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ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS : MANAGEMENT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a report on a survey done to compare the academic performance of pupils in public and private junior secondary schools in Ghana. Data for the study were collected from a random sample of 800 pupils, 60 teachers, and 20 headteachers selected from 20 schools in the Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan areas. The results indicate that pupils in the private schools did far better than those in the public schools. The difference is attributed to the fact that the pupils in the private schools come predominantly from middle-class homes where parents set high academic standards for their children. The more important explanation is that the private schools are better equipped, better managed, and more supported by parents.

Introduction

Education is today recognised the world over as the single most important social institution that influences and is influenced by other social institutions. It is recognised that the social, economic, political, and cultural development of nations

depends largely on the quality and amounts of education their citizens have. The rise of Japan into the status of an economic giant today (Evans, 1991), as well as the emergence of Hong-kong, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and recently Malaysia, into economic miracles, have all been attributed to the heavy investments these countries made in the education of their citizens (Ranis, 1990). It is because of the strong faith in education as an engine of development that nations today invest so much in that social institution.

On the attainment of independence Ghana, like many other African and developing nations, embarked on an educational expansion programme. The Accelerated Development Plan for Education of 1951, and the Education Act of 1961 were both meant to increase access to education (Graham, 1976). The same object guided the New Educational Reforms of 1987. With

the exception of the Reforms of 1987, however virtually none of the previous educational programmes gave any serious attention to the question of education quality and pupils' academic achievements. Consequently, there is the complaint that academic standards have fallen, or are falling (Mensah, 1995). The greatest disappointment is caused by the observation that pupils'

academic performance in private schools is far higher than what prevails in the public schools, where the bulk of pupils receive education (Mensah, 1995).

The following statistics published by the Ministry of Education seems to underscore the allegations made by the concerned public.

Table 1
Criterion Reference Test Results for Private and Public Schools in Ghana : 1994, 1996, 1997

Year	Type of School	Subject	Mean Score	Percentage reaching mastery level
1994	Public	English	31.0	3.3
		Maths	27.7	1.5
	Private	English	58.8	51.4
		Maths	47.3	31.7
1996	Public	English	33.0	5.5
		Maths	28.8	1.8
	Private	English	61.0	56.5
		Maths	47.0	31.0
1997	Public	English	33.9	6.2
		Maths	29.9	2.7
	Private	English	67.4	68.7
		Maths	51.7	40.4

Source : Ghana, Ministry of Education/PREP :
Criterion Reference Test Reports 1994, 1996, 1997 (1999)

Table 1 clearly shows that even though both school types have been improving steadily in academic performance, the private schools far outdo the public schools. This study went beyond mere comparison of academic performance. The purpose was to account for the differences. The following questions guided the enquiry:

1. Do pupils in private basic schools perform better than their public school counterparts in English and Mathematics?
2. Do pupils in private basic schools come from higher-status homes?
3. Is academic performance associated with socio-economic background ?
4. Are teachers in the two school types similar in terms of professional qualification?
5. Are the two school types equally well equipped ?
6. Are the two school types equally well managed?

Literature Review

Most of the literature explain the increasing popularity of private

schooling, as well as why the greatest patronage comes from the elite. The first explanation is that private schools provide the mechanisms for social mobility (Cookson and Persell, 1985) in that they provide environments that are particularly conducive to the academic improvement of even the average student (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985). The other explanation is that private schooling is perceived as a mechanism for perpetuating the stratification system in that it provides excellent instruction guaranteeing high levels of academic performance (Sernau, 1993). There is paucity of explanation for the high academic performance of pupils in private schools relative to those in public schools in Ghana. The literature, however, provides explanations for academic performance in general. Those factors often cited to explain academic performance and educational attainment are conditions in the home, conditions in the school, and the level of motivation of the student.

With regard to conditions in the home, the socio-economic status of parents, the structure of the family, and sibling size have been cited as widespread factors. The literature suggests that elite parents set high

academic standards for their children at an early age. They also take great pains to draw their children's attention to what socio-economic success is, and the means to that end. Such children naturally tend to take their school work serious, and they invariably become high achievers (Addae Mensah, Djangmah, and Agbenyega, 1973).

Regarding the structure of the family the literature suggests that children in both-parents-present family contexts (intact families) do better on scholastic tests than children in single-parent family contexts do (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington, 1992). The explanation offered is that children in non-intact, especially mother-only, families often suffer educationally because they invariably lack enough emotional and social contact with both parents. Single parents, especially single mothers, may not be able to supervise and monitor their children's school work because they are invariably struggling to make ends meet.

Besides, the low scores at school made by children from non-intact homes, according to Mulkey and her associates (1992) are attributed to frequent absenteeism. This, they argue, explains why children in single-

parent families lower their grades by one-tenth of the grade point average, or one-eighth of the standard deviation when family background is controlled.

Using the resource dilution model, Blake (1989) shows that sibling size is inversely related to academic achievement and educational attainment. Resources such as time, money, attention, space, materials for learning, and so on, are not enough to go around all the children when they are too many relative to the family resources available. Thus, lacking conducive learning environments in the home, and lacking assistance in homework, children with many siblings cannot be expected to do well in school, when family resources are limited.

Many studies on school quality and its effect on learning outcomes indicate that the availability of textbooks is a basic prerequisite for ensuring effective learning (Heyneman and Loxley, 1983, Caillods, 1989; Altbach, 1987). The studies suggest that when textbooks are inadequate or are not available, pupils cannot be expected to do well academically.

In a Ghanaian study, Opare (1981) also found that motivation is a strong determinant of academic

performance. According to him, a student who is determined to excel in school would work hard on his books in order to attain the desired level of performance. The purpose of this study? is to examine the relevance of the factors reviewed thus far for explaining the disparities in the academic performance of pupils in private and public junior secondary schools in Ghana.

Method

The Samples

The samples of schools, pupils, teachers and headteachers involved in this study were selected from the Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan areas. These two metropolitan areas were selected because of the large numbers of private and public schools they have.

Ten junior secondary schools were randomly selected from each of the two metropolitan areas. The ten schools selected from each metropolitan area were made up of five private and five public schools. Four hundred third year pupils were also randomly selected from each metropolitan area. In each of the selected schools a sample of forty pupils (20 boys and 20 girls) was randomly selected. Thus in all, 20 schools and 800 pupils were randomly selected. In addition, the 10 headteachers in all the 10 schools in each of the metropolitan areas

were automatically involved in the study. Again, in each school, three teachers were randomly selected for involvement in the study. Thus in all 60 teachers were selected.

Instruments

A five-item questionnaire was designed for the student sample. The questionnaire sought socio-demographic and school-level information that were considered likely to explain academic performance. Another set of questionnaire was designed for teachers. The information sought from this questionnaire included the qualifications of teachers, headteachers' frequency of visits to teachers' classrooms, and teachers' regularity of setting and marking exercises and assignments. Unstructured interviews were held with headteachers to find out about their supervision and monitoring of teachers' work and punctuality. The interviews also sought information on school infrastructure as well as the contribution of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) to the schools.

Personal observations were used alongside the obstructive methods in collecting data to confirm information provided by respondents. Besides, specially constructed English and Mathematics tests were used to

Opare

measure pupils' academic achievements. The tests were based on the syllabuses and textbooks for junior secondary school form two and part of form three. The structure and contents of the tests were based on those of the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) papers.

Analysis and Results

The major task of the study was to seek answers to the research questions. First, the academic performance of pupils in private and public schools had to be compared. To this end the performance of the pupils in English language and Mathematics were compared using the student's T-test. The result of the t-tests indicated that pupils in the private schools outperformed those in the public schools in both English ($t = 10.39$, $p < .01$) and Mathematics ($t = 11.35$, $p < .01$). On the basis of these results it is concluded that pupils in private schools perform better

academically than pupils in public schools.

The second task was to find out if pupils in the private schools come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Using father's education as proxy for socio-economic background, it was found that 71% of the students in all the schools in general have fathers with secondary education or higher.

The t-test showed, however, that the fathers of pupils in the private schools are better educated than the fathers of pupils in the public schools ($t = 10.45$, $p < .01$). It is therefore concluded that pupils in private schools come from higher-status homes.

The third task was to determine the association between socio-economic background and students' academic performance. Pupils' scores in the English Language and Mathematics tests were cross-tabulated with father's education. The result of that operation is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Percentage Distribution of Pupils' Mathematics Scores
by Father's Education

Scores	Father's Education	
	Low	High
Low	55 (121)	30 (174)
High	45 (99)	70 (406)
Total	100 (220)	100(580)

Note : Absolute numbers are in parentheses.

As indicated in Table 2, pupils whose fathers are highly educated are more represented in the high-scoring group than those whose fathers are not so highly educated (70% as opposed to 30%). There is thus a relationship between socio-economic background and academic performance ($X^2 = 15.3$, $df\ 1$, $p < .01$). There was no statistically significant relationship between socio-economic background and performance in English. The urban background of the pupils may account for the lack of variation between the two types of students. In the urban setting students all the time see and hear people communicate in English. They also have access to newspapers, the television, and radio. All these experiences enhance the English Language learning process.

The fourth task was to find out if teachers in the private and public schools are similar in terms of professional status. Information from the teachers' questionnaires were collated for this purpose. It was found that 30% of the teachers in the public schools had the teacher's certificate 'A' 4-year, while 60% and 10% have the certificate 'A' 3-year post-secondary and the teachers' diploma respectively. On the other hand, 70% of the teachers in the private schools are untrained. Thirty

percent are trained. A greater proportion of those trained are retired teachers. The data thus clearly show that teachers in the public schools in the study areas are almost all trained whereas only a small proportion of those in the private schools are trained.

The fifth task was to determine if the private schools and public schools are equally well equipped. Data collected through personal observation and the unstructured interviews with headteachers were used to this end. It was observed that the private schools have more and better furniture for both pupils and teachers. They also have sufficient textbooks and stationery. Most of the pupils also have their own textbooks. The private schools also have better stocked libraries and other teaching-learning materials. Some of them even have computers and computer laboratories. Few of the public schools are so well equipped. In some of the public schools a lot of congestion was observed. The congestion was due to limited space and inadequacy of furniture. From these observations one can rightly conclude that the private schools are better equipped than the public schools.

The last task was to find out if the private schools and public schools are equally well managed and

supported. Personal observation, coupled with data from the teachers and headteachers yielded the information for this task. It was observed that monitoring and supervision of the teacher's work are a constant practice in the private schools. The headteachers insist that lesson plans are up-to-date. They also check on punctuality, regularity, and use of instructional hours. This rigid enforcement of the rules and principles were found to be either non-existent or inadequate in most of the public schools studied.

Differences in the climates prevailing in the two school types were also observed. Activities in the private schools were found to be goal-oriented. The teachers' task was to ensure that the students master learning tasks and do well in examinations. Decision making was virtually left in the hands of the proprietors and their administrators. Those conditions found prevailing in the private schools were not found in the public schools, where the teachers were found to perform their tasks at their own pace and convenience. Teachers in the public schools, however, were found to be actively involved in the day-to-day decision making and running of the school.

Disparities in the motivation of teachers were also found between the private schools and the public

schools. Whereas teachers in the private schools receive some incentives from the school authorities and some parents from time to time, those in the public schools receive virtually none. Parents with pupils in the public schools even hardly visit the schools, much less give the teachers incentives. The PTAs and SMCs of the private schools were also found to be very supportive of the efforts of the schools. On the basis of these observations one can say that the private schools are better managed than the public schools.

The type of family context in which pupils were embedded was also examined. This involved an examination of the number of siblings each pupil had, and whether they were in intact families or non-intact families. About 63% of the pupils in both school types were found to have an average of four siblings. However, when this was examined more closely it was observed that more of the pupils in the private schools have fewer siblings (an average of 2) than pupils in the public schools. This means that sibling size and type of school a pupil is likely to attend are related ($X^2 = 8.31$, $df 1$, $P < .01$), and that the smaller the sibling size the more likely it is that a child will be put in a private school. About 62% of the pupils in the private schools, and 31% of those in the public

schools were found to come from intact (both-parents-present) homes. Going by Astone and McInahan's studies, one would say that pupils in the private schools live in more educationally conducive home environments.

Discussion

This study was designed to find out if in reality pupils in private schools are academically better than those in public schools. It was also designed to explain the disparities in academic performance between the two school types, if there are disparities at all. The results of the study confirm that pupils in private schools actually outperform their public school counterparts in academic work.

The results show further that most of the pupils in the private schools come from middle class homes. A relationship between socio-economic background and academic performance has also been found.

We can rightly infer from the above that pupils in the private schools are academically better than their public school counterparts because of the middle class backgrounds of the former. It must be argued from the point of view of matching theory that middle class parents are more conscious of the benefits of education. They also know better

what socio-economic success means, and the means to that end. Such parents tend to communicate this knowledge to their school-going children and wards, who in turn, get inspired to work hard and do well in school. The social support middle class parents offer to their children thus explains the high academic achievement of pupils in private schools relative to those in public schools.

Besides the social support that middle class parents offer to their children and wards, there is also the fact that such parents also put pressure on their children to study hard. They also monitor their progress in school, making their children feel a sense of mattering. Such a sense of mattering invariably tends to serve as a motivator to pupils to learn hard.

The finding that pupils in the private schools in general come from intact homes, and that they have fewer siblings are quite insightful. When we consider these facts against the background that most of them come from middle-class backgrounds, we can rightly infer that middle-class parents understand the dilution effect of having many children. Since middle-class parents have fewer children, they are more able to distribute their resources more evenly over their children. It is natural, therefore, that children of

middle-class parents, who happen to be over-represented in the private schools, are better academic achievers than their public school counterparts because they have a wider range of parental resources to draw on.

Furthermore, since more of the pupils in the private schools have both parents co-present, it is natural that parental monitoring and supervision of such children's school work would be effective. This also might account for the high academic performance of pupils in private schools, relative to that of those in public schools.

The most important finding from this study is that the private schools, as compared to the public schools, are better equipped. They are also better managed. Thus, if, in spite of the relative under-qualification of their teachers private schools outperform the public schools in academic work, then we can attribute that phenomenon to the better equipment and management of the private schools. The lesson we can gather from this idea is that the schools must be run as profit-oriented business units with clearly defined goals and modes of operation. For example, the public schools, taking their cue from their private counterparts, must have pupils' academic achievement as their prime goal. The monitoring and supervision of teachers' work must be effectively done. Teachers'

punctuality and regularity, the way they conduct their lessons as well as their setting and marking of exercises and assignments - in fact their use of instructional time - must be closely monitored, but not policed.

All the above call for the appointment of effective headteachers for the schools in the public system. This cannot be possible, however, unless the position of the headteacher is made substantive. It means that the selection or appointment of headteachers for the nation's schools should not be based merely and only on length of service or academic qualification. The person's managerial and entrepreneurial competence must be important criteria for making individuals heads of public schools. What this translates into is that the position of the headteacher of a public school should no longer devolve on a person: it must be competed for, and the one with the greatest promise of achieving results must be selected.

This writer is of the conviction that it is time the Ghana Education Service took bold steps to deviate from the practice of carrying the headteacher's job to the longest-serving teacher with little consideration for initiative, drive, resourcefulness, and managerial acumen.

Conclusion

Academic success is a good measure of pupils' mastery of know-how and know-what. Hence the academic achievements of pupils are of great concern not only to parents, but also to the public at large. That is why the relative under-achievement of public schools has generated such a serious public outcry.

The relative academic success of private schools is due largely to their better management. This suggests that the public schools too must focus on the managerial competence of the prospective headteacher, for it is only when the headteacher has managerial acumen that he or she can harness resources in the school and the community to promote pupils' learning. In order that the public school headteacher can have the legitimated power to do this, the position must be selective rather than appointive. Otherwise pupils in the public schools would always receive the warning that "Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here."

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