

Research report for Let's Read Ghana

**'It is now for us to run with it and we are ready'.
Expanding teachers' capabilities: pedagogy, language and gender in
Northern Ghana.**



Rona Bronwin

MA Education, Gender and International Development

UCL Institute of Education, University of London

2016

Introduction

As part of my MA in International Education, Gender and Development, I carried out a small qualitative research project with teachers in rural Northern Ghana. This involved questionnaires, observations, focus groups, and interviews with 20 teachers in four schools over three weeks. I partnered with the successful small scale teacher training project Let's Read Ghana (LRG), to look at the ways in which the NGO supports teachers in the local area to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. I was especially interested in understanding the challenges created by both language and gender issues, and the ways that teachers overcame these issues in the classroom.

Values

First I wanted to understand local teachers' aims and values in the classroom and establish to what extent these were reflected by LRG's aims. Teachers completed a questionnaire, where they rated 37 educational values. Every single one of the values rated highly by the teachers, were reflected in LRG's seven key objectives (see table below) and none of the values rated highly by teachers were unrepresented by LRG objectives, except perhaps to be a positive role model, but this could be tacitly understood within all of LRG objectives. This suggested that both the teachers and LRG were working towards shared and understood aims. The next stage was to explore whether language and gender acted as barriers in this context, limiting teachers ability to achieve their aims and if so, how teachers overcame these barriers.

<i>Let's Read objectives</i> (LRG, 2014, p.6)	<i>Teacher's most highly rated values</i>
1. <i>Raising attainment in literacy in English</i>	1. <i>Help pupils learn</i>
2. <i>Improving the quality of teaching and learning</i>	2. <i>Teach good quality lessons</i>
3. <i>Providing appropriate books and resources</i>	3. <i>Teach with good materials in class</i>
4. <i>Improving the role of spoken English in schools</i>	4. <i>Help pupils read and speak English</i>
5. <i>Improving teacher attendance and time on task</i>	5. <i>Attend everyday</i>
6. <i>Developing classroom management skills</i>	6. <i>Get training in new methods and improve qualifications.</i>
7. <i>Developing leadership skills and a Can Do culture</i>	7. <i>Be a positive role model for children</i>

Language

Interviews and focus group discussions showed that teachers were very aware of language barriers in the classroom and ways this impacted teaching and learning, such as a multilingual context, unsuitable policies. uneducated parents, high levels of poverty and a print poor environment. However, they confidently discussed their roles in overcoming these challenges within the classroom. This seemed directly linked to the confidence, strategies and vocabulary gained through their partnership with LRG. Much of the discussion linked language with pedagogy, both in terms of constraints, such as poor

subject knowledge impacting pedagogy, but also in terms of expanding capabilities. LRG's quality training on subject knowledge and pedagogies, increased teacher agency and increased teacher and learners wellbeing, in terms of the confidence and security it fostered in teachers and learners. One teacher stated,

The Let's Read...it is not only in the lower class, but through them, I can just walk into any class and take Let's Read materials and teach without any problem, in all the classes, from class 1 to class 6, they have given us materials. They have taught us how to use the materials. The thing that I am finding difficult in teaching, Let's Read have made it easy for me.

Developing teachers' agency freedoms has emerged as essential to enhancing capabilities and thus creating access to quality education (Buckler, 2014). However, this research also indicates that developing teachers' agency cannot necessarily be achieved, simply by providing training and resources. The difference between LRG and non LRG teachers suggested that top down initiatives, as with many government interventions, detached from local context and personal experiences, actually might constrain and not expand teachers' agency and wellbeing freedoms (Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond, 2011). LRG's personal and contextual intervention seems to have given teachers the language and time to engage critically with the links between language, pedagogy and literacy, as also found by Wyse, Sugrue, Fentiman, Moon (2014).

Gender

Contrary to language issues, gender barriers were discussed as an issue outside the classroom. This included: early pregnancy and early marriage; poverty; parental expectations; and negotiating tradition and modernity. However, analysis of the data suggested gender barriers also existed inside the classroom and included: gender norms and stereotypes dictating interactions and participation; and unequal power dynamics in the classroom. This suggests a link between gender and pedagogies and potentially gender and language, which have been largely unexplored by the literature on education in low and middle income contexts.

Interestingly, gender issues are not an area that LRG have focussed on and this seemed to be evident. Gender issues were largely viewed in terms of constraints rather than capabilities, limiting learners' wellbeing and agency and therefore teachers' and LRG's aims. Unlike in relation to language, teachers did not view their agency or pedagogy impacting gender constraints, and did not link discussions on gender to expanding capabilities. Gender issues were not discussed with the same confidence, strategies, detail or vocabulary. No explicit links were made between gender and language, but the data suggested that potentially these two barriers do intersect, especially in terms of opportunities for participation and developing language skills.

Moving forward

LRG have developed materials and training that have sequentially built teachers' subject knowledge, confidence, pedagogical agency and occupational well being. LRG seem to have expanded teachers' capabilities' sets, which have supported them to overcome language issues in the classroom. Training in subject knowledge and pedagogy, alongside appropriate materials has built teachers' confidence to facilitate

classroom interactions; and harnessed teachers' desired function to be positive role models. One teacher stated 'My experience with Let's Read actually, it's a brilliant thing. They have really come to change so many things, here to me'. While a head teacher commented, 'We don't know what we are going to do...to repay them back...there are no words we can use to express our profound gratitude to Let's Read'.

The positive changes experienced by teachers in their classroom, suggest that this may have created a space, following this sequence, to add a gender dimension; to give the vocabulary and time for teachers to become critically engaged with the links between pedagogy and gender, and gender and language. LRG's existing structure, in relation to pedagogy and language, could act as a scaffold to support greater agency and awareness in relation to informed interactions and higher levels of participation in the classroom, alongside the importance of role models, both male and female, in overcoming limiting gender factors, such as girls' retention and participation in school (Unterhalter et al, 2014; Skelton et al, 2007; Dunne and Ananga, 2013). According to Aikman and Unterhalter (2007: 117), NGOs, like communities and governments, need to improve 'their capacity to transform gender relations in their own work and in the way they work with others.' Therefore, an awareness of ways to support gender equality could be an important next step for LRG to support teachers and learners to overcome barriers in Northern Ghana.

Bibliography

Aikman, S. and Unterhalter, E (2007). *Practising Gender Equality in Education*. Dorset; Oxfam GB.

Brock Utne, B (2010). Research and policy on the language of instruction issue in Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development* 30, 636 - 645.

Buckler, A (2014). Teachers' Professional Capabilities and the Pursuit of Quality in Sub-Saharan African Education Systems: Demonstrating and Debating a Method of Capability Selection and Analysis, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 161-177

Dunne, M. Ananga, E. (2013) Dropping out: Identity conflict in and out of school in Ghana *International Journal of Educational Development* 33, 196–205

Let's Read Ghana Report (2014). Let's Read in Sirigu: Review and evaluation of a 3 year pilot literacy project in Sirigu in the Kassena West district in the Upper East Region of Ghana working with AfriKids Ghana. Available at <http://www.letsreadghana.com/index.html> (accessed 20/1/16)

Opoku-Amankwa, K & Brew-Hammond, A. (2011) Literacy is the ability to read and write English': defining and developing literacy in basic schools in Ghana, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(1), 89-106

Skelton, C. Francis, B, Smulyan, L. (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Education*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Unterhalter, E. North, A. Arnot, M. Lloyd, C. Moletsane, L. Murphy-Graham, E. Parkes, J. Saito, M (2014). Interventions to Enhance Girls' Education and Gender Equality. Education Rigorous Literature Review. Department for International Development

Wyse, D. Sugrue, C. Fentiman, A. Moon, S (2014), English language teaching and whole school professional development in Tanzania. *International Journal of Educational Development* 38, 59–68