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Title: Towards School Improvement and Democratic Education: An exploration of the views of pupils and teacher trainees in Ghana


Abstract

There is now a great deal of international and comparative studies on democratic education, with empirical evidence that listening to pupils, encouraging their participation and giving more power and responsibility (that is greater democratisation) can enhance school effectiveness and therefore facilitate school improvement (Cox et al, 2010, Mncube and Harber, 2010, Mncube 2008, Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, Davies et al 2002, Schweisfurth et al 2002, Harber, 1997, and many more). However studies on democratic education which focus on Sub-Saharan African countries are still relatively few, this paper contributes to the knowledge in such fields.

Based on a flexible qualitative study with multi-methods approaches in six basic schools in Ghana, this paper discusses how pupils’ views could be used to improve schools in a more democratic direction. The study found that despite Ghana’s achievement in multi-party democracy since 1992 there is no clear policy to promote democratic practice in schools. Whilst pupils want teachers to listen to their views and participate in decision making, surprisingly most pupils do not support the abolition of corporal punishment in Ghanaian schools.
Research Background and Context

The sum of human knowledge and complexity of human problems are perpetually increasing; therefore every generation must overhaul its educational methods if time is to be found for what is new (Russel in Meighan 1994:95).

Two big questions often asked in education research are ‘what are we educating for in schools?’, ‘what kind of citizens do we want to produce after schooling?’ and from these we can develop our formal education system in such a way to meet the demands of what we hope for in this fast advancing world. Akyeampong (2007) in his address to the Commonwealth Education Council points out that Ghana has made some strides in its educational development over the past 50 years, where about as many as ten forms of education reforms have been introduced. Each of the reforms has their own implications on the economic and development agenda for the country. He was of the opinion that access to all levels of education has improved significantly. However, completion rates remain the problem, especially at junior and senior secondary where low completion rates deprive the country of much needed educated youth prepared for work and for further education and training (Akyeampong, 2007).

From my observations although there are many reforms, practices within schools have barely changed. For example I have observed corporal punishment still exists, classroom arrangements where all pupils face the teacher, students bullying each other and pedagogy which is examination driven. However, whiles there are these reforms and changes in curriculum are being effected the key stakeholders’ pupils and their teachers are rarely consulted on what might improve their schools and the teaching and learning
process. All too often pupils’ views can be routinely excluded from research, even in the areas where such knowledge is vital (Wood, 2003). Rudduck et al (1996) argue that what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools and other education reforms. In schools however, it is acknowledged that most pupils still lack the power to influence the quality of their lives (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Yet Article 12 of the UN1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “whenever adults make a decision which will affect you in any way, you have the right to give your opinion, and adults have to take seriously” (Davies et al, 2002:144).

Research has been growing on the topic of pupils’ voice with some significant publications in recent times (Rudduck et al, 1996; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Mitra and Gross, 2009). However, most of this research has been done in developed countries and some efforts are being made for pupils to contribute their views on aspects of their schooling experiences. There are not many studies of education in Africa that promotes pupils voice in schools and student participation in decision making is very limited. Reflecting back on my experiences as a pupil and as a teacher in Ghana and considering the available literature for my doctoral studies, I realised that children in Ghana’s schools have got little chance of expressing their views on issues concerning their school, which should be a grave concern for a democratic country. It is an undeniable fact that pupils have many ideas about schooling. While there is growing interest in pupils’ voice, what is yet to be seen is using these voices to transform the image of schooling in the twenty-first century. If schools are to be a successful vehicle for learning in the twenty-first century,
it is vital that pupils are involved in determining their nature, design, organisation, ethos and use, or even if they are needed at all (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003). The next discussion focuses on how schools as social institutions help shape the future of pupils. In this session I explore some of the key concepts on why schooling are organised the way in which they exist.

**Schools As They Presently Are**

The unique challenge and opportunity the school has got is that it is (or ought to be) the future laboratory of our society. What goes on there should not only prepare students for today, but for their lives in a fundamental new society. At present, the school mainly prepares for yesterday (Dalin, 2005:27)

The deeper question to begin with is what are schools for? Sherman (1996) points out that to each of us there is a distinct memories of schools, the institution that seemed to occupy our childhood. In responding to the question ‘what is school?’ She asked:

Is it meant to help us gain knowledge of what it really means to live? Is it meant to introduce children to the basic skills which will make them into useful and productive citizens and workers? Does school teach complacency and uniformity to our children, or are children allowed and encouraged to think creatively? Is school really for children as they exist in childhood, or is it simply a vehicle to take them into adulthood? (Sherman, 1996: i)

These are arguably the basic aims which schooling or mass education seek to achieve but Sherman seems to pose questions to them because there is on-going debate about actual practices in schools that may or may not have positive impacts on pupils. Moos (2004) contends that schools aims to influence the behaviours and cognition of young people to make them capable citizens in any particular society. It is not only through exposition to the content of school subjects that students find their way to adult life but also through their daily routines in which they work during school days.
Moos (2004) argues that the essential functions and practices of the educational system have not changed over the years. In the context of sociological analysis most societies expect schools to perform three tasks, they must ‘socialise’, ‘store’ and ‘allocate’ children. Socialising children means that schools must educate or bring up children in ways that make them fit for, and fit into, the society in which they are going to live. They must be competent and willing to enter the workforce, the public sphere, the culture and private life of the society at hand. Allocating children means that schools must guide pupils into their ‘proper’ place in the workforce and in a particular society. This is done by testing them in final examinations and on that basis giving them a grade that points them to the way to go from there. Storing children and youth means that schools must be a safe and secure place for children to spend their days before they can be given into custody of parents or at a much later stage, into the custody of the labour market. Children and youth cannot be trusted to be on their own. These are the ideologies that underpin schooling or formal education. While some are more overt, some remain a hidden agenda (p5).

Harber (2009) further contends that “school is the default position, a given good” (p4). He argues that despite overwhelmingly positive support for schools by the public, international agencies, the media, politicians and many in education, there are many profound twentieth century educational thinkers and practitioners who think otherwise about the nature and effect of schooling. Goodman (1962), for example argues that the
schooling system exists for its own sake, offering more than a million people employment in a very large market for textbook manufacturers, building contractors and graduate Schools of Education. In adding his views about schools acting as ‘storing children’, he opined that the schooling system plays an important role as a large and expensive baby-sitting service, given that in many families both parents are working and it also helps in keeping unemployed off the streets by ‘putting them in concentration camps called schools’ (p21). Goodman continues to argue that schooling is often a form of brainwashing where a generalised global view is opted for without the consideration of any alternative view point. This is because what schooling seeks to achieve is orthodoxy, consensus and conformity rather creative thinking, curiosity and initiative among children which should be the hallmark of education. Yet in the rapidly changing world, socially and technologically we expect these children to be parents for tomorrow, future scientists and custodians of democratic societies.

Many countries do recognise the importance of education in the development of socio-economic structures. Therefore, there are many reforms that are pushed through in various countries in order for education to meet the economic needs of nations to compete globally. However the interest of some governments, even those which are democratic, has not been what kind of values and goals should be promoted within schools but questions of access, funding and examination results (Harber, 1997). While the structures of modern societies keep changing to meet up with the demand and challenges of the twenty-first century, the end product of schooling or mass education has rarely changed since it inception in the late nineteenth century.
Education is also increasingly based on the market model because advocates see it as a commodity that one can sell to students because it leads to employment and human capital wealth. Schools and colleges are seen as production centres where students are produced (McKernan, 2007). Philips and Schweisfurth (2007) point out that education is seen as a public good and therefore as deserving of allocation of public investment. This is all because there is the assumption that there is a positive relationship between an educated population and national development in all its forms. These assumptions underpin the economic benefit of human capital theory where education increases the employment skills, productivity and earning power of individuals and therefore contributes to economic growth. According to Akyeampong (2007) Ghana in the past 50 years, has, on average introduced one form of educational reform in every five years in responding to a competitive market driven by a global economy. However, he argues that how the country utilises the knowledge and experiences from these reforms will determine the extent to which education and economic development will interact to achieve Ghana’s goal to become a middle level income country by 2020. The Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) argues that “education is a good in itself, and precondition for, though it may not be a guarantee of, wider economic and social development” (p141). Yet education is regarded as a ‘weapon’ against poverty and other forms of underdevelopment (Philips and Schweisfurth 2007). Former South African President Nelson Mandela having realised the huge economic and social disparities in South African society, especially in the rural communities, has since 1990 facilitated the building of over 120 schools throughout the country in deprived areas. Out of Mr
Mandela’s initiative a foundation was set up and the work of the Foundation in support of rural schooling is based on the idea that “rural education and its potential for development is deeply connected with problems of poverty in rural communities” (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005: viii). However, the Foundation is cautious that “For many, education cannot compensate for much deeper economic and social inequalities – it is not a ladder out of poverty, it simply confirms one’s status in life” (2005, p142).

All too often the benefits of mass education or schooling to the society are highlighted while the negative contributions to the society are ignored. Harber (2009) argues that schooling reproduces inequalities in the society. It is a fact that children from poor families are more likely to attend poor schools and then move into poorly low status job or employment. It is only a small number of children from poor backgrounds that are successful in climbing up the ladder of social status. For example in Britain most of the political elite are the products of expensive private schools (Harber, 2009), whiles in Africa, political leaders send their children to foreign top schools or utilise expensive private schools to help retain the privileged positions of their families (Boyle, 1999). It is further noted that schooling not only reproduces society fundamentally as it is but by the actions and inactions of educators, it makes the lives of individuals worse and harms the society in general (Harber, 2004, Harber 2009). Harber (2004) argues that the dominant model of schooling globally is authoritarian with pupils having very little say in what is learned, when, where or how. Moos (2004) therefore suggests that we must engage in research and discussion on the quality of school life, relationships between pupils and teachers, between teachers and school leaders and the links to local and national
communities. This research seeks to do that with the emphasis on how children’s views could shape their schooling experiences and therefore enhance school improvement and education for democratic citizenship.

**Aims of the Research**

The aims of the research were fourfold:

- To find out how the views of pupils and student teachers could be used to improve schools in Ghana in a more democratic direction.
- To what extent could democratic education be harnessed for school improvement?
- To investigate in the views of pupils on how the basic principles of democracy (equity, participation, rights and informed choice) could be promoted within school practices.
- To explore the views of student teachers on what role should their teacher training play in promoting greater democracy in schools.

**Research Questions**

The aims of the study were turned into appropriate research questions in order for knowledge to be constructed.

1. What are the views of pupils and student teachers on school improvement in Ghana?
2. What are connections between school improvement and democratic education?
3. What are the views of pupils and student teachers on how schools might be changed in a more democratic direction?

4. In the light of 1, 2 and 3 above, what role should teacher education play in preparing teachers for greater democracy in schools, in views of the student teachers?

These questions are framed to guide the research to enable the aims of the study to be fulfilled. At the beginning of this research these questions remained open in order to be modified when additional questions unfolded. In addition, according to the type of design and the research approaches that were chosen in making meaning out of these questions, there might be several sub-questions arising in order to clarify or tease out some issues. Punch (1998) points out that research questions are central, whether they are prespecified or whether they unfold during the study. Research questions enable us to determine the type of data that will be needed.

**Methodology**

In this study, a flexible qualitative design is used in order to answer the research questions. Recapping the aims of this study, it seeks to investigate how the views of pupils and student teachers could be harnessed in order to embed democratic principles in the practices of Ghanaian teacher training institutions and schools. The aims were based on the assumptions that Ghana has an officially elected democratic government and therefore there should be democratic citizenship before any process of democracy can be effective. One way of establishing democratic citizenship among the youth is through schooling and their teachers need to be trained democratically as well. It needs a multi-
purpose approach to carry out this enquiry. According to De Vaus (2001) a qualitative approach will consist of different elements and different methods of data collection may be required for the different elements. A survey of students might be appropriate; observation of classrooms and staff meetings might also be worthwhile; while interviews might be a good way of gaining information from teachers. An analysis of school records and archives could provide useful information about the historical context within which the school operates. De Vaus’s statements here provide a range of data collection strategies which could be used for this project.

Strategies for Data Collection

By reflecting on the research questions, there is the need for a multi-method approach to carry out this inquiry. Therefore, the strategies of data collection were: interviews with pupils, teachers and teacher trainees in their respective schools and colleges in Ghana. In addition an open ended essay on how pupils want their schools to improve was used and teacher trainees were asked to write an open ended essay on the ideal school they would like to teach in and how it can be achieved. Mock school council meetings were held in six selected basic schools in Ghana (basic school is six years primary school and three years junior high school, there are no existing school councils in basic schools in Ghana). Two case studies of one basic school and one teacher training college were included for in depth study of a whole institution. The data collection was conducted in May/June 2010 in Ghana.
All ethical considerations including permission from educational authorities and further voluntary informed consent from individual participant were considered. According to BERA (2004) 'all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom' (p4). Among the schools that I approached, there was only one school that rejected my approach with headteacher citing busy schedules on her monthly plan.

**Preliminary Findings**

The schools and colleges involved were very cooperative and helpful. All the participants were happy and excited that somebody was listening to them and urged me to take the research further. Pupils involved in the school council were excited that they had been elected to represent their class in the school council. Pupils were able to prove to me that they have fascinating and interesting ideas that can help improve their schools. Most of their views covered these areas: facilities, maintenance, teachers, pupils’ behaviour, school bus, environment and sanitation. Teachers and teacher trainees agreed that pupils should be given a chance to express their views in matters affecting them.

One key observation I made in all the schools is the practice of corporal punishment. The pupils are asked to buy canes and bring them to school. Upon asking both pupils and teachers about their view on corporal punishment, I was surprised to hear that most pupils and teachers support the use of canes but want teachers to use it cautiously and not indiscriminately. Pupils support the caning of their friends who misbehave and teachers
also quoted the bible to support their claim ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’. The challenge here is that both pupils and teachers see the corporal punishment as an effective way of a disciplining the child but there has been widespread condemnation about the harmful effect on caning (Harber 2004; 2009).

I believe that with a more interventionist approach to research, people can be helped to explore different ways of doing things and see how they can change their mind-set about highly authoritarian practices and caning schools.

**Conclusion**

Having explored some of the literature about pupil voice and conducted research on how we can use pupils’ views to improve schools, I do feel the need for researchers who are researching for change to listen to those who the change might affect and how they can contribute towards the change for improvement. This paper presented a brief aspect of my research project on how we can use pupils’ views for school improvement and thus enhancing the prospect of democracy in schools.

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