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Towards Improving the Quality of Basic Education in Ghana, Teacher Licensure and Matters Arising, Challenges, and the Way Forward

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Abstract:

The National Teaching Council of Ghana has been mandated to ensure that aside possessing the requisite academic and professional certificate to practice as a teacher, one needs to be successful in a licensure examination before he or she could have his or her documents processed for a teaching appointment. This study specifically sought to establish what teachers' perceptions were regarding teacher licensure examination as a means to achieving teacher quality and improved student performance. The study found that teacher licensure examination was a good idea by government, as it would in no small measure contribute to the recognition of the teaching profession. However, the entire process required re-structuring. The restructuring process must begin with a wider stakeholder consultation and engagement. Also, there was the urgent need to develop pragmatic policies as guidelines to the entire licensing process, right from registration, content of the examinations, administration of the examinations, scoring, publication of results, issuance of the license, and renewal of license among others. Yet still, there was the firm belief that when the licensure examinations were incorporated into the initial teacher education curriculum, there would not be so much agitation, and potential teachers would write without any apprehension.

Keywords: Licensure, teaching, professionalism, quality, restructuring

1. Introduction

The Government of Ghana has tried in various ways to show her commitment towards the achievement of Universal Primary Education (MDG 2) and quality of education for all. The government has shown this commitment through policy directives and interventions such as the Education Strategy Plan (ESP) for 2003-2015, the Growth Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education Programme and the 1992 Constitution of Ghana. Strategies adopted to operationalize the policies include the introduction of the Capitation Grant (School Fee Abolition), expansion of Early Childhood Development services, promotion of measures to improve Gender Parity in primary schools, and the introduction of Nutrition and School Feeding programmes. These measures have led to improvement in various key indicators in education in recent years, notably, Gross Enrolment Rates, Gender Parity Index, Net Enrolment Rate and Net Admission Rate.

2. Education Policy Formulation in Ghana

A policy is a plan of action for guiding, directing or administering affairs to achieve a set target or goal. Policies are therefore goal-motivated and goal-targeted. For example, the various plans, strategies and other operational means evolved or adopted for developing, maintaining and processing the education delivery system constitute the education policies of Ghana. The process of policy formulation begins with a felt need for a change in the education delivery system. Such a change may be necessitated for various reasons as mentioned above. In Ghana, it is usual to respond to demands for change by first setting up a national committee or commission with membership from a wide range of stakeholder organizations to review the situation. For example, the Education Reform Review Committee of 1993/94 was set up with a mandate to review Ghana's policies on basic education. Such reviews draw heavily on the analysis of the experiences gained in the implementation of policies that are the focus/targets of the review. The concern here is not only to find out why targets are not being achieved and whether implementation has gone on as planned. It is also to examine what unintended outcomes or unforeseen obstacles have emerged during the process of implementation.

Central to the Government of Ghana's (GoG) Poverty Strategy Reduction (GPRS) is the provision of quality education. One of the key qualities of education policy indicators under the Education Sector Plan (ESP) and GPRS II is to improve the quality of teaching and learning for enhanced pupil/student achievement and the improvement of the quality of academic and research programmes. Under the GPRS II the policy was to improve the quality of teaching and learning and enhance the linkage between academic research in all sectors of the economy (MOESS, 2007). It seems highly likely that the achievement of universal participation in education is fundamentally dependent upon the quality of education available. Factors usually considered when determining the quality of education could be grouped into input variables, process and systematic factors, outcome variables (such as examination results), and proxy measures (such as repetition

and dropout rates). The questions that remain are what are the critical factors that determine the quality of education offered by schools and how do these factors influence the performance of learners? These seem to differ from country to country as the goals of education are not the same. In Ghana, the measurement of the quality of education has focused principally on resource inputs and outcomes. Hence, the quality of education is measured against stated curriculum goals and objectives, and a range of elements including the level of student achievement, the qualification of teachers, pupil-teacher ratio, the availability of textbooks, school facilities and equipment, and cognitive achievement. Whether education provided is of good or poor quality depends on the degree to which it measures up to the goals and objectives prescribed. Getting the right people to become teachers has long been a source of concern to successive governments. Various reforms on education have considered the teacher factor prominently. The current reforms sweeping throughout the entire educational system in Ghana thus places the teacher at the centre of the entire reform process. People have come to the realization that students develop under effective teachers. As pointed out by Amissah, Sam-Togoe, Amoah and Mereku (2002), "a teacher affects eternity – an average teacher would affect directly or indirectly lives of as many as 20,000 people before retirement". (2002, p.20). Surprisingly, the conditions under which teachers work in sub-Saharan African countries in particular according to Amissah et al. is just untenable and frustrating making them adopt a lukewarm attitude towards the teaching profession and an unprofessional; attitude towards students. In Nigeria for example, government officials, complained that during their visit to supervise schools, teachers were absent or late for no apparent reason. Other surveys according to Amissah et al. report high absenteeism among teachers in Liberia, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Ghana. Some of the factors, which hinder teacher motivation in sub-Saharan Africa include poor working conditions, low absolute salaries, low professional status and scarce opportunities for professional development. According to GNAT and TEWU (2009), it appears these factors do not only hinder teacher motivation but are also contributory factors to teacher attrition.

3. Teacher Licensure

Adopting a new regulation (licensing) to guide the evaluation of all educators (teachers) serving in position may be a good assessment portfolio to enhance teaching in education. Educators and Teachers graduating from the colleges of education and universities often may or may not meet the standard to impact through the transfer of knowledge. Even though these educators' evaluation mechanism for professionalism has the tendencies to keeping knowledgeable and skilled teachers in the classroom and poor performance teachers out, it is imperative to standardize the profession. Over the years, alternative methods of classroom teaching have been developed in response to the dire need for teachers to get themselves updated on methodologies and modernized approaches to handling subjects and students. It is often seen when students fail in schools (subjects); student failure are attributed to teachers shirking their classroom responsibilities. The clarion call for improvement in the quality of teachers has come in the wake of several research reports that show substantial differences in student achievement across different teachers (Wright et al. 1997). The McKenzie report (2007) opined that students with high teachers will progress 3 times faster than students with low performing teachers, especially, at the primary level.

In Ghana, majority of teachers at the Basic school level do not possess the minimum requirements to practice the art, there is very little regulation governing their practice. The National Teaching Council of Ghana has been mandated to ensure that aside possessing the requisite academic and professional certificate to practice as a teacher, one needs to be successful in a licensure examination before he or she could have his or her documents processed for a teaching appointment. It is of great concern that teaching in Ghana has not really assumed professional status like other professions such as legal, medical and other allied professions. From what exists on the ground, it appears that practitioners of teaching in Ghana see the teaching field as a stepping stone whilst they continue to search elsewhere for better paying jobs.

The study specifically sought to establish what teachers' perceptions were regarding teacher licensure test as means to achieving teacher quality and improved student performance. Improving the quality and quantity of the teaching workforce entailed several delicate issues to be attended to, including; teacher welfare that cuts across, good accommodation, access to health care, security and many other trivial but indispensable necessities that have been shirked by government. In addition, infrastructural needs, teaching aids, credible supervision, data on teacher efficiency and post in-service training workshops have various consequences on quality education and student achievement.

Just as teachers are blamed for the failure of their students; teachers also censure the blame on government for failing to provide the infrastructures, learning aids, incentives, and motivation, to facilitate teaching. Teachers again, criticize parents for sidestepping their role as parents or guidance. Teachers are in the nucleus blaming government and parents, while government and parents also blame teachers for circumventing their roles.

Ghana had had enough of the blame game, so we turn to an alternative that presents more advantages towards enhancing the quality of tuition; Teacher Licensure. The Education Act, 2008 (Act 778) makes provision for the implementation of Teacher Licensure in Ghana. According to Act 778, the National Teaching Council (NTC) is to "register teachers after they have satisfied the appropriate conditions for initial licensing and issue the appropriate license". However, since 2008 this function of the NTC has not yet been implemented despite efforts at initiating it.

In Ghana, public school teachers are enrolled in the colleges of education to be trained as "professional teachers" or attend university of education as tutors. Public school teachers are trained for a three-year diploma in basic education and a four-year Bachelor of Education from the university. Teachers from the colleges of education are often described as trained teachers or "professional teachers" as against those from the universities (tutors). Teacher professionalism is an undefined concept in the Ghana Education Service (GES). Trained teachers are directly posted by GES to schools where their services are most needed immediately while graduates from the University of Education must apply to schools after National

Service, desiring as a choice to teach in the public or private school. The trained teachers are fully confirmed as teachers after a year of regular teaching by Circuit Supervisors (CS), the confirmed trained teachers may choose not to further or upgrade his academic credential till pension. In-service trainings and workshops are organized periodically for teachers and tutors to meet the new adopted methods of teaching and mastering of certain subjects. Teachers and tutors are promoted as experiences are gained over the years. This trend runs throughout the life cycle of teachers. Promotion is often done through upgrade of teacher's academic qualification, number of years of practice and rarely by recommendations from superiors or a Director of Education.

4. Empirical Research on Teacher Licensure

Various educational reforms that have been passed in Ghana have had very little impact on the teacher whom almost everyone attests to as the pivot around which the reforms revolves. According to Kwofie (2017), education reforms in Ghana have had very little impact in addressing teacher crises and teacher issues. In Ghana for instance, past educational reforms have failed to enforce standards for teachers to work with. The situation is not different in sub-Saharan African. For instance the Teacher's Registration Council of Nigeria (2010) advocates that teaching just like other professions now requires that only those who are adequately prepared and regulated should be entrusted with the teaching-learning process.

Studies carried out by Buddin and Zamarro on teacher quality, teacher licensure tests, and student achievement pointed out that although teacher quality is an important determinant of student achievement, measured teacher qualifications and preparations explain little of the observed differences in student outcomes across teachers. However, research evidence provides little indication of how teacher quality can be enhanced. In their attempt to address issues of this nature, the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) was empowered by TRCN Act 31 of 1993, section 1(1) to regulate and control the teaching profession in Nigeria "in all aspects and ramifications". The Act also gave TRCN the responsibility to determine who is a teacher in Nigeria; and to determine the level of knowledge and skills required to be a teacher and to raise the level from time to time (Nwosu, 2017). On his part Kwofie 2017, opined that to improve teacher quality and quantity, some issues remain to be attended to. Such issues include teacher welfare issues such good accommodation, access to health care, security and many other trivial but indispensable necessities. The list includes good infrastructures, relevant teaching and learning materials and Post-in-service training workshops. All these according to Kwofie (2017) have various consequences on the quality of education and student achievement.

Just as teachers are blamed for the failure of their students, teachers also censure the blame on government for failing to provide the infrastructures, learning materials, incentives and motivation, to facilitate teaching. Teachers again criticize parents for sidestepping their role as parents or guardians.

5. Teacher Licensure in Ghana: Matters Arising

The Education Act, 2008 (Act 778) makes provision for the implementation of teacher licensure in Ghana. Since 2018, the Act has been operational. It has successfully conducted two examinations to license prospective teachers. As it stands now, licensing will continue to be a benchmark for the professionalization of teaching across the country at various levels of the educational sector despite other pre-requisites in academic and professional qualifications to be acquired from colleges of education and the universities.

The introduction of teacher licensing towards teacher professionalism brought in its wake the National Teaching Standards (NTS). The National Teaching Standards represent the first ever collectively agreed standards to guide teacher preparation and practice in the country. The standards have been developed as a professional tool to guide teacher educators, teachers, student teachers and other stakeholders in education to identify in clear and precise terms what teachers are expected to possess and some behaviour they are supposed to exhibit. (NTS 2017)

The National Teaching Standards is organized around three (3) themes, thus:

Professional values and Attitudes. Professional knowledge, and Professional practice.

Though licensing will not directly guarantee student achievement and outcome, if proper standards are set and followed, its trickledown effect will be the development of teachers and will in turn rub-off the students they inspire and mentor. Since student development is not only measured in grades, it would be profitable to have teachers that inspire growth in children in and outside the classroom. The impact intended for licensing teachers will reflect in improved student outcome when the evaluation system is able to check and correct imbalances in the entire educational system.

Though teacher quality has been found to have a positive association with teacher effectiveness and also of student performance, there are other equally important variables, those, that are important, vary according to cultural contexts. As captured in the McKenzie report (2007), students with high performing teachers will progress three (3) times faster than students with low performing teachers, especially at the basic level. Nevertheless, it is true to say those teachers who are motivated to teach and who like what they do are generally good teachers (Avalos) and Haddad, 1981).

6. Pitfalls of the First Two Teacher Licensure Examinations

Considerable resources were expended on the examinations. Prospective teachers were made to pay and register for the examination. The maiden examinations saw teachers pay an amount of Two Hundred Ghana (GH¢ 200.00) as registration fees. Unsuccessful candidates were paid One Hundred Ghana Cedis (GH¢ 100.00) as resit fees before they were permitted to resist the examinations. It is on paper that subsequent resit will cost more.

Perceived Leakage of examination questions: There were rumors, that the licensure examinations were leaked and that several of the candidates had access to the test items through various social media platforms. If this claim was true, then

the credibility, and validity of the examinations were at stake. Any decision that the Ghana Education Service would therefore make out of such scores would be inappropriate and unsound.

Restriction of entry into the teaching service. Take it or leave it, the fact remains that, once people have to register and write examinations, despite the fact that they graduated from various teacher training institutions and the universities, there would not be automatic guarantee that once they registered and sat for a licensure examinations, they would pass and be posted. In the event that everybody passed, there was still the belief that government would use certain tactics to cut down the number of successful individuals because of government's inability to recruit and pay.

7. Perception of Teachers about Teacher Licensure, Examinations

The news of teacher licensing in Ghana was received with mixed reactions among the Ghanaian populace. Practicing teachers and teacher trainees in particular were dumbfounded when the news first broke out. Some teachers and trainees started questioning the credibility of the certificates offered by various teacher training institutions as compared to the one-shot licensure examinations which were to be used as a determinant for entry into the teaching profession.

Ten teachers, (five newly trained and five practicing teachers) were interviewed as to how they perceived the new policy of licensing teachers. Response from one of the practicing teachers was "I was shocked and saddened when Ghana web news agency published a news item with the caption: 'Bad Teachers' reason for the introduction of license exams' – GES, in 16th August 2017. Two teachers responded same by saying that they doubt the credibility of the license and question whether it was not a tactics government was using to reduce teacher intake? News item captured by Ghana web news with the caption "teachers will now have to pass a special examination before being granted the license to teach received mist reactions " if the training and formation teachers receive in their various institutions of study are not good enough, then license exams also is not good enough. This won't solve our problems as a nation. What will solve our woes is a redesign of our curriculum from theory-based knowledge to productive and practical based knowledge (Ghana web news of 16th August 2017.

A newly graduated teacher who was interviewed responded that the way forward towards improving teacher quality and student performance was not license examinations perse but ensuring that the fundamentals were strong and working. The teacher continued to say that what will solve the issue was a redesign of the curriculum from theory-based knowledge. However, the teacher in question was not totaling against the licensing of teachers. Another teacher who was interviewed about the process responded and the interaction is captured as follows:

Interviewer: What do you know about license in general?

Interviewee: it's like permission granted to an individual by law to engage in or perform a specific task.

Interviewer: What is teacher licensing?

Interviewee: Teacher licensing is basically the process of ensuring that every teacher has a license that is issued by GES to teach.

Interviewer: How can one acquire a teacher license?

Interviewee: One can acquire a teacher license by passing the license exams after completing a three year or four-year education program at a Teacher Training College or University respectively.

Interviewer: How is the acquisition of teacher license done?

Interviewee: by registering online for index number. Then a date and venue are set for the exams where one is required to write three papers namely; essential skills, literacy and numeracy.

Interviewer: Is the G.E.S responsible for this examination?

Interviewee: I heard it's the national teacher council, but they are under G.E.S

Interviewer: Do you think the subject for the examination are enough?

Interviewee: Yes, they are?

Interviewer: Are the subject worth testing the teacher's capabilities to teach?

Interviewee: I don't think so. I think there should be a practical aspect where a teacher is given a topic to teach in their field of study so teachers could be assessed by observation.

Interviewer: How many hours do you spend on writing each paper.

Interviewee: It depends, some papers take two hours others take one hour thirty minutes.

Interviewer: Where you familiar with the subject matter in the items set for the exams?

Interviewee: Some of them

Interviewer; What was the nature of the questions?

Interviewee: Objectives and written

Interviewer: What are some of the challenges of teacher licensing?

Interviewee: Its quite scary since we don't know the angles from which the questions will be coming from.

Interviewer: Do you think the teacher licensure should be done at the Teacher Education Institutions like the colleges of education and the universities, so you pass out with it?

Interviewee: Exactly, because some of the questions in the Essential Skills will still be fresh in our minds.

Interviewer: do you think by licensing teachers they will get a better condition of service?

Interviewee: Not better than how it is now because the result might not be valid reliable since some people can cheat to pass.

Interviewer: State in four ways how you think this licensure could be improved.

Interviewee: By involving the Teacher Training Colleges and the universities

Assessing teachers through practical teaching. Issuing license to graduate from the Teacher Education Institutions so far as they pass their final exams. Testing teachers based on their specialty and professionalism.

8. Potential Merits of Teacher Licensing

Licensing of teachers will improve professionalization of teaching. Through teacher licensing, teachers' status and image in the eyes of the public would change. The public will begin to build trust for teachers. Secondly, licensing teachers will boost the confidence society has in the teaching profession, just as society has confidence in professionals such as doctors and lawyers.

Also, licensing teachers will weed off all categories of non-professional teachers from the education enterprise and lead to the recruitment of more qualified people into the teaching profession.

Teacher licensure will help clean the payroll of ghost names from the Ghana Education Service payroll. It is alleged that due to lack of strict formal checks and easy entry to the teaching field, people easily smuggle ghost names into the Ghana education payroll.

9. Conclusion and the Way Forward

Teacher licensure examination is a good idea by government, as it will in no small measure contribute to the recognition of the teaching profession. However, the entire process requires re-structuring. The restructuring process must begin with a wider stakeholder consultation and engagement. Also, there is the urgent need to develop pragmatic policies as guidelines to the entire licensing process, right from registration, content of the exams, administration of the exams, scoring, publication of results, issuance of the license, and renewal of license among others. Yet still, there is the firm belief that when the licensure examinations are incorporated into the initial teacher education curriculum, there will not be so much agitation and potential teachers will write without even realizing that they have written it. The decision to license teachers, although is a move in the right direction, has come with its own challenges. However, it is better late than never. If public sensitization and education continues through public stakeholder interaction on the way forward, the policy of licensing teachers will yield positive results in the not too distant future and will contribute greatly to change the face of the teaching profession making the profession more attractive and effective. Wrong timing of the examination was one of the challenges among others. Here the teachers were very emphatic that after their various training Colleges and Universities they should have written the exams in the same Institutions as part of their final examination. The sentiment expressed was that the teacher licensure examinations could be added to their final examinations taken in their various institutions so that they would be certified once they graduated from school. It was also clear during the interview that teachers wished they could be tested in their areas of specialization. The licensure could also include practical teaching and the marks added to grade that teacher concerned. This would be similar to what is done in the licensure of drivers in Ghana where there is a practical aspect of the process as well as a theoretical aspect of it as well.

To conclude, teacher licensure in Ghana Education Service is very important if teacher's professionalism is the way to improve the recognition and the improvement in the conditions of service. A critical look should be given to the implementation of the Act that mandates the National Teaching Council to organize the licensure examination.

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