL approaches, they recommend their aims may not be realised (Brodie, Lelliott, and Davis 2002; Sikoyo 2010; Vavrus and Bartlett 2013; Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett 2011). A key element in long-term change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs is clear evidence of improvement in the learning outcomes of their students (Guskey 1989), arising from adoption of practices, as well as alignment with assessments and incentives provided. This model of change is

based on an experientially based learning process for teachers. That is to say, teachers are more likely to retain and repeat practices that they observe to be bringing improvements in their students, and for which they are rewarded, based on their own experience, not because research, theory or because experts tell them to do it. Our study explores the hypotheses arising from our review of the literature.

Methodology

The DfID (Ghana)-sponsored research project on which this article is based was undertaken by a team of researchers under the auspices of the University of Cape Coast between December 2011 and August 2012. The research project sought to fill in knowledge and data gaps with the aim of influencing education policy-making with respect to ABL in Ghana. This was done with the view to seeing how learning outcomes are and/or could be transformed through a learner-centred pedagogy to enable a move toward a Ghanaian ABL concept and framework. Towards this end, a total of 1146 participants (made up of 181 teachers, 900 randomly selected pupils, 23 headteachers, 24 GES/Development Partner (DP) representatives and 18 purposively selected representatives of the Colleges of Education) were selected from four regions (i.e. Northern, Volta, Eastern and Central regions) for the study. The methodological approach involved reviews of international and Ghanaian educational literature, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with education officials and teachers, classroom observations, teacher surveys and assessments of students in the early years of primary education, including kindergarten. Essentially, the project sought to synthesise international research regarding ABL and present new primary data (evidence) and recommendations regarding the implementation of ABL to inform and influence policy-making and delivery of primary education services in Ghana and beyond. By so doing, it was hoped that the findings would assist the Government of Ghana (GOG) and its DPs in the preparation and implementation of a strategy to improve teaching and learning in the early years of basic education.

In pursuance of this research agenda, a number of steps were taken to ensure that the research adhered to conventional research ethical procedures. First, explicit permission was sought and obtained from the Ghanaian educational authorities to undertake the study in schools across the country. This was followed by seeking and obtaining clearance to undertake the research from the University of Cape Coast Research Ethics Committee. Again, given that the research project in question involved human participants, issues of trust, anonymity and confidentiality, researcher biases and research reciprocity were of paramount importance. For this reason, the following broad principles were applied to ensure that the problems associated with these issues were reduced as far as possible:

- openness and honesty to research participants regarding the purpose, methods for data collection, any potential risks that may be involved in the process and the intended and possible uses of the research outcomes and evidence;
- holding the information obtained in the strictest possible confidence and ensuring the anonymity of participants;
- seeking informed consent from participants, and granting them the right to opt out of the research at any point in time;
- independence and impartiality of researchers towards participants and indeed the research itself.

This article reports on the activities of the research team in schools in the northern region of Ghana. As the processes we sought to study ‘had already begun, and the relevant behaviours of actors cannot be manipulated in their respective contexts’ (Yin 2003, 7), we decided to use a case study approach. In all, eight schools from four districts within the northern region were visited for data collection. As first step of the data collection procedure, semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with one Vice Principal of a College of Education and three District Directors of Education from four of the districts from which the eight participating schools were selected for the study. A focus group discussion was also held with 12 frontline Deputy-Directors of Education in the fourth district. The focus group discussion was triggered by the request by the District Director who was unavailable for interview and had therefore asked his deputies to represent him. As senior officials who are central to or, at minimum, influence the functioning of their various institutions, the Vice Principal, Districts Directors and the frontline Deputy-Directors of Education in the respective interviews and focus group discussions conducted were considered as ‘elites’ wielding significant power and influence. They are influential people, each of whom occupies a unique privileged position, holding important information as to what or who is deemed to be significant within the Ghanaian education cycles (Nudzor 2013). Hence, the rationale essentially for their selection was grounded in the need to gain insights which would be useful later in interrogating issues regarding ABL practices in schools under their jurisdiction.

In each of the eight schools visited, the headteacher was interviewed by a member of the research team who was assigned this responsibility. As Nudzor (2014, 7), for example, notes, Ghanaian basic school headteachers are chief executives of their schools, and are the key implementers of change that central government has at its disposal at this level. Their responsibilities, within the resources available include, but are not restricted to: conducting affairs of schools to the benefit of all pupils, parents and communities; implementing educational policies under the direction and guidance of their District Directors of Education; managing the day-to-day administration of schools; and determining the job descriptions of teachers in their schools (GOG, cited in Nudzor 2014). Also, headteachers in Ghana are tasked with responsibilities as custodians of school curricula, teaching guides, TLMs and in-service and continuing professional development programmes, which they are obliged to fulfil on behalf of the GES and GOG. For these reasons, the headteacher interviews were aimed at eliciting first-hand and context-specific information that were to be used as the basis for making informed and strategic suggestions to Ghanaian education authorities about how to systematically improve the quality of teaching and learning in basic education.

Alongside the headteacher interviews, lessons taught by at least three teachers in each of the eight schools visited were observed by another member of the research team. The teaching and learning processes were observed closely and pupils’ learning outcomes before, during and after the lessons were evaluated. Then a discussion was held with the teacher who taught the lesson in each case. The subject of the discussions held with teachers whose lessons were observed centred on pertinent issues regarding the use or non-use of TLMs, class organisation and management, time management, and pupils’ time-on-task. Also observed in each school and classroom was evidence of the use of ABL techniques as indicated by display of pupils’ work on classroom walls, display of artefacts such as models or musical instruments produced by pupils, pupils’ seating arrangement, and the use of open spaces in the classrooms (as evidenced in language, science, maths corners, etc).

Besides these, a language lesson either in the local language or English language was observed in each of the schools visited. In addition, a lesson conducted using the NALAP model was observed in each school. Also, a lesson in Mathematics or Science was observed. In the case of one school, two model lessons in Mathematics and Science taught by people trained by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) were observed. This was at the insistence of the Director of Education for the district within which the school is located. The purpose for this arrangement was to get some insights into the capacity available in the district to carry out training, especially for personnel who train teachers in ABL teaching techniques.

Essentially, our research aimed to examine teaching and learning processes to better understand how ABL can be scaled up nationwide. As a result of this, we employed a 'processual analytical approach' (Pettigrew 1997) in analysing data derived from interviews and observation of ABL practices in Ghanaian schools. The driving assumption behind this type of analysis is that social reality is not a steady state, but rather a dynamic process, perpetually in the process of becoming an accepted norm. Our aim is to catch the current realities of ABL in Ghanaian educational settings while recognising that those realities are not static, but rather changing constantly.

Findings

For the purposes of this article, we report the findings of our processual analysis of data gathered from semi-structured open-ended interviews and observation of ABL practices in schools using a 'narrative approach' (Bates et al. 1998; Pettigrew 1985; Pettigrew, Ferlie, and McKee 1992). Narratives have been found useful for analysing phenomena contained within a small number of case studies in which social and organisational processes and outcomes are 'transparently observable' (Pettigrew 1990). In such an approach, analysis consists of summarising a number of processes, which are presented in the form of short histories of change events in chronological order, as well as an indication of the observable outcomes of the processes. Narrative analysis has been used in studies of organisational processes in sectors such as health (e.g. Pettigrew, McKee, and Ferlie 2007), and higher education (e.g. Tiplic 2008), drawing upon documents, interviews and observations as sources of data. Our analysis consists of narratives of ABL adoption processes and practices in the context of schools visited in the northern region of Ghana, and the observable outcomes (i.e. teachers' use of ABL approaches in schools) that emerge in each case.

For purposes of succinctness, the findings reported in this article are organised according to the three overarching research themes indicated in our opening statement, namely how participants conceptualise ABL; ways in which ABL practices reveal themselves in classrooms; and challenges of ABL practices in Ghanaian schools.

Conceptualisation of ABL

Our analyses of data suggest that participants conceptualised and/or articulated ABL in ways which are quite simplistic and inconsistent with definitions prescribed in the literature. For example, based on an extensive review of both national and international literature, and for reasons of succinctness, we conceptualised and defined ABL within the context of the research on which this article draws, as a model of teaching that highlights 'minimal teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge, multiple small group activities that engage students in discovery learning or problem solving,

and frequent student questions and discussion' (Leu and Price-Rom 2006, 19). This conceptual definition of ABL, for us, is helpful, particularly because of its potential in allowing for what is referred to variously in the literature as 'active learning' pedagogies (Ginsberg 2009, 2010) to be contrasted with 'formal' or 'direct instruction' approaches, and thereby de-emphasising teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge, coupled with 'recitation and drill' (Spring 2006).

In contrast, however, participants, in their rendition of what ABL entails, focused generally on activity methods of teaching. They viewed ABL simply in terms of activity methods of teaching and the manipulation of TLMs during lessons. The ensuing excerpts from interviews with a District Director of Education and a headteacher of one of the participating basic schools, for instance, help to illustrate this issue of lack of grounded conceptual understanding and/or conceptualisation of ABL. All interviews for the purposes of the study on which this article is based were conducted in English.

- District Director 1: ... You cannot teach a class without some form of activity (... clapping, sitting up, looking, touching, feeling, playing with TLMs etc) ... By ABL, we mean teaching children using activity methods of teaching ... I believe that ABL is a purposeful approach to pedagogy where the teacher tries to design activities suitable to him/her ... in order to bring out the core elements of a lesson ...
- Headteacher A: ... Well, I think from observations and from monitoring exercises our teachers use the normal lecture approach where a teacher prepares lesson notes, enters the class and then begins to teach ... We are saying that in ABL teachers need to explain concepts to children/pupils using activities and the TLMs they have designed for lessons ...

Clearly, these renditions of what is entailed in ABL fall short of the 'bigger picture'. The focus of teaching and learning, from the above excerpts, appears to be on the teacher (rather than on pupils) and what he or she does or should do as far as transmission of knowledge is concerned.

Also, whereas the literature on ABL emphasises group work and what could best be referred to or defined as 'multi-tasking' (i.e. pupils working in small groups on different tasks at the same time) as essential ingredients of ABL pedagogy (Barrow and Leu 2006; Ginsber 2009, 2010; Ginsburg and Megahed 2008; Mizrachi, Padilla, and Susuwele-Banda 2008; Price-Rom and Sainazarov 2009), in almost all interviews conducted, group work was hardly considered as essential in ABL. This, in the view of interviewees, emanated from the serious congestion and lack of furniture that existed in the schools and classrooms we visited. While the lack of furniture made it difficult for pupils to use TLMs on sustainable basis, the overcrowding made it impossible for them to engage in group work. Similarly, our observations of classroom practices indicate that in cases where teachers saw group work as a useful component of their lessons, they restricted this to pupils working in groups on the same tasks at the same time.

Taken together, the views and issues alluded to above suggest, although implicitly, that participants of the study on which this article draws conceptualised ABL approaches by simply contrasting them with 'formal' or 'direct instruction' approaches, which emphasise teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge. In this regard, the definition of ABL given prominence in this article is insightful. This is particularly so since it allows for both behavioural and cognitive dimensions along which active-learning, student-centred pedagogies can be contrasted with formal or direct

instruction. The behavioural dimension of active-learning pedagogies focuses on the degree to which instructional practices enable students to engage in verbal or physical behaviour, while the cognitive dimension highlights the degree to which teaching strategies enable students to engage in various forms or levels of thinking. (See Barrow et al. 2007 for detailed discussion on this.)

How ABL reveals itself in classrooms

The review of ABL literature, particularly in countries that have been successful in implementing ABL interventions, indicates quite clearly that ABL practices are best revealed through such classroom practices as the display of learners'/pupils' work in classrooms, the creation of subject matter corners filled with maths, science, reading, art and social science manipulatives, and the organisation of the seating arrangements of pupils in groups to facilitate and/or enhance group work. Yet, in almost all the schools and classrooms we visited, these essential ingredients were missing. In all the schools and classrooms we visited, no pupil's work was displayed. Also, the seating arrangement depicted pupils sitting in rows (where there was furniture) or gathered together in front of the teacher (where there was inadequate or no furniture for them to sit on). The interesting observation worth noting here is that, in cases where two or three pupils shared one dual-desk and were expected to be working together, the tendency was for each of them to work as an individual to the extent that they tried to cover their work from the view of their colleagues by raising up the cover of their exercise books.

Whilst we acknowledge and expect originality and independence of thought to be encouraged in our basic schools, the examples illustrated above, for us, are clear indications that ABL teaching techniques and practices were hardly being employed in teaching and learning processes in the schools and classrooms we visited.

Challenges of ABL practices in schools

The major challenges identified by participants related to actual classroom situations. The pertinent issues identified included: inadequate supply of TLMs and in some cases inadequate supply of textbooks in certain subject areas, inadequate and irregular pre-service and in-service training of teachers on ABL teaching techniques and approaches, overcrowding in classrooms, and lack of furniture. In the ensuing excerpts, for example, two District Directors of Education, in their respective interviews, spoke indirectly about the challenges of ABL practices in terms of plans they had conceived to ameliorate the issues of lack of TLMs and inadequate and/or inappropriate in-service training programmes organised for teachers in schools under their jurisdictions:

- District Director 2: One of the issues affecting the delivery of quality education in our district is the unavailability of TLMs. And what we have planned and have considered doing regarding this is that, we're thinking about collecting and keeping a pool of appropriate items/materials that would be used to train our teachers on the use of TLMs ... We're also planning to organise regular training sessions for our teachers on how to use TLMs effectively and thereby improve upon the quality of their lessons ...
- District Director 3: ... We have recognised that one of our biggest challenges is about inadequacy of TLMs. For this reason, we're also planning to organise regular training sessions for our teachers on how to

develop their own TLMs for use in their classrooms ... We believe by taking this measure, the issue of unavailability of TLMs vis-à-vis teachers' unwillingness and/or inability to use TLMs in teaching will be minimised ... We also plan to set up model schools in the metropolis based on the philosophy and pedagogy of ABL and using teachers trained under the JICA programme as instructors or facilitators, and scaling this up to cover all schools in the metropolis once the idea is well bought into by the stakeholders of education in the metropolis and region ...

Obviously, these are modest steps towards solving teething issues bedevilling education provision in their respective districts. However, it is important to note that these are just mere plans conceived whose implementation could present a new set of challenges. This is particularly the case since the implementation of some of the measures outlined could alter the existing funding regimes in place.

Other challenges identified related to implementation of ABL interventions and programmes nationwide. Towards this end, NALAP was identified as the most successful ABL intervention programme. One major reason the interviewees gave for this was teachers' easy access to Teacher Guides, Textbooks and TLMs which were all readily provided by Government through the Ministry of Education MOE. The other interventions, for example, QUIPS and Equal were considered less successful because, according to participants, there had been no follow-ups after these interventions were implemented so that in the course of time, the teaching techniques learnt by teachers during the period of these interventions were lost. In the case of the LfL programme, the participants observed generally that they saw it as a very laudable idea intended to assist school heads and teachers to connect their leadership capabilities with overall learning outcomes of their pupils. However, they were quick to add that the programme was new or was currently being implemented and so they were waiting to see the impacts it was going to make when it was eventually fully implemented and institutionalised.

Yet another aspect of the challenge identified by interviewees relate to the assessment system currently in operation in Ghanaian schools. In one of the interview encounters, a Vice-Principal of one of the Colleges of Education in the region, for example, recounted vividly the incongruence between ABL practices and the assessment system in Ghana as follows:

Vice Principal of

College of Education:

... I think we have now introduced continuous assessment which is good, but I will suggest that we go a little bit further so that continuous assessment should rather be activity based ... So that if the students are doing, let's say, carpentry, the assessment is based on a chair they have made and on which they are assessed rather than assessing their drawing of the chair ... Recently in my institution a Biology Practical Exam for students was conducted and I asked, would you call this a Biology Practical Exam? All the drawings which were on paper did not even resemble what they were supposed to be and the students were asked to label the parts. The students were not asked to draw any of the specimens and label them. There was a drawing of an onion and one would have thought that real onions would have been brought and students asked to dissect, observe what they see, draw a cross section of the onions and label the parts. But this was not the case. Everything was on paper and they were only asked to label the parts and you say this is a practical exam? ...

Thus, the above exposition suggests a clear incongruence between the continuous assessments-based focus of ABL pedagogies, and the 'pencil and paper' driven nature of assessment and/or examination procedures in the Ghanaian education system. For example, in successful ABL programmes (such as in Central and South America and now in India and Indonesia), student workbooks are provided and these facilitate groups of students collaborating in solving problems presented in the workbooks. These student workbooks serve as lesson plans to guide teachers and contain the necessary continuous assessment, so that the teacher can concentrate on creative, active, joyful teaching. In contrast, and as the excerpt above illustrates, rote-learning and less practical and hands-on activities appear to be the focus in the Ghanaian education system. Generally, ABL initiatives in Ghanaian schools hardly measure and/or provide incentives to promote outcomes beyond academic achievement. Concerns about the exam focus of students, lack of practical learning, and a disconnection between the school system and labour force evident in the interview excerpt above were also voiced by other interviewees in their respective interview sessions.

Summary and conclusions

The experiences of the team of researchers recounted in this article have shown that ABL as a concept is not relatively new in Ghana. Implicitly, the article also suggests that some essential components of ABL (such as development of TLM, including syllabi, teachers' guides and textbooks; modification of assessment procedures; and organisation of pre-service and in-service levels programmes for teachers in various parts of the country) are emerging within the Ghanaian education system. Based on the findings illustrated, the following conclusions may be reached regarding the utilisation of ABL pedagogy in Ghanaian schools. First, the research participants' conceptualisation and/or articulation of ABL do not reflect fully the demands of ABL as indicated in the literature. Inherently, the participants appeared to have contrasted ABL approaches simply with 'formal' or 'direct instruction' approaches, which emphasise direct transmission of factual knowledge. Second, ABL teaching techniques and practices were hardly being employed in teaching and learning processes in the schools and classrooms due to challenges associated with teachers' access to TLMs, teachers' attitudinal issues and resource constraints. Third, most ABL interventions tend to lose momentum because of lack of follow-up by implementers.

Whilst the implications of the conclusions alluded to above are, potentially, numerous, this article highlights a few. In the first place, teachers, as we observed earlier in the article, are more likely to retain and repeat practices that they observe to be bringing improvements in their students, and for which they are rewarded, based on their own experience, and not because research, theory or experts say so. For this reason, we think that ABL pedagogy could help improve teaching and learning in Ghanaian schools considerably if teachers were given the necessary assistance to develop their own TLMs from low-cost, locally accessible materials, and write student workbooks, teachers' guides and even textbooks, rather than waiting for the government, university professors or other experts to always tell them what to do. Following on from this first point, we believe that teachers' utilisation of ABL pedagogy could be improved if their professional development programmes were tied to long-term career prospects. This is against the backdrop of literature review findings (and, indeed, findings implicitly espoused in the original research on which this study draws) that suggest that Ghanaian teachers generally do not seem to be committed to investing their time in professional

development because they see teaching as a temporary job, and as a means to getting a more lucrative career. Third, we also hold the view, based on our observations explicated in this article, that ABL techniques can be utilised more effectively if its practice is initially promoted in model schools, for lessons to be learned, and scaled-up as expertise is established in these model schools.

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