Breaking Out of the Challenging Heights: The Contradictions of Multi-Level Actors' Decisions for Schools Improvement in the Northern Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Policy learning is a critical factor in schools improvement which is enhanced by flexible school governance systems. This phenomenon is discussed in the context of poor schools performance stemming from contradictions in schools decisions making. The paper presents empirical evidence of these contradictions, as well as various theoretical justifications for an alternative model of schools governance necessary for schools improvement. This qualitative research used a case study and multi-method designs, with interviews and focus group discussions as methods to collect data from 3 schools and an educational directorate. The population numbered 53 and, systematic random and purposive sampling techniques were used to select 22 respondents. Four levels of qualitative coding were used for data analysis. The findings confirmed the theory that decision-making difficulties impede schools improvement programmes and recommends the: enactment of best decision-making practice guidelines; encouragement of exchange of ideas; and crafting of code of conduct for target setting.

Keywords: multi-level decisions; schools improvements strategies; schools governance; resource mobilisation; partisan mutual adjustment; epistemic communities; policy learning.

1.0 Introduction

This article discusses questions about challenges of multi-level decisions regarding schools improvement for a dual purpose of academic discourse and schools engineering. These questions help to define a different model of school governance to aid schools improvement strategies. These are to: first, identify different types of decision making for school governance and their individual elements. The theoretical discussion about them will point out the reasons for their emergence, their mode of operation, and the links to the "classical" hierarchical forms of decision making; second, examine empirically, whether this new mode of school governance can be efficient at mobilizing resources for schools improvement. These will be gauged from the perspectives of their politico-institutional and instrumental capacity, and how these new modes of governance fit into the overall context of schools improvement policy implementation across multiple levels of decision making, and what their implications for creating successful schools are. Banerjee et al. (2007), Ige (2011), and Duze (2011) have indicated that all over the world, there are complaints about falling standards in education. The paper focuses on the assumption that the various educational policy interventions introduced in Ghana so far have not helped very much in raising the quality and falling standards of education at the basic level, and this situation is precarious in the Northern Region of Ghana. For example, Bannerman-Mensah (2013) and Ziem (2015) have argued that the interventions by government, district assemblies and other stakeholders in education especially at the basic level over the years have not resulted in any significant improvement in educational standards. The evidence for this claim is captured by the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) results from the Region. Gyebi (2017) has said that "the Northern Region has performed abysmally over the years, competing with the Upper East and Upper West for the bottom positions on the BECE ladder". He has argued further that "for the past 10 years, most of the BECE graduates in the Region are not getting the required grades to enter into Senior High Schools" (Gyebi, 2017). In 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010, Tamale secured 60th, 69th, 88th, 91st, 89th, 98th and 103rd positions respectively, out of a total of 134 districts nationwide (Ziem, 2015).
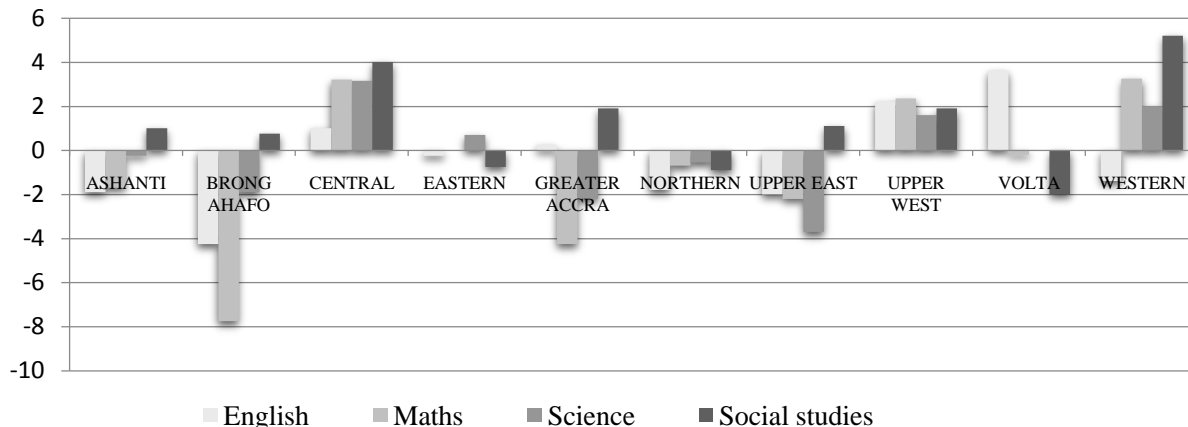
Besides, the Savelugu-Nanton Municipality, like the rest of the other districts in the region, is struggling to redeem its image in the educational sector since it took the bottom spot in the 2013 nationwide BECE placing 167th position out of overall total of 167 districts nationwide, and out of 22 schools presented for the 2012 BECE, 15 schools scored below 40 percent (Ziem, 2015). The spate of poor schools performance such as has been described above, enjoin all stakeholders to engage in collective action processes (Gyebi, 2017), to resource vertically across multiple levels of decision making to turn these poor performing schools into high performing ones through various schools improvement strategies. Fuseini (2014) has argued that this perennial poor performance of schools has reached a crisis stage, which calls for a multi faceted approach involving stakeholders. Such collective action processes require the engagement of both educational and non educational actors because no single actor has sufficient capacity in terms of knowledge, information and resources to solve the complex, dynamic, and diversified problems that lead to schools failures. These exigencies require the concept of school governance as described above to be put into broad and more restricted categories. In the encompassing sense, it has to be constituted by modes of political steering that involves a variety of actors, including traditional modes of leadership such as the school heads, District Directors of Education, Circuit Supervisors (CSs), the School Management Committees (SMCs), and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), but different types of steering, that shifts from hierarchical imposition to sheer information sharing. In the restricted sense, it has to comprise types of political steering in which non-hierarchical modes of guidance such as persuasion and negotiation with non-educational actors such as parents and communities to engage and perform their respective roles to improve schools performance. In this different type of steering, the non-educational actors may be engaged in a variety of activities to enhance the schools improvement processes which may occur in ways such as: self regulating of roles on voluntary basis; delegating regulatory tasks to these actors by the educational actors; or engaging in "co-regulation" tasks – that is, regulating jointly with educational actors.

This paper takes a view that this mode of school governance is critical for implementing schools improvement policies, especially in terms of mobilising resources to turn around the misfortunes of poor performing schools syndrome in the Northern Region. The essence here is that in recent years, a new mode of schools governance in which the civil society takes an active part in schools improvement programmes have become popular in Ghana, and this is seen as a panacea for resource mobilisation difficulties which has hitherto created schools performance gridlocks. This new mode of governance is critical because schools engineering in Ghana has reached a stage where core requirements for successful schools such as resource mobilisation, infrastructure development, teacher upgrading and welfare packages etc. have diminished government provision and therefore requires multi-level actor support. In order to attain these goals, a method of cooperation has to be developed which avoids the classical form of policy decision making that comes through directives and regulations. Instead, this new method of cooperation has to rely on an open method of coordination that is manifested in voluntary accords and partisan mutual adjustments that are realised through self-regulation of individual group actors. This paper sees this mode of governance as offering a possibility for schools improvement in the face of enormous resource constraints. Hence these have to be tolerated and accommodated by schools administration instead of regulation, because they allow actors more autonomy to shape the respective schools improvement policy process in order to turn the poor performing schools around.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The Government of Ghana as the key actor and provider of public education together with other stakeholders provide infrastructure, human and material resources to improve education in Ghanaian schools. In the Northern Region of Ghana, some public actors including head teachers have difficulties in bringing synergy between the efforts of public and private actors in implementing their schools improvement programmes which constitute a huge gap in schools governance in the region. These difficulties have resulted in incidences of inadequate instructional resources and infrastructure provision, and poor supervision of instruction in basic schools. This phenomenon has had the tendency to affect schools' performance at the BECE examinations negatively in the Region. Statistics from 2014 and 2015 BECE results indicates that the proportion of candidates from the Northern Region who achieved above average grades for all the core subjects (English, Maths, Science, and Social Studies) produced the biggest negative change for all core subjects as illustrated by Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Change in proportion of candidates achieving above average grade by region
from 2014-2015.**

Source: Adopted from MoE (2016).

Figure 1 shows that the Northern Region's performance retrogressed between 2014 and 2015 for all core subjects. Fewer students achieved above averages grades as follows: near 2% fewer students in English; near 0.75% fewer students in Maths; about 0.5% fewer students in science; then near 1% fewer students in social studies. This performance contrasts the 9 other regions' where more students proportionally achieved above average grades in most core subjects in 2015 above the 2014 performance. The problem however is that these poor performances are occurring in a time when there is abundance of educational resources that can be mobilised to reverse the failing trend in the BECE in the Region (MoE, 2016). So why are schools in the Region not taking advantage of the numerous resources? This paper's answer is that there are problems associated with compromises and agreements on the decision making front among the multi-level actors regarding resource mobilisation for schools improvement programmes. This constitutes the problem of this research and it is focussed on the assumption that, the poor performance of schools in the North is caused by the failure of the multi-level interest groups involved in schools governance to compromise and agree on decisions about mobilising resources to aid schools improvement programmes.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The study sought to investigate how multi-level actor decisions affect the mobilisation of resources for the implementation of schools improvement programmes in the Northern Region.

1.3 Objectives for the study

Two specific objectives were used to guide the study. These are: to investigate how decisions about instructional supervision by multi-level actors affect schools improvement strategies in the Northern Region; to examine how decisions about educational resource mobilisation by multi-level actors affect schools improvement strategies in the Northern Region.

1.4 Research questions

Two research questions were derived from the objectives to focus the study. These are: how do decisions about instructional supervision by multi-level actors affect schools improvement strategies in the Northern Region?; and how do decisions about educational resource mobilisation by multi-level actors affect schools improvement strategies in the Northern Region?

2.0 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the research is based on the assumptions that: the poor performance of schools in the North is caused by the failure of the multi-level interest groups involved in schools governance to compromise and agree on decisions about resource mobilisation for schools improvement programmes. This assumption is examined on two counts as.

2.1 Effects of multi-level actors' decisions about instructional supervision for schools improvement.

The discussion on this theme pertains to research question 1 which investigated the contradictions regarding multi-level decisions about instructional supervision and how these affect schools improvement in the Northern Region of Ghana. Hill (2005) has defined decision-making as the 'choice between alternatives' and he has discussed three models of decision making in policy analysis as the rational comprehensive, incrementalism and mix-scanning. Dror (1964) and Etzioni (1967) have long ago described the mix scanning model to be the optimal method of decision making because it combines the strengths of rational comprehensive and incrementalism to improve decision making. This paper takes a position that the mix-scanning model enhances multi-level decision making for instructional supervision because it enables decision makers to undertake a broad review of this field, and leads to the examination of longer run alternatives. These subsequently make it possible for decision makers to arrive at fundamental decisions about instructional methods needed to help the schools improvement programme. Instructional supervision on the other is described by this paper as that phase of school administration which deals essentially with the achievement of appropriate instructional expectations of an educational process, and these pertains to decisions about improvement of instruction. Zapeda (2017) believes that decisions about supervision have to be democratic, and the present writer believes that input has to come from all actors in this process. DiPaola and Hoy (2013), has said that supervision is an important tool for improving teachers' instruction which eventually contributes to schools improvement, and it is pertinent for supervisors to acquire the appropriate skills and knowledge to be able to plan, observe, assess and evaluate teaching and learning processes. These are largely attained through effective decisions by all actors and their vigilance. Marzano (2011) and Gyebi (2017) have attributed poor quality basic education delivery to the poor supervision which this paper believes is usually caused by contradictions in multi-level decisions about instruction. These contradictions include:

i. diffusion of authority and responsibility;
ii. uncertainties and disagreements over supervision times;
iii. negative attitude of teachers towards supervision; and
iv. lack of logistics (including transport) for supervisors.

Liddle (1986) has long ago argued that although instructional supervision of schools that are conducted by officials, as pertained to the Inspectorate Division of the Ghana Education Service (GES) in contemporary times is useful, the process is fraught with disputes from actors. The thrusts of the literature reviewed thus far is that the processes and dynamics of multi-level decision making has become a bane in school supervision, and the literature shows that these dynamics inhibit schools improvement.

2.2 Effects of multi-level actors' decision about educational resource mobilisation for schools improvement.

This theme discusses issues pertaining to research question 2 which seeks to explore how the multi-level actors' decision about resource mobilisation affect the schools improvement programmes in the Northern Region of Ghana. This paper takes a position that educational resources are important ingredients for teaching and learning and for that matter, for schools improvement. Educational resources vary in form and type. Several studies have been carried out to establish the effects of educational resources on schools' performance as mediated by multi-level decision making on resource procurement. Cohen et al. (2003) has said that the use of instructional resources like good teachers has the value of aiding and enhancing schools improvement. Clark and Lyon (2010) have cited visual aids as an example of educational resources and argued that a well planned and imaginative use of these resources in lessons reduces apathy, supplements the use of text books, and arouse students' interests due to the visualization of instruction. Consequently, Ziem (2015) has mentioned suitable textbooks, qualified teachers, and libraries as important resources that enhance schools improvement, and Polly (2011) has argued that these are important for raising the quality of education. The importance of these educational resources and many more are several. Coombs (1970) has pointed out that the procurement of real resources like teachers, buildings, equipments, and learning materials are important for varying intra-and inter-school academic achievement and eventually for schools improvement. Joyce and Showers (2002), and Darling-Hammond (2000) have also stressed the importance of teachers to schools improvement. The literature shows that, teachers constitute a large proportion of the resources of an educational system. Coombs (1970) has argued however that the problem of teacher supply presents a formidable challenge for decision making in school governance. This difficulty is identified on two counts: the problem of quantity, and the problem getting the right quality. Cotton (2006) has also noted that teachers are the hubs of any educational system and their numbers, quality and devotion determine the success of any educational system.

Darling-Hammond (2000) has also commented on the importance of teachers that, schools improvement programmes cannot be successful without the efforts of competent teachers. However, and in spite of this urgency, decisions about resource mobilisation, including the mobilisation of competent teachers has become a problem for schools improvement in the Northern Region of Ghana for various reasons.

3.0 Methods and methodology

This study was an analytical research and it explained how the contradictions of multi-level actors' decisions impede schools improvement programmes in the Northern Region of Ghana. The methodology used to conduct the study covers:

3.1 Research design

The research design used included first, a case study as it intended to portray the reality and nature of multi-level actors' decisions for schools improvement activities in the Northern Region and the lived experiences, thoughts and feelings of actors about issues regarding decision for reversing the phenomenon of failing schools in the Region (see Geertz, 1973). The study probed deeply and analysed in an intense way, the multifarious decisions associated with school improvement programmes in 3 schools with a view to establishing generalisations about decisions for schools improvement in the Region (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Secondly, the study used multi-methods to collect data which made it possible to triangulate the data in order to establish their consistency and reduce validity threats in the study (Yin, 2011; Warwick, 1983). Clark and Causer (1991) have said that there are two basic principles that underlie research design. These are the type and mix of the research methods used in the research and the frequency of use of the methods. Consequently and in this design, interviews and focus groups discussion (FGD) were used as the methods for data collection. These methods distinguished the research as qualitative study which was therefore underpinned by the phenomenological philosophy (see Collis & Hussey, 2009).

3.1.1 Interview

The interviews were face-to-face meetings between the researcher and respondents. The researcher posed questions to the respondents for appropriate responses. The interviews used the semi-structured format to obtain information from the sampled actors about their attitudes and experiences regarding schools improvement decisions. A total of 11 interviews were conducted for actors who participate in governance of the 3 schools.

3.1.2 Focus groups discussion

FGDs were also used for data collection in this multi-method research design. This also used a semi-structured data gathering method in which teacher participants were put into two groups of 5 and 6 to discuss the contradictions in the multi-level actor decisions on resource mobilization to salvage failing schools (see Hennink, 2013). The use of FGDs helped to check for consistency in the research findings (Schutt, 2009).
Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2007) have said that "at the heart of any case study lies a method of observation". Consequently, an observation strategy was used in this study not as a method of data collection but as a methodological approach to establish the representativeness of the sample and the typicality of the data collected.

3.2 Population

Population consisted of all the unit of analysis in a research (Schutt, 2009). Hence in this study the population is made up of the various levels of decision makers in 3 selected schools in the Northern Region namely, Busunu St. Peter's Roman Catholic, Yipala Roman Catholic, and Larabanga English and Arabic Junior High Schools, their education directorate, and the communities. These actors constituted the unit of analysis in the population, and they were 53 in number. They are the multi-level actors for the selected schools who make policy decisions that determine the success or failure of schools improvement programmes.

3.3 Sample size and sampling procedure

The study used the multi-stage sampling design to select the sample for the study (see Schutt, 2009). With the first sampling unit of teachers, a systematic random sampling technique was used to obtain a sample of 11 who were put into 2 groups of 5 and 6 for the FGDs. These teachers were selected with a numbered interval scale of 4. This meant that every 1 person in 4 in the target groups was selected for the study. This method was used in order to discount possible biases in the selection process. Schutt (2009) has said that the systematic random sampling is a type of simple random sampling in which the first element is selected randomly from a list and every nth element is selected subsequently.

With the second sampling unit, a purposive sampling technique was used to choose 3 head teachers and 1 leader each from the SMC, PTA and the community for the interviews. Schutt (2009) has again said that in purposive sampling, each sample element is selected for a purpose due to their unique positions. For the purpose of this research, the head teachers work on the frontlines of decision making in their schools as well as the leaders from the SMC, PTA and the community. Their unique positions determined their selection. The third sampling unit was the Educational Directorate and convenience sampling method was used to select 2 deputy directors of education (DDE) and 2 supervisors (CS) for the interviews. Schutt (2009) believes that in convenience sampling, the elements are selected because they are available and easy to find. Furthermore, in this sampling unit, the District Director of Education was purposively selected for an interview. This design produced a total sample size of 22 for the study.

3.4 Instrumentation

The research used semi-structured interview guides and schedules to collect data using interviews and FGD. In order to establish the validity of the instruments, 4 former educational administrators including a retired head teacher were given copies of the instruments for comments. The instruments were then pilot tested to verify their trustworthiness and appropriateness at the Jafo Junior High School with 4 teachers and 2 officials from the District Education Directorate (these officials were not included in the main study). The results from the pilot test were evaluated in tandem with the research objectives which showed that the instruments had the capability to generate suitable data for the study.

3.5 Data collection procedure

The data was gathered over a period of 3 weeks. The interviews took 2 weeks, and the 2 focus group discussions were held within 1 week. Questions were posed to respondents in a semi-structured format which afforded the researcher the opportunity to probe the responses given by the respondents. The data was audio recorded and backed up with note-taking.

3.6 Data analysis

The data was put through four levels of qualitative coding. These were: open or initial coding, focused coding and category developments. This was followed by the axial or thematic coding and finally the development of theoretical concepts. The researcher used Microsoft word for the level 1 coding from which memos were derived from the raw data. These forms were copied into Microsoft Excel for levels 2 to 4 coding. The levels 3 and 4 codes were combined with verbatim quotations to produce the research report.

4.0 Data analysis and discussions

The data obtained from the field were arranged and organized under a framework of two themes that focused on multi-level actor decisions:

4.1 Effects of multi-level decisions about instructional supervision for schools improvement in the three selected schools

The data for this theme was obtained from interviews and FGDs to answer research question 1 that sought to investigate how multi-level actors' decisions about instructional supervision affect schools improvement programmes in the Northern Region. The interview data indicated that head teachers make effective decisions regarding the inspection of their teachers' lesson note books on a weekly basis and they follow these through as the schools policy require. A respondent said that "head teachers review the lesson notes to make sure that the notes are based on the scheme of work and that the notes are suitable for teaching" (Interview data, Respondent #2). These effectual decisions have some drawbacks however, as a teacher said that "the head teachers after reviewing the notes do not discuss the errors detected in teachers' lesson notes with the teachers" (FGD data, Respondent #7). This view was generally accepted by the respondents in the FGDs which is evidence that instructional supervision is haphazardly organized without effective structuring from the multi-level actors. The respondents remarked further that in the course of supervision, officials always found faults with teachers. One said "they often give unfair criticism of teachers' work and fail to offer alternative ideas and practical demonstration which will help to improve teaching" (FGD data, Respondent #5). Liddle (1986) has argued that such supervision practices inhibit effective teaching, and the paper takes a view that these practices generate contradictions in the multi-level actors' decisions. The data showed again that head teachers do not inspect and record the number of exercises that teachers assign to pupils weekly.

The data further indicated that "teachers do not give adequate class exercises, mark and discuss pupil's errors with them, to enhance better understanding as required of us per the decisions made" (FGD data, Respondent #3). This is the result of ineffective internal supervision practices by the head teachers which contradicts the requirements for schools improvement strategies. The data further showed that none of the head teachers in the selected schools organise in-service training for the teachers to improve their teaching skills. A respondent said that "in order to get good teachers in the schools, the right type of experts should be recruited to train the teachers from time to time" (FGD data, Respondent #5). Another respondent said "in-service training for teachers should be regular for those teachers who are already on the job. They should be given the appropriate attention" (FGD data, Respondent #2). Ziem (2015) has said that, this is important to upgrade teachers in contemporary teaching trends and skills, because this paper believes that the shortfalls are anathema to the schools improvement programme.

The data also revealed that CSs do not visit their circuit schools thrice in a term as prescribed by the Circuit Supervisors' Handbook. A respondent said that "we always want to visit our allocated schools as prescribed by the rules, but we are restricted by the needed logistics to fulfil this task … in a whole term, we are unable to visit some schools" (Interview data, Respondent #5). Regarding supervision and monitoring of basic schools by the district education directorate, the data showed that members of staff of the local education unit do not effectively supervise and monitor teaching and learning in the schools as the rules specify. "The CSs are not mobile and it is difficult for them to visit all the schools in their circuit" (Interview data, Respondent #3). Another argued that "the quarterly financial grant from the government sometimes delay so much that it becomes difficult for the office to provide fuel for the few motorbikes available to the officials. Hence, most of the officers are unable to visit the schools which come under their supervision" (Interview data, Respondent #1). Furthermore, most of the roads are not useable in the raining season…, and some officers have remained in the same office and same circuit for several years and have become familiar and intimate with most of the teachers. Hence, these officers find it difficult to reprimand their colleagues even when they have faults (Interview data, Respondent #3). These contradictions in the multi-level actors' decisions basically affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning which results in poor academic performance, as well as the schools improvement programmes. The data further showed that head teachers do not put up proactive posture towards instructional supervision. According to this perspective, "... head teachers go to the classroom every day, but they do not open pupils' books to see what they have written inside them" (FGD data, Respondent #4). Another respondent said that "… I have never seen anybody in my community visiting our school, not even from the education office, I only see the CS coming to the school" (FGD data, Respondent #5). The data has shown that the multi-level actors i.e. both head teachers and the Education Directorate staff do not carry out supervision effectively as they are required to, and this goes a long way to negatively affect pupils' academic performance in external examinations. This means that the implementation of multi-level decisions on instructional supervision in the selected schools by head teachers and the district education staff is problematic, and this is partly the cause poor pupils' academic performance in BECE. This constitutes a huge problem for schools improvement, and until the principles of supervision are religiously applied and followed, the performance of pupils in the region will continue to plummet (Ziem, 2015).
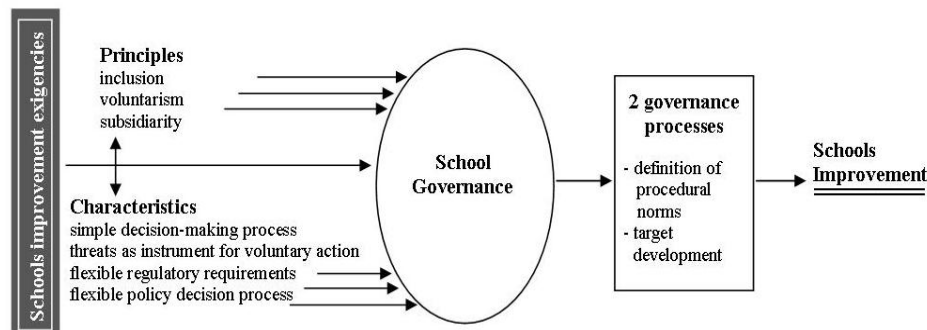
4.2 Effects of multi-level actors' decisions about educational resource mobilisation on schools improvement in the three selected schools.

The data pertaining to this section deals with how the multi-level actors' decisions about educational resource mobilisation affect the academic performance of pupils and consequently, schools improvement in the Northern Region. The data revealed that the selected schools have inadequate classrooms, and decisions made by stakeholders to address this issue have not been effective. A respondent claims that "the inadequate infrastructure, especially classrooms tend to affect the academic performance of pupils in the schools" (FGD data, Respondent #6). Furthermore, the data from the FGDs shows that the inadequate infrastructure is further compounded by ineffective procurement decisions for textbook provisions. Respondent #3 from the FGDs iterated that "it is difficult for decision makers who have been put in-charge of schools in this area to come up with effective decisions on text book supplies to schools in the region…" Besides, the textbooks situation is precarious because "…we pair up students to use Mathematics and English textbooks ..." (Interview data, Respondent #2). Furthermore, "we don't have Ghanaian language and pre-vocational textbooks, it is only the teachers who have copies" (Interview data, Respondent #4). Anamuah - Mensah's (2001) perspective on these contradictions is that although the educational system is decentralized, the provision of resources including book supplies is centralised. This impedes the procurement decisions made at the Region's educational directorates. Another respondent discussed the subject of classroom furniture and asserted that "these classrooms are poorly furnished.

This accounts for the congestion in the classrooms. How can effective teaching and learning take place when 2 pupils have to share a chair?" (FGD data, Respondent #2). The interview data also corroborated this view when a respondent stated that "…we look hopeless when we visit some schools and see children sitting on benches and on the floor" (Interview data, Respondent #4). On the subject of actors' responsibility to provide libraries to schools in the area, both the FGDs and the interview data converged on the fact that "the inadequate library facilities in the area also account for the poor academic performance of pupils, and the management of our schools for years have done almost nothing about this. This is unacceptable" (FGD data, Respondent #1). Then an interviewee retorted that "…we cannot continue to accept this mediocre situation under which our pupils are forced to learn. Management of these schools have to be proactive and forthright with their decisions" (Interview data, Respondent #2). The consequences of these contradictions have been expressed by Ziem (2015) as he acknowledges that poor academic performance of pupils over the years in the Northern Region is worrying and that effective measures are needed to reverse the trend. It is evident from the data that decisions about educational resource mobilisation for schools in the region face a number of challenges in spite of financial injection from both public and private sources into the educational sector (Baiden-Amissah, 2006; Ziem, 2015), and these have dire implications for schools improvement.

5.0 The NSI model of governance: Radar for schools improvement

The contradictions about multi-level actor decisions on schools improvement as exhibited by the data calls for a different mode of governance to facilitate schools improvement projects in the region. This paper proffers a different model of schools governance called the Northern Schools Improvement (NSI) model of governance because the existing governance systems have not been able to sustain schools improvement programmes (see Figure 2 below).

Source: Author (2017).

Figure 2: The Northern Schools Improvement (NSI) model of governance

The model is guided by the principles of: inclusion that enables all actors to participate in the schools governance; voluntarism, which creates non-binding targets and the use of soft regulation on the activities of actors; and subsidiary that provides the opportunity for socially identifiable groups to make practical decisions without seeking clearance from top public officials. Besides, the model comes with some specific characteristics as:
the evasion of the lengthy, unwieldy, and cumbersome process in school decision-making; using threat of external examination failure to increase the willingness of actors to engage voluntarily; the avoidance of strict regulatory requirements from the GES that will generate less political resistance from actors. The paper takes a position that after all, the cost of excessive regulation from GES is part of the causes of the systemic school failures in the region as a whole, and greater flexibility in terms of the policy decisions, and greater adaptability of these decisions to a rapidly changing learning and educational technological environment to help schools improvement. These benchmarks lead to the prescription of two basic processes in the NSI model of governance. The first process defines procedural norms for schools supervision and resource mobilisation that points to specified substantive policy targets and aims at creating successful schools. The second process which uses two essential policy instruments (see Linder and Peters, 1991; Howlett and Ramesh, 2003) develops substantive targets for schools supervision and mobilising resources to create successful schools.

The first instrument seeks to reach the targets exclusively by using reputation mechanisms and mutual learning (through open methods of coordination) – what DiMaggio and Powell (2000) calls mimetic isomorphism which happens in institutional isomorphism. The second instrument seeks to reach targets by using voluntary accords. Each of the two processes is composed of several elements, and it seems analytically useful to distinguish between the instruments that will be used to implement the targets, and the participatory structure in which these instruments are defined and then applied to implement the decisions made. The NSI model of governance will reduce opposition from those actors who bear the implementation costs because they are involved in the target-definition, and are free to choose the policy instruments to attain these targets. This suggests that the instruments used to reach the policy targets are chosen by the multi-level actors, and the indicators of achievement (i.e. benchmarking) and guidelines for action are formulated and defined by these actors. This will ensure that the performance of schools is then measured by the specified indicators that have been crafted by the actors themselves. Consequently, by publicizing and exchanging information about different practices, it will be expected that the processes of mutual learning among various schools governance systems will be set in motion. This process will then be embedded with a reputation mechanism that will shame those schools showing poor performance into performing better. This is on the basis that the actors involved are quite willing and committed to participate in the decision-making to shape the schools improvement policy, and they are willing to financially and logistically support the introduction of the chosen policy instruments such as the provision of vehicles or fuel (classified as treasure by Hood, 1986) for circuit supervisors. In other words, this mode of governance has a high school-community capacity that is able to generate both participation and social support.

5.1 Developing targets for schools improvement through policy learning under the NSI model

Target development is a novel method of policy-making (Radaelli, 2000) and its theoretical background has been formulated in the literature as the exchange of information for example between schools. Target development is thus primarily underpinned by the theory of policy diffusion and transfer (Radaelli 2000; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000; Raffe, 2011), and this must essentially be integrated into the framework of the NSI model. In this work, the linkage of target development with the processes for schools improvement (i.e. via school supervision and resource mobilisation) is well-adapted to problem solving through collective action under conditions of schools diversity, and under conditions in which problems are culturally volatile as pertaining to the Northern Region of Ghana. This portends a notion of a "deliberative educational polyarchy" under which problem-solving experience is pooled, and the diverse pragmatic solutions practised by the various schools and their respective performances are compared (see Dorf & Sabel 1998). This phenomenon may trigger a learning process that benefits all schools in terms of informing separate, independent decisions for schools improvement in the context of mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). Then the tool of benchmarking as applied in assessing organisations may be used to develop targets for schools improvement. Benchmarking in this sense will imply comparing how a school performs relative to other schools in view of defined targets. Benchmarking can be initiated by any one particular school (bottom-up), or this can be imposed (top-down). de la Porte et al. (2001) believes that this process may involve searching for best practices, organizational learning and continuous improvement in order to eliminate performance gaps.
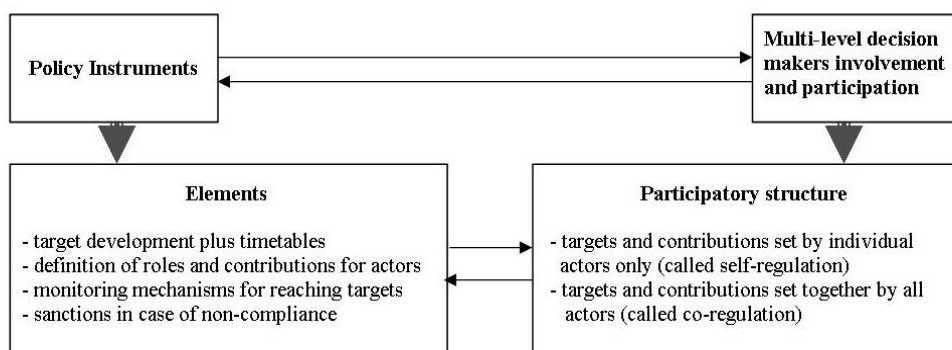
With respect to the cost of decision making, target setting has the advantage of not requiring lengthy formal decision-making processes before consensus can be reached. Instead, information pooling may begin informally and spread step by step across schools. However, in order to seriously monitor and evaluate performance, targets for schools improvement would have to be defined and measured clearly, and second-generation administrative support also created. A condition for effective functioning of the multi-level actors in target development is that individual actors must be willing to provide the necessary information (see Dorf & Sable 1998). In a more encompassing and long-term view, a successful on-going exchange of information on schools practices may lead to decentralised trans-school learning networks. In the Northern Region, these possibilities will raise the expectation that school governance may eventually turn into an educational policy communities or epistemic communities (Jordan, 1986; Hill, 2005; Dunleavy, 1984; and Knoke, 1990) that will promote schools improvement.

5.2 Implementation of schools improvement targets by voluntary accords

This paper has argued in 5.0 (above) that target development for schools improvement calls for setting up voluntary accords by actors. The actualisation of these accords may be underpinned by co-regulation and self-regulation that may originate from different sources and may take on different forms.

But one crucial question to ask is, why would these multi-level actors be interested in committing themselves to such voluntary accords? For example, when individual schools establish and manage their own improvement policy and implementation rules without outside interference, voluntary self-regulation which is expressed as unilateral and negotiated agreements by Börky & Lévêque (1998) will emerge as a viable instrument for implementing the schools improvement policy. At the administrative level, the multi-level actors will prefer voluntary agreements to legislation from government because the accord will provide more flexible avenues to shape the policy instruments. In contrast however, co-regulation (or delegated self-regulation) will be required when the schools improvement arrangement is imposed on the schools, and the rules under which this arrangement functions is defined by the GES. This is what is called public voluntary agreements (Börky & Lévêque, 1998; Ronit & Schneider, 2000). This kind of voluntary accord functions in the shadows of a hierarchy, and it fulfils a support function (see DeClercq, 2001). This means that, should there be mismanagement or policy failure, the GES for example through its local offices may take on the regulatory functions which will be instituted on a parallel national and local basis. However, some public voluntary accords function entirely independently where typically, schools improvement targets are set in a collective decision process, and the actors are held collectively liable for implementation. In case of policy failure under this model, all actors are collectively sanctioned, independently from individual schools' efforts.   These theoretical discussions of voluntary accords point to various advantages that they have as steering instruments for schools improvement policies:

1. from the vantage point of schools capacity, a voluntary commitment to the accord by the community actors implies lower educational decision-making costs, because the affected community actors and their associations will mobilize less environmental resistance to the decisions.
2. private accords may be reached more quickly, particularly if there is a need to act across individual failing schools, and where government decision-making is painstakingly slow.
3. in terms of instrumental capacity, once commitment is secured, compliance is more likely both because community actors have participated in putting up the accord in the first place and may have developed an intrinsic motivation to carry it out (DeClercq, 2001); and because they are better at mobilising the necessary resources for implementation. In this circumstance, the community actors' resources may cover a vast spectrum, ranging from the possibility of obliging members to comply with the accord through financial resources, to technical expertise. All these elements will help to overcome the informational asymmetry among schools and preserve the schools improvement policy process from information closure. Figure 3 describes the individual instrumental and decision-making components of the NSI model of governance.

Source: Author (2017).

Figure 3: Schools improvement target development and implementation by voluntary accords for the NSI model of governance.

The model describes two basic elements that are crucial for the implementation of voluntary accords for schools governance. These are the choice of policy instruments, and actors' involvement and participation. The model emphasise the importance and relevance of policy instrument in the schools improvement programme i.e. the determination of success or failure of the programme (Hill, 2005). This is because the instrument choice determines the levels of actor participation and vice-versa, as the instrument choice creates conditions for winners and losers in the policy process (Hill & Hupe, 2003).

It is important to point out that although the model is useful in terms of capacity for target development, the costs for decision-making for schools improvement may be higher than theoretically anticipated as the shadow of hierarchy still looms large whenever there is regulatory failure and when voluntary accords and public intervention mutually support one another. Two elements point to their possible costliness:

1. For one thing, voluntary accords have to be initiated by a certain authority, meaning that they would emerge spontaneously, and
2. Further, the actors on their part may consider this authority to have too much influence in shaping guidelines and views, and be seen as foisting certain requirements upon them most of the times.

These elements emphasise that the general direction of the schools improvement policy development has to shift from hierarchy to self-regulation, with strict adherence to the instruments and the development of a "second-generation" of policy instruments. This is very critical for ensuring the shift.

6.0 The road ahead: The NSI model as a new focus of governance for schools improvement policy.

In this study, the two questions that have been addressed are multi-level actors' decisions about supervision, and educational resource mobilisation. These questions have been further examined from the purview of the NSI model of governance, and aimed at breaking out from the repetitive external examination failure which has constituted a challenging height for schools in the Northern Region. Two theories are generated from the data. The first is that the actors have to take effective decisions regarding schools supervision for effective teaching and learning to enhance schools improvement projects. This makes the NSI model of governance relevant for schools improvement policy making due to its inclusion and participation criteria. The second question generated a theory that 'the poor academic performance of pupils in the BECE is caused partly by the lack of effective decisions on educational resource mobilisation'. The data has shown that target development on resource mobilisation has not been adequate. Evidence to that effect is provided - that the decision process for developing resource mobilisation targets has to be enhanced. These theories explain the reasons for the poor academic performance of schools in the Northern Region. The theories emphasize that when decisions about teacher supervision is haphazard, it breeds deficiencies in teaching which affect pupils learning in the long run. They further explain the phenomenon that, educational resource mobilisation difficulties leads to ineffective teaching and learning practices which compromises schools improvement programmes. Finally, the question of the significance of the NSI model of governance to the overall context of schools improvement programmes is debated. Two perspectives help in this direction:

a. on a time scale, the role of target development, benchmarking, and monitoring has to be properly crafted to ensure that they point positively to the appropriate schools improvement strategies.
b. the NSI model of governance offers a possibility to overcome the "joint decision trap" which may be encountered by schools who desire closer cooperation on the targets developed but are not willing to embark on community-wide decision making. This brings about open coordination that will create avenues that clip accountability from below and help improve "good governance" in schools.

On the basis of these theories, the study recommends that in order to enhance schools improvement programmes, three new procedural norms or codes of practice are important for the NSI model of governance. These are:

a. as a part of the schools improvement agenda, the multi-level actors have to draw up "best practice guidelines" for dealing with the problems of poor academic performance what this paper calls schools improvement target development.
b. the need to encourage exchange of ideas among schools on how to deal with the problem of poor academic performance and by so doing monitor the achievement of individual schools' target schemes – this is the creation of epistemic communities or educational policy communities.
c. schools must be encouraged to take on similar responsibilities in terms of target development and benchmarking. Under this scheme, the schools management will need to invite all actors to formulate a code of conduct on the platforms of policy learning, inclusion, participation and private accords for the set target.

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