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English language teaching and whole school professional development in Tanzania

Dominic Wyse [a], Ciaran Sugrue [c,*], Alicia Fentiman [b], Seonghye Moon [b]

[a] Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom
[b] University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
[c] University College Dublin, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a two-year in-depth qualitative enquiry into English language teaching in a typical primary school in an economically disadvantaged ward of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The research found that modest but significant changes to teachers' pedagogy, practice and understanding of the teaching of English could be achieved. One of the most important changes was the teachers' increased understanding of the benefits of engaging learners in a greater range of interaction styles. Another important change was greater understanding of the importance of communicative intent and semantics in the teaching of English. The whole school approach to teacher development, including the research team's sustained engagement with the head teacher of the school, was an important context for the changes to practice.

1. Introduction

Global commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) has increased access to primary education for millions of children around the world especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Republic of Tanzania significant strides have been made and the net enrolment ratio in primary school doubled from 54% in 2000 to 95.9% in 2010 (United Nations, 2010). Although this is a sign of clear improvement there are severe challenges facing schools and teachers in Tanzania, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, poor training, and low qualifications. Another key issue is the quality of education once pupils are in school. As part of thinking about quality there has been a growing interest in reforming teacher education particularly in teacher training colleges (Hardman et al., 2012; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2013) but little research has looked at how to improve teaching and learning in the context of schools.

The context for research in Tanzania, as part of the wider development education field, includes work on the historical, political, cultural and economic implications of language of instruction. As part of colonial rule the British promoted the use of English as the medium of instruction in primary, secondary and tertiary education in Tanzania, and as an official language (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004). Shortly after independence in 1961 Kiswahili became the national language of the country. The rationale behind this decision was to unify Tanzanians with one 'national' language. This resulted in a deliberate political decision to use Kiswahili as the official language of the government (Barrett, 1994). Although Kiswahili became the medium of instruction in primary schools in 1967, the language of instruction in secondary schools remained as English. Debate has continued about language policy (or the lack of) in Tanzania (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004). Some advocate that Kiswahili should be the only medium of instruction throughout the educational system because it is claimed that English is not used outside the classroom, and hence it is recommended that the Tanzanian government revisit their language policy for education (Brock-Utne et al., 2003; Rubagumya, 1997). However, others such as Kadeghe (2010) fear that Tanzania is missing out on global opportunities because of poor grasp of English.

Although a considerable amount of empirical work focusing on the language of instruction has been carried out, including some in Tanzania, research on the teaching of English in Tanzania is scarce. Evidence of the challenges for pupils learning English has been established by a significant study carried out by a non-governmental organisation which found large numbers of pupils

* Corresponding author at: School of Education, University College Dublin, Roebuck Castle, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland. Tel.: +353 17167944; fax: +353 17161143.
E-mail address: ciaran.sugrue@ucd.ie (C. Sugrue).

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struggling to acquire the English knowledge and understanding necessary for secondary education (Uwezo and Sumara, 2010). In a broader study of interaction across all the subjects of the primary curriculum, including English, O-Saki and Agu (2002) found that teacher interaction styles were orthodox, typically consisting of teacher expositions and the requirement for pupils to answer questions requiring factual recall.

Lewin and Stuart's study of teacher education in Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa and Trinidad and Tobago found that newly qualified teachers valued their initial teacher training, and had benefited from new knowledge, new skills and resource materials. But there did not appear to be much impact on the teachers' "behaviour, attitudes or understandings" (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, p. 701). The demands of limited resources were also part of the context for a study of secondary education in Tanzania (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2013). Tensions between constructivist theories of knowledge and cultural values related to teachers' authority in the community were also evident (Bartlett and Mogusu, 2013). Hardman et al. (2012) found that most schools in their sample of schools in Tanzania were not equipped with the resources required to support teacher education but suggested that with the appropriate support school-based training was possible and could bring about more effective teaching and learning.

It was in the context of limited research on the pedagogy of English teaching in Tanzania, and the need for empirical evidence about the ways in which teachers' pedagogy could be developed, that a two-year research study was carried out in an urban 'resource poor' primary school in Tanzania from 2009 to 2011. The research examined the teaching of English from a whole school perspective, with attendant implications for school leadership and capacity building. The paper begins with a section outlining the theoretical framing that was an important feature of our overall approach to both the research and the capacity building with the school. This is followed by a report of the research findings that focuses particularly on capacity building and the teaching of English, including of English grammar. Finally the discussion and conclusions highlight the significance of changes to teacher's practice that occurred and the implications of this for sustainable professional development.

2. Theoretical framing: professional development and the teaching of English

2.1. Professional development and leadership

Notwithstanding the challenges of sustainable educational improvement some remain optimistic that "globalisation has the potential to bring enormous benefits to those in both the developing and the developed world" (Stiglitz, 2006, p. 4). Such perspectives emphasise the 'knowledge economy' as a means of developing 'human capital' leading to work, economic activity and wealth generation. However, even in Western economies, education systems have been described as more akin to "the factory and the monastery" rather than places to prepare young people for the postmodern, post-industrial world (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 12). Thus, what is called for is a highly educated workforce that is flexible, adaptable, creative and innovative. Western perspectives on teacher professional development have shown that teachers are one of the most significant factors in the quality of learning in schools (Day et al., 2007). Teachers' "well-being and positive professional identity are fundamental to their capacities to become and remain effective" (Day et al., 2007, pp. 236–237). While it is clear that some education systems fare much better than others in the major challenges of teacher professional development (see for example, Sahlberg, 2011), it is not surprising that initial teacher education in particular (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2012) and continuing professional development (CPD) have come under sustained attention in recent research and policy (Day, 2012).

Despite the attention to teacher development, and after decades of school effectiveness and school improvement research, CPD is often characterised in the following terms:

> It is brief and rarely sustained, deficit oriented, radically under-resourced, politically imposed rather than professionally owned, lacking in intellectual rigour or coherence, treated as an add-on rather than as part of a natural process and trapped in the constraints of a bureaucratic system that poses barriers to even modest levels of success. (Guskey, 2004, p. xii)

Such commentary was a cautionary tale in the context of the research being reported on in this paper, where members who were from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, collaborated with a school in Dar es Salaam. We were mindful of, and sensitive to, local culture and context while seeking to avoid many of the pitfalls inherent in arriving with ready-made solutions to problems we might be impatient to solve before adequately understanding their genealogy. We took seriously the distinction between 'planners' and 'seekers' while being committed to 'professional capacity building' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). We were keen to eschew planning in favour of seeking to build capacity from the ground up.

Even if our ambition to improve teachers' capacity to teach English in one primary school was perhaps small in scale, it was nevertheless tempered by the team's previous experience working in low-income countries and knowledge of failed initiatives that promised more than they delivered. Awareness that "anytime you hear a Western politician or activist say 'we', they mean 'we whites' – today's version of the White Man's Burden," tempered our disposition further (Easterly, 2006, p. 23). Thus, taking time to build relationships of trust and mutual respect were important building bricks in our approach to building professional capacity on a whole school basis. We felt that by working collaboratively from the ground up we were more likely to create a sustainable legacy. Though we arrived with claims to expertise, for example in development education, leadership, and English teaching pedagogy, our disposition also included a commitment to building on elements of the teachers' existing pedagogy that were 'promising' and lent themselves to further development rather than adopt a deficit perspective.

Awareness of, and sensitivity to, traditions of school leadership in the setting were regarded by us as an important element of leading capacity building at the same time as building leadership density within the school community in a more 'distributed leadership' manner (Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2009; Spillane and Diamond, 2007). We were mindful that leadership is a cultural construct with considerable variation. Nevertheless, cognisance was taken of the potential of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) to cultivate, develop and sustain professional capacity, and the possibility that, together and over time, pedagogical and leadership capacity could be improved in a symbiotic manner.

Closely connected with such understandings, particularly with reference to leadership was a recognition of *Ubuntu* having real local meaning, i.e. that "one's humanity can . . . only be defined through interaction with others" (Boon, 2007, p. 26). While we acknowledge the critique that Boon may be essentializing leadership in African contexts we reasoned it would be important to engage with the school's existing leadership as a means of building community capacity and leadership capacity through participation. Such a collective, communal commitment held out significant promise that might prove to be fertile ground for a sense