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Decentralisation and teacher accountability: How the political settlement shapes governance in the education sector at sub-national levels in Ghana

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Abstract

Despite a series of reforms designed to improve the education system in Ghana, the quality of education remains low. This paper uses a political settlements analysis to explore why this is the case. Focusing on the issue of teacher accountability and performance, we argue that a key reform – decentralisation – remains a highly contested process. The current system generates insufficient incentives, from either a top-down or bottom-up direction, for effective forms of policy implementation and accountability to emerge at scale. In practice, educational quality differs significantly between districts. An explanation for the variation observed is the significant negative impact that intense party political competition can have in reducing the capacity of local actors to cooperate and to facilitate difficult reforms. The evidence suggests that improving educational quality depends on reform-minded coalitions made up of state and non-state actors at both district and school levels, and a stable political settlement at the district level. We conclude that where good practice is observed, it is as a result of efforts by these coalitions to devise and enforce local-level solutions to local problems.

1. Introduction

The question of how politics shapes social services provisioning in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has centred on the extent to which democratisation, or at least the consistent holding of elections over time, will lead to higher levels of expenditure on goods and services that benefit non-elite groups (Carbone, 2012; Stasavage, 2005). Although this is an interesting and worthwhile question to ask, it is a question that may obscure the main characteristics of both politics and education and thus prevent a clear understanding of the links between the two. In terms of politics, this approach tends to ignore the extent to which 'democratisation' remains a highly contested process, which has yet to displace other often 'informal' political processes and relationships (Oduro, Awal and Agyei Ashon, 2014; Whitfield et al., 2015;), that exert more powerful influences over processes of resource allocation and service delivery (Abdulai and Hickey, 2016). In terms of education, the approach tends to focus mainly on the provision of access (visible infrastructure and enrolment) to the detriment of the quality of education that is being delivered (Darvas and Balwanz, 2014; Lenhardt, Rocha Menocal and Engel, 2015).

Ghana is a particularly interesting setting in which to explore the debates around democratisation, politics and education provisioning. Though the country has performed relatively well in terms of ensuring increased access to education (albeit at a slower rate than some other poorer, less democratic countries), it has achieved less in terms of securing outcomes. A recent study found that 75 percent of those leaving school after five to six years could not read, and the youth literacy gap between rich and poor is 50 percent (Rose, 2014). High teacher absenteeism has been identified as one of the key inefficiencies in the education sector accounting for poor education outcomes (World Bank, 2010). Rates of absenteeism among teachers for reasons other than sickness increased from a low of 4 percent in 1988, to 13 percent in 2003 (World Bank, 2004, 2010), and 27 percent in 2008 (CDD, 2008). This is a puzzle, not only because one might expect democratic and (lower) middle-income Ghana to be performing better in terms of education outcomes, but also because the country seems to have undertaken some of the key reforms for achieving 'learning', most notably the decentralisation of power and resources within the education sector (Pritchett, 2013). This suggests that the puzzle of educational outcomes in Ghana cannot be understood through a focus on formal political institutions associated with democracy and decentralisation per se, but, more importantly, through the kinds of political relationships or relational forms of politics between political elites and poor groups in society (Kosack, 2009).

This paper seeks to unravel this puzzle by following Levy and Walton (2013), who make the case for exploring the political drivers of educational quality through a multi-levelled approach that starts with the nature of the 'political settlement' at the national level and then works through multiple levels of governance arrangements at the sub-national level, right down to the front-line schools. This paper will therefore examine

the local political drivers of quality educational performance through a political settlements lens. From this perspective, therefore, the education sector in Ghana needs to be understood not simply in a technical sense, but as a domain of resource allocation that can play a political as well as a developmental function with regards to maintaining the legitimacy and longevity of the ruling coalition.

Taking the case of teacher absenteeism, this paper argues that implementation of education quality reforms is significantly shaped by district-level dynamics in Ghana's political settlement. In particular, the level of inter- and intra-party competition influences the capacity for 'developmental coalitions' to emerge at district level, and for the incentives and interests of politicians, bureaucrats and school-level state and non-state actors to be aligned around collectively addressing the challenge of teacher absenteeism.

The paper draws on mainly qualitative research conducted between 2012 and 2015, using in-depth case-studies of two pairs of schools in two different districts within the Central region of Ghana. The key qualitative methods the study used included documentary analysis, school surveys and a total of 36 key informant interviews with stakeholders at national, regional, district and school levels.[1] Informants were purposefully selected on the basis of a mapping exercise, which identified key actors in the education system at different hierarchical levels. Four focus group discussions (FGDs), two in each district, with 40 key stakeholders[2] at the community and district levels were also undertaken as part of the field research. The choice of schools and districts is discussed in more detail in Section 4 below.

2. The political settlement and the education sector in Ghana

The political settlement in Ghana has been defined as 'competitive clientelist' (Oduro et al., 2014), combining elements of multi-party political competition with clientelist practices.[3] Elections in Ghana have developed into a highly competitive political game since 1992, in which two parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), have consistently challenged each other in closely fought national elections. The highly competitive nature of the country's electoral process and the constitutionally imposed four-year term limits have combined to generate strong pressures for governing parties and elites to answer to the short-term socio-economic needs of voters and their supporters, and the needs of their own short-term political survival. This political context strongly incentivises ruling elites to adopt a politicised approach to public policy formulation and implementation,

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[1] The key informants included: former and acting directors of Ghana Education Service; former minister of education; chief directors of Ministry of Education; chairman of Education Reform Review Committee; civil society actors; district chief executives; district directors of education; circuit supervisors; executives of teacher unions; members of the district education oversight committees; assembly members, etc.

[2] The FDG participants were: representatives of parent teacher associations; school management committee; community-based organisation; faith-based organisation; selected parents; traditional authority, etc.

[3] For detailed discussions of Ghana's political settlement and its implications for development, see (Oduro et al., 2014; Mohan and Asante, 2015; Whitfield et al., 2015)

resulting in the public bureaucracy becoming increasingly personalised and informal in character.

This personalised, rather than programmatic, character of the public bureaucracy has particular implications for the education sector in Ghana, which has historically been seen by its ruling elites as critical to legitimising their status and staying in power (Antwi, 1992; Casely-Hayford, 2000). The political significance of education has seen it become a critical arena within which elite incentives and ideas are played out. Education sector reforms in Ghana over the past three decades have, on paper at least, focused on the twin imperatives of improving both the quality and quantity of education. For example, the Free, Compulsory, Universal Basic Education programme (FCUBE), introduced in 1993 under the leadership of the NDC regime, focused primarily on increasing enrolment and expanding physical infrastructure, to the detriment of teacher education and quality of pedagogical resources available to the teaching force (Tagoe, 2011; Inkoom, 2012). Similarly, the NPP government, shortly after gaining political power in 2001, ordered a review of the 'goals and philosophy' of Ghana's education system. This review eventually led to the launching in 2007 of the National Education Reform Programme (NERP) (Darvas and Balwanz, 2014). These reforms reaffirmed the government's responsibility for the implementation of the FCUBE programme, setting out a framework for decentralisation, in addition to several initiatives aimed at improving the quality of education (Darvas and Balwanz, 2014).

With the electoral pendulum swinging back to NDC regime in 2009, further reforms in the education sector were introduced. Although these reforms were broadly in line with the reforms highlighted in the Education Act of 2008 (Act 778) promulgated and passed into law under the previous NPP regime as part of the NERP, there was a stronger focus on enhancing education delivery and outcomes through the deepening of decentralised structures (Little, 2010). Outside the decentralisation reforms, which were largely sustained, the NDC regime in 2009 subsequently reversed the NPP's policy of extending secondary education from three to four years. This singular move, in addition to a few other politically engineered initiatives, reinforced the sense that the frequency of reforms within the education sector in Ghana tends to increase under the conditions of intense electoral competition at the expense of both coherence and technocratic control.

Indeed, many key decisions affecting education continue to be made outside of the MoE (Darvas and Balwanz, 2014). This situation is driven by the increasing politicisation of education, as well as bureaucrats' fear of victimisation by political actors within the sector (Booth, et al., 2005; Casely-Hayford, Palmer and Ayamdoo, 2007). Indeed, politicians and political actors, informed by party manifestos, ultimately drive policy formulation processes in the education sector in Ghana (Casely-Hayford, 2011). Whilst a focus on quality has been apparent throughout the discourse among the political and policy stakeholders in Ghana, this appears to have been outweighed by the political imperatives of providing more tangible goods via the access and quantity of provisioning agenda. Similarly, ensuring that critical

constituencies such as the teaching force and district-level bureaucracies are appeased is essential, with a strong union focused on teacher salaries and welfare issues, and not (unlike the professional teacher associations) on teacher performance (Casely-Hayford, 2011; Prempeh, 2011). Consequently, the balance of power between the different actors active in the education sector, and their specific interests, helps to explain how reforms actually play out in practice, including why some gain priority over others.

3. Mapping the key actors within decentralised education governance in Ghana

Recent efforts to decentralise power and responsibilities within Ghana's education sector need to be understood within the wider context of decentralisation that was launched in 1988, and further extended following the return to democracy under the Fourth Republic in 1993. Under this programme, the country has developed a three-tier structure of sub-national governments at the regional, district and sub-district levels. Institutionally and functionally, the decentralisation framework structured local governance around the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs, here referred to as District Assemblies (DAs)).

The DAs are the highest political authorities entrusted with the political, administrative and legislative powers to initiate, facilitate and execute development activities in their respective districts. Reforms aimed at decentralising line management functions to the District Education Directorates (DEDs) and to devolve decision-making and financing authority to the DAs were first put in place by the Ghana Education Service Act of 1995 (Act 506). Following this, the Education Act of 2008 (Act 778) deepened the decentralisation of education service delivery by creating new mechanisms and structures to empower regional and district-level stakeholders to play active roles in the management of education service delivery. The Education Act of 2008 (Act 778) provided Ghana with a four-tier structure for the decentralised governance of the education sector, running from regions, through districts to circuits and then schools (see Figure 1 below).

The DAs have broad responsibility for development outcomes, including ensuring that effective educational provision is available and responsive to local needs, across basic, secondary, and functional literacy levels (including non-formal education). The DAs are headed by the centrally appointed metropolitan, municipal and district chief executives (MMDCEs, here referred to as district chief executives (DCEs)), who are political and development agents of the ruling political party. DCEs are expected to represent the interests of the ruling party and government at the district level. The DAs are made up of elected and appointed members of the various localities under the DAs. The ruling party and government appoints 30 percent of DA members and these are largely party activists and loyalists. It is also worth noting that, although two-thirds of the membership of the DAs are elected on a non-partisan platform, there is anecdotal evidence of the alignment of these assembly members to the two main political parties at the central level of government, the NDC and NPP. Hence,

centre–local relations are critical to understanding decentralisation and implementation of decentralised reforms in Ghana (Crook 2017).

Figure 1: Structure of education policy implementation at the district level in Ghana
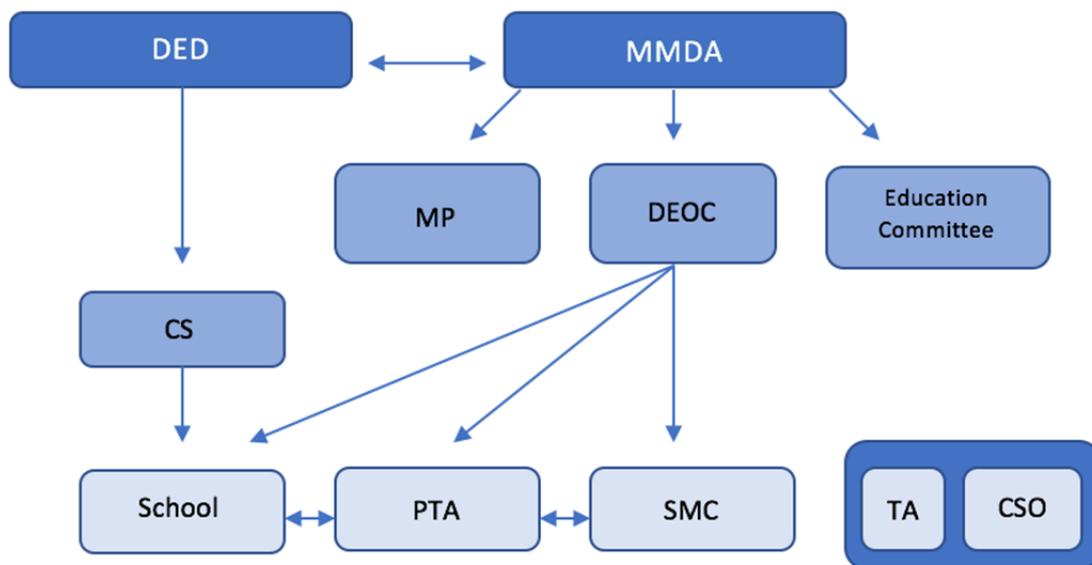
Source: Authors' construction.

The decentralisation of education sector governance in Ghana has centred on efforts to ensure higher levels of authority for local political actors over more centralised and technical actors, and on empowering non-state actors to be involved in governing the sector. Democratic oversight is organised through the district education oversight committee (DEOC), which is chaired by the central government-appointed DCE, who is also the political head of the DA. Other members of DEOC include the district director of education (DDE), chairperson of the education committee at the DA and representatives from parent teacher associations (PTAs), school management committees (SMCs), private schools association, teacher unions, traditional authorities and faith-based organisations (FBOs). Although the Education Act of 2008 (Act 778) called for the creation of DEOCs and empowered them to directly participate in the management of teachers and provision of support, in practice they have weak incentives and authority to drive up performance over the long term, and are therefore largely advisory bodies. For instance, where the DEOC takes decisions on education at the district level, which may not be in accord with national policy, the committee has no real power to enforce its decisions on education at the district, leading sometimes to conflict and contestations with the district education directorates (DEDs) and implementation challenges at the school level.

The members of parliament (MPs) are also key actors, mediating politics and policy implementation between the central and local levels. MPs are ex-officio members of the DA and operate outside the formal structures of the DEOC. MPs are elected on the competitive electoral platforms of political parties and hence subject to inter- and

intra-party pressures in terms of their decisions, initiatives and ideas to improve teacher accountability and education performance at the district and community levels. MPs have often undertaken programmes to improve education performance at the local level, in partnership with the DEDs and DAs, especially when they represent the ruling party at the central level of government. Where the MPs represent the opposition party, they often directly implement policies without recourse to the DAs, and to some extent the DEDs, leading sometimes to conflicts and a focus on 'visible' goods, to the neglect of quality reforms.

The Ghana Education Service (GES), the technical arm of the Ministry of Education, implements education policy at the district level through the District Education Directorate (DED), in accordance with the GES Act of 1995 (Act 506) (Mankoe, 2006; Baffour-awuah, 2011). A centrally appointed district director, who is accountable to the central appointing authority at the Ghana Education Service (GES), heads the DED. Relative to other actors at the district level, the DEDs have strong powers and incentives to influence district education policy and decision-making. However, the DEDs have no influence on changing national policies affecting education delivery in Ghana. The DED mainly works around existing policies and adapts these policies to suit the needs of their districts. The DED is de-concentrated, rather than devolved from the centre of power in the state.

Circuit supervisors (CSs) operate as the interface between the DED and school authorities, and are in charge of particular zones within each district[4] and responsible for inspecting school facilities, providing assistance and support to teachers and headteachers, and using the outcomes of training programmes and the centrally produced headteacher appraisal guides to assess performance (Baffour-awuah, 2011). Headteachers of both primary and junior high schools in Ghana are responsible for monitoring teaching and learning in their schools and directly accountable to the district directorates (Baffour-awuah, 2011).

The reforms emanating from the Education Act of 2008 (Act 778) resulted in the increased involvement of non-state actors at both district and school levels (Bogaert et al., 2012). These non-state actors include FBOs, which participate particularly strongly in the building and provision of school infrastructure and in the management of many schools (Casely-Hayford, 2011). It is worth highlighting, however, that from the perspective of the GES, FBOs have no institutional legitimacy to intervene in education service delivery, including with regards to the recruitment of teachers at school level (Casely-Hayford, 2011). Consequently, at the district level, FBOs have little power to improve education outcomes. However, they seem to wield some influence over headteachers and teachers at the school level and over other non-state actors at the school level, such as PTAs, especially in the schools established through the FBOs.

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[4] The district is zoned into circuits. There are also inspectors at the regional level.

Other key actors at the community level include SMCs,[5] PTAs[6] and local traditional authorities. PTAs and SMCs are tasked with working alongside headteachers to ensure effective school management and improvement, including defining how financial allocations will be used; improving learning outcomes; and monitoring teacher attendance. Teachers' unions are indirectly involved in the implementation of education decentralisation, and they have a strong and effective voice, stemming from their large membership numbers and the electoral importance of their constituency to political actors (Casely-Hayford, 2011). Teachers' unions, such as the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) and Concerned Teachers Association (CTA), have representatives at the national, regional, district, zonal and school levels (Casely-Hayford, 2004).

On the face of existing evidence, therefore, Ghana has put in place many of the governance measures that experts perceive as critical for the promotion of higher levels of educational performance (Pritchett, 2013). Indeed, these reforms in the governance of the education sector in Ghana have occasioned the entry of a myriad of sub-national actors with interests and ideas about education service delivery. However, given wider problems with political manipulation, local capture, and deficits in state capacity associated with decentralised service delivery in Ghana, it is essential to examine the extent to which the formal institutional reforms actually play out at the district and school levels, particularly in terms of promoting improved teacher accountability and associated performance outcomes in education (Crawford, 2009; Crook, 2017; Crook and Manor, 1998).

4. Researching the politics of education in Ghana: A district- and school-level analysis

To establish a clear view of how politics shapes education sector governance at the district and school levels in Ghana, we identified differing levels of performance within contexts that were otherwise similar in terms of their levels of development, geographical features (e.g. urban–rural balance) and ethnic composition. We focused on two districts within the Central Region of Ghana that are similar in most respects other than their educational outcomes. The two districts are Abura Asebu Kwamankese (referred to as AAK[7]), and Twifo Ati Morkwa (referred to as TA[8]).

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[5] Membership of the SMCs include parents, teachers (including the headteacher), a representative from the traditional authority, a representative from the old students' association, an assemblyman and a female representative

[6] The PTAs are made of parents and teachers (including the head of the school).

[7] The AburaAsebuKwamankese district is considered one of the most deprived, in developmental terms, districts in the country. It has a total of 312 schools, with an enrolment of 35,381, of whom 15,865 are boys and 23,388 are girls. There are 35 privately-owned schools. There are 1,132 teachers in the district, of whom 49 percent have not had any formal training in teaching..

[8] The Twifo-AtiMokwa district (formerly part of the Twifo-Hemang Lower Denkyira district) has 135 primary and 85 junior secondary schools. The number of primary and JSS pupils stands at 16,271, while only 451 students attend the two secondary schools in the district. Seventy-four (74 percent) of people above 15 years in the district have attained education up to the

These are among the poorest districts in Ghana. In each district, we randomly selected two schools to examine variation in performance in more depth. In AAK, the two schools sampled were Abakrampa Catholic Primary and Junior High School (JHS) (referred to in this study as AAK School A) and Methodist A Primary and JHS (referred to in the study as AAK School B). In TA, the two schools sampled were Hemang Mampong Catholic A Primary and JHS (referred to in the study as TA School A) and Hemang Mampong Catholic B Primary and JHS (referred to in the study as TA School B).

As seen from Table 1, the average Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) pass rate for students in TA for the four core subjects--English, mathematics, science, and social studies--in the academic year 2012–13 was 59 percent, as against 53 percent for AAK. In terms of overall performance in the BECE, schools in TA district performed better than those in AAK district. While the two schools selected in TA for the case study recorded overall BECE pass rates of 88 percent (TA School A) and 80 percent (TA School B), respectively, those selected in AAK recorded 33 percent (AAK School A) and 27 percent (AAK School B), respectively, for the 2013–14 academic year.

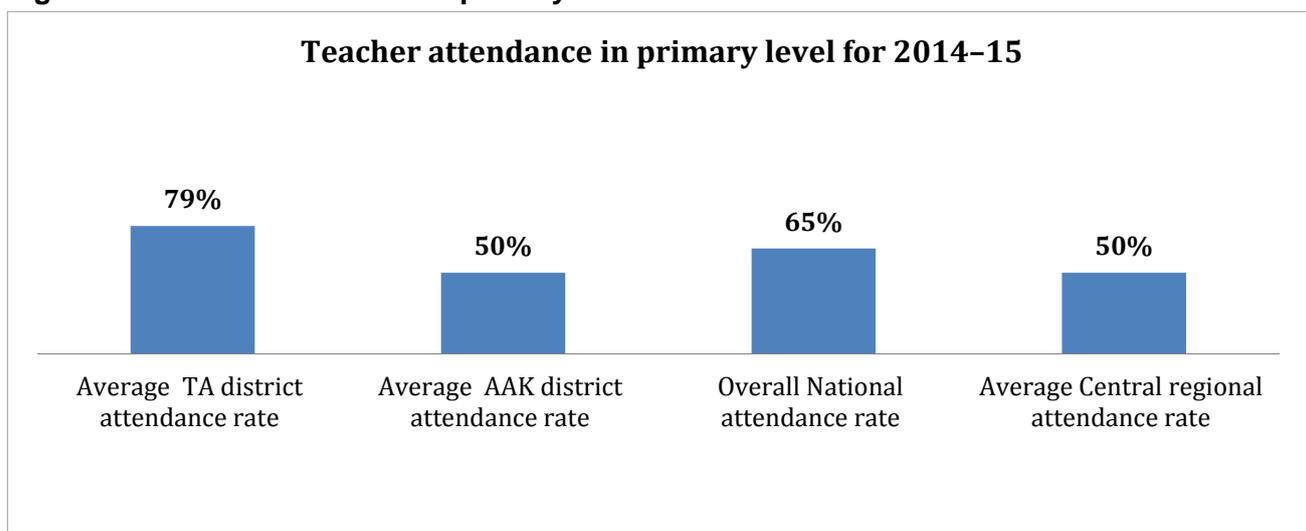| Table 1: Comparative case study of the two districts		
Indicators	**Abura Aseibu Kwamankese**	**Twifo AtiMokwa**
District league table 2014 (DLT) ranking[9]	173 out of 216 13 out of 20 districts in the Region.	180 out of 216 14 out of 20 districts in the Region.
Number of schools	312	419
Enrolment of pupils	35, 381	21,887
Number of teachers	1,132	875
Percentage of untrained teachers	49%	44.6%
Teachers engaged in primary schools	**470**	**444**
Pupil–teacher ratio	20.1	21.1.
Pupil –trained teacher ratio	**31.1**	**55.1**
The average Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) pass rate for the four core subjects in 2012/2013	**53%**	**59%**
Teacher attendance on average per term for the year	**50%**	**79%**

Source: Authors' construction from DLT 2014 report (CDD/UNICEF, 2014) and EMIS (Ministry of Education, 2014).

JSS level. The pupil–teacher ratio is 27.1. Similarly, enrolment in junior secondary schools in the district is 67.5 and pupil–teacher ratio at the JHS level is 14.1.
[9] Note that the DLT ranking is based on a composite of six indicators (health, education, security, governance, rural wáter, and sanitation). Although data suggests that TA is higher achieving than AAK in terms of education, in other respects it appears that AAK outperforms TA.

In terms of teacher attendance at school, schools in TA district had a better record of teacher attendance: 79 percent attendance rate, as compared to 50 percent attendance rate among teachers in AAK district. Indeed, schools in the Central region of Ghana had a lower record of teacher attendance, with an average of about 50 percent, as compared to a national average of 65 percent (see Figure 3 below). Set against this, TA's ability to ensure relatively high levels of teacher attendance is notable; given the comparative evidence that teacher attendance is critical to achieving improved learning outcomes, we would expect to see further improvements in TA in the coming years.

Figure 3: Teacher attendance at primary school level

Teacher attendance in primary level for 2014–15

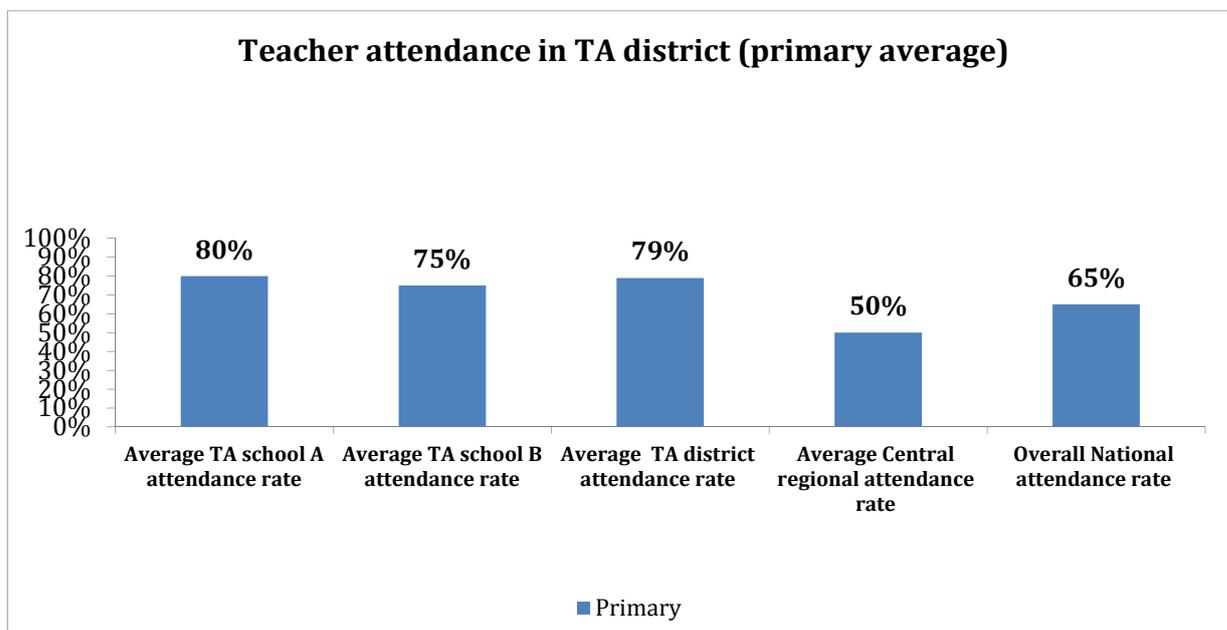|			
79%	50%	65%	50%
Average TA district attendance rate	Average AAK district attendance rate	Overall National attendance rate	Average Central regional attendance rate

Source: CDD-Ghana field data, 2015.

As noted above, teacher attendance in TA district was reported at an average of 79 percent in the 2014–15 academic year (see Figure 4). In TA Schools A and B attendance was 80 percent and 75 percent, respectively, over and above the national average and the Central regional average of 65 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

In AAK district, on the other hand, teacher attendance on average per term for the year was 50 percent – similar to the regional average, but below the national average of 65 percent (see Figure 5). Average attendance was the same in the two sample schools, AAK School A and AAK School B in the district during the 2014–15 academic year.
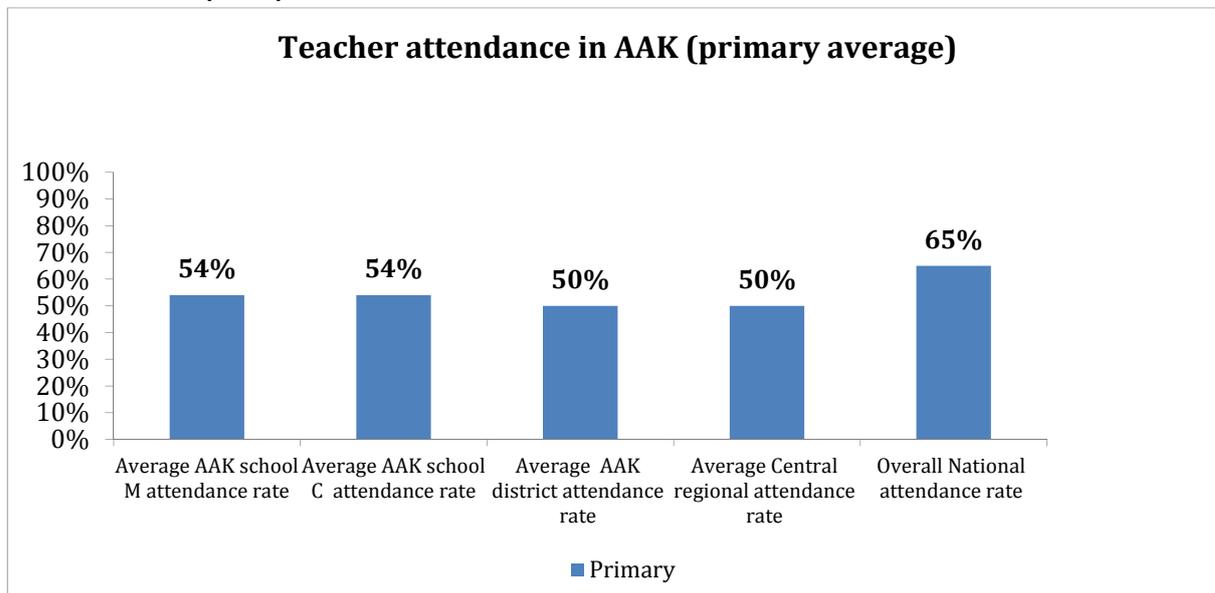
Comparing teacher attendance rates across the two districts, we found that schools in TA district outperformed those of AAK, the Central regional and national averages. We also found similar patterns of better performance at the school levels in this regard.

Figure 4: Teacher attendance at primary school level in Twifo-Ati Mokwa (TA) district

Teacher attendance in TA district (primary average)

Average TA school A attendance rate	Average TA school B attendance rate	Average TA district attendance rate	Average Central regional attendance rate	Overall National attendance rate
80%	75%	79%	50%	65%

■ Primary

Source: CDD-Ghana field data, 2015.

Figure 5: Teacher attendance at primary school level in Abura Asebu Kwamankese (AAK) district

Teacher attendance in AAK (primary average)

Average AAK school M attendance rate	Average AAK school C attendance rate	Average AAK district attendance rate	Average Central regional attendance rate	Overall National attendance rate
54%	54%	50%	50%	65%

■ Primary

Source: CDD-Ghana field data, 2015.

Given the clear variation in teacher attendance and educational outcomes described above, a key question for us is whether this variation can be explained by differences in the dynamics of the political settlement at the sub-district level. This means examining the ways in which sub-national politics and institutional dynamics shape the implementation of local governance reforms intended to secure higher levels of

teacher accountability and performance. From this perspective, it is interesting to compare the levels of political competition across the two districts.

Analysis of election results since the return to democracy in 1992 indicates that there are slight differences in voting patterns, with a higher level of competition between the two main parties in AAK, as compared to the higher-performing TA. In TA, the NDC has secured a majority in every presidential and parliamentary election between 1992 and 2012. The margin of victory in the presidential elections ranged between 34 percent at its highest in 1996 and 6 percent as the lowest in 2000, while the margin in the parliamentary elections ranged between 17 percent in 1996 and 11 percent in 2012. In AAK, NDC has secured a majority in all presidential and parliamentary elections since 1992, with the important exception of 2004, when the NPP won with a majority of 8 percent in the presidential election and 11 percent in the parliamentary election. Despite the NDC winning both presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008 and 2012 in AAK with a higher margin of 23 percent and 18 percent, respectively, than in TA, AAK has a higher level of political competition within the political elites and between elites, bureaucrats and local forces,[10] as data below will explore further. In this sense, AAK more closely reflects the central region's reputation as a 'swing' district than TA. A crucial difference between the two districts in this regard, is the level of inter and intra party competition between elites. The perception of political insecurity in AAK, stemming from the historical victory of NPP, has resulted in political elites perceiving other political leaders and bureaucrats as potential political rivals, and significantly decreased the ability for collaboration.[11] From a political settlements perspective, therefore, we expect the pressures generated by intense levels of political competition flowing from the central to the local levels could have an adverse effect on capacity to enforce reforms in teacher accountability at district level, with implications for education sector performance.

5.   Politics of tackling teacher absenteeism in Ghana: The role of coalitions involving politicians, bureaucrats and non-state actors

This section explores why the variation in educational quality exists between AAK and TA districts, focusing on the challenge of teacher accountability and performance. By comparing how the challenge of teacher absenteeism is dealt with across the two districts, we arrive at an understanding of how the political settlement – and in particular, the significance of political competition and the importance of district level 'development coalitions' – impact the delivery of teaching at the frontline.

Significance of political competition

The differing levels of inter and intra party competition across the two districts significantly influenced the ability of political leaders and bureaucrats to coherently address teacher absenteeism. In AAK, intense intra and inter party competition between the main political actors (MP, DCE and local party executives and activists)

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[10] Interview data, 2015.
[11] Interview data, 2015.

significantly undermined the ability to promote teacher accountability and decrease absenteeism.

The DCE in AAK – who, at the time of research, had served for two out of the four year mandate – aspired to become an elected representative, and was therefore in intense competition with the existing MP, as well as other political and non-political actors and party activists who he perceived could undermine his political ambition. Within the bureaucracy, the DCE also perceived the DED and other highly trained bureaucrats as threats to his political ambitions, and as being aligned with the political opposition, and he thus often refused to commit the resources of the DA to support the budgets of decentralised institutions at the sub-national level.[12] Because of his political ambitions, the local MP, who belongs to his political party, was also perceived as a direct political rival to the DCE. As a result, the DCE was incentivised to undermine the local MP in order to increase his chances of gaining the party candidature during the next election; the MP was similarly engaged in efforts to undermine the DA and the DCE's role in promoting teacher accountability and district-level development as a whole. Indeed, mistrust between the MP, DCE and DED in AAK resulted in the appointment of trainee teachers who either had loyalty towards the MP or the DCE. These teachers were often difficult to control, hence decreasing the ability to control absenteeism.

The competition between these political actors also resulted in the need to create visible projects within the districts to show or garner support rather than antagonise non-performing teachers, which could have implications for the political ambitions or the fulfilment of the political mandates of the MP and DCEs. The DCE tried to undermine the MP for the constituency by presenting local government projects such as the construction of schools, teachers' quarters, among others, as his personal contribution to the constituency. One of the political actors in AAK summarised the over-emphasis on visible infrastructure projects in the light of the intense political competition between the parties below:

> 'When it comes to infrastructure, we [the DCE and the DA] have been providing them classroom blocks and teachers' quarters, among other things, since 2011. I have been able to put up about six teachers' quarters – some were abandoned and we have completed them. We have six classroom unit blocks and KGs [kindergarten blocks], among many others. The district assembly also supports the activities of DEOC financially and the district assembly [under the leadership of the DCE] is involved in organising "my first day at school programmes" [to welcome new students into schools in the district].'

The DCE perceived such projects as more effective at promoting his political ambitions at the expense of 'invisible' projects aimed at promoting improved accountability and higher performance. The determination of the DCE to unseat the

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[12] Interview data, 2015.

sitting MP also led to covert scheming in internal party elections. This included underhand dealings to control the hierarchy of the party at the grassroots levels through handouts to influential political party executives, scheming to get favourable executives elected at the grassroots level of the ruling party. This strategy also led to the appointment of influential community leaders and stakeholders as members of the DEOC and as government appointees to the district assembly.

In TA, on the other hand, less intense inter and intra party competition shaped the relations between MP, DCE and officials of the DED, leading to far greater coherence in the application of strategies to address teacher absenteeism. The MP was the longest serving of the three officials and hence the DCE and the DED deferred many decisions to the MP. The DED had also aligned closely with officials of the ruling party in the constituency and thus worked together with key political officials to promote and achieve the political goals of the ruling government and party in the constituency. Indeed, in all meetings and decisions of the district, the MP was informed and he participated directly or through intermediaries to ensure very strong political leadership in the constituency, and identification of the party, not the individuals, as the provider of the projects.

As a result, the MP and key political actors such as the DCE party executives had total control of the internal political machinery and thus minimised the potential for internal political competition and its ramification for policy implementation. The MP and DCE mainly collaborated to provide job opportunities for party loyalists through an elaborate patronage system. Using the proceeds and resources of cocoa allocated from government through the district assemblies, as well as collaboration with owners of commercial plantations in the constituency, the MP channelled resources to party loyalists and key political actors in the constituency to consolidate his position both within and across the political spectrum. The MP also aligned with key political actors and bureaucrats at the district level by channelling national and regional-level funded programmes to the constituency. This enabled the MP to align intra-party interests to promote the district, rather than undermining the DCE.

The MP and DCE were also willing to sponsor potential teacher trainees, especially those belonging to the ruling party, for short-term training programmes under the Untrained Teacher Training Diploma in Basic Education (UTTDBE) programme. The UTTDBE is a government-funded distance learning in-service programme, aimed at addressing geographical disparities in teacher allocation and improving the quality of education at the basic school level in Ghana. The primary reason for training these party activists was to build a cadre of party-friendly teachers in the district who could permanently populate the classrooms in the deprived communities in the district where regular GES teachers refused to accept postings. In addition, strong political alliance between the MP, DCE and officials at the DED at the district level also ensured the appointment of party loyalists and activists through the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP). The NYEP teachers, who were mainly untrained personnel, filled the classrooms in the districts where the regular teachers absented themselves on grounds of attending distance-learning and sandwich programmes

held at the two teacher education universities in the region, the Universities of Cape Coast (UCC) and Education in Winneba (UEW), respectively. The lower rates of teacher absenteeism that this ensured, and increased contact hours between tutors and pupils ultimately improved school performance, as a DA official described:

> '…this [arrangement to appoint teachers from communities in the district] is improving teaching and learning. To your surprise, this district never scores 0% [in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)] as compared to the previous [period] when we [some of the schools in the district] were getting 0 percent, 14 percent, 17 percent, 18 percent in schools, but this year, because of the strategies we [the DA, MP and DED] have put in place, performances have improved. Children are going to second cycle institutions [after successfully passing the BECE], so teaching and learning in the district has improved.'

While this arrangement may then raise questions about the politicisation of education provision, it in practice enabled the political actors, the DAs and DED, to ensure adequate provision of teachers in school at all times, rather than relying on the regular teachers posted form the Ghana Education Service (GES) or the centrally appointed National Service Scheme (NSS) personnel, whose appointment the political actors had little or no control over.

Roles of district-level 'developmental coalitions'

The level of political competition at the district level had implications for relations between political actors and bureaucrats charged with the responsibility of implementing education policies, and their ability to enforce sanctions on absentee teachers. In the context of TA, the absence of political competition enabled the emergence of 'developmental' coalitions at the district level, which shaped the higher performance identified in that district, particularly in terms of the lower levels of absenteeism. There was evidence of the emergence of a developmental coalition between community-, school- and district-level actors in education which was able to circumvent the problems emanating from conditions of competitive clientelism, incoherent district- and school-level governance arrangements and vested interests at the local level. In particular, a strong alliance was forged not only between the key political and bureaucratic actors involved in governing education at the district level, most notably the members of the education committee at the DA, the DEOC and DED, but also with the teacher unions in the district.

This coalition was critical in overcoming opposition to policies from teachers and other local-level politically powerful stakeholders and promoting the enforcement of accountability mechanisms from the district to the school levels. The coalition helped in developing a range of context-specific approaches to the problem of policy opposition, which had proven to be a critical constraint to higher levels of accountability and performance. For example, the DED in the high-performing TA had put in place several formal and informal arrangements to improve supervision at

the school level, in order to address teacher absenteeism and other performance challenges that did not exist within the national policy framework on teacher attendance and absenteeism. These measures included making deductions from teachers' salaries if they absented themselves from school; embargoing the salaries of teachers without challenges from teachers' unions[13] or the political actors at the DA;[14] and initiating community monitoring and reporting on absentee teachers. A bureaucrat in TA summarised some of the measures the DED had put in place below:

> 'When teachers complete the college of education, instead of serving for three years, they quickly apply to upgrade themselves at the universities in the region, UCC and UEW. Unfortunately, the schedule for the university academic calendars for those courses conflicts with the GES timetable and so they would even leave the classroom to pursue their programme without informing the district education directorate (DED). We decided to embargo their salaries and invite them to the district office to arrange with the potential interim replacement during their absence from the classroom. First, the teacher is encouraged to prepare lesson notes ahead of time to reduce the workload on whoever is coming to replace them in the classroom. Second, we encourage the absentee teachers to arrange with people in the community who are qualified and have applied for recruitment in the Ghana Education Service… They are not trained teachers, but have completed university and are not employed... So such people can hold the fort in the absence of the teacher.'

In TA, there was also evidence of improved collaboration between political officials at the DA, DED officials and teachers' unions, which facilitated enforcement of sanctions for teachers who absented themselves from school without official permission. The local Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), which was the main teachers' union in the district, often had dialogue with the headteachers, PTA, FBO representatives and traditional authorities to devise mechanisms to monitor teachers' attendance and develop informal strategies to replace absentee teachers without the formal processes of recruitment. Collaboration among education stakeholders was further entrenched in TA, where the political and administrative officials of the DA informally co-opted key executives of the teacher unions into the DEOC and relevant committees in education at the DA. Officials of the DA also provided financial and logistical support to the activities of the teachers' unions at the district level. This collaboration between political, bureaucratic and union executives in the district resulted in the creation of a strong coalition at the district level to promote teacher attendance and promote greater accountability among teachers.

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[13] In other districts where there are no developmental coalitions, teachers' unions sometimes choose to protect members' interests over those of students.
[14] For political actors at the DA, teachers constitute a significant voting bloc.

In the low-performing district AAK, by contrast, competition between the government's appointed DCE and the directors of the DED resulted in incoherent application of sanctions for absentee teachers. Rooted in the competition between the MP and DCE, political officials at the DA did not effectively collaborate with the bureaucratic officials of the DED to implement a joint action plan to promote teacher accountability. Indeed, officials at the DA and the DED focused on their own initiatives and ideas to reduce teacher absenteeism, as earlier indicated. Some of these mechanisms undertaken by the political officials at the DA included building teachers' quarters in politically important localities in the district, without recourse to local demands at the school or community level. Meanwhile, the DED did not wholly support and enforce recommendations of the DEOC and the DA and its DCE, such as in relation to sanctioning absentee teachers in schools in the district. At the same time, the DA, who had a general mandate for oversight of education, often declined to allocate and release budgetary resources to support DED initiatives for improving teacher accountability.

The absence of an effective coalition between political officials at the DA and the bureaucratic heads at the DED in the low-performing district, AAK, resulted in teachers' unions undermining the capacity of DEDs to enforce sanctions against absentee teachers. Indeed, executives of the teachers' unions seemed to benefit from the disharmony between political and bureaucratic elites in the district and took every opportunity to challenge the authority and capacity of officials of DED, and within school, to sanction teachers who abandoned their classrooms to pursue upgrade courses at UCC and UEW, respectively. This discordant relationship between political, bureaucratic officials and teachers' unions sometimes resulted in absentee teachers being promoted or transferred to other schools or districts without recourse to the local school governance structures, rather than being sanctioned in accordance with existing GES regulations.

Community-level dynamics

The emergence of 'developmental' coalitions in education at the district level, underscored by the sub-national political settlement, appeared to have been mirrored at the community levels. Key actors within community-level 'developmental' coalitions included circuit supervisors and headteachers, who constituted a vertical axis of accountability, and PTAs, FBOs and traditional authorities, who constituted a horizontal axis of accountability. Actors in this coalition possessed differing levels of power and political influence at the community levels.

Due to the alignment of political interests between key political actors at the district and community levels, circuit supervisors (CSs) and headteachers in the high-performing schools in TA district liaised effectively with community-level political party officials, who also doubled as SMC officials. These 'politically-salient stakeholders' (Levy and Walton 2013) were able to use their connections with both political and bureaucratic actors at the district level, namely the DAs and DEDs, to create strong

incentives and pressures among headteachers and teachers to reduce absenteeism and drive up teachers' and students' performance at the school level.

In addition to liaising with SMCs to promote accountability among teachers, CSs in TA also devised mechanisms to benefit from the intra-party alignment at the district and community levels by tapping into the powerful influence and networks of the traditional authorities, PTAs and FBOs within their jurisdictions who controlled politically salient blocs of voters in their localities. The membership of the PTA, FBOs and traditional authorities in TA was comprised mainly of retired district education officials[15] and former assembly members with strong political party connections,[16] and political party constituency and polling station executives. They could thus leverage their power and influence over key political actors in the district, such as the MP, DCE and executives of the ruling party, among others, to exert pressure on school-level officials to generate positive incentives for teacher accountability.

In the poor-performing schools in AAK, on the other hand, the political misalignment between the MP, DCE and grassroots activists of the ruling party at the district level seeped into the community level, and affected the ways in which vertical and horizontal structures promoted/undermined teacher accountability at the school level. The excessive partisanship of members of the PTA and SMC at the community level, who also doubled as political party executives and local party activists, often suspected headteachers and teachers of doing the bidding of the main opposition party in the constituency, undermining efforts to monitor and even sanction non-accountable teachers. Indeed, there were contestations and negotiations between headteachers, SMC and PTA executives over the power to sanction or enforce sanctions on teachers who absented themselves from school without relevant permission.

6. Conclusion

This paper emphasises the extent to which teacher accountability in Ghana's education sector is shaped by the dynamics of the country's political settlement, from the national level through districts to schools themselves. A key finding across the two districts studied, within our wider, multi-levelled analysis, was that within Ghana's competitive clientelist settlement, which tends to generate a high degree of policy incoherence and politicisation within the education sector, the drivers of improved performance and accountability flow less from the national to the local, but instead need to be (re)-generated at the level of districts and schools. Ghana's education sector decentralisation reforms have to some extent opened up a good deal of space for manoeuvre amongst key stakeholders at both district and school levels, and when political conditions are conducive, this can result in the emergence of some forms of 'developmental coalitions' that were observed in the context of TA district.

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[15] They were former directors and assistant directors of education, former teachers, local managers of the faith based organisation (FBO) schools among others

[16] This included former members of the education sub-committee of the M/M/D/A, retired public servants and representatives of traditional council.

In TA district, successful implementation of the teacher accountability reforms at the district and school levels depended on having a functioning and resourceful district education oversight committee, strong technocratic leadership of the district education directorate, a well-supervised cadre of circuit supervisors, active and functioning PTAs and SMCs, and (some) progressive teachers' unions. In addition, and more importantly, the ways in which these different actors could be brought together into a coherent developmental coalition accounted mainly for the progressive ways in which they functioned to promote effective teacher accountability. Such coalitions addressed teacher absenteeism through local and often informal solutions and governance arrangements, which need to be recognised in order to improve teacher accountability. These developmental coalitions could then provide a critical basis to offset the collective action problems that characterise the education sector in Ghana, with its often incoherent reforms and governance arrangements, both of which are nested within and flow from the country's competitive clientelistic political settlement.

Critical for the emergence of such coalitions is an alignment between the interests of political and bureaucratic elites, which is prevented by inter and intra party competition, as the AAK case demonstrated. Although more research is required to unearth the underlying drivers of these incoherent relations between actors and institutions at the sub-national level in the low-performing district, we hypothesise that higher levels of political competition faced by and within the then ruling political party (the NDC) in AAK may to some extent be an important driver in reducing the level of collective action amongst district-level elites, as compared to the relatively more 'dominant' position enjoyed by elites within the NDC in TA.

Our analysis has a number of implications for development practice. We highlight the fact that there is a need to harness horizontal institutions at the district and community levels to counterbalance the vertical institutions of state decentralised through education sector reforms. This process of balancing the vertical and horizontal structures of state and society in education should be delicately undertaken, in order not to undermine the often high levels of technical competency associated with the centrally appointed DEDs. Capacity matters as well as accountability and the former may well be a condition for the latter. It is worth noting that in contexts where there is incoherence/misalignment between political actors at the district level, there is a need to support the autonomy of technical actors (Fukuyama 2013), perhaps through providing stronger support to politically-salient stakeholders which can exert some countervailing power (Levy and Walton 2013). In districts where there is evidence of 'developmental' coalitions emerging, a different approach is required. Such coalitions, which by their nature involve a degree of 'embeddedness' between political and technical actors, can generate processes which may on the surface look very much like 'collusion' or even patronage. However, rather than proposing 'best-practice'-type approaches in such contexts, it might be better to adopt a 'going with the grain'-type approach, which recognises the importance of such coalitions to problem-solving approaches that are contextually relevant (Booth and Cammack, 2013). This may in turn imply that external actors

need a very good understanding of the 'political settlement' at the district and school levels before devising responses to problems of teacher accountability at sub-national levels.

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