

Executive Summary of

Evaluation of the BTL and ASTEP Programs in the Northern, Eastern and Volta Regions of Ghana

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There is a crisis of reading achievement in public schools in Ghana. Reading achievement levels as measured by the Criterion Referenced Test (CRT, 2000) indicate that fewer than 10% of the school children at primary level six are able to read with grade level mastery. It is not surprising then that Kraft recently concluded, “*There can be no question that the fundamental problem still facing the Ghanaian schools...remains basic literacy skills in English or Ghanaian languages*” (Kraft, 2003, p. 3).

Responding to these findings, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports/Ghana Education Service (MOEYS/GES) has emphasized literacy and numeracy in English and a Ghanaian language as a key intervention area in its Education Strategic Plan (ESP). In support of the implementation of this plan, USAID/Ghana’s new Education Strategic Objective is focused on *ensuring that the majority of children who enter and complete primary schools in Ghana are able to read with grade level understanding*. As part of its strategic development process, and following a recommendation by Dr. Richard Kraft, USAID/Ghana undertook plans to pilot a reading program similar to the BreakThrough to Literacy (BTL) approach operated by the Molteno Project in South Africa.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the MOEYS/GES and USAID/Ghana contracted with the Molteno Project to undertake a BTL pilot in the Northern and Volta Regions of Ghana. At the same time, another literacy pilot program was undertaken in the Afram Plains area of Ghana. This pilot was based on materials and training developed by the Assistance to Teacher Education Project (ASTEP) with funding from the German Technical Co-operation (GTZ).

In order to examine the implementation of these two pilot programs and to determine whether these programs merited expansion, USAID/Ghana entered into an agreement with the International Reading Association for assistance in conducting an evaluation. This evaluation was intended to determine the levels of reading skills of pupils at the end of primary one in respective pilot schools, to provide recommendations designed to improve the implementation of the two programs, and to promote synergies and collaboration in the implementation of the programs as part of the literacy in English and a Ghanaian language focus area of the Education Strategic Plan.

The Problem and the Programs

Ghana is a country where very few children can read with understanding at the end of grade 6, and there are serious regional and gender-based differences. Poor, rural children and adults are much less likely to be able to read and comprehend texts than urban or more affluent individuals. In addition, the gender gap is critical, with women lagging significantly behind their male counterparts. Recent initiatives to promote free, universal education have been somewhat successful but this success has carried its own burden, since there are not enough classrooms, teachers, or instructional materials to support universal education. These problems are especially acute in the Northern and some other regions—in areas deemed “deprived.” Although recent reform initiatives on the part of the MOEYS and many of its donor partners have been helpful, pupil performance in the area of literacy is still a matter of serious concern. Importantly, pupils’ literacy performance is unacceptably low in both their local language(s) and in the official English language. In summarizing the need for the current literacy thrust, the Terms of Reference (USAID, 2003) asserted that “Ghanaian children grow as illiterates in their own languages as well as in the English language.”

While there are important differences in the two pilot programs, both introduce first-year students to literacy using their local dialect as the vehicle for instruction. Both programs include a more

interactive and engaging method than has been typical of Ghanaian instruction and each takes a student-centered approach. In other African countries, BTL has been successful in teaching children to read and write using the children's own language and the local language as the basis for instruction. Students generally spend quite a lot of time creating and reading their own words and sentences. The program is intended for P1 only, after which students are expected to "bridge" to English. The ASTEP program was actually conceived as a teacher-training method and, as a result, has a less structured approach. On the other hand, an array of materials is available in this program for teacher read-alouds and for student reading as well. The ASTEP materials and approach are intended for use in grades P1-P3.

Summary of Findings

Pupils' literacy development was evaluated using a battery of assessments that measured a variety of reading skills. In addition, observations, questionnaires, and interviews were employed to collect information about the attitudes of teachers and administrators, about the teaching/learning environment, the effectiveness of implementation, the suitability of materials, and about prospects for sustainability.

Pupil performance. Students' overall literacy achievement was assessed by combining scores from all the subtests into three aggregate scores that reflect different "stages" of literacy development. The first "stage" was assessed using an aggregate score comprised of three Emergent Literacy Indicators—Name Writing, Alphabet Writing, and Concepts of Print. The second "stage" is reflected in scores from two subtests measuring phonics and word reading abilities—Word Writing and Word Recognition. The third aggregate score is comprised of the Oral Reading and Comprehension subtests. As would be expected, pupils performed best on the Emergent Literacy Indicators, less well on the Word and Sound Indicators, and not very well at all on the Oral Reading and Comprehension Indicators.

Although students' did better on emergent literacy tasks than on the more sophisticated reading and comprehending, the results show that many cannot write their own name or write the alphabet or handle a book appropriately. That is a matter of extreme concern. The P1 pupils being evaluated were completing one whole year of schooling. It is hard to imagine what the children have been doing for a year if they have not at least managed to acquire this limited knowledge and skill.

In general, pupils in the BTL pilot schools performed better than students in the non-pilot schools. In addition, students in the Northern Region and the Afram Plains generally outperformed pupils in the implementing and non-implementing ASTEP schools in the Eastern region. Importantly, the impact of the programs was more apparent in the BTL pilot schools (versus non-pilots) than in the ASTEP implementing and non-implementing schools. The results of the Oral Reading and Comprehension Indicators are of particular importance. Only 40 of 216 pupils tested were able to manage *any* oral reading and text comprehension. This number is extremely small and virtually all of those who could read and comprehend grade-appropriate texts were in the pilot schools. Roughly 38% and 53% of children in pilot schools in the Northern and Volta regions respectively were able to do at least some reading with comprehension. While the numbers are not as large as we might like, this is an encouraging start given that the pilots were not implemented until mid-year.

Finally, it is important to note that there was considerable variation within groups and regions. The between-school differences in the Afram Plains region are especially notable and not entirely explicable by self-reported implementation. Although not quite so dramatic, there are,

nevertheless, similar between-school differences among the BTL schools also. What is clear is that some schools and teachers (even within the same district and general socioeconomic conditions) are doing much better than others. The most noticeable differences are between pilot and non-pilot schools, but even among the pilot schools there are some that are doing quite a bit better than others.

Attitudes and support. Generally, everyone involved in the pilot programs (district personnel, head teachers, P1 teachers, parents and community members) expressed enthusiasm for the pilot programs. They agreed that these programs were suitable and relevant, that they were far superior to the traditional approach, and that they should be expanded to include more Ghanaian languages and schools. Specific benefits noted included: improved teaching and learning of the Ghanaian language; attitudinal changes on the part of pupils and teachers in the form of punctuality, regular attendance and increased enrollment in P1; and more active participation of pupils in lessons. In addition, many noted that the programs (especially BTL) had increased parents' interest in their children's schooling. Both BTL and ASTEP teachers indicated that as a result of the programs they enjoy teaching more, feel they are better teachers, teach differently than before, and that the children enjoy class more. Parents and community members asserted that the programs were suitable because they liked the emphasis on the local language. At the same time, they acknowledged the importance of learning to read and write English, since it is an international/national language used for examinations.

Everyone who participated in this evaluation indicated that they wanted to find ways to be supportive of the pilot programs. It is noteworthy that virtually all of the BTL pilot school communities reported providing supports that were specific to the needs of the program – sometimes in innovative ways. Many parents and PTAs purchased mats and exercise books and some PTAs even provided free lunch to the P1 teacher, worked a P1 teacher's farm for her, or raised funds for a P1 teacher as compensation for the extra work being done.

Teaching/learning environment. There was strong evidence of the impact of the BTL program on the classroom environment. "Talking walls" were evident in almost all classrooms. Print-rich environments, with the benches organized for group work were in sharp contrast to the BTL non-pilot classrooms and the ASTEP classrooms, which reflected a more traditional environment. In these non-pilot classrooms there were typically virtually no reading and writing materials visible on the walls or being used by children. A recitation mode of teaching prevailed in contrast to the interactive and hands-on instruction in the BTL pilots. There was, however, little difference between the implementing and non-implementing ASTEP classrooms and ASTEP classrooms looked more like the BTL *non*-pilot classrooms than the BTL pilot classrooms.

Effectiveness of implementation and suitability. The evaluation reveals important differences in the effectiveness of the implementation of the two pilot programs. The significant majority of BTL pilot and non-pilot teachers were trained, while only a third of the ASTEP teachers were. While all of the BTL pilot teachers indicated they knew a lot about the program, only 2 of the 11 ASTEP teachers reported this level of knowledge and one of those was in a non-implementing school.

The implementation of BTL appears to have been unusually effective. The combination of ongoing training and monitoring influenced teaching and learning positively in all classes/schools. The availability of many teaching-learning materials (TLMs) also enhanced the program's effectiveness. When asked specifically about the materials, the majority of BTL teachers in both regions indicated that the materials were good. They cited clarity of instruction, well-sequenced lessons, language that is appropriate for the learners, and useful teacher's guides

as positive features. The one weakness cited by the majority of BTL teachers was the relevance of some of the materials to the local culture.

The implementation of ASTEP does not appear to have been as effective as that of BTL. The training of tutors in teacher training colleges (TTCs) has not trickled down to P1 classrooms in the manner intended. In addition, the training of the teachers in the Afram Plains did not have the same positive impact on instruction as did the training of BTL teachers. Possible reasons for this include the ambivalence of teachers in this region about using the local language as the medium of instruction, and/or the lack of training for head teachers and district personnel, which contributed to a lack of monitoring. In addition, the materials may not provide enough advice to permit novice teachers to implement a successful early reading program. However, the pupil books, especially at P2 and P3, are the source of exceptional reading materials in mother tongue, including as they do local folktales and longer stories.

Sustainability. There are both near term and long-term concerns associated with the issue of sustainability. Of immediate concern is the need to address three interrelated issues: (1) training – both quality and coordination; (2) integration of materials and methods; and (3) language of teaching and transition to English. Of course, the future success of BTL, or literacy instruction more broadly, is highly dependent on the quality of professional development that occurs. Molteno is experienced in training BTL teachers and supervisors and this expertise has allowed Ghana to begin an ambitious literacy initiative quite quickly. The short-term concern is that *last year's* P1 pupils must be provided with Stage 3 instruction during the 2004-2005 school year, *in addition* to the BTE training while schools must, at the same time, implement the full program to this year's P1 children.

The potential difficulty of reliance on a highly structured, pre-packaged program such as Molteno offers is that it may lead teachers to depend too heavily on the particular materials/methods of this program without fully appreciating the underlying principles and building on the approaches. *If the training advances too rigidly or is conducted without accounting for local contexts*, teachers will be tempted to abandon the program—or, more seriously for Ghana—be led to think that they cannot teach this way unless they have the specific and particular “BTL package.” Since Ghana does not have the resources to outfit every school/classroom and then sustain the materials over time, the sustainability must not be linked to one specific set of materials.

Given the meager availability of TLMs in Ghana—in any language—any attempt to address the issues of literacy must include a pragmatic appeal to make use of everything possible. In particular, ASTEP materials, which are contemporary, attractive, and sensitive to local culture and language, need to be put to better use. Because most experts agree that one year of instruction in a local language is insufficient, the coordination of BTL and ASTEP materials is critical. A common training that incorporates and expands upon the two programs has the potential to address these concerns.

The long-term issues of sustainability include the ongoing cost and funding for education, the nature of teacher training and monitoring, and the matter of accountability and “motivation.” Education is gravely under funded and under supported in Ghana at all levels, but especially so at the basic level. Although the cost of BTL appears large, its cost appears much greater than it is because so little is spent on basic education. It is important that MOEYS/GES officials, international “donors” and the federal government more generally attend to needs at the basic education level. Money spent on secondary education is, of course, important. However, the importance of investing in a good beginning for young students has been largely ignored and,

consequently, the resources have not been allocated to ensure that students and teachers have the materials and training required to set children on a course for higher levels of achievement.

The problem of teacher retention is equally critical. The present system of postings does not appear to be sensitive enough to placing teachers who are proficient in the local dialect in the appropriate communities. Even when they have been placed appropriately, once they receive more formal education, teachers do not stay in basic education. This can and should be addressed by examining the reward system and the working conditions for these individuals. Resources must also be allocated for the close monitoring and support of teachers.

Summary of Recommendations

This evaluation produced recommendations in five areas: Planning the expansion of BTL, extending L1 instruction beyond P1, developing a plan for the coordination of BTL and ASTEP in P1-P3, developing capacity for sustaining literacy achievement, and the close monitoring and assessing of the programs.

- ***Expand and elaborate BTL instruction.*** All stakeholders, but especially key educational personnel need to expand the methodology to ensure children are working with print and writing right from the beginning, that on-going classroom assessments are used to monitor progress and differentiate instruction. Further, teachers need to create many more opportunities for pupils to practice reading and writing, possibly through the coordination of BTL and ASTEP materials.
- ***Extend L1 instruction beyond P1.*** One year of BTL alone will not be enough L1 instruction. A sensible pedagogical proposal is to continue L1 instruction in P2 and P3, alongside the introduction of English as an additional language through BTE.
- ***Develop a plan for coordinating BTL and ASTEP in P1-P3.*** We are making the strongest recommendation that GES, USAID, GTZ and their other partners allocate resources to develop a specific plan for and recommendations about the alignment of BTL and ASTEP. However, this will require a specific working group charged with aligning and integrating the BTL, BTE and ASTEP materials so that they are manageable and meaningfully coordinated.
- ***Monitor and assess programs.*** The need for close monitoring, assessment, and adjustments of the programs is especially critical next year to ensure that P2 pupils are completing Stage 3 of BTL (which was not completed during this abbreviated pilot year). This Stage 3 is critically important to the consolidation of early literacy learning and pivotal to the program's success. In addition, district-level supervisors monitor these programs to ensure that teachers are implementing the BTL program with fidelity.
- ***Be prepared to adapt the program over time.*** As the program unfolds and begins to use a TOT (training of trainers) model it will be especially important to monitor the *trainers'* knowledge and expertise. The Molteno training, while thoroughly preparing individuals to follow the implementation guidelines, does not necessarily provide participants with a deep understanding of the rationale behind these methods. The regimented nature of the training and the suitability of the approach in the Ghanaian context should continue to be a matter of investigation.

- ***Develop capacity for sustaining literacy achievement.*** There needs to be an increased awareness of the importance of early literacy instruction. There is a need to train teachers in the teaching of reading and writing, particularly at the level of the TTCs and Universities. The GES, USAID and other interested partners, such as the GTZ should continue to collaborate with the International Reading Association to develop more knowledge about reading and writing.
- ***Build capacity within school districts.*** At the local level, USAID and GES have plans to build capacity with the communities. This will be crucial. District personnel, head teachers, and P1-P3 teachers should be encouraged to invite PTAs and SMCs to participate more fully. As we have seen, some innovative and creative local solutions to problems have already been initiated. More of these local solutions are needed.
- ***Refine and develop appropriate program evaluation tools and procedures.*** A protocol and prototype assessment battery should be designed for data collection at the end of P2. The evaluation plan for 2005 should continue to track pupils' literacy development in L1 but also their ability to read and write in English.