



**Action research in Ghana and Tanzania points the way forward for leadership training to enable head teachers to improve the quality of primary schools. Local and national contexts remain an important factor.**

**Identifying effective school leadership practices: using action research**  
EdQual's Leadership and Management of Change project set out to identify effective school leadership practices for improving the quality of education for the most disadvantaged learners. It did this through facilitating 20 primary school head teachers in Ghana and 10 in Tanzania to each conduct an action research project in their own school.

This involved them identifying a specific issue in their school, collecting and analysing data to understand it better, creatively planning and implementing actions to tackle this issue, and then evaluating impact. Action research is ideal for studying the change process and the local conditions for realising change. It connects directly with local realities and perspectives.

In addition, the project conducted a survey of head teachers' views on leadership in relation to the quality of teaching and learning, gender, poverty reduction and decentralisation. It also conducted case studies of effective practice in a small number of schools.

#### **Successful initiatives and a change of mind-set among head teachers**

Successful action research initiatives included:

- mobilising community support for a feeding programme;
- persuading local officers and NGOs to fund school development;
- instigating remedial classes for working boys;
- reducing girls' exposure to sexual risk;
- improving the communication skills of hearing impaired learners.

Facilitators supported these initiatives through annual two-day workshops and intermittent school visits. Local support was organised in the form of cluster support groups, and district officers were kept informed of the project's progress.

For some head teachers, participating in the action research transformed attitudes to leadership. In Ghana in particular, it generated a belief amongst head teachers that they could make a difference to learning and teaching in their schools. There was a clear change of head teachers' mind-sets from seeing themselves as bureaucrats and functionaries to a view that they could act as 'instructional leaders' (Bush & Glover, 2003).

#### **EdQual RPC and education quality**

The Leadership and Management of Change project is part of the EdQual Research Programme Consortium. EdQual's research focuses on how to improve the quality of basic education. Education quality is key to attracting and retaining learners in basic education and ensuring education contributes to other areas of development.

**Head teachers are experienced professionals. Those who train and manage them should view themselves as facilitators, responsible for nurturing their innovative potential. It takes effective school leadership to achieve effectiveness and improvement in teaching and learning.**

Create enabling conditions for locally initiated and designed quality improvement by:

- Supporting head teachers' professional development as reflexive leaders of quality improvement in their schools;
- Involving school leaders in the design as well as the implementation of school improvement projects;
- Identifying and re-distributing resources to schools that are severely under-resourced, under-staffed, and have large numbers of disadvantaged pupils or serve especially poor communities;
- Further research investigating the role of district level officers, as well as head teachers, in quality improvement;
- Encouraging school self-evaluation as part of the overall monitoring and evaluation process;
- Considering incentive packages: the role of the head teacher, especially for those in disadvantaged schools, is becoming very demanding.

Training for school leadership, including research degrees in education management, should equip school leaders with skills for evaluating school quality and leading change. These include:

- Collecting and analysing information on school quality;
- Presenting information clearly to mobilise staff and community members;
- Working collaboratively with school colleagues and educational officers to solve problems;
- Reviewing the impact of changes implemented and reflecting on practice.

In this research, 25% of head teachers surveyed in Ghana and 40% in Tanzania had not participated in any leadership training. As a result, many head teachers depended on learning through experience and through 'trial and error'. There were also wide variations in school quality indicators, such as pupil to teacher ratio, pupil to classroom ratio, and examination performance. Both countries have been decentralising education management and have recently introduced free and compulsory education (starting from 1995 in Ghana and 2002 in Tanzania).

**In Ghana**, the baseline study showed that the majority of head teachers at the primary school level did not see themselves as leaders who should take the initiative and act as change agents. Rather, they saw themselves more as administrators, whose primary responsibility lay in taking custody of school property, attending meetings, and implementing directives from local directors and supervisors. They lacked the courage to take the initiative at school level.

Those who performed the dual roles of teaching and administering the school concurrently played down their teaching tasks. They saw their involvement in teaching as not commensurate with their position as head teacher and therefore argued that combining teaching with headship responsibilities in the schools tended to affect the quality of their headship roles.

*"I teach and I do administration going to district office, attending meetings, doing many things and teaching at the same time ... They should make teachers help children to learn so we heads do the administration"*

*(Head teacher of a rural school in Ghana)*

*Head teachers regard themselves as the frontline of the battle for universal primary education and are intensely interested in children's realities and social contexts.*

**In Tanzania**, evidence from the baseline study and a needs analysis workshop suggests that decentralisation has extended the leadership and management roles of head teachers, intensifying their workload. Head teachers now have greater responsibility for managing the school budget and mobilising resources from various sources. The universalisation of primary education in Tanzania has extended the administrative task of enrolling children in standard one to include seeking entrants out in the surrounding community. For this reason, head teachers regard themselves as the frontline of the battle for universal primary education and are intensely interested in children's realities and social contexts.

Despite the increase in administrative responsibilities, head teachers still view themselves as responsible for supervising teaching and learning activities in the school, including teacher professional development. They also see themselves as playing an important role with respect to promoting inclusion and gender equity, although a minority did not see themselves as having a role in combating sexual harassment or promoting health education.

## **Improving communication and reading skills** *Savelugu School for the Deaf, Northern Region, Ghana*

Savelugu School is one of Ghana's largest schools for hearing impaired children. It is a boarding school attended by children from across the Northern and Upper East region of Ghana.

Mrs Atonyab Immaculate, the head teacher, was concerned that many of the pupils could not communicate effectively in writing, largely due to their limited vocabulary and poor language development.

The root cause of this was attributed to poor communication and interpersonal interactions generally, especially with parents, many of whom had limited ability in signing. Some children were kept relatively isolated at home for fear of stigmatization.

The action research project aimed at setting measurable targets for language acquisition at various class levels and strengthening the use of sign language.

The following changes were implemented:

- Tighter supervision of teaching through regular staff appraisal, checking of lesson plans and systematically monitoring teachers' attendance;
- Weekly school-based professional development focusing on sign language;
- A reading programme was initiated, including allocated time for individual reading and encouraging parents to buy reading books for children;
- Awareness-raising amongst parents, particularly through Parent Teacher Association meetings, on communicating with hearing impaired children;
- More experienced teachers were deployed to the lower grades to strengthen children's foundation in reading and writing.

- Setting of measurable targets for language acquisition, against which pupils were regularly tested and progress monitored;

By the end of the two years, there was already measurable improvement in the pupils' signing and reading skills.

**Effective leadership training**

Effective leadership training increases participants' sense of agency and responsibility for their schools. This requires sustained contact, as well the provision of required logistical support.

**Empowered leaders**

Head teachers responded well to action research strategies. They identified the needs of disadvantaged learners in their schools and took responsibility for initiating school level change.

**Motivation**

As head teachers recognised their capacity for producing positive change, their sense of resignation and of having an unfair administrative burden was replaced by motivation and enthusiasm for school improvement. Head teachers were deeply interested in and knowledgeable on the social and educational experiences of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, in their schools.

**Instructional leadership**

Head teachers initiated interventions that improved pupil motivation and learning in their schools. In Tanzania, head teachers were more prepared to improve teaching in upper years, often ignoring vital early grades. Incentives are not yet in place to motivate school leaders to prioritise improvement of instructional leadership in early years.

**Evaluate and monitor school quality**

Simple analytical techniques were developed into equally simple evaluation tools for head teachers to use to monitor school quality and struggling pupils.

**Work closely with community leaders and parents**

Clear and easily understood data on school quality enabled head teachers to mobilise local support for schools. School leaders in the study persuaded parents to ensure their children attended school with proper stationery or a full stomach.

**Draw on all available resources**

Even schools in the poorest areas have been able to raise funds. For example, Mrs Makrita (box top right) was able to make a difference by selling seedlings and plants grown at the school.

**Collegial staff relations**

Effective head teachers developed strong collegial relationships between teaching staff.

**Relationship with pupils**

The most successful head teachers were observed to be approachable by pupils as well as staff.

**When head teachers cannot initiate change**

In a minority of schools, head teachers did not seem able to bring about change. There was no capacity to support the school in the local community and in one case the school was under-staffed. In some schools, quality improvement is dependent on outside intervention and not just school leadership.

## Supporting disadvantaged pupils

### *Majani Mapana Primary School, Tanza-*

Mrs Juliet Makrita, head teacher, wished to find ways the school could meet the needs of pupils living with difficult home conditions as a result of poverty and related factors such as orphanhood.



Fifteen vulnerable children were the focus of the inquiry, identified through analysis of attendance registers. Mrs Makrita started by finding out more about the home backgrounds of the 15 children and raising parental awareness on the importance of regular school attendance through home visits and parent questionnaires.

The school's self-reliance funds were then used to address practical problems the children faced by purchasing uniforms, stationery and food for them. A horticultural club was started for the 15 project children, through which they grew food to improve their nutrition and raise some income. However, this proved hard for the children to maintain.

The individual attention and practical support given to the children did lead to an improvement in attendance for some and also greater engagement in class. Teachers also were more pro-active in finding ways to improve their teaching, such as looking for new text books.

It was due to the leadership's on-going entrepreneurship and creativity, particularly in the use of the school farm, that the school had self-reliance funds to draw on. This increased the head teacher's agency for bringing about change. Mrs Makrita was particularly effective in nurturing collaborative staff relations and discussed all interventions with the school committee. She reviewed the impact of actions and adjusted her plans accordingly.

## Raising achievement

### *Changa Primary School, Tanga, Tanzania*



Mr Gadrick Maruchu, head teacher, identified poor pupil performance in mathematics as a key problem facing the school. The school had a good reputation for quality but nearly all the staff were young and inexperienced.

The project focused on the standard six year group and continued with them as they moved into standard seven. In a class of 46 pupils, 22 were failing in mathematics prior to the intervention. Through talking to the students and diagnostic testing, Mr Maruchu ascertained that most pupils had not yet mastered their multiplication tables.

Mr Maruchu's individualised his teaching so as to build on pupils' strengths. He instigated group work, in which pupils discussed problems and the quicker pupils acted as 'peer teachers'. He administered tests regularly and showed pupils how to set their own learning targets. He then urged other teachers in the school to adopt similar techniques.

Mr Maruchu had developed these techniques in his last posting as a mathematics teacher. The innovation was his demonstration of these techniques to other teachers. He could now build upon this project by focusing on this staff development element.



## About the Research

The initial phase of the project in both countries encompassed a baseline survey of a sample of schools which focused on school leadership practices, together with a systematic literature review centred on effective educational leadership practice within an African context. Following this phase, a small group of head teachers was chosen to become involved in the project.

In Ghana, a group of 21 school leaders attended a workshop in February 2008, where they were introduced to Participatory Action Research (PAR) techniques by facilitators from Pakistan, the United Kingdom and Ghana, and guided to identify problems they would like to try to solve using these techniques. Similarly, in Tanzania, 12 head teachers attended a training workshop on PAR organised by the Faculty of Education, University of Dar es Salaam, and facilitated by colleagues from the universities of Dar es Salaam, Bristol and the Aga Khan University.

The aim was to empower the head teachers to use these techniques so their practice of leadership would enhance their capacity to improve pupil achievement. We sought to identify good practices from the head teachers' Action Research interventions to provide insights into leading and managing change to enrich educational quality within their schools. Head teachers were encouraged to focus on issues or concerns that directly impacted upon the quality of education for the most disadvantaged pupils within their schools.

By the conclusion of the initial workshops in February 2008, all participating head teachers had identified their specific issue of concern and had started to build up a picture of their approach. A key element in both countries was the direct and on-going support offered by facilitators from the universities and critical friends (co-participants in neighbouring schools). The network of professional relationships built up over many years was seen as a vital ingredient in both maintaining research momentum and in emphasising the South-South nature of the research collaboration.

Contact was maintained between project school leaders and their facilitators through regular school visits in Tanzania. In Ghana, issues of distance, school location in difficult terrain and poor transport infrastructure meant that a smaller number of face-to-face meetings had to be supplemented with cellular phone contact. All head teachers were encouraged to keep a log of their actions in relation to their chosen issue and to develop data gathering instruments to provide them with evidence of any resultant changes emerging from their actions. They were also asked to write summary reports for a workshop held in March 2009. University facilitators in both Ghana and Tanzania kept logs of their regular meetings with case study head teachers.

The emphasis throughout both the initial workshops and follow-up contacts has been on developing the head teachers' sense of agency linked to a belief that they could affect the quality of their pupils' education through their actions. The emphasis throughout was on focusing on issues of 'social justice' through identifying concerns that centred on severely disadvantaged pupils (Bosu et al, forthcoming).

## References

- Bosu, R., Dare, A., et al. (forthcoming). "School leadership and social justice: Evidence from Ghana and Tanzania." *International Journal of Educational Development* 31.
- Bush T. & Glover D. (2003) *School leadership: concepts and evidence*. National College for School Leadership, Nottingham.

## Further Reading

[www.edqual.org/research/leadershipmanagement](http://www.edqual.org/research/leadershipmanagement)

- Ngcobo, T. and L. P. Tikly (2010) Key Dimensions of Effective Leadership for Change: A Focus on Township and Rural Schools in South Africa. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 38(2): 202-228.

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