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Causes of Student Underachievement in Northside New Era Secondary School in Ghana

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Causes of Student Underachievement in Northside New Era Secondary School in Ghana

by

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This study focused on the causes of student underachievement in a selected high school in Ghana. The anonymous name chosen for the school was Northside New Era Secondary School. The participants in the study were administrators, teachers, and students. They were selected from the same school where the researcher conducted the study. The school was located in the Northern Region of Ghana. It had proven records of underachievement compared to other schools in the country according to the Ministry of Education’s recent statistical report on education. The criterion for measurement was based on the results of the final examination conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for the years 1996 to 2000.

The study employed a qualitative methodology to examine student learning. A list of guiding interview questions were developed and validated prior to the study. Seven categories were identified to be the main contributing factors to student underachievement in the school. The categories fell under two main themes: external and internal factors of underachievement.

The external factors included the lack of government intervention in the provision of educational materials, the socio-economic background of people in the demographic settings, unworkable educational policies, and poor working conditions for teachers and administrators. The internal factors were comprised of the apathy and passivity with which teachers conducted themselves in the school, parents' beliefs and psychological underpinnings of what an ideal school should be, and the school's lack of educational resources. This study found that
both external and internal factors contributed significantly to student underachievement in schools.

Participants' knowledge of the implications of the themes, and their understanding of all the educational stakeholders' role in the provision of a sound-learning environment in the school became the bedrock of the study. The researcher challenges all educational authorities everywhere, especially those in the third world countries, to consider student academic achievement as a major priority, necessary for strong nation-building into the 21st century and beyond.
Chapter One
Introduction and Background

Introduction

All societies have complex needs, including the need to provide an educational system. Societal needs result in different educational systems based on the expectations, values, and the history of the culture in place. As societies change, their educational systems also change.

The purpose of this study was to advance a clearer understanding of student underachievement in one secondary school in the West African State of Ghana. The study examined recent educational changes as well as the history of educational change in the nation. The emphasis was on the causes of recent student underachievement in the selected secondary school, using the results of the final examination conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for the senior secondary schools (SSS) as the criterion.

Historical Background

Examples from history have helped to illustrate how societal needs influence educational systems. For example, Abbam (1994) argued that the Romans believed educated people should have military and oratorical skills. Therefore, the Romans included military and oratorical skills in their educational system. To the Greeks, education included physical and mental balance. These
educational values led to some outstanding athletic accomplishments in Greek society such as the Olympics, and to superior cognitive achievements including the Socratic method of intellectual inquiry and the philosophy of Aristotle. These examples illustrate ways in which educational beliefs and expectations influence societies.

Prior to the introduction of formal, European style education by the British in the Gold Coast (Ghana), Ghanaians relied on a type of educational system they referred to as traditional. Agbodeka (1972) described traditional education as learning from elders and parents rather than learning through classroom education. Education in Ghana changed when missionaries, mostly from England, introduced a British style educational system in the 1760s. This system included elementary schools for many children, followed by middle school education for a few of the brightest children and for children from the most affluent families. Instructional emphasis was on reading, writing, and arithmetic (popularly known as the “three Rs”) with religious instruction as a core subject. During this time Ghana was known to the world as the Gold Coast.

In 1957, the people of Ghana rejected the British controlled colonial government that had ruled the nation for a long period of time. In place of the colonial rule, the nation introduced self-government. Self-rule in Ghana led to changes in all aspects of society, including changes in the educational system. President Nkrumah (the first president of the Republic of Ghana) introduced significant educational changes in 1961. The changes were the outcome of an educational reform initiative, popularly known as the Accelerated Development
Plan (Agbodeka, 1972). This plan was originally proposed in 1952 when Dr. Nkrumah was made Leader of Government Business during the colonial era and prior to Ghana’s independence. The changes in this plan included initiatives such as expansion of elementary schools throughout the country and training of teachers to teach in these schools. These innovations in educational policies led to a dramatic increase in the number of elementary school graduates. Because most of the graduating students were unable to find employment, the people of Ghana began to question the effectiveness of the educational reforms introduced during Nkrumah’s early regime.

In response to many questions about the efficacy of the 1961 educational reforms, the Ghana government appointed a national committee, the Ammlssah Committee, to examine educational problems and to provide suggestions for further reform (Foster, 1968). After studying the educational problems confronting Ghana, the committee made a series of proposals designed to deal with the most pressing educational issues facing the nation. Their proposal called for changes in the structure of primary and middle school education and for more teacher training. It placed emphasis on the provision of the Accelerated Development Plan that required education for every child aged 6 and above. Schools were funded through the Ministry of Education and the central government took responsibility for teacher training.

In 1966, a coup d’etat occurred in Ghana, which resulted in the overthrow of the Nkrumah government. From 1966 until 1983 the nation of Ghana experienced rapid changes in governmental leadership. The country went
through a series of civilian government administrations that were frequently replaced at gunpoint by military rulers. Thompson (1981) indicated that the instability led to a significant decline in educational services as well as an overall decrease in social and economic progress.

In 1973, the government formed another national committee to investigate educational reform initiatives. This group was known as the Dzobo Committee and its recommendations served as the basis of the present educational system in Ghana. Rothchild (1991) found that the major reforms recommended by the Dzobo Committee were not implemented until 1987 due to political instability. According to Rothchild, when the committee's recommendations were finally implemented, they led to significant changes that involved providing special types of training for students to match the needs for trained workers.

One recommended change was for all SSS students to study a core curriculum of seven subjects: English and Ghanaian languages, science, mathematics, agricultural and environmental studies, life skills, and physical education. In addition to those core subjects, each student was to select one specialized program from five fields: agriculture, business, technical programs, vocational training, and general fields including the arts and integrated science options.

This overview of Ghana's educational system provides the necessary background for considering the purpose of the proposed study and establishes the framework for the literature review in chapter 2.
Research Question

According to Bodgan and Biklen (1992), qualitative research questions should portray the terrain to be examined. Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggested that in qualitative research, questions and problems most often come from real-world observations, dilemmas, and questions. In examining the problem under study, four related questions surfaced:

1. How were students benefiting, academically, from the recent educational changes?
2. To what extent did the high schools in Ghana have adequate resources to prepare students in their academic studies?
3. Why were many students in the school under investigation not making the necessary grades as compared to student grades in a similar high school?
4. What recommendations did school administrators, teachers, and students believe needed to be considered to assist the underachieving students?

Statement of Purpose

This study investigated the causes of student underachievement in a selected high school in Ghana, within the context of the 1987 educational reforms. Rothchild (1991) explained that one initiative of the reforms was to train students in specific vocations for which there were available employment opportunities in local communities. The second initiative was to provide students with modern training in science and technology. For example, this initiative included provisions for student access to science laboratories and modern techniques of teaching and learning in other subject areas.
The researcher investigated the resources available to enhance learning and teaching in the selected high school. The findings helped to determine what was most necessary for student success. Open-ended questions were asked by the researcher regarding the exhibition of professionalism in the school by teachers and administrators. Related questions were advanced to further explore the causes of student underachievement in the school. The analysis helped to establish the causes of students' low achievement. Recommendations and suggestions were made to incorporate the successes, methods, and processes used in a relatively higher achieving school into the practices of the lower achieving school.

**Significance of the Study**

The American College Personnel Association, 1994, stated that the creation of conditions to motivate students to engage in educationally purposeful activities, in and out of the classroom, was a key to enhancing learning and development. The need to investigate student underachievement in a selected high school in Ghana was urgent. According to Grace (1995), failed reform programs often caused further problems and could even result in chaos. In the case of Ghana, the situation could have been catastrophic had student underachievement, wholly or partially, been determined a result of the implementation of the 1987 reforms. Reform initiatives had initially been met with hostility from different sectors of the population, particularly from academia.

Additionally, the researcher found the study to be important due to the fact that there was a dearth of research on student underachievement and related
areas of study in developing countries such as Ghana. Also, the economic situation in the country had compelled many academicians to flee for greener pastures abroad. This study could add to the literature on student underachievement.

A closer examination of materials collected by the researcher from two secondary schools in Ghana, further substantiated by copies of final examination results from the Ministry of Education in Ghana, affirmed the need for investigation and analysis of student underachievement at the selected school. Records from the other secondary school were used as a basis for comparison only.

Definition of Terms

Specific terms, defined below, were used extensively throughout this study.

- **Cedi**: The Ghanaian currency currently in use. One hundred pesewas equal 1 cedi. Since the pesewa has lost its value, the name is dying out. The name cedi originated from “sedee” cowry shells, which were used as monetary exchange during the olden days. The value of the cedi stood at 8000 to $1 as of August, 2002.

- **Educational Policies**: Unlike the United States of America where schools are primarily state controlled, schools in Ghana are nationally controlled by the government through the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education issues educational policies for planning and implementation. The Ministry also supplies direction and oversees general school administration.
• **Educational Reform:** In this study the term educational reform referred to the reform initiatives proposed by the Dzobo Committee in April 1974. These initiatives were actually implemented in 1987.

• **Gold Coast:** Ghana was formerly known as the Gold Coast until her independence in 1957.

• **Sankofa(n):** Sankofa, a word in Akan, a major Ghanaian language, was literally defined as "go back and take it" or "return to the source and fetch" or "back to basics." Its adjective was the word sankofan (anglicized).

• **Scramble for Africa:** Following the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, some European countries rushed to Africa and took possession of lands and demarcated those lands to be their territories (Gordon & Gordon, 1996). The period is referred to historically as the "Scramble for Africa."

• **Secondary Schools:** In Ghana, high schools were popularly known as secondary schools. The graduates were those students who completed the secondary school and passed a comprehensive examination administered by WAEC. The academic level of those graduates was supposed to be equivalent to the level of high school graduates in the United States.

• **Underachieving:** Many graduates in high schools in Ghana were failing the final graduation examination conducted by the WAEC. For the purpose of this study, underachieving refers to those students who failed the final examination conducted by the council.

• **WAEC:** A recognized professional examining body for the West African sub region.
This chapter described the purpose of the study, provided a historical background, a list of research questions, a statement of purpose, and a discussion of the significance of the study. Unique terms were also defined. The next chapter reviews the body of research literature, related to the Ghana education system in general and student underachievement in particular.
Chapter Two
Review of Literature

Introduction

The focus of this investigation was student underachievement in a selected high school in Ghana. Since some background knowledge of educational systems and reforms was necessary in this discussion, the researcher considered it worthwhile to illuminate some basic educational concepts and practices in the Ghanaian community, before independence (colonial era) and after independence.

The literature review contains four major sections: (a) an overview of the relationship between culture and education, (b) a history of education in Ghana, (c) a review of the present educational system in Ghana, and (d) current research studies on education in Ghana.

The Relationship between Culture and Education

Varying cultures and traditions in the world result in differences in literacy training from country to country. Culture plays a major role in identifying a type of education for a particular people. Taylor (1974) wrote, “Culture is a concept used to describe a way of life of a particular society. A ‘way of life’ of people means the beliefs, attitudes and norms — which have been crystallized into law and become
formally instituted so that some measure of articulation of the behavior of one society is not only ensured but that society can also be distinguished” (1974, p. 123). Taylor expanded this explanation further, stating:

The relationship between culture and education comes out clearly in the meaning of education as understood by two prominent educators, namely, A. N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. The former thinks of education as the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life; and by the art of life Whitehead meant the most complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentiality of that living creature in the face of its actual environment. Russell noted: “education ... may be defined as the formation, by means of instruction, of certain mental habits and a certain outlook on life and the world.” (p. 123)

In another clarification, Taylor said, “Education is a lifelong process of which schooling is only a small part. The ultimate goal of the education process is to help human beings become educated persons. Schooling is the preparatory stage” (p. 10). Identifying and maintaining a particular kind of education for a particular society is therefore very important for the progress of its people. It becomes an area of critical concern if a majority of a society’s students are unable to pass school examinations that serve as a blueprint for the skills considered necessary to functioning and contribution to the culture.

The following review presents a general picture of education in Ghana, beginning with a preview of some educational practices before Ghana gained her independence in 1957.
History of Education in Ghana

*Pre-Independence Ghana.* It has been argued that the African communities had some kind of education prior to their colonization by European countries. Traditional education, as it was called, was functional since it emphasized the process of passing down to each generation the culture and tradition of the society. An extract from The University of Ghana at Legon (1994) on Ghana Education published online stated that the dominant mode of transmitting knowledge in the pre-colonial societies of the Guinea Coast was through apprenticeship as smiths, drummers, or herbalists.

An advantage of this informal education was the assurance that individuals were able to satisfy the basic traditional or communal needs such as motherhood for women and farming for men. There was the creation of peace and harmony in the society as well as the spirit of community awareness generated within the family, tribe, and ethnicity.

However, the system placed too much emphasis on religious values; superstition and ancestral worshiping were venerated which, in turn, generated unscientific thinking. There was not enough room for logical thinking. Mazrui (1978) clarified that “all that we want to suggest with regard to the pre-literate society is that it has the kind of accompanying characteristics which make functional and structural diffuseness even greater than in more modernized entities” (p. 65). The traditional education system served its purpose, at least so far as harmony in the community was concerned.
Education was directly related to the requirements of the traditional community life and the demands of custom. It had much to offer despite its known weaknesses, which included obedience without questioning, lack of individual initiative and creativity, and the absence of freedom for critical thinking or discovery through exploration and interrogation.

Missionaries arrived in Ghana as a result of the Scramble for Africa. Makulu (1971) explained the partitioning and colonization of the continent. He wrote that "... the manifold processes which have shaped the continent: the building of the Christian communities, the expansion of Western imperial influence through territorial acquisition and the establishment of strong and viable states, and finally the building of the new nations of Africa would help to explain the significance and the place of education in the continent" (p. 2). Makulu's explanation clarified the motives of the colonists' endeavors and the subsequent partitioning of the African continent.

*Education in the Missionary Era in Ghana.* The more the world becomes compressed into one organic unit by the impact of science and technology, the more a nation will be required to prepare its people to perform additional roles other than those previously demanded by its culture and the local traditions of that society.

Mungazi (1993) contended that a discussion of some of the educational problems left behind by the colonial governments would underscore the need for educational reform. According to Memmi, a Tunisian professor of philosophy, the extent of control exercised by the colonizer on the colonized was done through
the utilization of myths about their (the colonized) culture and intellectual potential (1965). The colonial educational policies were, therefore, directed towards the development of colonial governments and were, to a large extent, incompatible with the development of Africans.

Bourret (1952) believed that, in spite of the great difficulties of assimilation and conformity expected of the native people, missionaries contributed much through their general civilizing influence. Codjoe (1988) believed the contrary. He maintained that formal introduction of colonialism into Ghana, and its attendant legal and administrative processes founded on the experience - the cultural norms and values of the metropolitan power - hampered the progress of the country. Furthermore, Codjoe argued that the consequence of overpowering and holding in check the vim and dynamism of the indigenous Ghanaian culture made Ghanaians feel that their own culture was inferior. Both authors were correct in their arguments. However, Ghana has been independent for over 40 years but it would appear that the country's educational development does not correspond to the needs of present day Ghanaian society.

Ordinances, commissions, and committees. The government of the then Gold Coast began to play an active role in schools and school administration around the beginning of the 20th century. Schools were run with the assistance of the enacted ordinances. Commissions and committees were established to organize the system in an attempt to achieve the best results possible for students and society. The underpinning philosophy was evident. Taylor (1974) stated, “there is often a conflict between goals of education which seek to
preserve the entire way of life in spite of changes, and those goals which seek to adapt the society to changes in the environment" (p. 123). Those ordinances, commissions, and committees were all operated with the aim of reforming schools to the advantage of the colonizer. 

Graham (1971) reported on the Phelps-Stokes Commission. He said the terms of the Commission were based on American ideas. The aim of the Commission was to assess the nature and quality of education of Negroes both in Africa and the USA. Areas stressed included the need for girls' education, character training, rural improvements, and the need for secondary schools with the cooperation of the Africans themselves. The following ideas were also stressed: Education must conserve whatever was sound in the African's life and transmit the best that civilization and Christianity had to offer, and, African education must cater to both the masses and the leaders, but the leaders must be trained directly for service to the community. 

Commenting on the Commission's report, Foster (1968) said Guggisberg, the then governor of the Gold Coast, saw the report as the "book of the century, a combination of sound idealism and practical commonsense" (p. 87). The importance of this commission for Ghana lay not just in its recommendations but also in the fact that it focused attention on the needs and problems of African education. The areas stressed by the commission were those considered appropriate for the Ghanaian society at that time. 

The colonial administrators found the need to review educational policies constantly as they attempted to implement the decisions brought forth by
appointed committees and commissions. The Ammissah committee was appointed in 1963 to advise the government on the nature of reforms needed to uplift the image of education in the country. The key recommendation by the committee was to plan a new type of education that would solve the unemployment problems of school graduates. Psacharopoulos (1994) wrote, “in all African countries, the expansion of secondary education had to be linked, one way or another, to productive employment...” (p. 184). The committee’s recommendations were experimented with for 10 years, but the social and educational problems remained unsolved.

The failure of the Ammissah committee gave birth to the Dzobo committee. The Dzobo committee recommended a 9-year basic education, followed by a 3-year secondary schooling, after which a graduate could either seek a vocational employment or pursue tertiary or higher education. Taylor (1974) examined reports of the various commissions and committees during the colonial era and argued that “at the heart of Ghana’s education were two basic assumptions: (a) Education should reflect the values of Ghana; and serve the needs of the individual and society; (b) Education should aim at imbuing the individual with Christian ethics” (p. 133). The second assumption operated more than the first and Ghanaians soon saw this assumption as hegemony. After Ghana gained her independence in 1957, some people thought it was time for Ghana to plan and implement a curriculum that would reflect the socio-economic needs of the Ghanaian society, and not place emphasis on the curriculum dictated by British colonial rule.
The first president of the Republic of Ghana, Dr. Nkrumah, emphasizing the importance of education, often said that Ghana was running against time in Africa. The president called for the elimination or eradication of the deficiencies of the past so that Ghana could catch up with modern techniques of education in the shortest possible time. The foundation for the quest to catch up with modern techniques had been laid by the new constitution that came into being in 1951, which included a provision called the Accelerated Development Plan for education. Codjoe (1988) explained that until 1951, when Ghanaians took over the government as a form of internal self-government and then initiated the Accelerated Development Plan for education, the majority of Ghanaians who had any opportunity to attend school only received a rudimentary education. Some educational programs were unplanned or ill-considered. He further stated that the main objective of the plan was to help develop a balanced system working towards universal primary education as rapidly as considerations of finances and teacher training allowed.

The result of the colonial domination, in educational terms, was that many Ghanaians were denied their right to universal education. Codjoe (1988) contended, "The difference between elementary and secondary school remained very diffused, fitting quite well into the strategy of educational control" (p. 178). The underpinning philosophy, however, was expansionist.

The different types of arguments put forward by Mungazi (1993), Bourrett (1952), Codjoe (1988), Graham (1971), Foster (1968), and Taylor (1974) provided enough indication of the necessity for Ghana to determine the
educational curricula required to meet both individual and national needs. The introduction of the current educational reforms was, therefore, necessary in order to outline goals for student academic and vocational preparation, and to allow for the establishment of standardized examinations to ensure that those goals were consistently met.

The Present Educational Reforms

A new education reform was introduced in September 1987. The reform covered education from primary schooling to the university level. It was popularly called the 6-3-3-4 system of education. It implied that the student goes through 6 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary school (JSS) program, a further 3 years of SSS program, and 4 years of university or tertiary education. Unlike the previous education system, which was lengthy (17 years of pre-university course work), the new system proposed a shorter route, requiring 12 years of pre-university education. Rothchild (1991) reported that the proposals for the reforms included abolishing the middle school system. The proposal called for a secondary school system of two stages: JSS followed by SSS. Not all Ghanaians, especially the academicians and the intelligentsia, supported the change. Many academics were skeptical about the long-term effects of the reforms.

The Ghanaian government provided guidelines for the reform implementation. Aduamah noted that Committees were set up to examine the modalities and operational requirements of the JSS. University authorities and students were invited
to submit proposals on the reforms. Public education forums on the system were set up in all districts in the country. The process opened the way for open, free and fair expression and exchange of views and ideas and constructive criticism. (1988, p. 79)

Some highlights of the overall principles and guidelines for the reforms as indicated in the *Official Handbook of Ghana* were:

1. The government’s belief in the right of every Ghanaian to be able to read, write, and function usefully in the society;

2. Provision of free and compulsory education for all to realize their potentials for themselves and the society;

3. The need for ethnic and national cultural identity and dignity for the unification of the nation;

4. Eight special types of training of pupils to suit the labor market thereby reducing the rate of unemployment;

5. Provision of scientific and technological education for every pupil to understand and live well in the modern world;

6. Development and adaptation of scientific and technological skills to help Ghanaians provide their needs from their own resources; and

7. Knowledge of the environment and prevention of deforestation, low agricultural output, and diseases. (Information Services Department, 1991, p. 13)

The objectives of the SSS reforms, as indicated in the *Official Handbook of Ghana*, were:
1. To reinforce the knowledge and skills acquired during the basic education program (JSS);
2. To diversify the curriculum to cater for different talents and skills;
3. To give higher education to basic education leavers (students), to equip them with skills to meet national manpower requirements in education, health, agriculture, industry, science, and technology;
4. To develop in students the longing for further self-improvement; and
5. To equip students with responsible leadership qualities for the overall development of national life. (Information Services Department, 1991, p. 14)

These objectives constituted the framework of educational expectations for the present day high school graduates in Ghana. In the event that examination results indicated that most students were not achieving the stated objectives, then investigation and alternative recommendations would be necessary.

Governments in developing countries continue to institute more modern practices, but incorporation of such changes and innovations has never been easy. Rondinelli, Middleton, and Verspoor (1990) contended that expanding school systems and improving the quality of education were important goals of governments in developing countries and have been considered as such since the 1960s. Development theories argued that improving education was a primary means of building human resources, which Harbison referred to as the "ultimate basis for the wealth of nations" (1973, p. 3).
Rondinelli, et al. (1990) went on to say, however, that the gap between proposed reforms and the ability to implement them in developing countries was widening as the projects financed by international assistance organizations supported increasingly ambitious educational innovations. Harbison (1973) again said that projects promoting educational reforms pose major management challenges. The problem was that developing countries would always need international assistance until they attained self-sufficiency. In many cases local managers appointed by international supporters would either become puppets for the international organizations or would take it as an opportunity to amass personal wealth. In other words, corruption and malpractice would take the place of loyalty, true service, and dedication.

Havelock and Huberman (1978) wrote that promoting change was difficult under any circumstances, but it was especially challenging in developing countries with uncertain and unstable economic, social, and political conditions. Most developing countries lacked the physical infrastructure as well as the experienced and skilled professionals needed to ensure successful results. Many countries lacked the strong institutions and organizations necessary to carry out change. Havelock and Huberman explained that most countries did not have the planning processes required to allow planners and administrators to learn from past experience. Additionally, planners often failed to understand how proposed changes might affect the resources, power, and authority of different organizations, which could lead to resistance or opposition to reforms.
Most developing countries have attempted educational reforms, but success was usually hindered by a host of problems. The generation of adequate resources - human, financial, and material - was always a major obstacle, and the methods by which Ghana could break through this difficulty, experienced in most developing countries, remain undiscovered.

Using Contingency Theory as the basis for discussion, Rondinelli et al. (1990) suggested some solutions. They indicated that different levels of uncertainty in the environment and differing degrees of innovation in projects called for varying management strategies. These strategies required particular skills, knowledge, and behaviors. In order to select appropriate management strategies, planners needed to understand the environment in which a project would be carried out and the degree of innovative behavior required of those who would implement the project. Reform planners needed to take into consideration: "(a) environmental uncertainties, (b) the socioeconomic environment, (c) assessment of the political environment, and (d) the cultural environment and staff values" (p. 27). They went on to say that for education reform projects to be meaningful, "the organizational environment may be shaped by a complex set of variables: Education sector policies, education sector characteristics, and expectations and traditions that influence people's behavior toward education" (p. 29). Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) summed it up by stating that if reforms were to be successful, individuals and groups must determine what should change as well as how to go about the change. Reform was not simply putting into place the
latest policy. The change could involve changing the cultures of the organization and all of its affiliated agencies.

The fact that reform implementations were difficult in Africa as a whole and indeed in many developing countries did not mean that effort should not be made. Tedlar (1995) stated, “the 21st century requires the development of a new form of education that is firmly anchored in indigenous African thought while it judiciously borrows ideas and technologies from other people of the world” (p. 209). Tedlar called this type of education the Sankofan. "Sankofa is an Akan word which roughly translates as return to the source and fetch or back to basics." (p. 1).

Ajayi, Goma, and Johnson (1996) maintained, however, that bringing about important innovative and creative developments in African universities (and all educational institutions) would not be easy. Such tasks demanded courage. Some people would feel inhibited about moving forward, preferring the well-beaten path. Others, perhaps not fully appreciating the challenge and the opportunity proffered by proposed changes or new directions, would use their influence at home and elsewhere to defeat or place serious impediments in the path of possible new developments. Ajayi et al. stated that other change recipients would fall into the category of people who were simply fearful of the unknown. They wrote, “As soon as a really profound and unexpected change is suggested in the curriculum or in the pedagogical or administrative structure of a department or a faculty, the professors who see some improvement in this are
few indeed" (p. 67). It is of no surprise therefore that people in the academia and influential positions in Ghana received the reform agenda with mixed feelings.

It has been argued that problems often arise when changes are instituted, but African governments and policy initiators should endeavor to initiate reforms carefully when reform becomes necessary. Thompson (1981) explained that in addition to studying the factors that might inhibit educational change and the pre-conditions for successful change, scholars in many parts of the world have been increasingly concerned with the ways in which the desired changes might be introduced and managed. He indicated that reformers in Africa have been naturally pre-occupied with the kinds of changes that they believed would achieve the results sought. But the scholars have been far less concerned with the question of how to manage the change. The effectiveness of the change in the curriculum of the Ghana education system should, therefore, be reflected in the standards of student achievement.

In summary, the people of Ghana wanted and still want a better education system for students. The educational goal has always been to develop an efficient system with sound academic and vocational offerings. Underlying this goal should be methods, processes, and resources for student achievement.

*Records of Student Achievement*

The compiled 1993-1997 results of the SSS Certificate Examination (see appendix A) by secondary division of Ghana Education Service indicated that a few students in most high schools were passing their final examinations. In 1993, 12.85% of students passed seven, eight or nine subjects, in 1994 the percentage
dropped to 10.79%. In 1995 the figure rose to 17.58%. A somewhat steady increase was noticed in 1996 and 1997 of 21.86% and 26.13% respectively. Though the annual increase between 1995 and 1997 showed some encouraging signs, the corresponding figures of students who took the examination left a question mark regarding the level of student achievement and factors leading to poor performances. In 1993, 5,411 students wrote the examination. In 1994, the figure was 8404 students, in 1995, it was 11,636 students, in 1996, it was 18,252 students, and in 1997, a total of 21,741 took part in the final examination. Approximately 5,000 students failed in 1993, increasing to 15,000 in 1997.

Though the difference in number of failures might be due to increase in student enrollment over the years, an investigation needed to be done to determine the reasons why large numbers of students were not passing generally, and particularly why the increased failure rate in specific schools such as Northside New Era Secondary School. It appeared that while some schools were obtaining better results, the achievements of others were far below expectations. The great disparity in student achievement among schools fueled the researcher's efforts to undertake this educational investigation. Tables 1 through 7 give a clearer picture of the differences in achievement at Northside New Era Secondary School and Beachside Secondary School.
### Tables 1 through 4

**Northside New Era Secondary School**  
Analysis of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations Results

**Table 1**  
1996 Total Number of Candidates: 423

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of subjects passed at grade E and above</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>Percentage passed of total candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records

**Table 2**  
1997 Total Number of Candidates: 313

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of subjects passed at grade E and above</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>Percentage passed of total candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records

**Table 3**  
1998 Total Number of Candidates: 305

<table>
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<th>No. of subjects passed at grade E and above</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>Percentage passed of total candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records

**Table 4**  
1999 Total Number of Candidates: 303

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of subjects passed at grade E and above</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>Percentage passed of total candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records

---

Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records
### Table 5

**Northside New Era Secondary School**  
**Analysis of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations Results: 2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Number of candidates passing</th>
<th>Number of candidates failing</th>
<th>Total number of candidates</th>
<th>Percentage of candidates passing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Language (core)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (core)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>7.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics (core)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies (core)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Agriculture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horticulture and Crop Husband</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automechanics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Drawing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood Work</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal Work</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Construction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>7.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics (Elective)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture Making</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Know in Art</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foods and Nutrition</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management in Living</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number of Candidates: 301  
Number of Students Failed: 141  
Source: Document obtained from Northside New Era Secondary School records
### Table 6

**Beachside Secondary School**  
Analysis of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations Results: 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>No. of candidates presented</th>
<th>No. of absentees</th>
<th>Number of candidates passed with grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. English Language</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Science</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mathematics</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agric. &amp; Env. Stud.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Life Skills</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Eng. Language Elect.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lit-In-Eng.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Maths(Elective)</td>
<td>130</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Physics</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Chemistry</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Biology</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Horticulture</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Agric. Econs.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Gen. Agric.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. History</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Government</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Christian Religion</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Manag. in Liv.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Total Number of Candidates: 499**  
Source: Document obtained from Beachside Senior Secondary School records
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Subject</th>
<th>No. of candidates presented</th>
<th>No. of absentees</th>
<th>Number of candidates with grades</th>
<th>No. passed</th>
<th>% passed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Mathematics</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Integrated Science</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social Studies</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. English Language</td>
<td>501</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lit-In-Eng.</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Maths(Elective)</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Physics</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Chemistry</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Biology</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Crop Husb. &amp; Hort.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Gen. Agric.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. History</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Government</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Manag. In Liv.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Cloth. &amp; Textiles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Foods &amp; Nutrition</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Textiles</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Gen. Know. In Art</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Graphic Design</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Total Number of Candidates: 501
Source: Document obtained from Beachside Senior Secondary School records
Through a comparison of figures from the two schools, the researcher found significant differences in student achievement. The comparison school is referred to as Beachside Senior Secondary for purposes of confidentiality. The Northside New Era Secondary School became the focus of the investigation on the basis of Thondike's (1963) claim that, “It seems obvious that we can only have underachievement in relation to some standard of expected or predicted achievement. So perhaps we should begin by asking where that standard of expected achievement comes from” (p. 2). In the case of this study, the measured expectation was the passing rate of final year students who took the SSS Certificate Examination examinations, conducted by the WAEC. Beachside SSS’s figures were used for comparison basis only.

There were marked differences, as well as similarities, between the two schools. Beachside Senior Secondary was situated in the capital city of Ghana. Parents of those students were mostly civil and public servants. Parents of the students of Northside New Era were primarily farmers or self-employed. Self-employment was a comparatively newer venture in employment for the area. On the other hand, both schools employed the same curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education. Academic expectations of both schools, in terms of student achievement, were the same.

The grading system of schools in Ghana differs from the system in the United States. Like the system in the United Kingdom, passing grades range between A and E, the highest and the lowest respectively, but in the United
States, D is considered the lowest passing grade. However, psychologically, the D grade is not respected as a passing grade.

In 1996, 207 out of 423 students failed all subjects in the final examination at Northside New Era Secondary School, a percentage of 49.16 (Table 1). If the ceiling of grades considered to be average were put at passes in five subjects and above, a total of 87% would have been determined to have failed. The year 1997 was not encouraging either since 43.58% of students failed in all subjects (Table 2). The percentage would have been much higher if passing at five subjects and above had been considered average. In 1998 the figure was worse than those of the previous years. A total of 162 out of 305 failed all subjects, representing 53.1% of the candidates (Table 3). Passing figures in 1999 were not healthy either. Out of 303 candidates, 141 (46.83%) failed in all subjects and 95 candidates passed in only one subject each (Table 4). Table 5 showed a breakdown of candidates' grades in each subject area for the year 2000. English language, science, mathematics and social studies were the points of reference. All students were required to take those core subjects. Twenty-one students managed to pass with grade E (the lowest passing grade) in English language, thus 280 students failed. In science, three students secured grade D and 20 passed with grade E, 278 failed. In mathematics a total of 267 failed with four, two, 12 and 16 passing with grades B, C, D, and E respectively. Sixty-seven passed in social studies with 55 earning grade E, nine earning a grade of D, two earning grade C, and one student passing with a B.
Unlike Northside New Era Secondary School, Beachside Secondary performed incredibly well in the same examinations. In 1999 the school had 96.9 passing rate in English language with 14 candidates passing with a grade of A. A total of 189 students received Bs, and 115 received C grades. Fifteen students failed the English test. A total of 458 students, representing 93.2%, passed in science and 140 received As in mathematics (Table 6). The percentage of students passing in the year 2000 was also encouraging (Table 7). Out of 501 candidates, 80.9% passed in mathematics; 89.8% passed in integrated science; 98.4% passed in social studies; and 98.2% passed in English language.

The examination results of the two schools discussed above provided sufficient reasons for the researcher to investigate underachievement in Northside New Era Secondary School. The examination of current research on the Ghanaian education system below provides additional information about the need for this study.

*Current Research on Education in Ghana*

Peil (1995) conducted one of the most recent studies on the current status of the educational system in Ghana. The specific problem under investigation was how adults perceived the changes in academic and vocational education. Six hundred adults were selected for participation in the study, representative of all parts of the town of Madina. Peil used an interview method to gather data and information about each participant including educational history and occupational achievement. Particular attention was given to the educational and economic background of the parents. A major finding was that the parents’ level of
education and affluence were key factors in the educational attainment of the children. Most respondents felt strongly that gaining an education was desirable and important. Based on these findings, the researcher concluded that most people remained disillusioned but still believed in sacrificing so that their children could have at least some education.

Dean (1998) was another researcher who studied education in Ghana in recent years. The problem under investigation was the impact of cognitive skills with reference to household incomes in Ghana. His investigation was triggered by the conclusions drawn by Psacharopoulos (1994) from more than 55 studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, indicating that human capital in developing countries focused predominantly on measuring the returns of how much time a person spent in school. The paper examined the effect of skills on total household income and not just wage or farm income. Dean (1998) argued that, although ambitious educational goals were set during the 1960s and widely pursued during the 1970s, school attainment for many Ghanaians was low. He stated that there was a pronounced difference in school attainment between urban and rural dwellers. His analysis used data from the Ghana Living Standard Survey, carried out by the Ghana Statistical Service with technical assistance from the World Bank. While many Ghanaians were farmers and the findings of the research indicated that the benefits of cognitive skills to Ghanaian households could not be determined by the effects on farm income, this did not, however, mean that households engaged in farming would not benefit from improved cognitive skills.
Several themes emerge from this review of literature. Some of the themes relate to topics such as the relationship between culture and education, pre-independence Ghana, education in the missionary era, and ordinances, commissions, and committees. Literature on the 1987 educational reforms, current research studies on education in Ghana, and statistics on students' recent examination results indicating lower academic achievements in the school under investigation as compared with another, higher achieving, school were of particular interest.

The theme from this research is factors that contribute to student underachievement in one secondary school in Ghana. In conclusion, the relative scarcity of research literature on the 1987 educational reforms, in relation to student achievement in Ghana, affirmed an urgent need for the study.
Chapter Three

Research Methodology and Procedures

Methodology

The design and focus of the study merited qualitative methodologies that were more inclined towards a case study. Merriam (1998) said one of the most common types of qualitative research found in education was the case study. Ball (1990) explained that qualitative research requires a search for meaning, a suspension of preconceptions, and an orientation to discovery. In this case study methods and analyses of interviews, surveys, and other research methodologies were clearly structured and much attention was given to participants' views and suggestions.

The following question format with corresponding methods to be employed was used for the formulation of the research questions.

1. How are students benefiting from the recent educational changes in terms of student achievement?
   Method: Interviewing headmasters/headmistresses, teachers, and students

2. To what extent do the high schools in Ghana have the academic resources to prepare students in their studies?
   Method: Examining resources—textbooks, teaching and learning aids, and availability of teachers
3. Why are students in the selected school not making the necessary grades as compared to the records of students in similar high schools?
   Method: Interviewing school administrators, teachers, and students

4. What steps do administrators, teachers, and students think are necessary to help student achievement?
   Method: Interviewing administrators, teachers, and students, and examining supporting programs that enhance teaching and learning

*Population Sampling and Procedures for Data Collection*

Interviewing the high school administrators, teachers, and students was a vital component of the study because the school administrators (called headmasters/headmistresses and assistant headmasters/headmistresses) held the key to the academic records of the school. Teachers delivered instruction dictated by the curriculum. For that matter, teachers were important resources to students’ education and training. Their input into this investigation was, therefore, crucial.

Students were the recipients of educational instruction in the classroom. Their voices constituted emotional responses - positive or otherwise - to the outcomes of learning. The researcher felt that students were not to be left out in any educational research agenda that investigated student achievement.

Investigating the availability of resources was important because resource availability in the school was essential for student achievement. The resources must be equitably distributed, to reach all schools using the same curriculum, whether such schools were situated in rural or urban areas because teachers
were expected to use the same curriculum wherever they taught, and students were expected to pass the same final examination conducted by WAEC before they graduated.

Ghana, like most countries, had socio-economic disparities with regard to income, class affiliates, and residential status. People in Accra, the capital city, and the three other cosmopolitan cities – Tema, Sekondi/Takoradi, and Kumasi (the Garden City) had job advantages such as public or civil service and private entrepreneurship. Parents of students in these areas were mostly working and middle class income earners. Conversely, as Pellow and Chazan (1986) noted, most people in the rural areas in Ghana were subsistence farmers, low-income earners with very poor living conditions, who enjoyed minimal government infrastructures. The unemployment rate was very high in those areas. The researcher believed that students in the rural areas had the same academic expectations as those in the cities, though resources for educational enterprises, both human and material, tended to be woefully below average.

Of particular interest was Peil's (1995) remark: “the basic floor, pillars and roof provided by the state have been ignored, especially by poor northern villagers who were unlikely to get the resources needed for success in the new system." She indicated that across the country, failure rates were especially notable in mathematics, since children coming from inadequate primary schools could not “cope with the new curriculum” and “neither [could] some of the teachers” (p. 291).
Procedures for Data Analysis

Inductive data analysis was undertaken. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) explained that data analysis was the process of systematically searching the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials accumulated to increase understanding of them and to enable the researcher to present what was discovered. Similarly, Merriam said, “data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (1998, p. 178). Huberman and Miles (1998) also said that data analysis occurs throughout the research process. However, the researcher believed that prior to data collection and analysis some semi-structured questions were required to guide him in maintaining a smooth interview flow with participants.

Semi-Structured Questions

The semi-structured questions were developed because the researcher assumed that those questions would serve as guidelines that would help to provide insight into participants’ understanding of the emergent literacy process. Denzin and Lincoln explained,

Recently, postmodernist ethnographers have concerned themselves with some of the assumptions and moral problems present in interviewing and with the controlling role of the interviewer. These concerns have led to new directions in qualitative interviewing, focusing on increased attention to the voices and feelings of the respondents. (1998, p. 51)

In order to avoid the controlling role as explained by Denzin and Lincoln, the researcher’s goal was to construct open-ended questions to bring to the surface
whatever was on the participant's mind rather than imposing his own constructs and expectations.

In an addition to the avoidance of a controlling role, the questions were not meant to be in a format that was to be followed rigidly, since Spradley (1979) suggested that researchers should develop guiding questions but allow the interview to flow from context, interaction, and social rapport.

In the development of the semi-structured questions, two steps were taken to ensure that the questions would serve as useful tools in eliciting information. Members of the dissertation committee offered assistance in framing the questions during the proposal stages of the paper. At the proposal defense, the committee posed the questions to the researcher to test question suitability. The researcher also tested the questions prior to taking them into the field, posing them to a group of friends (teachers, administrators and students who were not part of the study and were not from Northside New Era) upon his arrival in Ghana. Written approval from the Institutional Review Board was also obtained prior to the study (see Appendix E). Some of the guiding questions are discussed below.

Administrators and teachers.

- Upon what criteria do you recruit new students?
- What level of academic preparedness do you see from your newly enrolled students from the JSS?
- Describe your teaching resources in terms of equipment, textbooks, and stationery.
• Tell me about your staff and teachers with regards to their professional background and professional commitments.

• How often are teachers given refresher courses and who administers those courses?

• What are your classrooms like in terms of size and student population?

• What are the success rates of your final year students in the final exams in the previous years?

• What suggestions do you have that would enhance student achievement in your school?

Students.

• What circumstances led to the choice of study in your field?

• What was/is the level of learning materials and resources available to help you become academically competent?

• How would you describe your classrooms and the availability of equipment?

• How do you see the level of instruction that you are acquiring in school helping you to pass your final examination?

• What suggestions do you have that would help students to achieve more in their academic and vocational pursuits in your school?

The research was undertaken between May and June of 2002; the researcher spent 5 weeks in the field. Since the methodology included tape recording, jotting down ideas, words, and phrases, and coding and ciphering, much of the analysis was done after leaving the field. Data were summarized into themes and categorized according to areas that captured recurring patterns.
Limitations

Reservations from participants were anticipated in terms of answering questions openly and fearlessly. The researcher expected to encounter reluctance from participants to answer questions openly due to the potential danger of participant identification, a valid concern considering the politics of a developing country such as Ghana. All ethical issues were followed because, as Simon (1989) puts it, “All human research has ethical dimensions” (p. 114). In addition to seeking permission, in advance, from the Ministry of Education and the particular site to be visited, as well as all persons to be interviewed, anonymity was promised to all participants. Delamont (1992) said, “I am a believer in pseudonyms rather than real names because the individual must be protected whether they like it or not” (p. 31). Real names were substituted with fictitious ones.

In addition to ensuring participants’ anonymity, the researcher followed the educational research protocol by providing the participants with copies of informed consents (Appendix B); informed consents signed by parents, since students could be under 18 years of age (Appendix C); and signed assents from students (Appendix D). Prior to the interview process, the researcher duly explained contents of consents and assents, and participants and parents appended their signatures accordingly.

The researcher was a Ghanaian and a product of the country’s old education system. Eisner, 1998, said that a researcher’s unique background was his or her own signature. Peshkin (1988) also said that it is better for a
researcher to acknowledge subjectivity rather than pretend it does not exist. Though the researcher was undertaking this project with many of his own views, his role as a researcher and educator was to look for meaning and to go to the field to collect data from the participants' point of view, without relying on any of his own preconceived ideas. The data collection process was done under a critical lens, and analyses were undertaken constructively. A major advantage for the researcher was his knowledge of the culture. As he was deeply rooted in his own culture and traditions, methods of gaining access were included in his area of expertise.

In chapter 3 the researcher indicated the study methodology and signified how each approach constituted an important frame for the collection of data. Clear population sampling procedures were determined, and sample questions for participants were outlined. Procedures for data analysis were indicated and the appropriate limitations were noted, including the advantages of his personal and cultural background and affiliations, vital as they were to the research process.

The following chapter on data analysis begins with a brief description of Northside New Era Secondary School, discusses participants' biographies and responses, provides economic, social, and educational background for the school's constituency, as well as an evaluation of findings.
Chapter Four

Data Analysis

The researcher chose a secondary school located in northern Ghana for this investigation. The town where the school was situated was about 10 hours drive from Accra, the capital city of Ghana. Although the road was only about 360 miles long, it was exceedingly narrow, in poor condition in some parts, and there were many police checking posts, some of which took longer than expected to pass through.

The school was co-educational with an intake of about 1000 students per academic year. It was housed in an old building with old-styled classrooms each measuring about 30 feet by 20 feet. A traditional blackboard was provided for each classroom. Two of the classrooms had the two-in-one type desks. Other classrooms had single tables and chairs. Since those chairs and tables were not uniformly structured, it could be inferred that individual students owned them.

A few of the classrooms had educational posters. One had a wall map of Ghana. Another classroom had a painting of traditional drumming and dancing. The researcher was not granted access to the science lab, which, according to participants, was not in frequent use. Looking through the wired window, the researcher saw three long tables with two paint buckets on each. The science teacher who served as the guide said they used the buckets to fetch water from
outside for use in the lab, especially for the washing of hands after lessons had been conducted. There was not much equipment in the lab.

The verandas were spread with domestic animal droppings. The students themselves would be required to sweep the verandas since there was no outside janitorial service. Students took turns each morning sweeping the floors and tidying the surrounding areas according to an arranged order. The headmaster and two of his assistants lived a few meters away, within the school compound. As one of the assistant headmasters happened to be the researcher's college mate, at least one cordial relationship was established immediately, well in accordance with what Eisner (1998) referred to as "a researcher's unique background, ... his or her own signature" (p. 36). Teachers and students were extremely friendly and that atmosphere enhanced the research process greatly.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher chose Northside New Era Secondary School to be the school's pseudonym. In addition, all participants were anonymous. However, in order to describe data collected by the researcher effectively, descriptions of location and participants' biographies were necessary. Kvale (1996) explained, "If a study involves publishing information potentially recognizable to others, the [participants] need to agree to the release of identifiable information" (p. 114). The researcher explained the entire interview process clearly to all the participants prior to beginning the interviews. Participants willingly agreed to the interview process.
Data analysis is a key component of every research study. Huberman and Miles (1998) said that analysis occurred throughout the research process. Marshall and Rossman (1995) stated that it was a nonlinear and concurrent process of bringing order, form, and meaning to the data.

Eighteen participants took part in the study, representing a cross-section of the school culture that included administrators and learners and both experienced and inexperienced instructors. There were ten teachers, six students, and two administrators in the sample. All of the participants volunteered to be interviewed. Participants were not chosen randomly, nor was any format used to select those who were interviewed.

Members of the faculty were notified of the researcher’s mission through an announcement in the staff lounge. Previously, the researcher had established written communication with the headmaster. Within an hour of the announcement, participants came to the assistant headmaster’s office, offered the researcher a warm welcome, and volunteered to write their names down as prospective interviewees.

A similar approach was used to inform the students. At the end of the school session the teacher-on-duty announced to the seniors that interested students who would like to be interviewed should see the researcher at the assistant headmaster’s office. After the assembly, interested students lined up at the door to have their names written down for the interview. Assent and consent forms were distributed the next day after a brief orientation to discuss the Institutional Review Board’s protocol. Interviews began two days after the
researcher's arrival. The researcher spent a total of 5 weeks at the school, accommodating days when school activities did not permit interview sessions. Interviews were mostly held at one of the assistant headmaster's office. An attempt to have an interview at a local restaurant, at the request of one teacher, was not successful due to excessive noise and interruptions. An interview session ranged between 45 minutes and 1 hour 10 minutes.

It was interesting to note that the hospitality exhibited by the host school, coupled with participants' willingness to discuss their views, made it possible for the researcher to achieve more than anticipated. The researcher began the data analysis with biographical descriptions of each participant followed by the participant's responses.

Participant Biographies and Responses

The study focused on individuals' personal as well as their practical knowledge of the causes of underachievement in a selected school in Ghana. The researcher knew that choosing administrators, teachers, and students, who possessed the elements that embodied such personal and practical knowledge in school settings as participants, would meaningfully serve as an overarching link between the study proposal and the overall results. A participant's description consisted of "a descriptive account ... that requires thinking through what will be included and what will be left out from the hundreds of pages of data collected for the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). By carefully examining the comments and suggestions made by the participants, a clearer understanding of the causes of
student underachievement at Northside New Era Secondary School was established.

Joseph. Joseph was an assistant headmaster of the school. He entered the University of Cape Coast in 1989 and graduated in 1993. He read social studies and obtained a B.S. degree in geography. Shortly after graduation, he was posted to a secondary school in the Cape Coast area where he taught for 5 years. He later became an assistant headmaster for that school. He was transferred to Northside New Era Secondary School in 1998 as the assistant headmaster. He liked this position because he enjoyed a better cooperation from the teachers in the discharge of his duties and he was happy with the headmaster’s leadership.

Responding to the interview questions relating to student underachievement in the school, Joseph said the school did not get much assistance from the government. The government was supposed to supply books and stationery materials, teaching and learning aids, and school equipment to support student learning but not much of this had happened through the years. The school survived on the school fees that the students paid. Each student paid about 600,000 cedis (approximately $75.00 U.S.) per year to supplement government grants. As an example, Joseph said that some ordinary hammers had been supplied by the government some years back for use in the technical department, but since then there had not been any other supplies.

Responding to the question regarding the level of professional commitment of the teachers in the school, he said teachers were not treated
fairly in terms of salaries and employment benefits so they were not motivated in any way to teach. Teachers did not have good homes to live in. He said that in many of the older schools teachers were given fairly decent accommodations, but in his school almost all of the teachers lived in compound houses (private landlords’ rented homes, where all tenants shared utilities). In most cases the houses did not have electricity and toilets.

Comparing the school with other secondary schools that he knew, he said that teachers in his school were not given periodic professional training. Upon graduation, newly trained teachers preferred to get employment in well-furnished schools. Those teachers who could not find jobs elsewhere, and who had no other alternatives, were employed by his school. Those teachers used the school as a “springboard” for better places in the future.

Joseph said a school like his should have a full boarding house where students could do some homework after school. Most of the students came from poor homes where there were no resources for private studies. Most of them did not have common lanterns to be able to do their homework. Many students shared a room with other members of the household, making individual studies practically impossible. In many cases, even adolescents of the opposite sex shared a common room, especially if they were siblings. Most students would not do homework, but teachers could not hold them accountable knowing of their home and family conditions.

Students often came to class late. Many of them traveled miles on foot, but the teacher could not wait for everybody to arrive before beginning the day’s
lessons. Several students missed certain classroom lessons almost everyday. Unlike some countries where students have the privilege of riding in school buses or have other alternatives of transportation, these students did not have such choices and were forced to walk to and from school. Teachers also arrived late to school because they either did not have their own means of transportation or did not have access to public transportation.

Joseph said many teachers in his school were not certified. Those teachers often did not understand or even know what they were teaching but their appointments could not be terminated because there would be no replacement. To this, he asserted, “Students are bound to achieve little if at all.”

*Emmanuel.* Emmanuel was the head of the mathematics department. He earned the advanced-plus certificate in City and Guilds, London Institute, then earned a certificate in secretarialship. He later obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in economics and mathematics, earning a professional teachers’ certificate in education from the University of Cape Coast. He was also qualified as a chemical engineering technician. He had taught in the school for 3 years.

Echoing what Joseph said, Emmanuel maintained that the government had been able to give them a few school materials for mathematics but the supply was woefully inadequate. The materials they had were not age and standard appropriate to meet the curriculum requirements. He reported that there were only two complete mathematical sets for use in the classroom. Students were supposed to buy the sets themselves. However, he believed that 90% of the students could not afford the mathematical sets.
In comparing past years to the current situation, he concluded that things were getting worse. Referring to the pre-1987 education reform days, he said the government used to give out at least some education materials but he felt the government no longer seemed to care. He reiterated that teaching and learning resources were non-existent. Teachers taught with what was available. Using himself as an example, he indicated that teachers cared more about the ticking of the clock and their paychecks than what they were supposed to teach because they did not enjoy the profession.

Emmanuel added that overcrowded classrooms were contributing factors to student underachievement. He estimated that on an average day, teachers sometimes had sixty students in one class. The limited number of textbooks and related resources, combined with the overcrowding made teaching simply impossible.

Reflecting on the parents' role, he said that the few parents who could afford to give material support to their children had lost interest in education due to the visibly inadequate outcomes. There were no jobs, no opportunities for further education, and the continued rise in the number of failures in the final examination were contributing factors to parents' loss of hope. On the other hand, there were parents who were interested in their children's education but they often did not have the means to contribute financially.

He said students had, of late, become arrogant and disrespectful in schools, something that the Ghanaian society abhored. He attributed those behaviors to students' inability to get what they wanted from education, resulting
in underachievement. He said most teaching was done orally as there simply were not enough teaching resources. There was very little practical teaching which would involve the students in more cooperative learning and exploration.

*Frances.* Frances also taught mathematics. She taught algebra and geometry and served as a national service intern to the school. She was willing to pursue further courses in her field in any of the universities in Ghana but as she had not been “lucky” in gaining admission into any of them, she had changed her mind and decided to travel to Germany to pursue a different career. She said teaching was not her choice of career.

Frances contributed to the interview by reiterating the deficiency in the teaching of mathematics and other subjects. She said mathematics was considered a core subject. According to her, mathematics was offered in both science and arts block areas of study. She emphasized the difficulty in teaching a subject for which educational materials were either absent entirely or in short supply.

She said that due to the limited educational funding from the government, schools such as hers had no alternative but to make do with the limited materials at their disposal, improvising when necessary. She said it had been difficult for the government to provide schools like Northside New Era with teaching resources. She believed that students' underachievement in mathematics, and in all subject areas, was due to lack of government funding.

*Akwasi.* Akwasi, a social studies teacher, completed his secondary school education at Ghana Secondary in Koforidua. He did his national service
internship as a teacher in a small village near Nsawam in the eastern region of Ghana. He liked the teaching profession, so he studied at the Canton Teacher Training College where he graduated as a post-secondary certificate "A" teacher in 1967. He then entered the University of Cape Coast and chose history as his major. He had been in the school for about 8 months.

This participant said that this school, and indeed many others, were producing "half-baked" graduates. He explained that the students they were teaching did not fit anywhere in the society because the students were achieving too little to be able to continue literacy education or to enter the employment sector. He argued that the main reason for student underachievement in his school was the result of the educational policies currently in practice. He believed that the root cause of low achievement in his class was the result of education reform which encouraged "mass promotion," meaning that a student was promoted to the next grade if even that student scored zero in all subjects at the end of the academic year.

Akwasi said even the handful of their students who managed to pass the final year examination had trouble getting into a university because most of them did not meet the entry requirements. He stated that the situation was so bad that in most cases the universities had to conduct an entrance examination to screen the newly enrolled students or, in some cases, the higher institutions would admit students for a one-year pre-entrance program before they would be allowed to start the main undergraduate courses.
Changing the topic to the curriculum and the necessary resources, he said the lack of educational resources in the whole education system, and particularly a school such as his, had contributed to poor student performance. He lamented that the demands of the school curriculum and the availability of academic resources were not proportionate, a very broad curriculum but very limited resources in terms of qualified teachers and materials to enhance teaching. The end result was the students' very weak academic foundation, he said.

Responding to the interview questions regarding the level of students' academic readiness prior to admission into the SSS program, Akwasi said students who were admitted into his school had not been academically prepared for SSS education because the JSS they attended had also had inadequate resources. He stated that the whole education system was in disarray and that student underachievement, as indicated by the published results, should be interpreted as a failure of the current education system.

Issa. Issa was the second administrator interviewed. He served as an assistant to the headmaster. Issa entered the University of Cape Coast in 1974 and graduated in 1978 with a major in educational psychology. After graduation, he got a job in a senior secondary school in the central region where he taught mathematics for 5 years. He then left the country and lived in Nigeria for 3 years. Upon returning to Ghana, he was transferred from one school to another until he was posted to this school as an assistant headmaster. He had been in that position for a year and a half.
Restating what other participants had said, Issa attributed student underachievement in Northside New Era to the duration of the SSS program. He said the 3-year duration was too short and students were expected to accomplish too much. The curriculum was too wide. At a conference for headmasters of SSS he attended 2 years previously, the participants unanimously recommended 4 years of secondary school education rather than 3 years, but there had not been any change. The established duration of 3 years was still the practice. He said another reason for the "massive failure" during the final examination was that most of the students were not well informed on their choices of study subjects. Many of them considered it prestigious to study science but had no real comprehension of what science, as a subject, entailed.

Issa also reiterated what other participants had said regarding the lack of educational resources. He said the shelves of the library were empty and the school did not have textbooks. The few that they had were torn and had been donated 2 years before by World Vision, a foreign charitable organization. Due to a lack of appropriate resources, students had virtually nothing to enhance their studies. Teachers copied notes and assignments on the chalkboard from their teacher’s manuals and students had to copy the notes into their exercise books, a process that was slow, tiring, tedious, and archaic.

Another reason for student underachievement, according to the interviewee, was keeping good and experienced teachers. He said when teachers were posted to the school and discovered the prevailing internal conditions including poor resources, lack of housing, poor physical structures of
the school with “pooled” classrooms, combined with unacceptable salaries, they decided to leave for a better place or for a better job.

Lack of resources in the school was not the only problem that Issa saw. He said that a significant problem for all the schools in the vicinity was the lack of resource centers. Resource centers had been provided and equipped by donor agencies in some parts of the country to augment individual schools resources. Students traveled to such centers to use resources that would normally be unavailable in their respective schools. He admitted that there was one such center in the area, but stated that the location was too far away from the school and thus transportation to the center posed a problem.

He said the limited teaching and learning aids, coupled with the fact that his students did not have access to a resource center, resulted in the low level of student achievement. He said, without hesitation, that most of the students had little practical knowledge about their world as what teachers taught them was all theory. For example, there was no science equipment in the science lab.

According to Issa, the percentage of students that had been able to pursue further education after graduation from the school was less than 2%. About 90% of students were unemployable so the majority went back to the old system of traditional farming - cattle rearing - the main occupation for the educationally disadvantaged people of that region.

He stressed that, due to psychological profiling, the few secondary school graduates who were able to pass the final examination could not find jobs because employers assumed that they couldn't function well in jobs that required...
skills and academic competency. Employers would prefer to employ someone who had passed the Middle School Leaving Certificate examination under the old system to a graduate with the SSS certificate.

He attributed part of the underachievement problems of Northside New Era Secondary School, and other schools in a similar situation, to the transition process of the JSS to the SSS. He said, for example, that many students who enrolled in his school to begin secondary school education could not identify a protractor. Secondary school teachers had to refer to the junior school curriculum to teach the basics before they could go on to teach the secondary school curriculum. In the same manner, the universities had to prepare the freshmen on subjects they should have studied in the secondary schools in order for them to be able to assimilate university course content.

He remarked that the complexity of the system, coupled with the teachers’ inability to complete student education in the broad curriculum areas, and, in most cases, their insufficient knowledge of what they taught, did not help students academically. As a result, students had achieved very little by the time they wrote their final examination.

Edward. Edward was the physical education teacher. He had received his training at the University College of Winneba when it was a diploma awarding institution. He had been employed by the school for 8 months. He had married about a month prior to the interview and planned to join his wife in the operation of a confectionary store in the same town. He thought engaging in private business would be better than teaching.
Edward also believed that the major problem for students' achievement had been lack of educational funding and the low esteem in which the teaching profession was held. Teachers did not feel motivated to teach due to poor salary structures and working conditions. He stated that the basic respect once accorded teachers had gone down the drain. He could not also understand why the government would not find a solution to pre-university education problems through the provision of sufficient funds to enable administrators to operate the schools effectively. He did not foresee a short-term solution to students' underachievement because he believed nobody cared. He said the classroom environment itself was not conducive to learning.

Leticia. Leticia was a final year student. Her father was a medical doctor and her mother was a teacher. She entered Northside New Era Secondary School after completing her JSS with good grades. She was planning to follow her father’s profession, thus biology and chemistry were her areas of interest.

From a student's perspective, complementing what teachers had said previously, Leticia said the reason why students were not achieving had to do with inadequate instruction from the teachers. She said the teachers were not dedicated in the field of teaching. Teachers were observed coming to school late. One of the teachers was deeply involved in politics and wanted to stand for the district level elections. According to this student, all that the teacher was interested in was campaigning, requesting that the students convince their parents to vote for him. She said the teacher wrote the day's assignments on the chalkboard and asked them to work in groups to share the few textbooks that
they had while he read through the newspapers. They were not given feedback on their performance in the classroom. They only had their examination results (report cards) that showed nothing more than a “chain of Fs” at the end of each term.

She combined the interview questions on how she would describe the availability of equipment in the school and the level of instruction that she was acquiring and said they did not have a science laboratory where they could perform science experiments. Also, few teachers in the school had a degree in what they were teaching. She said the students knew each teacher’s qualifications because the headmaster had all the details hung on a wall in his office.

*Mina.* Mina came from a village nearby. Her parents were farmers and could barely pay her school fees. She had to sell oranges in the evenings after classes to supplement her parent’s income during her JSS school years. She moved to the town where Northside New Era was situated to live with one of the teachers. The female teacher had won Mina’s admiration and sympathy for her hard work in school. She had the opportunity to study in the evenings instead of selling oranges. She was planning to be a teacher upon the completion of her education.

Mina had witnessed changes in the Ghanaian school system and commented that formerly students did 5 years of secondary education towards the "O" level (Ordinary level) certificate after middle school, and 2 years comprehensive education after the ordinary level, to obtain the "A" level
(Advanced level) certificate before they entered the university. She said that at least statistics and past records showed that those students performed well and better than students of more recent times and more specifically, in Northside New Era Secondary. The university expectations in terms of entry requirements had not changed; thus there was no reason for people to believe that they could use 3 years of senior secondary education to achieve the same level of academic competency that other students spent 5 years to achieve.

As an example, she stated that many of her friends in the same class with her had dropped out. Out of a cohort of 43 students who began the first year together only 19 remained in the class. Two of them, Godfred and Joseph, had moved to the regional capital of the Ashanti region to stay with relatives and were in better schools. The rest had dropped out. The dropouts were seen in the streets, unemployed. Martha, Mina’s good friend had also dropped out during the second term of the previous year. She was in the Ivory Coast (a neighboring country), prostituting. She recounted that most students stopped schooling because they could not make the necessary grades and considered attempting the final examination several times before they would be able to pass, if at all, extremely frustrating.

She agreed with the Ghanaian government’s claim that 7 years pre-university education was too long, but by the same token, she felt the 3 years in SSS were too short. Students were not able to complete the curriculum within the 3 years and could only pick and choose specific areas in the textbooks to memorize. They did not understand anything. They only practiced the “Chew-
Pour-Pass-and-Forget theory, a term meaning that students chose special areas of the curriculum, memorized those areas (chewed), they wrote (poured) what they memorized on the examination answer sheet and after passing chose to forget what they'd memorized. The method was a pattern used by all their predecessors. Seniors often made the same preparation towards the final examination, but were often unlucky, getting questions from areas other than what they'd been able to memorize, resulting in failure. She said that students, particularly seniors, acquired knowledge by memorization, rather than from what had been taught in school, in an effort to pass the examinations. She did not have any goal or hope and did not know what she was going to do after completing secondary school.

"The situation needs a lot of thought," Mina said. She did not believe the government had wanted to change the system in the first place and had much concern about the current situation. She said that she wished someone would take her petition to the Ministry of Education for a thorough consideration. According to Mina, students in her school were not achieving anything academically but nobody seemed to care. She believed the educational authorities felt that cutting the cost involved in providing students with good education was more important than the quality of education necessary to the students' future. She said, "We are the future generation without hope."

Tracing the history of the recent educational system, she said that the secondary education started with the JSS and continued with the SSS. She said what people needed to understand was that what students learned at the JSS
level had no bearing on what they learned at the SSS level. She did not find any linkage between the JSS and the SSS programs. She said she did not think she learned anything in the JSS to help her at the SSS level. According to her, the transition process from the JSS to SSS had contributed to underachievement.

Stating her point, she said the Ministry of Education contended that the previous education system prior to entry into the universities was too long, however most of the SSS graduates who qualified for university admission were made to wait 3 years before entering the university. Her argument was that if the number of years spent at JSS and SSS and the waiting time for a prospective student’s probable entry into the university were all added together it would be close to 10 years, thus the 7 years experience required by the old system had been exceeded. She said “Students underachieved because they could not maximize their academic studies within the short term of study.”

Susan. Susan was also a final year student. Her parents were divorced and she lived with her father and stepmother. Her father was a carpenter with a very low income to support the four children from his previous marriage and his two children with his current wife. Susan was the oldest and was responsible for most of the household chores. She wished that her father could afford to get her a teacher to help her at home for at least 2 hours a week like other students that she knew.

She said, “We do not have equipment and furniture in the school.” She pointed to their benches (desks). Some students were too big to fit in the chairs. Amina, a friend of hers, stopped coming to school, stating that the bench hurt her
knees. Susan spoke of the unavailability of textbooks and commented on the
poor state of the textbooks, especially those in the seniors' classroom. Her
sister's friend, a student at a secondary school in the capital city, had mentioned
that her school had a library where there were many books for references.
Students were allowed to borrow the books and take the books to their
dormitories for independent studies. Susan's school did not have a school library.

Comparing her school to other schools in Ghana, Susan felt that New Era
Secondary was the worst equipped. She attributed poor student performance to
ineffective teaching methods. Teachers sometimes read a book and did not
understand parts of it. Teachers would then tell the students that they (the
teachers) did not know where the information in the book came from and could
not explain further. She cited an example, stating that students had been told
they had to learn "by imagination" and "abstract thinking" during physics lessons.
She had been unable to comprehend what she was asked to do. Rhetorically she
asked, "How can students achieve academically under these circumstances?"

Susan said she consulted with her parents regarding her choice of career.
She wanted to be a journalist. Her parents consented but unfortunately there
were not enough resources in the school to study journalism. She gave an
example that literature was a component study to journalism. The textbook
Romeo and Juliet was used in the literature class, but, as there were only five
copies of the book, three students had to share one book. Some of the students,
whose parents were able to afford it, managed to buy the textbooks but others
could not afford the textbooks.
She thought the government would subsidize the cost of textbooks but had not seen any new books in her time there. The old ones kept tearing apart. She did not believe she would be able to pass the SSS final examination due to inadequate preparation. She knew her teachers were not maximizing class time as they had to write everything on the chalkboard for students to copy. Sometimes the teachers gave their notes to students with good handwriting to assist in writing the notes on the chalkboard.

She reported that the results of a practice test for the West African Examination, administered in a class prior to the interview, had not turned out well. Of the 65 students who took the trial test, only 3 were able to score 60% and above. Susan scored 52%.

Susan decided to drop out of school in her 2nd year. Her aunt, who traded in yams, advised her to reconsider. After staying home for 3 weeks, she went back to school. Susan said she knew she would fail in the coming final year examination because 3 years in SSS was not enough time for students to prepare for the final examination.

She recalled that the previous year's seniors had been unable to complete the syllabus prior to taking the final examination and considered it unlikely that her senior year classmates would have completed theirs either. The students themselves did most of the examination preparation, but that was not helpful as they did not have adequate learning resources.

Morris. Morris lived with his parents in a small village, not far from the school. He commuted to and from the school on foot. He did not have any study
assistance at home, so did all his studies, including his homework, at school. He stayed at school late to finish all his homework before going home. In some cases he went to school very early the next day to finish the homework that he could not complete the previous evening. He would have loved to further his education but his parents could not afford it. He was planning to apply for a job in the postal system. He said he planned to take correspondence courses to further his education later.

Morris believed that the few people who had been able to pass the final year examination could not have done so without outside support. He believed these students had parents who were rich and could afford to pay extra for private tuition to support them. He believed students who had relatives outside the country, in Germany, Britain, or the United States, who brought foreign money or learning materials to help them study on their own, often did better in the classroom and in the final examinations. Those parents and supporters who could afford it paid teachers between 65,000 to 80,000 cedis (about $8 to $10 U.S.) every month to give private tutoring at home. Morris stated that current circumstances, under which achievement depended upon the wealth of a student’s parents, could only result in most students continued failure of the final examinations as few students had parents who were relatively rich. He said lack of permanent teachers in the school was also a major setback.

Ahmed. Ahmed was the music teacher and had been employed with the school for 14 months. He also had a part-time job driving a taxi in the evenings.
The old car had been given to him by an uncle who’d retired from the Ministry of Health.

Ahmed could count just a few of the students who had been able to achieve academically. Some were students who had relatives overseas who supported them materially and financially. Others were fortunate to have parents who had the means to pay for extra tuition. Those students who had achieved academically had not relied only on what the school could provide or on what teachers had taught, but had also received support from well-to-do parents or relatives.

He viewed student underachievement from the effects such underachievement had on the students. He said that the secondary school graduates were not employable. Teenage pregnancy was high. Other teenagers who were dropouts and underachievers did many negative things they probably wouldn’t have done, had they received the support and the means to learn while in school. They drank pito (a locally brewed alcohol). Many became hooligans and thieves and others became addicted to drugs.

He quoted one objective of the present education system in Ghana, “To equip students with employability skills,” stating that as the main reason why technical subjects were taught side-by-side with academic subjects in the schools. However, students needed to be academically equipped to be able to take technical subjects. He argued that learning technical subjects required literacy to understand what was being taught, but the means to learn both the academic and the technical subjects were non-existent.
He concurred that the school's academic standard was very low. Teachers did not have the necessary "tools" to teach the students. There was total lack of enthusiasm in the teaching profession. He believed that since many teachers did not have any hope in the profession, they did not give their best in teaching students and the result was student underachievement. He said he was one of the teachers who had planned to leave the teaching field at the end of the current academic year.

Referring to the area of social studies, a core subject, as an example, he said teachers had the curriculum without corresponding textbooks, even though this was the 3rd year since the introduction of social studies as a core subject. Teachers had been waiting anxiously to see what efforts the government would put forth to encourage students to develop interest in the subject. He remarked upon the discouraging passing rate for the previous year in that subject area, stating that he felt it did not reflect well on the teacher who taught the subject, and the head of the department, or on the school as a whole.

Ahmed further contended that as everyone knew that students who went for 3 years in SSS could not pass the final examination, not only in New Era Secondary but in many other schools as well, at least 4 years of secondary education should be required for the SSS program. He believed that the gross student failures were compounded by the fact that there had been a significant difference in the curriculum used for the past 3 years.

The current curriculum, he said, was more complex than those used in the previous years. More topics had been added but there were insufficient
educational materials to correspond with the increase. Another one major setback mentioned was the school's inability to maintain permanent teachers. As an example, he said that for recent final year students, there had not been a permanent teacher in many subject areas, since the students' 1st year of the secondary school. He maintained that the above-mentioned factors caused student underachievement.

Christina. Christina had dropped out of school for the second time. She dropped out when she was in her 2nd year of JSS. A teacher advised her to re-enroll. She again dropped out for 3 weeks in the 1st year of SSS. Asked why she had been dropping out, she simply said, “I am not happy in school.” She did not, however, tell the interviewer why she was not happy in school.

Christina blamed student underachievement on the country’s current education system. She gave as an example an incident that had occurred the previous year, when university authorities at the University of Science and Technology had been forced to withdraw many students in the first semester, as they weren’t up to standard. She argued that the students were not up to standard because they did not receive a meaningful and equitable education while in secondary schools such as her own. The incident was an affirmation that students were not academically prepared before enrolling in the university program.

She recollected a meeting between government officials and the Student Representative Council during the previous year that she had attended as a representative of her school. Underachievement was one of the topics discussed.
Students wanted to know why they were not given the educational resources necessary to promote learning. The representative from the Ministry of Education answered that students had to bear with the government as the education system was becoming more and more complex and more time was needed to put the system into place. He went on to say that most projects in Ghana were funded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), therefore, Ghana had no choice but to follow the terms set by the IMF, especially when it came to setting priorities.

Her understanding was that the representative meant education was not among the priorities set by the IMF as he concluded his remarks by stating that the Ghanaian government had already run into high debt by following the terms of the IMF, thus it was unwise to consider plunging into more debt through the provision of additional educational resources. She said she was sure the root cause of underachievement in her school was the government’s failure to recognize that educational needs were priorities.

George. George taught mathematics. He was a secondary school graduate from the Achimota Secondary School. He pursued a bachelor’s degree in mathematics at the University of Ghana, Legon, and went on to study at the Cape Coast University for a 2-year diploma course in educational psychology. He taught educational psychology at a Teacher’s Training College between 1986 and 1990. He had always wanted to be a mathematics teacher so he applied for a transfer. He had taught in several secondary schools. He had been the mathematics teacher in Northside New Era Secondary School for 1 year.
George emphasized that teachers felt they were not adequately cared for in terms of salary and remuneration. When he considered his salary and what he was able to do with it, he felt it was not worth the work he did. Nothing motivated him to be in the classroom. The situation became worse if he compared what he received monthly to the salary of someone with less education and qualifications "fortunate" enough to be employed in a career other than teaching.

Comparing a teacher's salary to that of an office messenger who worked in a good establishment, he said the messenger could receive about 500,000 cedis (about $63 U.S.) a month while a teacher, who had graduated from college, received between 300,000 and 350,000 cedis (between $37 and $44 U.S.) per month. He knew of a superintendent of schools who was ready to retire after about 30 years of active and continuous service in the teaching profession, and who received about 800,000 cedis (about $100 U.S.) each month. The pay structure within the Ghana Education Service was based on teachers' training and qualifications. Less qualified teachers received lower salaries and experienced teachers got higher salaries with yearly increments. The gross monthly pay ranged between 300,000 and about 700,000 cedis, (between $37 and $88 U.S.).

The respondent remarked that it could easily be observed that none of the teachers owned a car, not even the headmaster. A senior teacher who was fortunate might get a motorbike on hire purchase, making monthly payments of about 50,000 cedis (equivalent to $6.25 U.S.) out of his salary until the bike was
paid off. He said there was no material prosperity or emotional satisfaction in the teaching field so teachers did not do their best. As a result of teachers' disillusionments and lack of enthusiasm, students would continue to achieve little.

He vehemently stated that underachievement at Northside New Era, and indeed in all other schools in similar situations, did not imply that students had a low IQ. He said all students were capable of achieving, if the necessary "apparatuses" were in place to assist them. Students in the school were like students everywhere; resources were required to enable students to learn. Analogically, he said, the school system operated similarly to the theory of the factory where there was "mass production" of people who were promoted every year to the next class and eventually graduated but had accomplished nothing academically.

Explaining further, he said the theory and practice of "mass promotion" as applied in the Ghana Education System was a contributing factor to student underachievement. By that system, every student had to be promoted to the next class/grade irrespective of his or her academic output. The practice, he stressed, did not help the school or the students because there were no remedial measures to help those students that underachieved. As a direct result, students did not care to learn; they knew they would be promoted to the next class whatever they did or did not accomplish.

The participant's other concern was the teacher-student ratio. He said most of the time there were as many as 60 students in a class with just one
teacher, and for a teacher to grade all work done by 60 students in a week was too overwhelming. Besides, a teacher taught four classes on average. In simple mathematical terms, this meant that the teacher would have to grade 240 pieces of student work in a week. The teacher’s inability to grade all work in order to give appropriate feedback was detrimental to student achievement.

Another area of the respondent’s concern was the fact that the school did not have school counselors. Teachers served as guidance counselors but often parents refused the advice given by teachers on a course or class a student could pursue. They wanted their children to pursue a profession of their (the parents’) choice. The students who followed their parents’ choice of profession rather than the teachers’ suggestions usually realized that they could not perform well in the chosen areas and ended up failing.

George said he could understand that due to the country’s current economic crisis it was almost impossible for the government to provide the necessary educational materials necessary for the schools to function effectively. However, as a result, students were unable to achieve. According to him, it appeared Ghanaians believed it was the government’s responsibility to provide individuals with everything in life, thus parents did not make many efforts to spend money on their children’s education.

Speaking with an insider’s voice, this native of the town reiterated a comment by Ahmed, stating that he observed parents who claimed to be too poor to support their children in school but spent money every hour and every day on pito. He thought one solution to the dilemma of the provision of adequate
education would be for parents to take part of the burden of their children’s education off the shoulders of the government. He said the school had often tried to involve parents in the PTA but attendance had always been poor. Most parents simply did not understand education in general. He concluded that the school’s inability to involve parents effectively was also part of students’ poor academic performance.

Another problem he mentioned as hindering student achievement was the attrition rate of teachers. Most of the teachers came to the field and soon left after deciding the profession was not attractive. If teachers were actually well remunerated they would remain in the classroom. Lack of devoted and permanent teachers contributed to student loss of focus, resulting in underachievement.

*Elvis.* Elvis’s father lived in the capital city. He had been away for about 2 years and had not been back even to visit. Elvis lived with his grandmother because his mother had passed away. Occasionally his father sent some money to his grandmother to help take care of his education. Elvis’ grandmother considered his education a priority so she helped him in every way that she could. Elvis was planning to be a medical doctor.

The student said people thought it was their (the students’) fault for not passing their SSS Certificate Examination but he thought the government was responsible. He had visited a secondary school in Accra, in the south. There, he saw a great difference in the school environment. The school he visited had many amenities that he did not have in his school. In Accra, the school had a
library full of books. It had a computer laboratory where students typed (word-processed) their work. In his school, most of the students literally did not know what a computer was, much less how to type their schoolwork. He pointed to the school library and said all the books were old and torn. Besides, he said, the general school environment did not encourage them to learn.

Rebecca. Rebecca was a science teacher. After completing her secondary school education in her hometown, about 18 miles away, from where she was teaching at the time of the interview, she entered the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region. She took general science with chemistry as her major. She graduated in 1995 and moved to Accra, taking a job with the city council. She met a friend who talked her into teaching. She moved back to her town to take care of her ailing mother and found the job at the Northside New Era Secondary School, where she had been teaching chemistry and physics since 1999.

Responding to the question on the success rate of the final year students in the school Rebecca initially said. “I don’t want to talk about that” but as the discourse became more informal she said, “it is a disgrace to tell you that our students have not been passing the examination.” Without further questions she began to enumerate the reasons she believed caused student failure in her school. She stated that the intended curriculum could not be followed because much of the materials were out of date. The books prescribed for delivery of the course content were unavailable. The examination questions were constantly reviewed and upgraded but the textbooks were not revised and some of the
chapters were confusing. There were not enough of the textbooks to go around. As a teacher, she had not even seen most of the books that were prescribed for the courses. She added that the gross student failures in the final year examinations were due to ambiguities in the curriculum.

Asked how she handled the teaching work she said, “I can only do so much.” She explained what she meant by “so much” by saying that she used her own experience and some notes that she had kept from her school days to help the students. Rebecca said that often teachers were teaching subjects that they did not have a clue about as they had not been given the opportunity to learn the subjects themselves.

She spoke about limited resources “of all kinds” in the school. Her major concern was teachers’ pay, which did not last till the next payday so teachers had to find other means of sustenance by engaging in odd jobs. Sometimes she did sewing as a part-time job. On some occasions she had to be absent from school to provide service to her sewing customers, especially when there were special occasions and events. She knew that she was not the only teacher who chose to leave students for a second job, but she said, “I need to survive.” She concluded that, “we do not expect high student achievement under these circumstances.”

Samuel. Samuel taught general science. He attended the Assin Foso Teacher Training College between 1971 and 1975. He was posted to teach in a middle school at Akropong as a classroom teacher who taught all the middle school subjects. He studied privately and became successful at the General
Certificate of Education (GCE 'O' level) examination in 1980. He further studied for the Advanced level ('A' level) and passed all of the entry requirements to enter a university. He studied agricultural science at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. He graduated in 1986. He was still planning to pursue further studies and preferred to study outside Ghana if given the opportunity.

The respondent said that underachievement in the school would continue until, and unless, the educational authorities changed their policies. As a science teacher, he said the school was supposed to have a science laboratory where the students could perform experiments but the school did not have a laboratory. When it came to the practical and experimental aspects of teaching science they sometimes had to go to a nearby school where there was a resource center, which catered to a cluster of schools within the vicinity. The problem with this arrangement was that the resource center belonged to the school where it was located so students at Northside New Era Secondary could only go there when the host school was not using the center. In addition, to ensure efficient maintenance of the resource center, participating schools were made to pay fees. Many of the Northside New Era Secondary School students simply did not have the money to pay the 50,000 cedis (about $6.25 U.S.) fee each term. Consequently those students who could not afford the fee were left behind when the other students went to the resource center. He concluded that those problems posed a significant threat to student achievement.
Stephannie. Stephannie taught fine arts and served as the head of department. She attended St. Louis secondary school in Kumasi and graduated in 1985. She then entered the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi to study fine arts in 1990. Her first job as a teacher was at Navrongo Secondary School. She had been at Northside New Era for 7 months.

She said the education system looked fine on paper, but in reality was not working. Many of the students were not able to pass their final examination and as a result they were dropping out and roaming the streets. All of the teachers and students had recognized students' underachievement but it appeared nobody cared or wanted to implement teachers' recommendations and no agency or individual in authority was prepared to address students' concerns. Teachers channeled grievances and concerns through the headmasters to take to the general headmasters' meetings. From that point, a summary of all the grievances and recommendations went higher, up to the Director General of Education, but teachers got nothing out of their recommendations.

She spoke of a general education forum in 1999. It was suggested at the forum that the secondary school courses should be continue for 4 years instead of 3, due to the fact that the overall national statistics on graduates passing the final examination was not healthy (reference to appendix A). Another reason for the recommendation was that students in schools such as Northside New Era were underachieving because of the short duration of their academic studies. She said the recommendations were never addressed. She believed that one way of raising the standard of achievement would be the government's
willingness to accept objective discussions, criticisms, and decisions that came from the grassroots.

Among other concerns, Stephannie believed the poor salary given to teachers was a high-stake contributing factor to students' underachievement. Her take home pay was 600,000 cedis (about $75 U.S.) a month. She said teachers were not the only group frustrated by the school system, students were frustrated as well. She said the profession was not attractive in any way. Responding to a question on the availability of resources to enhance student learning, she stressed that teaching resources were not available. She said she only saw a computer when she visited a friend's office in the capital city. The great majority of teachers did not have access to computers.

She quoted Ali Mazrui, a renowned professor of African origin currently residing in the United States, "We are teaching these students things that would be obsolete by the time they graduate, if at all." The curriculum content was too broad. Students were not able to cope with the overwhelming demands of the syllabus, which were not only too broad, but also contained many unimportant aspects. According to Stephannie, student underachievement was a phenomenon that would remain for years to come unless there was some type of critical intervention. She said she knew that she was not doing her best, as a teacher, but that she did not have control over what she could do. In terms of students' academic achievement, she preferred the old system and the number of years that students spent in classes. Students in the old system were able to cope with more of the content of the syllabus then in use, than the current
syllabus, which, to her, was too complex and ambiguous, contributing to student underachievement.

*Albert.* Albert taught agricultural science. He was one of the oldest teachers in the school and had taught in many elementary schools. In 1975, he entered the Kwadaso Agricultural Training Center and obtained a diploma in agriculture. He worked at the center for learning skills where the students learned skills in agriculture, carpentry, masonry, sewing, and home economics. Albert did not have any plans to leave this school until his retirement.

Albert commented on the general outcome of schooling by comparing the old system of education in Ghana to the present system. He said secondary school graduates of the old system were considered mature enough to be absorbed by the employment sector or into further education programs. There were post-middle school graduates who went into teacher training colleges and came out with certificate “A,” qualifying them to teach in the primary and middle schools. Others pursued nursing as a profession after graduating from both middle and secondary schools. At the time of this study, he felt the situation had changed.

Albert said he understood that the standard of education should be raised to meet global labor demands, but, he said, if the education system did not have the “energy” to raise the standard, “why try?” By “system” he indicated that he meant the entire network of change as an agent, including planning, resources, training, and innovative and proactive leadership. He believed that the main cause of student underachievement in the school, among other factors, was the
disillusionment among a majority of Ghanaians. Education was disappointing in the Ghanaian society; parents did not care, teachers were apathetic because they had lost hope; and students had no hope either.

Thematic Approach to the Study

Theoretical frameworks used in studying underachievement in schools are many. Thorndike (1963) said,

The causes of underachievement are in all probability manifold. Many of these causative factors may well represent contingencies that arise in only a minority of cases. The contingency, or complex of contingencies, may be quite important when it does occur, but occur so infrequently that its influence cannot be convincingly demonstrated by statistical studies. (p. 67)

This study identified two main themes, to “move basic description to the next level of analysis” (Merriam, p. 179); and “to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across the preponderance” (Taylor & Bodgan, 1984, p. 139). Since Leong and Austin (1996) said qualitative research emphasizes processes and meanings that are not rigorously measured in terms of quantity or intensity, the researcher’s choice of themes was not strictly based on quantity and intensity of data but consistency and extensiveness of respondents’ responses. The identified themes of the study were the external causes of underachievement and the internal causes of underachievement.

Reflecting on Marshall and Rossman’s (1995) contention that the heart of data analysis consisted of identifying categories, recurrent themes, ideas or language, and belief systems that were shared across the research settings, the
themes for the study were further categorized into seven areas. Categories under external factors comprised the following: the importance of the government in the provision of educational materials to students, socio-economic background of people in the demographic settings, educational policies and people's expectations, and poor working conditions for teachers and administrators. Internal factors were: apathy and passivity with which teachers conducted themselves in the school, parents' beliefs and psychological underpinnings of what an ideal school should be, and lack of teaching and learning resources in the school.

The categories reflected the purpose of the research, and the names of the categories came from the researcher. Merriam (1998) said, "The most common situation is when the investigator comes up with terms, concepts, and categories that reflect what he or she sees in the data" (p. 182). Descriptions of the categories follow.

*Lack of government intervention.* All the participants said that the government had failed in its objective to provide what was necessary for student achievement. Joseph said the school did not get much assistance from the government. The government was supposed to supply educational materials including textbooks, stationery, and related learning and teaching equipment but the resources were not provided. The school survived only on the meager school fees that the students paid (a student paid 600,000 cedis, about $75.00 U.S. per year towards textbooks).
Emmanuel said the government had been able to give the school a few school materials for mathematics but the supply was inadequate. The materials were not age and standard appropriate to meet the requirement of the curriculum.

George argued that the main reason for student underachievement in his school were the educational reforms currently in place. He explained that the root cause of low achieving students in his class was the result of the reform that encouraged "mass promotion" where a student was promoted to the next grade, even if the student scored zero in all subjects at the end of the academic year.

Mina said she was sure the root cause of underachievement in her school was the government’s failure to recognize that educational needs were priorities. Frances explained that due to limited government revenue, educational funding was limited. Schools like hers could only do what was possible, teaching with whatever was available and improvising when necessary. She believed that students' underachievement was due to lack of government funding.

Referring to the area of social studies, Akwasi said that teachers had only the curriculum without corresponding textbooks, even though it was the second year of its introduction as a core subject. Teachers had been waiting anxiously to see what effort the government would put into it in order to encourage students to develop interest in the subject.

Stephannie said the entire education system looked fine on paper, but in reality was not working and many of the students were either dropping out or were not able to pass their final examination. Some were reduced to roaming the
streets. Efforts had been made by all concerned, especially by the teachers, to rectify the poor performance of students, but it appeared either nobody cared or nobody wanted to implement teachers’ recommendations.

George and Akwasi expressed that underachievement in the school and indeed in all other schools that were in similar situations did not imply that students had low IQ. He said all students were capable of achieving, given the appropriate inputs. The school needed resources to enable students to learn. His explanation of the concept of “mass production” and relating it to the educational process clarified his point. He said students were promoted every year to the next class and eventually graduated but with nothing accomplished, academically. He said the theory and practice of “mass promotion” as applied in the Ghana Education System was a contributing factor to student underachievement. By that system every student had to be promoted to the next class/grade irrespective of his or her academic competency.

Elvis said some people put the blame on them (the students) at the school for not passing their examination but he thought the government was to be blamed. He had visited Achimota Secondary School in Accra, in the south. There, he had seen a great difference in the school environment. That school had educational resources that were not available in his school. That school’s library was full of books. There was also a computer lab. Christina said that underachievement in the school would continue as long as the government or the educational authorities refused to make changes in their policies. All of the
participants alluded directly or indirectly to the lack of the government support in the school.

*Socio-economic status of the people in the demographic settings.* Joseph said that a school like his should have been turned into a boarding school but parents and guardians could not afford the fees involved and so the school remained a day school. Most of the students came from poor homes where there were simply no resources for individual learning. He stated that many of the students did not have common lanterns so they could see to do their homework after school.

Emmanuel accepted the fact that students in the school were underachieving as demonstrated by the results of the final examinations, but he thought a major contribution to their failures was that parents had lost faith in the education system. Even the few parents who could afford to support their children had declined to do so because of the visible outcomes of schooling. He also said that children's secondary education had not yielded the desired outcome, bearing in mind that the primary reason for parents investing in their children's education in that region was economic. Parents were educating their children in anticipation of financial freedom after their children had successfully graduated and secured jobs. Better still, those parents expected their children to be able to further their education after they had completed secondary school because the higher a student climbed on the academic ladder, the better it was for him or her and the entire extended family economically, but those expectations were not forthcoming. Since parents’ expectations were not
realized, they did not care to support their children in school. There were no jobs for secondary school graduates in the region and there were limited opportunities for further education, he said. On the other hand, the few parents who were prepared to invest in their children’s education did not have the financial means to do so.

Morris could think of just a few students in the school who achieved academically. Those were students who had relatives overseas who supported them financially and materially. Those students did not have to rely on what the school or the education ministry provided. Mina, Arthur, and Stephannie added that many of the students who were able to pass their examinations could not have passed without outside support. They were supported either by their wealthy parents or relatives who lived outside the country.

*Unworkable educational policies.* Akwasi stressed that the demands of the school curriculum put in place as a result of the current educational policies and the availability of academic resources to carry the policies through were not proportionate. He mentioned that the curriculum was very broad but resources, both human and material, were limited. There were not many teachers qualified to teach the required subjects. Furthermore, adequate teaching materials were not available. He stated that students admitted to the school were not academically prepared for SSS education because the policy demanded that students should be promoted to the SSS after 3 years of JSS education, irrespective of their academic preparedness. He said the whole education system
was in disarray and that student underachievement, as seen through the published results, should be interpreted as a failure of the education system.

Issa also attributed part of the underachievement problems in Northside, as well as other schools in the same situation, to the transition process from the JSS to the SSS. He cited as an example the fact that many students who enrolled in math class to begin secondary school education did not know what a protractor was. Senior secondary teachers had to refer to the junior school syllabus to teach the basics before they were able to teach the curriculum of the SSS. He said the Ministry of Education’s complex policies, coupled with teachers’ inability to complete the broad areas of the curriculum, retarded students’ academic achievement.

Mina, when comparing the duration of the old secondary schooling to the present system, said that there was no reason for the Ministry of Education to believe that students could use 3 years of senior secondary education to achieve the same level of knowledge that other students spent 5 years to achieve. She said that students were not able to complete the syllabus within the 3 years. They had no choice but to pick and choose some areas in the textbooks and memorize those areas. In most cases, they did not understand what they memorized. They only practiced the Chew-Pour-Pass-and-Forget theory. Stephannie added that students were not able to cope with the overwhelming demands of the broad curriculum.

Albert understood the wisdom in raising the standards of education to meet global employment demands, but he said if the education authorities in
Ghana did not have the resources to raise the standards they should not try to change the system. He explained “system” to mean the entire network of change as an agent, including planning, availability of resources, training, and innovative and proactive leadership. He believed that the main cause of student underachievement in his school, as in all schools in similar situations, was the idea of disillusionment. Education was disappointing in the Ghanaian society.

Issa commented that the duration of the secondary course was too short and students were expected to do too much. Susan said 3 years in SSS was not enough to let students prepare for the final examinations. She recollected that during the previous year, seniors did not complete the syllabus prior to taking the final examinations and it was more than likely that this year’s students would not be able to complete theirs either.

Rebecca’s view was that the gross student failures in the final year examinations were due to the fact that there had been significant differences, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the curriculum used during the past 3 years. She said the curriculum was more complex than what had been used in previous years. More topics had been added without adequate educational materials to correspond with the increase.

Poor working conditions for teachers and administrators. Joseph said teachers were not treated fairly in terms of salaries and employment benefits so teachers were not motivated to teach, resulting in student underachievement. Instructors did not have good homes to live in. He said in some of the older schools, instructors were given fairly decent housing accommodation but in his
school, almost all of the teachers lived in compound houses (homes rented by private landlords where all tenants shared utilities, in most cases the houses did not have electricity and/or toilets).

Stephannie's comments on teachers' pay were interesting. Using herself as an example, she said her take home pay was 600,000 cedis (an equivalent of about $75 U.S.) a month. She said teachers were not the only group frustrated with the school system; students were frustrated as well. She said the profession was not attractive in any way, so teachers did not put forth the efforts necessary to assist students.

George also believed that teachers felt they were not adequately taken care of in terms of salary and remuneration. He couldn't do anything meaningful with his salary. His salary was not even enough to buy food for himself and his family. He felt the salary was not worth the work he did. Nothing motivated him to be in the classroom. He said a teacher who had graduated from college received between 300,000 and 350,000 cedis (between $38 and $44 U.S.) a month. A superintendent of schools near retirement after about 30 years of active and continuous service in the teaching profession received about 800,000 cedis (about $100 U.S.) a month.

Issa said that when teachers were posted to the school and discovered the prevailing conditions including poor resources, lack of housing, the physical structures of the school and the potholed classrooms, then considered their unacceptable salaries, they decided to leave for a better place or for a better job.
Teachers' apathy and passivity. From the study it appeared teachers contributed directly or indirectly to students' underachievement in the school. Joseph said that unlike other rival schools, teachers in his school were not given periodic professional training. Upon graduation, newly trained teachers preferred to get employment with other, well-furnished, schools. Those teachers that could not find jobs elsewhere, and who had no other alternatives, were hired by his school. Those teachers used the school as a springboard for better places in the future. They did not care much about student achievement.

He added that teachers also arrived late for school because they either did not have their own means of transportation or did not have access to public transportation. He spoke of teachers' certification and related it to student underachievement. He said many teachers in his school were not certified. Those teachers often did not understand or even know what they were teaching but they could not be terminated because there would be no immediate replacement. To this, he asserted, "Students are bound to achieve little if at all."

Rebecca said teachers were teaching subjects that they themselves did not understand. Emmanuel mentioned that teachers, for the simple reason that they did not have enough teaching resources, did more theoretical teaching, which did not benefit the students as much as practical teaching that involved student input and exploration.

Leticia, a student, said the reason why students were underachieving was because they were not getting adequate teaching and instruction from many of the teachers. She said those teachers were not dedicated to the field of teaching.
She observed teachers coming to school late. She mentioned a teacher who was deeply involved in politics and wanted to stand for the district level elections. She said all that the teacher was interested in was to ask them in the classroom to convince their parents to vote for him. She said the teacher wrote the day's assignments on the chalkboard and asked them to work in groups to share the few textbooks that they had while he read through the newspapers. They were not given feedback on their performance in the classroom. They only had their examination results (report cards) at the end of each term showing nothing more than a "chain of Fs." She noted that few of the teachers in the school had degrees in teaching.

Susan, another student, added that teachers could not teach well because they had to write everything on the chalkboard for students to copy. Sometimes the teachers had to solicit students' help in writing notes on the chalkboard because the teachers felt frustrated and tired.

Albert believed that since many teachers did not have any hope in the profession, they did not give their best to teaching and the result was student underachievement. He said he was one of the teachers who had made plans to leave the teaching field at the end of the academic year. George mentioned teacher-student ratio. He said in most cases there were as many as 60 students with just one teacher in a class and for a teacher to grade all work done by 60 students in a week was too overwhelming. Teachers' workloads were more than they could handle because each teacher taught as many as four classes, on average.
Issa said another reason for students’ underachievement in the school was the problem of maintaining good and experienced teachers. Susan made a similar contribution and said that one major setback was that the school did not have permanent teachers. She gave as an example that the present final years students had never had one permanent teacher for any subject for 1 full academic year ever since beginning the first year of the SSS. George also said that a major problem hindering student achievement was the attrition rate of teachers.

Parents’ psychological underpinnings. George could understand that the country’s current economic crisis was making it almost impossible for the government to provide the necessary educational materials in schools, including Northside New Era. But he said, psychologically, it appeared many Ghanaians, especially parents, believed that the government had to provide individuals with everything in life. Parents did not make the efforts to spend money on their children’s education. Many parents who claimed not to have the means to support their children were often seen spending money every day, on alcoholic drinks. He suggested that parents take part of the financial burden for their children’s education off the shoulders of the government by sacrificing their wants for the children’s needs.

A significant psychological factor that was mentioned by four of the interviewees was that due to the school’s wholesale promotion policy, students did not care about academic achievement since they knew that whatever happened they would be promoted to the next grade.
Lack of educational resources. Basically, all respondents said that lack of educational resources was a major factor in students' underachievement. Teachers and administrators had accepted the status quo, a belief that since there were no resources in the school, nothing could be done to improve student achievement. Table 8, below, shows a statistical breakdown of participants' responses according to categories.

Table 8

Participants' Responses According to Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Administrators (2 participants)</th>
<th>Teachers (10 participants)</th>
<th>Students (6 participants)</th>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents' Psychological underpinnings</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Educational resources</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
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</table>

In examining Table 8, it became clear that all 18 of the study's participants felt the government shouldered the greatest responsibility for student underachievement in the school. Equally, all of them said lack of educational resources was a major factor to students' underachievement. Fifteen of them felt educational policies were not helping students to achieve. Eleven felt socio-economic factors were contributing factors to student underachievement and an equal number thought teachers should be held accountable for student
underachievement while six participants thought parents were not supporting their children, resulting in poor achievement. All teachers and administrators felt poor working conditions of educational personnel contributed greatly to student underachievement in the school.

The researcher observed one classroom and found the following: 32 traditional classroom desks, and an old wooden cupboard with one hinge broken measuring about 5 feet by 4 feet which held the textbooks and some exercise books. The verandah leading to the classroom and the classroom floors were littered with goat and sheep dung, evidence of the occupation in which many locals were employed. The traditional wall blackboard had three big potholes and five smaller potholes, the size of the rim of a common teacup. The chalkboard was generally rough, but the teacher had managed to fill it completely with notes to be copied by students. The researcher did not have to be told that there were no resources available for photocopying or duplicating. Also, he presumed that if there were enough textbooks available, the teacher would not have copied all the history notes on the board.

**Evaluation**

The importance of this study cannot be overemphasized. The findings were commensurate with what the literature on student underachievement had revealed. For example, Honig (1996) wrote that students with poor academic performances had less access to further education, high skilled jobs, and less opportunity to participate in the higher reaches of society. If the current assertion that the world can be considered a global village, as but one country, then
mankind, its citizens, should be viewed in the context of higher educational standards for all, irrespective of their ethnicity or cultural boundaries.

In his annual lecture in London, Millet (1996) added that everyone agreed that the top priority in education was to raise pupils’ standards of learning and that there was a widespread awareness that, in a competitive world, constant progress was necessary just to maintain parity with other nations. Efforts must be made to find solutions to students’ underachievement in Ghana, as an independent nation and a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education in Britain, said in 1997, “we are talking about investing in human capital in the age of knowledge” (Blunkett, 1997, p. 3).

In order for schools in Ghana to become globally competitive, “optimal [educational] strategies must be prevention oriented” (Ford, 1996, p. 29), especially in a school like Northside New Era Secondary School. To employ optimal strategies, Renzulli, Reis, Herbert, & Diaz (1994) suggested that research and practice would seek to prevent underachievement. These would help to keep students from experiencing school failure, educational disengagement, and educational suicide.

Throughout the interview, participants said that the government had failed to provide the necessary educational materials to support learning. Cox (2000) said that sociologists of education had frequently been critical of work on school improvement. The central tenet of school improvement has always been that the responsibility for change must lie in the hands of the school itself, Stoll and Fink
(1996), but Angus (1993) believed the contrary. He criticized the assumption for failing to explore the relationship of specific practices to wider social and cultural constructions and political and economic interests, instead of holding schools responsible for student underachievement. Secondary schools in Ghana exercised little autonomy in their day-to-day administration. The government maintained control over the budget and the provision of resources through the Ministry of Education for school operation. The schools were not able to do much about overall change, particularly where monetary factors came into play.

Issues of the socio-economic background of the parents of the students surfaced as contribution factors of underachievement in the school. Factors of family background, such as parental education or family socio-economic status were always important in research into student underachievement. The population of Ghanaians living below poverty line was 31.4% as of January 2002. The concentration was mainly in the rural areas including the area where the research was done. It became apparent, therefore, that most parents did not have the means to support their children in school.

Cox (2000) argued that the relationship between pupils' backgrounds and their school achievement received little attention in educational discussions, dominated instead by markets and league tables. Yet the correlation between disadvantaged family background and low achievement persists. Ford (1996) maintained that academic achievement was dependent on more than individual abilities or aspirations. The social environment in which learning took place could enhance or diminish the behaviors that led to optimal student achievement. From
the sociological point of view, the school was a microcosm of the society and
students' underachievement could not be divorced from the sociological settings
of the region.

In attempting to determine reasons for students' underachievement,
schools would always be held accountable. Operating as individual entities,
schools are obligated to provide a healthy organizational environment conducive
to optimal personal, social, and academic learning. Ford (1996) said those
environments should provide individuals with a feeling of significance, a sense of
competence, and a belief that they have some control over important aspects of
their environment and, indeed, their lives. Controlling these variables would
enable students to feel more comfortable, feel a greater self-worth and,
consequently, take more risks. Childers and Fairman (1986) stressed that lack of
these elements in public school was a predominant cause of student failure.

Data collected from the study provided a strong indication that the school
had given up the hope that remedial measures could assist students, in some
way, to enhance achievement. Both administrators and teachers mostly passed
the buck on to the government, the educational policy initiatives, and lack of
parents' understanding of education and support for their children. Galloway and
Goodwin (1987) stated,

Other schools in more difficult areas may attribute the school's low
placement in the league tables as a function of the impoverished
social and economic backgrounds from which their pupils come.
They may conclude that there is nothing a school can do in such circumstances and that it is a wider societal and political problem. (p. 21)

Even though the administrators and teachers apportioned a greater blame onto the government and unworkable educational policies constituting "a wider societal and political problem," it would be possible for schools in these difficult areas to successfully intervene and work with parents and the local community to make a difference. On a national level, it was of great interest to discover, through the course of this study, the government's initiative to increase the salaries of educational personnel. Tables 9A and 9B below represent the present and current salary structure for educational personnel. The researcher provided the dollar equivalent for easy reference.

Tables 9A and 9B present the pay structure for education service personnel including a recent across the board increase of 30% on the Ghana Universal Salary Structure (GUSS) and a 2.7% incremental ratio on the GUSS.
### Ghana Education Service Personnel Pay Structure

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<th>Dollar</th>
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Gross Annual Pay by Experience

8,000 Ghanaian cedis equals $1.00 U.S.
(Currency Exchange Rate, August 2002)
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8,000 Ghanaian cedis equals $1.00 U.S.  
(Currency Exchange Rate, August 2002)
A letter dated May 24, 2002, from the Ministry of Finance, Accra, read:

Following the successful negotiations between the Central Management Board, representing the Government, and the consultative forum comprising the Civil Servants Association, the Ghana National Association of Teachers, the Judicial Service Association of Ghana, and the Health Workers Union of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) on salary adjustment for the year 2002, the Ministry of Finance, in line with recommendations from the Ministry of Manpower Development and Employment, has approved the following across board increase of 30% on the GUSS and a 2.7% incremental ratio on the GUSS.

To better understand the pay structure, the researcher converted the salary scales into the United States dollar equivalence at an exchange rate of 8,000 cedis to 1 dollar, the exchange rate at the time of research. The cedi devalues at an alarming rate, a characteristic of currencies in most developing countries. For example the cedi equivalent to the dollar between 1997 and 2002 was as follows: in 1997, 2050.17 cedis to $1 U.S.; in 1998, 2314.15 to $1 U.S.; in 1999, 2669.30 cedis to $1 U.S.; in 2000, 5455.06 cedis to $1 U.S.; in 2001, 7170.76 cedis to $1 U.S.; and in 2002, 7195 cedis to $1 U.S. These figures were posted in January of each year.

The researcher selected three salary scales from the list of the different scales for interpretation. Those were the 5th step for levels 9, 15, and 20 (highlighted in table 9B). Figures on the horizontal axis (step) indicate yearly salary increments for an employee and figures on the vertical axis (level) denote promotions in the education service.
Level 9 of step 5 was the assistant superintendent scale and represented an average of what most of the teachers interviewed received in salary. As indicated, a teacher with 5 years experience received $994 U.S. a year, an average of $83 U.S. gross salary per month. Most headmasters/mistresses received salaries equivalent to an assistant director's ($2,206 a year or about $184 a month U.S.), indicated on level 15 of the salary structure. The top administrator of secondary schools, with 5 years experience, received a gross salary of under $200 U.S. per month. The highest position in the Ghana Education Service, the Director-General, had a starting salary of $3,469 U.S. (level 20, table 9A), received an increase to $3,964 after 6 years of continuous service in that capacity (level 20, 9B), and could not go further unless he or she received higher promotions to levels 21 or 22 and was possibly able to retire on $4,410 per annum (level 6, 9B).

Though the standard of living in Ghana was not very high, important basic consumer products required by teachers to survive were not cheap, and considering the estimated annual inflation rate of 25%, administrators and teachers interviewed by the researcher had a strong case to argue that poor working conditions demoralized them. As a result it was difficult to maintain experienced teachers and those that "sacrificed" to stay did not put in their best into teaching, thereby resulting in student poor academic standard. Tables 9A and 9B and the corresponding analysis illustrate teachers and administrators complaints during the interview of low salaries and the poor conditions of service.
Reviewing documents that the school administrators willingly shared, the researcher noted that the government had plans to offer improvements in student achievement, in particular, and in educational services, in general. One such initiative was the introduction of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) program. The acronym popularly written as fCUBE, with a lowercase 'f' for Free. Agyakwa, Gome, Konadu, & Zoglha (1998) said the "F" of fCUBE has gotten smaller, meaning that though the program was supposed to bring about free education for Ghanaian students, parents had to pay fees.

The intent of the fCUBE program was to bring overall sustainable improvements to the education sector by improving the quality of schooling, in addition to providing more equitable access and effective management. For its implementation, the government of Ghana successfully negotiated with the World Bank for an IDA credit of $50 million U.S. to supplement program implementation resources during the first phase. According to a document from a 2-day consultative meeting on fCUBE held February 26-27, 1997, in Ghana at the Ministry of Education, pledges of support came from a host of countries and organizations in support of the betterment of Ghanaians schools. Pledges came from USAID (50 million U.S. dollars), ODA of UK (15 million pounds), and KFW/GTZ of Germany (DM 35 million). The African Development Bank offered credit facility of 12 million unit of account valued at 17.3 million U.S. dollars to support the implementation of the program. In addition, JICA of Japan and the European Union were still conducting surveys to determine their involvement. Further discourse with an administrator revealed that all monies were duly received for the
purpose of educational improvements. However, the administrator continued, as the Ministry of Education handled such donations, he could not tell specifically how those monies were expended. Though the fCUBE aimed at improving schools in the primary sector, the overall objective was to prepare students for better secondary education, curbing the problem of underachievement and related educational problems.

Another initiative undertaken by the Ghanaian government was the Cost Sharing program. Parents were officially requested to bear a percentage of the cost of secondary education by covering textbook fees. In Cost Sharing in Education – Public Finance, School, and Household Perspectives, Agyakwa et al. (1998) carefully analyzed the implication of the program. They contended that cost sharing was supposed to provide benefits to pupils and schools. That seemed to be of the utmost importance and though it appeared to work well, and seemed to be reasonably efficient in collection, it appeared less so in distribution. In their survey they wrote, “87% of the teachers said they did not have enough books for their classes, and over half of the teachers reported that up to 75% of their students were without an adequate number of books” (p. 2). Their report confirmed the researcher’s findings where all interviewees said they did not have adequate textbooks. In another confirmation, Agyakwa et al. stated,

While it may seem that there are sufficient books, many of the books are donated or old books and not suitable for the syllabus [curriculum]. The SSS appear to be lacking science books, many schools have stocks of books which they do not use because they are not the right books for the course. (p. 2)
It appeared that cost sharing was not the answer to school improvement in Ghana.

Agyakwa et al. concluded that

the efficiency of education system in Ghana is low, with a high proportion of expenditure on salaries and little on learning; parents are therefore subsidizing inefficiency. In any case, examination results have not been improving, and other evidence suggests stagnation in school performance. (p. 4)

Chapter 4 was introduced by explaining the importance of participants' biographies. The researcher provided the biographical data of each participant, followed by a description of what they said. A thematic approach to the study was provided and categories were identified. Each category constituted part of the sum total of the findings. A careful evaluation commenced, using contents of educational records obtained from the school as benchmarks in some cases. The chapter that follows will attempt to address the findings, implications, recommendations, summary, and conclusion of the study.
Chapter Five

Findings, Implications, Recommendations, Summary, and Conclusions

A significant number of studies have been carried out in the field of student underachievement, mostly in the developed world. Hopkins, Ainstow, and West (1994) contended that the roots of school improvement could be found in 20 years of research into school effectiveness carried out primarily in England, the Netherlands and the United States. This study investigated student underachievement in one secondary school in Ghana, a developing country, in an attempt to add a third world perspective to the wealth of educational research.

A qualitative approach was employed through the use of interviews. The researcher asked open-ended questions to allow participants the opportunity to voice their opinions, and to offer suggestions and recommendations. It was possible to record their views and reflections, a process that would not have been easy through mere observation or postal survey. The longer the interview, the more familiarity was established, thus enabling participants to become more comfortable and to express themselves in a more direct manner.

Findings

Study findings fell under two broad themes, confirming what Cox (2000) said: two possible avenues forward may often be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. One
avenue built on work in school improvement, pioneered as a result of research into school effectiveness. The other was more fundamental, and demanded change not only to the nature of educational practice, but also to the broader social cultural contexts within which education took place. Cox believed that an effective strategy for tackling the disadvantaged required movement on both fronts.

All participants interviewed acknowledged the impact of student underachievement in the school. The three groups interviewed - administrators, teachers, and students - had common concerns in most cases, though each group provided information from the perspective of its own respective status. Students concerns were mostly centered on the lack of available resources in the school. Teachers were mostly concerned with conditions of service, and administrators were bitter about educational policies and lack of governments support. Their voices served as some of the main categories of the study.

Teachers emphasized that the government should better their working conditions, including the provision of simple housing for them. It was also suggested that parents should sacrifice to pay for extra tuition for their children. A participant mentioned that often there were examination frauds, cheating, in other schools. Though he admitted, on behalf of his school, that Northside New Era student performance in the final examinations had never been good, thus portraying underachievement, he recommended that proper security be adopted to ensure fairness during final examinations conducted by WAEC.
The researcher recognized the importance of ensuring fairness in the examinations but he could not agree with the participant that cheating by other schools contributed to students’ underachievement in Northside New Era Secondary School. According to Lickona (1976), psychological experiments had shown that a large percentage of school children would cheat when given an opportunity, even though they knew it was wrong.

Participants’ knowledge of the implications of the themes, namely, the external and internal causes of student underachievement, and the understanding of all the educational stakeholders’ role in the provision of a sound-learning environment in the school became the bedrock of the study. Interviewees’ practical knowledge of the school and its culture provided invaluable contribution to the dialogue.

Implications

Working conditions for teachers in most parts of the world have always been below satisfactory level. However, this study revealed a critical lack of consideration for teachers’ needs in Ghana. Apportioning blame to any stakeholder would not solve the problems; rather, careful consideration should be given to possible solutions, particularly to the dilemma of underachievement in schools such as Northside New Era. In addition to participants’ recommendations for professional training and development, the research indicated a need for discourse, symposia, surveys, and organized research as a priority for the government through the Ministry of Education. These intervention processes should start from the district level, be implemented through the regional level, then applied to the national level. One participant thought that the
Ministry of Education should conduct investigations to determine the reasons why students were not performing well academically. She said,

The investigation could only be done by undertaking research work like you are doing now. We must try to investigate the causes of student underachievement, whether it is their own weaknesses in academic pursuit or due to other factors. I have not seen or heard of any of our university graduates undertaking a research work like yours. We will only be able to offer solutions if we identify the problems.

It is imperative that teachers, in both the JSS and the SSS systems, be given ample training and that uncertified teachers be given the opportunity to train as qualified teachers. These goals could be accomplished through sponsored training and professional development in the form of scholarships from external organizations and trusts to supplement the efforts of the Ghanaian government. This implies at the macro level that Ghana should continue to receive outside aid in the form of funds from United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization, for example, to assist with educational infrastructure. Also, groups of highly structured secondary schools and colleges in the developed world, the United States and Britain for example, should consider donating resources to the less developed, needy schools in Ghana, especially books, computers, and overhead projectors considered obsolete in the West or available in excess. Those resources could be of great use to a school such as Northside New Era Secondary.

A mechanism for educational development must be established to identify the needs of marginalized, poor, countries and provide the necessary assistance. It would be appropriate for individual schools in more developed countries to “adopt” sister
schools in marginalized countries to offer assistance. Unwanted school materials, such as those warehoused at the Duval County’s Bull’s Bay store in Jacksonville, Florida, could be of great help to schools in developing countries.

Better working conditions could help teachers maintain their posts, thereby eliminating the “brain-drain syndrome,” at least to some extent, and enabling teachers to perform at their best. The Ministry of Education must work out modalities to extend the SSS course from 3 years to 4 years. Throughout the interview, participants made mention of the short duration of the secondary school program. Curriculum could not be covered within the 3-year span, as evidenced by students’ examination failures and university entry quandaries. The syllabus must be shortened and be tailored to suit the resources currently available.

Ghana has reached a stage where a proper taxation system could be implemented. The option of a local or national tax system must be examined. The current tax system is not properly streamlined at the local or national level. It is the researcher’s belief that the government has not kept track of a majority of the Ghanaian businesses, thus authorities were not able to assess equitable taxation to generate government or district revenue from many people in the private sectors of the economy. The country’s postal system, operated similarly to that of a post office box system, contributes to this dilemma, as it is difficult to track individuals. Additionally, there is a high labor mobility rate. As a result, the majority of Ghanaians are able to easily evade taxes.
If an effective taxation system were instated, the government could generate substantial tax dollars every year, allowing part of the revenue to be channeled into educational funding at national and local levels. With money allocated to the education district, school equipment and other educational resources could be provided, students in schools like Northside New Era could be adequately supported, teachers’ service conditions would be better, and students would be better able to learn, thus raising academic achievement levels.

**Recommendations**

The participants made a number of recommendations in the course of the interviews. Their recommendations and suggestions were helpful to the research process. One of the recommendations offered was for the government to initiate periodic and sustained professional development and training for teachers. Ford (1996) recommended that educators require training and continuing professional education and development, and similarly, parents and significant others require training to work effectively with schools and to understand and exercise their rights relative to identification and assessment, placement decisions, curriculum and instruction, and school improvement.

The participants also provided recommendations that they thought could assist student achievement. At one point, a student impatiently asked, “Are you taking our recommendations to the government after you complete this study?” In most cases participants, especially teachers who were products of the old educational system, tried
to compare the existing school practices with those that existed before the 1987 educational reforms in order to bring their point home.

The researcher suggests that further investigations be carried out in secondary schools that were able to achieve academically, in order to be able to determine the factors that underlie their successes. Methods and practices of those schools could be applied to low-achieving schools. Another area requiring further inquiry would be the overall application and success of the current educational reforms. For instance, are the reforms bringing about the type of education necessary to meet the global standards required by today's market forces?

Summary

This study investigated student underachievement in a school in Ghana. To offer a clearer understanding, the researcher gave a comprehensive background of education in Ghana through the history of education in the country, systematically explaining the educational changes that occurred during the colonial era and after independence, up to the present educational reforms which brought about a new educational structure from the primary school level to the university level.

Ghana, a developing nation, was considered among the best of the African nations at education, previously producing top scholars. The weight of participants' comments indicated a downward trend in the country's literacy education, partly due to the fact that many of the people are socially disadvantaged. Woodhead (1998) claimed that many studies have found that social disadvantage has an adverse effect on educational achievement. Yet, some educationalists argue that poor teaching methods
and ineffective schools are more to blame for educational failure than poor social circumstances. The researcher hoped to add to the existing body of literature in student underachievement.

One significant phenomenon was participants' willingness to be interviewed. After every interview session, additional people asked to be interviewed. However, the researcher maintained the boundaries set by the Institutional Review Board, allowing only those who had signed assent and consent forms to participate in the interview process. Throughout the study the participants showed their concern, providing meaningful answers to the interview questions and offering all possible assistance. Administrators and teachers exhibited their pedagogical and methodological expertise in answering educational questions. Students considered it a privilege to be part of the study.

The researcher's observations, along with participants' candid comments, presented a clearer understanding of why students at Northside New Era Secondary School were underachieving. Estein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw (1998) claimed that the underachievement [of students] must be seen in part within a broader context of phenomenon. All the categories of this study provided the broader context of phenomenon that influenced student underachievement in Northside New Era Secondary School.
Conclusion

A participant concluded his interview with the statement,

It seems the whole education system is turning out to be bogus. I can see that the authorities did not take their time to plan the educational reforms before effecting the change. Since 1986 most of the initial books that were written for the schools have not been revised. Some schools are still using the first edition of the publication. Our books are completely worn out with missing pages.

Another participant said,

What we now see is a mass of secondary school graduates falling in academic achievement. I am not trying to disgrace the graduates of the SSS system but facing the reality, I can say that most of them graduate without being able to write a common friendly letter, let alone a letter of application for a job. The standard of education has fallen to its lowest since I grew up.

Reflecting upon these statements, the researcher challenges all educational authorities everywhere, especially those in the third world countries, to consider student academic achievement as a major priority, necessary for strong nation-building into the 21st century and beyond. The American College Personnel Association, 1994, stated that, as educators, we must take a leadership role in improving educational opportunities for our students. Creating conditions that motivate students to engage in educationally purposeful activities, in and out of the classroom, is key to enhancing learning and development. It would be more appropriate for educational authorities to define clearly, and analyze the implications of educational policies and practices before
their implementation so that no one individual could be used as an experiment for an
expected result as it is possible for experiments to go either way, positively or
otherwise.

Cox (2000) said that our society appears to be deeply confused about the
relationship of disadvantage to patterns of achievement. In particular, there is confusion
over how much underachievement is due to the actions of individuals and how much to
the influence of the school or the attitudes of the wider society. In this study the
researcher found that all three elements, actions of the individual, the influence of the
school, and the attitudes of the wider society, were contributing factors to student
underachievement at Northside New Era Secondary School. The findings of the study
showed that both external and internal factors contributed significantly to student
underachievement.

Finally, the researcher strongly believes that teachers must accept the great
challenge before them – the challenge of being "the source of all good" in the classroom
and indeed the school in which they teach. They must realize that once they enter the
classroom, it is their responsibility to discard all thoughts of dissatisfaction in the
profession, domestic issues, and all the excuses that they may have for not functioning
properly in the classroom or in the school setting. They must consider only the great
task before them; the modeling of an individual to attain the highest human
susceptibilities. Difficult though this assignment may be, they must try, because to
maintain the dignity of our professional status we have to make a difference in students'
lives.
### Results of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (1993-1997)

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Source: Compilation based on statistics supplied by Secondary Division of Ghana Education Service (GES)

Note: Pass is defined as a grade E or above.
Appendix B

Informed Consent (participants)


I, the undersigned, will be conducting an educational research at Northside New Era Secondary School as a step to fulfill my degree requirement at the University of North Florida. The primary purpose of the research is to investigate the causes of student underachievement.

The Ghana Education Service (GES) has willingly given me permission to conduct the research. Though I am undertaking this research project to fulfill my degree requirement at the University, I believe the findings could serve as a research-based theory that would help find solutions to the causes of student underachievement in Ghana.

I will be interviewing a cross-section of people in your school. I am pleased to let you know that I have chosen you as an interviewee. The interview would be about one hour. I will use qualitative research approach in the process. The method involves questions pertaining to possible causes of student underachievement with special reference to the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) results for final year students, and ways to help students achieve. There will be no compensation for participating in this research project. Participation is purely voluntary and refusal to participate will not involve any penalty. A participant may choose to discontinue at any time if he/she wants.

Though I will ask of your name for my records I promise total anonymity and your right to confidentiality at all times. I will be recording the interview on audiocassette. I will also be writing down points in the form of field notes to keep me abreast with the interview process. I will be the sole individual with access to my field notes and the audiocassettes. The audiocassettes and the field notes will be kept in a locked file. I will use anonymous names during my transcription and my data presentation because I can understand that some participants would find it uncomfortable to see their names published after the project. In addition to maintain anonymity all data will be destroyed after the completion of the research.

If you have any pertinent questions regarding the research or the rights of participants you may please contact Dr. Warren Hodge, the IRB chair, on (904) 620-2990.

Thank you in advance

Edward Larbi (PI) Participant’s signature

Date ________ Date ________

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Appendix C

Informed Consent (parents)


I, the undersigned, will be conducting an educational research at Northside New Era Secondary School as a step to fulfill my degree requirement at the University of North Florida. The primary purpose of the research is to investigate the causes of student underachievement.

The Ghana Education Service (GES) has willingly given me permission to conduct the research. Though I am undertaking this research project to fulfill my degree requirement at the University, I believe the findings could serve as a research-based theory that would help find solutions to the causes of student underachievement in Ghana.

I will be interviewing a cross-section of people in your school. I am pleased to let you know that I have chosen your son/daughter as an interviewee. The interview would be about one hour. I will use qualitative research approach in the process. The method involves questions pertaining to possible causes of student underachievement with special reference to the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) results for final year students, and ways to help students achieve. There will be no compensation for participating in this research project. Participation is purely voluntary and refusal to participate will not involve any penalty. Your son/daughter may choose to discontinue at any time if he/she wants.

Though I will ask of your child's name for my records I promise total anonymity and your child's right to confidentiality at all times. I will be recording the interview on audiocassette. I will also be writing down points in the form of field notes to keep me abreast with the interview process. I will be the sole individual with access to my field notes and the audiocassettes. The audiocassettes and the field notes will be kept in a locked file. I will use anonymous names during my transcription and my data presentation because I can understand that some participants would find it uncomfortable to see their names published after the project. In addition to maintain anonymity all data will be destroyed after the completion of the research.

If you have any pertinent questions regarding the research or the rights of participants you may please contact Dr. Warren Hodge, the IRB chair, on (904) 620-2990.

Thank you in advance

Edward Larbi (PI)  Parent's signature

Date __________  Date __________
Appendix D

Assent (students)


My name is Edward Larbi. I will be conducting an educational research at Vitting Secondary School as a step to fulfill my degree requirement at the University of North Florida. The primary purpose of the research is to investigate the causes of student underachievement.

I will be interviewing students in your school. I am pleased to let you know that I have chosen you as an interviewee. The interview would be about one hour. I will be asking questions relating to possible causes of student underachievement with special reference to the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) results for final year students, and ways to help students achieve. You will not be paid when I interview you. However, I will write to thank you for your participation after the project. Participation is purely voluntary and if for some reason you do not feel comfortable to be interviewed you will not receive any consequences. Also, you may choose to discontinue at any time during the interview if you want to.

Though I will ask of your name for my records I will not use your actual name during my transcription and my data presentation. Instead I will use fictitious names because I can understand that some students would be uncomfortable to see their names published. I will be recording the interview on audiocassette. I will also be jotting points on a notepad. I will be the only person with access to the audiocassettes and the points that I jot down. The audiocassettes and what I will be writing will be kept in a locked file. I will destroy all materials after the research is completed. If you do not understand anything regarding the research and your rights as a participant feel free to contact Dr. Warren Hodge, the IRB chair, on (904) 620-2990.

Please check one of the statements below and sign your name.

☐ I will like to take part in the interview

☐ I will not take part in the interview

________________________________________  __________________________
Edward Larbi (PI)  Student’s signature

Date ____________  Date ____________

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Edward Larbi
    Educational Leadership

VIA: Dr. Charles Galloway
     Educational Leadership

FROM: James L. Collom, Institutional Review Board

DATE: April 22, 2002

RE: Review by Institutional Review Board IRB#01-252
    “What are the Causes of Student Underachievement in a Selected High School in Ghana.”

This is to advise you that your project, “What are the Causes of Student Underachievement in a Selected High School in Ghana” has bee reviewed by the IRB in its meeting of April 10, 2002 and has been approved as submitted.

This approval applies to your project in the form and content as submitted to the IRB for review. Any variations or modifications to the approval protocol and/or informed consent forms must be cleared with the IRB prior to implementing such changes. Any unanticipated problems involving risk and any occurrences of serious harm to subjects and others shall be reported promptly to the IRB. If your project extends beyond 12 months in length, you must provide an annual status to the IRB. The above annotated approval date establishes the baseline date for this required annual status report.

If you have any questions or problems regarding your project or any other IRB issues, please contact this office at 620-2498.

Attachments

c: Dr. John Venn
References


lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@filed(DOCID+gh0067)

Vita

Edward Wilson Larbi was born in Dawu-Akwapim, in the Eastern Region of Ghana. His parents moved to Ekorso in the Akim Abuakwa district where they acquired a farmland for subsistence agriculture. He started his primary school education in this small village at the age of six and continued till the third grade. He commuted by foot to school at the next village, Asamamah, a distance of two miles each way from his village, for his upper primary and middle school education. He gained admission to the Abetifi Teacher Training College in 1966 for a 4-year certification course. After his training, he undertook independent studies while teaching in villages in the Eastern Region and obtained his General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O Level) and the Advanced Level (A Level) certificates, which qualified him for entry into a university in Ghana. His love for the study of Ghanaian customs and traditions made him decide to pursue a course at the Ajumako School of Languages (University of Cape Coast) from 1980 to 1983. After graduation, he taught at Akwatia Technical Institute for two years and migrated to the United Kingdom in 1985.

In the United Kingdom, he undertook professional career education in teaching and graduated at the Greenwich University with a Bachelor's degree in business education in 1991. He obtained his Master of Arts (MA) degree in urban education at King's College, University of London, in 1995. While pursuing career education in those two institutions, he taught in secondary schools and at Christ's College, Blackheath,
London. In July 1995, he migrated from the United Kingdom to the United States and pursued a graduate program at the University of North Florida for his doctorate degree in educational leadership. At the time of writing, he was serving as the director of education at Tiger Success Juvenile Correctional Facility in Jacksonville, Florida.