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CASE STUDY

Meeting EFA: Ghana School for Life

Introduction

School for Life is a nine-month education program for eight to 15 year olds living in Ghana's rural Northern Region, where there is very little access to primary education. School for Life teaches local language literacy, numeracy, and general academics equivalent to three primary school grades in nine months. It was established in 1994 by the Ghanaian Danish Communities Association (GDCA) with support from the Dagbon Traditional Council, The Ghana Friendship Groups in Denmark, and the Ghana Education Service (GES) in the Northern Region. Approximately 70 percent of School for Life students continue on to formal primary school at fourth grade. By 2004, it had established operations in eight districts and four languages in Ghana's Northern Region.

The Northern Region of Ghana

The Northern Region accounts for almost a third of Ghana's land area and is inhabited by about 10 percent of its population, with a population density of less than 25 people per square kilometer. Poverty is endemic in Northern Ghana, and the people face formidable challenges with regards to water, food, and livelihood. With limited access to potable water and few economic opportunities, younger people, especially girls, have few chances to find productive work. As a result, many leave their home villages. A significant percentage of girls aged 12 to 18 years migrate from Savelugu and Gusheigu Districts in the north to urban areas to earn money for their marriage dowries. Foster-parenting by extended relatives and traditional gender roles and responsibilities also pose problems.

GES statistics and the 2000 Ghana Population Census indicated that in 2002, the Northern Region literacy rate was lower than 5 percent and 40 percent of school-age children, mostly girls, were out of school. The great majority of children do not complete the compulsory nine years of primary school and consequently do not attain a basic level of literacy. The Northern Region receives only 4 percent of recurrent budget expenditures, although it has 10 percent of Ghana's total population.

Effectiveness

This case study analyzes three dimensions of effectiveness in Ghana's School for Life: access, completion, and learning.

Access

It is not enough that children enter school. The important thing is that they stay long enough to gain the knowledge and competencies of basic education. Ghana's gross enrollment rate has increased from 75 percent to 81 percent over the past decade, although it has leveled off since 2000. From 1990 to 2000, the public school gross



Educational Quality Improvement Program
Policy • Systems • Management

EQUIP2 is funded by the
United States Agency for
International Development

Cooperative Agreement
No. GDG-A-00-03-00008-00



enrollment rate for first through sixth grade in Ghana’s Northern Region rose from 51.4 percent to 59.7 percent, with enrollment growth slightly ahead of school-age population growth. According to the Ghana Ministry of Education 2000 Education Management Information System (EMIS) Basic Education Statistics and Planning Parameters and the 2000 Ghana Population Census, Northern Region gross enrollment in first through third grade was 69 percent at approximately 131,000, but only 59 percent for girls in 2000.

School for Life reaches approximately 25 percent of the villages in the districts where it works, targeting those locations where there is no formal school or where there is very low enrollment in the public primary school. From 1996 to 2003, School for Life enrolled 50,000 children, half of whom were girls. In 2000, School for Life’s annual enrollment was just over 9,000 pupils, which, if added to the public school enrollment rate, would raise the regional rate from 69 percent to 83.3 percent. Moreover, School for Life attendance averages 90 percent, whereas USAID/Ghana research estimated public school average daily attendance in the Northern Region at only 75 percent of enrolled students in 2002.

School for Life Coverage in the Northern Region of Ghana

| District | Communities Covered | Communities in District | Percentage Covered by School for Life |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Gusheigu-Karaga | 151 | 415 | 36.4% |
| Nanumba | 64 | 350 | 18.3% |
| Saboba-Chereponi | 76 | 408 | 18.6% |
| Savelugu-Nanton | 97 | 350 | 27.7% |
| Tamale | 89 | 350 | 25.4% |
| Tolon-Kumbungu | 57 | 350 | 16.3% |
| Yendi | 128 | 316 | 40.5% |
| Zabzugu-Tatale | 105 | 350 | 30.0% |
| TOTAL | 767 | 2,889 | 26.5% |

Completion

Even if children enter school and complete a cycle, little is gained unless they have actually learned to read, write, calculate, and use these tools to solve real life problems. According to Ministry of Education 2003 Education for All (EFA)-Fast Track Initiative (FTI) statistics, Ghana’s national survival rate to sixth grade is 66 percent. In the Northern Region, the survival rate from first to third grade is 59.4 percent, with 47.9 percent reaching fourth grade from first, and only 35.5 percent reaching sixth grade.

Of those students who enter School for Life, more than 91 percent complete the nine-month program, equivalent to first through third grade, with equal rates for boys and girls. Of those who complete the School for Life program, 66 percent overall and 68 percent of girls continue on to fourth grade in public schools. Much of the retention is credited to School for Life’s short duration of only nine months.

Completion

The third dimension of effectiveness is evidence of learning, as reflected by the achievement of minimum levels of competency in reading comprehension, writing, and numeracy. In 2003, GES randomly surveyed 367 pupils from 17 School for Life classes in eight districts. According to the February 2004 *School for Life End of 8th Cycle Report*, 51.8 percent read with comprehension and wrote and calculated with mastery, 29.4 percent read and calculated well but wrote only a few words, and 18.8 percent read and calculated with difficulty and were not able to write properly. Thus, 81.2 percent of School for Life pupils met minimum standards for literacy and numeracy at third grade level after a nine-month cycle.

In the absence of a standardized national test at third grade level, there is no means to directly compare learning in School for Life to learning in public schools. However, the Criterion Referenced Test (CRT), given to a 10 percent national sample of sixth grade students each year, provides a language and mathematics learning performance benchmark for primary schools. In 2003, only 8.7 percent of the public school sixth grade students tested achieved minimum competency in English. Although CRT is not a literacy test, the results imply that as much as 90 percent of sixth graders do not perform at the minimum level of reading. This is in contrast to the 81.2 percent of School for Life pupils who are able to read in their own language with comprehension at a third grade level.

Given that the language of instruction in Ghanaian public schools is English, School for Life students who are taught in local languages and move on to fourth grade might be predicted to perform poorly in public school. However, Ministry of Education and GES Performance Monitoring Tests show that School for Life graduates perform in the upper 50 percentile in English and mathematics. This reflects the School for Life assertion that functional literacy in the mother tongue provides a strong platform for acquiring literacy in a second language. Teachers in Savelugu District, where there are a significant number of School for Life students transitioning to the formal public school system, indicated that School for Life students were able to transfer their literacy skills from local language to English and were in many cases performing much better than students who only had previous exposure to the formal school system. According to Leslie Casely-Hayford in *Reaching Underserved Populations with Basic Education in Deprived Areas of Ghana: Emerging Good Practices*, published by CARE in 2003, some parents and education officials in School for Life communities even recommended that all pupils attend School for Life before entering the formal school system.

Field reports from School for Life indicate a very high proportion of total class time utilized for teacher-learner interaction and literacy and numeracy practice. Lessons focus on discussion and representation of issues and topics directly relevant to the communities in which the students live. In contrast, daily teacher attendance in public schools has been documented at less than 75 percent and only 30 percent of the school day is used for building language and numeracy skills. In 1998, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) ChildScope Project three-day rapid assessment of teacher time on task



in nine schools in the Afram Plains District of Ghana’s Eastern Region found that only 16.4 percent of teachers were actually in the classrooms during scheduled lessons.

Costs: School for Life vs. Public Primary School

This section compares the recurrent per-pupil, startup, and capital costs for School for Life and public schools. Annual and sub-regional variations in budget and expenditure report estimates, which are not fully audited, pose a challenge to exactitude, but consistency over time and examination of cost patterns lends some reliability.

The Ministry of Education and GES do not report annual budgets and expenditures regionally, nor break out costs for just the first three grades of primary school. For comparison purposes, per-pupil public school operational costs based on the national average for the full six grades of primary school are used here. Given that unit costs for first through third grade are likely lower than for fourth through sixth grade, with lower pupil/teacher ratios and a higher percentage of qualified teachers, the national public school per-pupil costs are likely marginally higher than the actual public school per-pupil costs for first through third grade in the Northern Region. However, this is offset by the fact that public schools would have to increase incentives and support for teachers and considerably raise per-pupil costs to effectively extend to the Northern region’s rural communities.

Annual Recurrent Per-Pupil Costs

From 1998 to 2003, annual School for Life budgeted operating costs averaged \$349,020 for an enrolment of 9,000, or approximately \$39 per pupil. Of this, incentives for the facilitator amount \$2.45, instructional materials and texts cost \$10, supervision and staff training are \$14.50, and management and operations (e.g., rentals, fuel, overhead) come to \$11.70. There are no direct tuition costs to parents, and other costs are kept to a minimum with no fees, books to buy, or uniforms.

Profile of School for Life Recurrent Costs (2003)

| Operating Costs | Amount Per Student | Percentage of Total |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Teacher honorarium/incentives | \$2.45 | 6.3% |
| Textbooks | \$6.90 | 17.8% |
| Other learning materials | \$3.12 | 8.1% |
| Supervision | \$10.75 | 27.7% |
| Continuous staff training | \$3.85 | 9.9% |
| Other operating costs | \$11.70 | 30.2% |
| TOTAL | \$38.74 | 100% |

The most striking feature of this profile is the very low cost for teachers. Whereas in public schools teacher salaries and benefits consume over 90 percent of the recurrent budget, School for Life facilitators are volunteers, receiving a small amount from the program each month at about \$7 as an incentive, representing only 6.3 percent of

budget. It is reported that they also receive support from the community, although this has not been documented or analyzed. Significantly, 36 percent of the budget is allotted for supervision and ongoing training, representing a considerable level of activity and support.

Startup and Capital Costs

Startup costs, including facilities, vehicles, curriculum development, materials, community engagement and radio campaigns, and local and international consultants totaled about \$1.3 million over the five-year period.

School for Life Startup and Capital Costs (1998-2003)

| Item | Cost |
|---|--------------------|
| Classrooms and infrastructure | \$706,756 |
| Vehicles and motorcycles | \$216,216 |
| Teaching and office equipment | \$50,000 |
| Community mobilization and radio | \$94,600 |
| Curriculum development—new languages | \$40,540 |
| Consultancies—local and international | \$114,864 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$1,222,976 |
| Community contributions and renovations | \$102,976 |
| TOTAL | \$1,325,341 |

Community Contributions

Reports from field visits indicate that communities participate in School for Life by providing land, selecting sites and teachers, and setting the school schedule. Community members are less active when it comes to providing labor and materials to set up schools. As an indicator, the *School for Life 8th Cycle Completion Report: 1 July 2002 - 30 June 2003* states that the community contributed an estimated \$45,000 to the completion of 21 classrooms during that one-year period. These startup and capital expenditures supported a program of approximately 9,000 students per year at a total per-pupil cost of \$135, excluding the contributions from communities in order to more accurately compare program costs between School for Life and public schools. Assuming that these inputs have an average life of 10 years, the annual per-pupil development cost would be \$13.50.

Recurrent Per-Pupil Costs

According to the Ministry of Education’s Education Sector Development Project, as reported in Francois Orivel’s *Strategies for Financing the Education Sector*, published by GES in 2002, per-pupil annual recurrent unit cost for public primary education in 2001 was as follows:



Public Primary Per-Pupil Annual Recurrent Costs (2001)

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Wage Bill | \$45 million |
| Other Recurrent | \$9.5 million |
| Total Recurrent | \$54.5 million |
| Number of Students | 2,021,196 |
| Recurrent Unit Cost | \$27 |

Ghana’s 2004 EFA-FTI proposal shows a total of approximately \$78.389 million for salaries and \$35.218 million for all other recurrent expenditures, including donor funding. With a total estimated recurrent expenditure of \$113.5 million for an enrollment of 3,278,236 public school pupils, there is an annual cost of \$34.60 per pupil. The major reason for the increase in the per-pupil cost is the increase in teacher salaries, leading to a sharply higher wage bill.

Capital Costs

The capital costs for public primary schools involve classrooms, offices, storage space, and latrines. In remote areas, governments budget for, although they do not always provide, teacher bungalows, usually in blocks that can house up to four teachers. According to Orivel, the standard cost of a six-classroom school with a latrine is \$51,331. A four-teacher bungalow with a latrine costs \$38,250. As the average pupil/teacher ratio is 33, a six-classroom school serves 198 students. The capital cost per student is \$452.

Cost-Effectiveness

The analysis of cost-effectiveness is based on a comparison between School for Life and public primary schools on the three cost performance dimensions:

1. Access, reflected by the annual recurrent per-pupil cost
2. Completion, reflected by the expense of a pupil completing third grade equivalency
3. Learning, based on the percentage of pupils who achieve a minimum measurable level of competency at grade level

The cost-effectiveness of School for Life relative to public schools in Ghana is illustrated in the table below:

Cost-Effectiveness of School for Life and Public Schools

| | ACCESS Recurrent Unit Cost | COMPLETION Annual Recurrent Cost x Years in School / Completion Rate | LEARNING Completion Unit Cost / Percentage of Pupils Meeting Minimum Literacy Standards |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|---|---|
| School for Life | \$39 | \$43 | \$53 |
| Public School | \$27 | \$135 | \$1,500 |

It is important to note that although the annual recurrent unit costs for School for Life is slightly higher than the national average for Ghana’s public primary schools, School

for Life operates in areas where public schools have not been able to reach pupils and where, if they were to operate effectively, unit costs would undoubtedly be higher than the national average listed here. The relative efficiency of the School for Life program becomes evident when comparing cost of completion. Since School for Life only operates for nine months and has a 91 percent completion rate, it is more than three times as cost-effective than public schools in terms of completion.

The huge difference between School for Life and public schools in cost per learner meeting minimum standards is due to an 81 percent rate of literacy for School for Life, compared to a 9 percent minimum competency level on the CRT English language test in public schools. It is arguable that if only 9 percent of public school sixth graders were proficient, even fewer third graders would meet minimum standards, making the figure \$1,500 an underestimate of the cost of learning for third grade in public schools.

Critical Features of the School for Life Model

The School for Life Executive Board includes representatives of GDCA, the Ghana Friendship Groups in Denmark, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), and GES in the Northern Region. The Executive Board provides policy guidance and appoints senior staff at the regional and district levels. In its statement of purpose and principles, School for Life espouses a holistic approach to education and socioeconomic development, designing curricula that empower people to improve all aspects of their situation.

School for Life aims to develop in children skills for critical thinking and promotes active participation in the democratic process. School for Life builds synergy between the learner, the classroom, the home, and the community to facilitate mutual respect and understanding between sexes, ethnic groups, generations, and social groups.

School Organization

School for Life usually has one class within a single community or village. The pupil/teacher ratio may not exceed 25 to one, and students in a single class range in age from eight to 15 years old, with no determination for grade. All pupils study the same topics, with the older or more advanced helping others. In contrast, public school class size varies greatly, with Northern Region lower primary teachers often instructing more than 40 pupils. In communities with more than 25 children who want to enroll in School for Life, older students are taken first, followed by younger students over the following years until essentially all the children in the community have been enrolled.

Classroom arrangements are traditional with one teacher, a blackboard, and 20 to 25 children seated in chairs or on mats.

Schedule

School for Life sessions last nine months each year, from October to June, with July through September free for harvesting and planting in the farms. Classes are held each afternoon for five days a week, usually leaving free one market day and one religious



day—Fridays in Muslim communities and Sundays in Christian communities. Daily classes last for about three hours, with time off for important community events like funerals and holidays.

The school day includes time for sports, handicrafts, music, and dance, because art, culture, creativity, and physical fitness are important parts of children's lives. Classes even compose their own School for Life theme songs to enliven the tasks of teaching and learning.

Volunteer and Community-Based Facilitators

Facilitators are recruited directly from the communities in which they live. Instead of depending on formally trained teachers who are often difficult to attract to rural areas, facilitators are nominated and recruited by the communities themselves. Facilitators are preferably community development workers in whom the community has confidence. School for Life staff encourages the communities to nominate female facilitators to act as role models for girls. Facilitators mostly volunteer their time and are compensated with only an annual incentive equal to about half the price of a bicycle and monthly 'soap-money.' Communities also contribute food, small amounts of cash, or household labor as payment.

Facilitators initially receive a comprehensive three-week GES-run in-house training, complemented by refresher courses every three months at various district centers. Trainers are instructed in the School for Life approach and teach in the facilitator trainees' local language. Guest trainers also conduct sessions on various topics. After some years of service, facilitators have opportunities to further their education, for example by supporting potential teachers to gain formal, college-required teacher qualifications. School for Life supervisors also visit classes at least once per month to give facilitators on-the-spot training. Regular in-service training reinforces new skills sets, improves instruction quality, and helps rekindle the facilitators' commitment.

Local Language Textbooks

The textbook to pupil ratio is one to one. Language instruction follows a learner-centric sequence emphasizing phonetics. A comprehensive and detailed teaching manual in local language guides the facilitator through the literacy and numeracy curriculum so that they are trained in the language in which they will teach. Teaching and materials are developed in the languages spoken within the program communities (e.g., Dagbani, Likpakpaain, Ncaam, Anufo). The communities choose the language of instruction most suitable for the class. English, however, is not offered. School for Life also provides communities with a mini-library of extra local language texts to further sustain learning impact after program close.

Student-Teacher Relations

School for Life encourages a friendly and open relationship between teachers and students. Teachers encourage pupils to speak up, ask questions, and engage in discussions, which is simplified by conducting class in a local language. Compared

to public schools and according to observation, School for Life classrooms have a far higher level of participation, including oral readings from textbooks followed by group discussion. In addition to facilitating literacy and an easy transition to English as a second language, mother tongue instruction builds self-esteem and permits engagement of the larger community in classroom pursuits.

Curriculum

The School for Life curriculum does not follow the national curriculum, which relies on English as the medium of instruction and includes seven subjects, one of which is a Ghanaian language, and includes grades. School for Life curriculum includes only three areas of instruction—language, mathematics, and environmental studies—all three of which are integrated into each lesson. The themes of each lesson include familiar issues like livestock, hygiene, sanitation, and local geography. The texts facilitate classroom activities that include practice with theory. School for Life encourages students to reflect on classroom lessons at home and draw on their home experiences for their studies.

Everyday objects like seeds, pebbles, farming tools, and basket materials, which are familiar and in regular supply, become teaching aids. Cultural touchstones like stories, traditional games, plays, and songs, are used as the knowledge base for classroom instruction, often transferred to audiocassettes and other media for greater permanence. Functional literacy refers to the application of achieved knowledge. Active learner participation, focus on daily community-level activities, and learning by doing are major components of School for Life's pedagogic approach.

Local Committees

School for Life conducts orientation seminars for communities before establishing new programs, often with the support of the Department of Community Development (DCD), highlighting the importance of education in community development. Community members are engaged in the development process as they identify their facilitator and form local School for Life committees prior to applying for a new class. School for Life committees include three women and two men, among whom is usually a representative of the chief, local assembly, or women's organizer. The local committee formally applies for the School for Life literacy program and is responsible for supervision of day-to-day classroom monitoring, making decisions, tracking attendance, and organizing local support for the classroom facilitator. The makeup of the committee is determined by the larger community, who are regularly involved in class instruction on such traditional topics as crafts, gardening, drama, and dance.

Government Policy

In 2003, the Ministry of Education, following an in-depth education sector review and in consultation with development partners and stakeholders, formulated a comprehensive Education Strategic Plan. The plan explicitly includes complementary education programs as a means of reaching the EFA goals of access and equity. Under the policy goal Increase Access to and Participation in Education, the Education Access Strategies 6 and 7 are to "Encourage the Private Sector, CBOs, NGOs, FBOs and IGOs



and Development Partners,” “Support hard-to-reach children through complementary/alternative education programs,” and “Design and implement programs for the integration of complementary schools with formal schools.” This is Ghana’s first policy acknowledging and encouraging complementary education models for underserved areas.

School for Life advocates for various policy issues with the overall aim of drawing from its practical experience to improve access to quality basic education in Ghana:

- Promotion of School for Life methodology in formal schools
- Promotion of mother tongue teaching in formal schools
- Production of literacy/school materials in local languages
- Establishment of schools in remote, sparsely populated areas where School for Life has a cohort ready to move to grade four
- Adoption of alternative/flexible approaches to education for hard-to-reach children and communities (e.g., flexible calendars, no school uniforms)
- Use of rural volunteer teachers in formal schools to serve the most deprived areas and assist trained teachers in overpopulated schools
- Promotion of girls’ education and gender equity in general
- Promotion of free education and discouragement of fee collection—Ghana eliminated school fees in 2005 using capitation grants
- Encouragement of district assemblies to become responsible for out-of-school children and initiate measures to sustain School for Life impact

Beginning in 2004, USAID has supported expansion of School for Life through the Education Quality for All (EQUALL) Project. The program has moved to two new districts and added two new languages in the Northern Region.

Policy Issues

As School for Life expands and its influence grows, a number of policy issues emerge and are currently a matter of consultation and review at local and national levels.

Language

One of the most important elements of School for Life’s success is instruction in local languages. Policy at the national level places importance on learning and using English even before grade 4, though this is seldom accomplished outside urban centers. School for Life demonstrates how education systems can overcome difficulties caused by multiplicity of local languages, the lack of language-competent teachers, and the lack of appropriate reading materials. Nonetheless, both the Ministry of Education and the general public tend to view acquisition of English as the purpose of schools because examinations are conducted in English. Pressures to introduce English before literacy skills have been developed continue.

Facilitators

It is incredibly difficult to post and keep trained teachers in remote and rural villages. Moreover, formally trained teachers seldom know or can teach in local languages.

Communities, as a prerequisite to starting a School for Life class, identify, facilitate training of, and support volunteer teachers who already have local language skills. The policy issue is whether these volunteer teachers can become legitimate and qualified teachers and elevate their status. Negotiations between the Ministry of Education, EQUALL, and School for Life yielded a distance education program for the volunteer teachers to enter teacher training colleges or take part in distance education modules. The volunteer facilitators policy implemented by School for Life also allows accredited teachers to focus less on early primary grades and offer their services to higher grades where English is the language of instruction and a shortage of skilled, qualified teachers further complicates student retention issues.

Sustainability and Expansion

Virtually all of the financing necessary to support and expand School for Life comes from external sources like DANIDA and USAID. While Ghana's Ministry of Education endorses the program and sees it as an important element in meeting its Education Sector Plan targets for access and quality in the Northern Region, it does not expend public funds to support it. The question remains whether the government only sees such programs as acceptable as long as they are financed outside the public budget, If there were a decline in external funding, would that mean a contraction or collapse of the program? The policy issue is whether public funds can be used to support complementary education initiatives that demonstrate effectiveness and whether the government can manage such a grant program so as to maintain, if not enhance, that effectiveness.



Acknowledgements

This paper was written for EQUIP2 by Ash Hartwell (Education Development Center), 2006. A summary of findings from three case studies, *Meeting EFA: Cost-Effectiveness of Complementary Approaches*, is also available.

EQUIP2: Educational Policy, Systems Development, and Management is one of three USAID-funded Leader with Associate Cooperative Agreements under the umbrella heading Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). As a Leader with Associates mechanism, EQUIP2 accommodates buy-in awards from USAID bureaus and missions to support the goal of building education quality at the national, sub-national, and cross-community levels.

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