

Ghana must urgently reform its school system to improve quality and equity

Prince Hamid Armah | 14th May, 2015

I was not surprised to read, on BBC News on the dawn of last Thursday that Ghana had placed bottom in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s global school rankings. Perhaps, I am used to the outcome of such international rankings including TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS, EIU and others. In all these international rankings, the top five spots have been largely occupied by Asian countries, and one European country, Finland, making the occasional appearance.

When Ghana has taken part in these international assessments, specifically TIMSS, we have often trailed. However, I have previously criticized the results of these rankings in particular because several contextual factors are largely ignored. My position has not changed. Consider, for instance a sample TIMSS problem: "How will you use 3-litre and 7-litre containers to obtain 5 litres of water from a well?" Our pupils would have linguistic difficulty in respect of the concept of litres, because we are used to measuring liquids including water in gallons. Consistent with my 3-year research work in mathematical problem solving, using indigenous language could help pupils' performance better on such tasks in TIMSS.

Nevertheless, some of these international rankings provide good insights into tracking the impact of reforms and informing curriculum improvements. In Australia, Scotland, Singapore and I believe a number of other developed countries, findings from these international comparative studies have occasioned major reform agendas. In Scotland for example, the results from two major surveys including TIMSS in 1997 led to significant reforms by Her Majesty's Inspector of Education, local authorities and schools to improve pupils' mathematics performance. Pupil tracking was one of many interventions which resulted the TIMSS report. This involved tracking pupils' performance in every assessment so that patterns established thereof can be used to predict future performance of other similar groups. In the case of Australia and Singapore, they totally overhauled their mathematics and science curriculum and made problem-solving as its central focus. Similarly, Finland has used results from TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA to mount progressive education programmes that has seen many countries including United Kingdom traveling to Finland to learn their success story.

Consequently, as long as these international studies emphasize problem solving, these countries would always be ahead of us, unless considerable change in our curriculum is invoked. However, it is still unclear whether decisions based on Ghana's TIMSS results have had a positive impact on students' achievement levels. Disturbingly, Ghana will not participate in the 2016 TIMSS programme since previous funding from World Bank is no longer available. This is why we need to carefully study the full report published today by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The OECD's study compared the results of mathematics and science tests among 15-year-olds around the world including countries in Africa and Latin America. Although, education in Ghana goes beyond Mathematics and Science which formed the basis of the conclusion of OECD's reports, the study appears to be quite insightful. What makes the findings interesting is the attempt to connect education and economic growth to explore the long-term economic gains from improved quality in schooling for participating countries. I found that quite intriguing and innovative. It estimates that Ghana's GDP could grow up to 3,881% if all 15 year olds achieved at least basic level of education. The implication is that our current GDP could balloon up to 38 folds if we achieved basic skills for all our 15-year-olds, over the lifetime of today's children.

These findings have demonstrated that education system performance transformation and institutional improvement are not esoteric; they are within Ghana's reach. In an interview with BBC, Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, contended that, "If you go to an Asian classroom you'll find teachers who expect every student to succeed. There's a lot of rigour, a lot of focus and coherence". Mr Schleicher's contention is consistent with several years of empirical findings that failure to put teachers at the centre of any reform agenda is a recipe for implementation disaster. The most instructive aspect of this study is the finding that the top performer, Singapore, had high levels of illiteracy and low quality of education in the 1960s perhaps more so than Ghana. Indeed, when Singapore became independent in 1965, it was a poor, small (about 700 km²), tropical island with few natural resources, little fresh water, rapid population growth, substandard housing and recurring conflict among the ethnic and religious groups that made up its population. During that period, there was no compulsory education and only a small number of high school and college graduates and skilled workers compared to Ghana. In just one generation, Singapore is a shiny global hub of trade, finance and transportation and an aspiration for Ghana, with which it was compared at birth.

We have largely failed to improve our school system despite several reform agendas in recent years. A more ambitious, national reform strategy is now urgently needed to improve quality and equity in our education, which I have frequently written about. Importantly, a comprehensive education reform is required to restore the country's system to its previous glorious standards and even better. This include a range of measures such as higher salaries, better training, and tougher entry requirements for the teaching profession; more centralised efforts to integrate nonprofessional teachers into the system; and a more active approach to improving performance from the National Inspectorate Board. Similar measures have been prescribed for Sweden where standards in education are said to be currently at an all-time low.

The rest include scrapping BECE and merging JHS and SHS for a 6-years Continuous Secondary Education with 7 years primary schooling. Others include insulating the proposed National Teaching Council from the Ghana Education Service and any other governmental influence with a mandate to regulate all activities and programmes of Teacher Education Institutions in Ghana; withdrawing from the WAEC treaty and setting up an independent National Credit and Qualification Authority for that purpose with additional responsibility to design and manage a

National Qualification Framework; and of course a complete overhaul of our national curriculum. Finally, we must completely devolve our education system to the local authority level by allowing them to run and manage the schools as prescribed by the Local Government Act (ACT 4362). These reforms could be undertaken with timelines spanning a period of 10-15 years under a specific legal framework that binds successive governments to continue its implementation.

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