Education collaboration to promote school participation in northern Ghana: A case study of a complementary education program

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceived benefits and challenges of the collaboration model of a complementary education program which operates in marginalized communities in northern Ghana. The scope of the paper includes the background, collaboration as a transformative process, research methodology, findings, and discussion. The study revealed that: (a) the collaborative partners' "shared values" were a major drive of the collaboration; (b) the collaboration model was fluid, contextual, and an unstructured process; (c) the process provided new strategies promoting school participation in northern Ghana; and (d) the collaborative partners' idiosyncrasies posed a major challenge to the collaboration.

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1. Introduction

This paper is based on a study to investigate the collaboration "model" of School *for* Life—a special complementary education program which provides education for marginalized children in northern Ghana. The study also investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of the collaboration model. It builds on other studies which explore the contribution of complementary education programs (CEP) to the global initiative of "education for all" (EFA) in marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa (see Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2001; DeStefano, 2006; Haiplik, 2004; Hartwell, 2006; Hoppers, 2005; Mfum-Mensah, 2003, 2009; Muskin, 1999).

"Complementary education programs" (CEP) is a term used for an array of non-formal basic education programs implemented in the developing world to provide education for children that are "hard to reach" and "hard to teach" with the traditional school model. These programs include "community schools", "alternative primary schooling programs", and non-formal basic education programs (see DeStefano, 2006; Hoppers, 2005; Farrell and Mfum-Mensah, 2002; Mfum-Mensah, 2003; The United Nations Children's Fund, 1993). The United Nations Children's Fund, (1993, p.1) defines these programs as:

> A set of complementary programmes for the unreached or poorly served, [and as] an approach to education . . . leading to greater flexibility in organization and management of educational programmes with a decentralized structure and less

authoritarian management style. It also promotes adaptation of programmes to needs and circumstances of learners, a learner-centered pedagogy, creative ways of mobilizing and using educational resources, community participation in planning and management of programmes, and learning content and methods related to life and environment of learners.

For the past two decades, CEP have been implemented in sub-Saharan Africa to address the educational needs of children in rural, remote areas and impoverished urban communities, girls, children orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and those belonging to communities displaced by natural and manmade disasters who do not have access to quality basic education (Farrell and Mfum-Mensah, 2002; Mfum-Mensah, 2009). The literature (see DeStefano, 2006; Farrell and Mfum-Mensah, 2002; Mfum-Mensah, 2003; Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002; Hartwell, 2006) posits that CEP are expanding in marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa because they (a) provide educational access for marginalized children; (b) are children-friendly and use child-centered pedagogy; (c) provide socially and culturally relevant curriculum; (d) are an affordable educational program; and (e) promote strong community involvement.

School *for* Life (SfL) is a complementary education program which was implemented in 1995 to provide schooling for children in rural and other marginalized communities in northern Ghana. The term School *for* Life is used to denote the local non-governmental organization (NGOs) operating the education program and the program. Between 1995 and 2008 SfL successfully turned out 102,753 children. Out of this number, 68,576 children enrolled/mainstreamed into the formal school system from

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Primary 4 or above and compete favorably with their peers from the formal school (Mfum-Mensah, 2009; Shircor, 2009).

As a complementary education program, SfL has provided the educational needs of children in rural remote communities in northern Ghana. It has succeeded in providing education to the marginalized communities because it incorporates the local communities' socioeconomic, sociocultural, and religious contexts in the school process. SfL views this approach as a strategy to help promote school participation in the area (see Atakpa, 1996; Blakemore, 1975; Mfum-Mensah, 2003; Stephens, 2000). The program uses nine months to provide three years of primary schooling in northern Ghana. SfL also uses the local language as medium of instruction.

SfL lays much emphasis on community participation. It views community participation as an instrumental approach to involving the local members to participate in the decisions about their children's education. The local members work with SfL's administrators to identify and recruit individuals in the community who have completed senior secondary schools to serve as classroom facilitators or instructors. Furthermore, each local community determines a school schedule which suits its social, cultural, and religious activities. SfL also trains some of the community members to monitor the classrooms to ensure that the facilitators regularly attend school. Arguably, SfL's approach has led to the increased enrollment and retention of both boys and girls in the communities, and the strong community involvement in children's education. SfL also provides a second-chance education to children who are above school-going age, and successful mainstream of graduates to the public schools (Akyeampong, 2004; Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour, 2010; Hartwell, 2006; Shircor, 2009).

Even though studies on CEP continue to grow they have not extended to investigate the nature of linkages and relationships between CEP and organizations involved. This study explores SfL's collaboration mode with other organizations to promote schooling. Furthermore, it discusses the drive leading to the collaboration, the areas of collaboration, and the perceived benefits and challenges of the process. Findings of the study are situated within the broader literature of collaboration and institutional improvement, and discussions on EFA. The terms "stakeholders", "organizations" and "partners" have been used interchangeably to represent the organizations involved in the collaboration.

2. Collaboration as a transformative process

Collaboration as a concept has been extensively discussed in the literature on institutional reforms and improvement (Freeman, 1993; Gregory, 1995; Hawthorne and Zusman, 1992; Lasker et al., 2001; Lawrence et al., 2002; Lawson et al., 2007; Musanti and Pence, 2010; Uchiyama and Radin, 2009; Wallace, 1998). Collaboration is defined as "joint work for joint purposes" in one or more areas of shared concern, promoting mutual survival of member institutions. It is also a condition that occurs when two or more people or organizations join forces over a long period of time to produce something neither can achieve alone. In the process, each participant contributes something significant and different, derives something of personal and/or organizational benefits, and acknowledges the mutual dependence on the other required to achieve the mutually desired results (Lawrence et al., 2002; Freeman, 1993; Wallace, 1998).

Discussions on collaboration stem from the perception about the complexity of humans and organization's connectedness strengthened by joint purpose and strained by conflicting feelings (Lasker et al., 2001; Musanti and Pence, 2010; Uchiyama and Radin, 2009). Uchiyama and Radin (2009) note that collaboration and supportive cultures which reach across religious, cultural and

philosophical traditions are an important component of high quality programs. Lasker et al. (2001) posit further that because of economic and technological changes, there is a great potential in collaboration that enables different people and organizations to support each other by leveraging, combining, and capitalizing on their complementary strengths and capabilities. They pointed out however that there are bound to be frustrations in the practice because collaboration requires relationships, procedures, and structures that are quite different from the way many organizations have worked in the past. Similarly, partnerships have the potential to be destructive, particularly for weaker partners.

In the field of education, collaboration is viewed as a transformative process for policy reforms and classroom teaching. Collaboration leads to complementary knowledge for educational programs, creativity, and improved thinking. It also brings diverse people and organizations together to find new perspectives to conceptualizing and solving problems (Gregory, 1995; Lasker et al., 2001; Lawrence et al., 2002; Musanti and Pence, 2010; Wallace, 1998). Gregory (1995) posits that collaboration has direct benefits to education policy and practice because it helps to improve instruction, and to develop new solutions to complex problems. It also acts as a source of change in institutional fields. Wallace (1998) contends further that collaboration acts as a counter-policy against an external policy shift promoting competition between institutions. While many scholars point out that education collaboration leads to substantial benefits, some argue that those benefits are based on the level of participants' involvement (Lawrence et al., 2002; Wallace, 1998). Wallace (1998) argues that collaborative activities that yield substantial and sustained efforts are those where the organizations put considerable energy into coordination, and the key players foster ongoing negotiations.

3. Methodology

The study is a descriptive case study that used the naturalistic inquiry of extensive interviews. The heurism of utilizing case study framework for studies of this nature has been extensively discussed in the literature (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Holmes, 1967; Lasker et al., 2001; Merriam, 1988; Gall et al., 1996; Yin, 1984). Merriam (1988) posits that the case study approach enables researchers to investigate a single phenomenon to uncover the interaction of its significant factors. Gall et al. (1996) posit further that qualitative case studies have the advantage of exploring phenomena in their natural settings and interpreting, understanding, explaining and bringing meaning to them. Yin (1984) points out that case studies investigate contemporary phenomena within their real life context, when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are not clear, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. Similarly, case study reports are able to reveal researchers' perspectives on issues under examination.

Naturalistic inquiry was beneficial for the study because it is concerned with gathering descriptive data to ground a theory of collaboration between SfL and the other organizations. Naturalistic inquiry aided the process by focusing on the nature of the collaboration process and its perceived benefits and challenges. Furthermore, the methodological framework is appropriate for a study in which questions are likely to emerge and change as the nature of collaboration becomes clear. I modified Lawrence et al.'s (2002) framework for investigating collaboration between organizations. Lawrence et al.'s framework utilized collaboration (instead of organization) as the unit of analysis. It investigates multiple instances of collaboration, develops summaries of collaboration with each organization, and the effects of collaboration.

I purposefully used both SfL and collaboration as the units of analysis. I explored the dimensions of SfL's collaboration with other organizations and the communities with the goal to