

---

# The Quality of Education in Rural Ghana and Mexico

---

*Nigel Brooke*

This study of education in rural Ghana and Mexico was a modest test of the hypothesis that when schools are used to groom and select young people for more schooling and the better paid jobs of society, the quality of schooling suffers (see Dore 1976 for an extended elaboration of the thesis).

The belief that both the content and style of teaching can be influenced by the desire for educational qualifications rests on two major assumptions. First, that the demand for education as a medium of access to modern employment effectively swamps any alternative definition of educational purpose. The second assumption is that educational success is synonymous with good exam performance. This latter assumption can apply, of course, only in those countries which have patterns of scholastic examinations which are centrally controlled and standardised, and where promotion through the school system is highly selective. Several ex-colonies of Africa and Asia preserve such patterns. The assumption cannot apply where, as in much of Latin America, the assessment of scholastic attainment is devolved to individual schools or where access to higher levels of schooling is not strictly rationed, so that those who wish to proceed, can. Most Latin American systems use variants of the continuous assessment method and what attrition occurs is largely the product of drop-out, ie self-selection, rather than examination failure.

## **The Nature of the Study**

The study set out to ask these questions: could poor educational quality be explained by similar factors in both an ex-colony such as Ghana and in a Latin American country such as Mexico?; was the purpose of parents in sending their children to school related to the demand for secure, modern employment?; and was there evidence that this demand, via educational selection methods, was influencing the quality of teaching and learning? In Ghana, the second question was concerned with elucidating the effects of centralised academic achievement exams, and in Mexico, with determining the impact, if any, of grading practices in a situation where individual teachers and schools are responsible for the evaluation and graduation of their pupils.

If there was a drive for qualifications, it was reasonable to assume that it would be at its most acute in the final year of 'open access' schooling—the point at which selection is made for entry to secondary schools. In Ghana this point occurs in the final grade (grade 10) of the middle school and is marked by the Middle School Leaving Certificate (MSLC) exam. From this grade, as well as from the preceding three grades, pupils can also sit another national exam, the Common Entrance (CEE), which gives access to five years of general, commercial or technical secondary schooling, to polytechnics and teacher training colleges. Our decision to study grade 9, the grade prior to the MSLC exam, was the result of the wish to determine whether 'backwash' from the exam extended into previous grades.

In Mexico, free and compulsory schooling extends only to the end of primary school (grade 6). Graduation depends on grade point averages. Secondary entrance for those of the 30–40 per cent of an age cohort who have remained to graduate, is officially based on a combination of primary grade point average and results of a newly instituted Secondary Entrance Exam (EIS). However, this exam is more diagnostic than selective; few are rejected. What is more, many secondary schools, including private ones (with 25 per cent of enrolments in 1974/75) do not employ the exam. As no exam 'backwash' was anticipated, grade 6 was chosen for the study.

The attitudes and aspirations of pupils and parents were examined with the use of questionnaires, and observations were made of teacher practice in six rural communities in Ghana and four in Mexico.

## **The Definition of Educational Purpose**

The replies of parents to questions on the benefits of education demonstrate that, in many rural communities at least, education has more than a single purpose. In Mexico, the majority view is that primary education is about learning to read and write. Literacy is seen as akin to being 'awake' and a defence against the unscrupulous who take advantage of the uneducated. A smaller proportion of parents, between 5 and 30 per cent of the four groups in the sample—the differences

between groups will be examined later—see primary school as the starting point for a protracted educational career or for 'progress', or as a means to securing employment. As Table 1 shows, the Ghanaian proportions are reversed.

Table 1

**Parental views on the advantages of children going to school (%)**

	<i>Mexico</i> ( <i>n</i> = 88)	<i>Ghana</i> ( <i>n</i> = 127)
1 Jobs/progress	18 <sup>1</sup>	41
2 Reading and writing	72	29
3 Combination 1 and 2	—	28
4 Others/Don't know	10	2
	100	100

When parents were asked why they felt it worthwhile keeping their children in school after basic literacy skills had been acquired, the proportion in Mexico giving responses that involved improved work or educational opportunities was still only 22 per cent. In Ghana the proportion increased to 80 per cent.

**Educational and Occupational Aspirations**

Given the seemingly more instrumental attitudes towards education of Ghanaian parents, it was no surprise to find that a higher proportion had the intention that their children continue their studies. Whereas in Mexico 42 per cent expected their children to continue, in Ghana 61 per cent had this desire with a further 15 per cent as yet undecided. The exception to this pattern in Ghana was a village where a large proportion of the respondents were guardians rather than parents (it being common for city dwellers to send their children to school in the community of origin) who were unable to give an account of the plans for the child's future. If this village is excluded, then 69 per cent aspire to secondary education for their children with 13 per cent still undecided.

In Ghana there is a much closer fit between educational and occupational aspirations than in Mexico. By and large those parents who would like their children to continue in school see this as leading to improved occupational status in the city, at least in the short term. In two of the Mexican communities this is not the case. Of the parents in these villages who were able to answer

the difficult questions regarding their children's future beyond the secondary school, more than half mentioned employment within the community. The unfamiliarity with urban jobs and the feeling that it is not the parents' business to decide upon a child's employment may have prompted some to give farming or handicrafts as their child's probable future, but the finding underscores the observation that not all parents, not even the majority, see education as the 'bridgehead' to city employment. (Just why these two groups of parents should have differed from the other two will also be discussed later.)

The explanation of the different levels of educational and occupational aspirations in the two countries necessarily involves many factors, not least that the level of schooling already reached was not the same for the two samples. As children progress through the educational system, their aspiration levels (and those of their parents) can be expected to rise. In Mexico the aspirations of secondary school students in grades 7 to 9 are uniformly high [Mayo 1973], not only because they represent a social élite, largely from urban backgrounds, but also because, through historical precedent, the internal school structure reinforces such aspirations [Little 1978].

**Economic Factors**

In both samples there is a broad correlation between economic status and aspiration level. This, in conjunction with other criteria, such as mention of poverty as an explanation for discontinuing the child's education, might indicate that the lower level of aspirations in Mexico is the product of economic differences, but the relationship is far from simple. One major difference between the two rural economies is the availability of land for agriculture. In Ghana there is no shortage of such land, while in Mexico it is scarce. This permits Ghanaian parents the opportunity of sending their children to study and work in the city in the knowledge that a high proportion will return. Indeed, the objective of sending their children away to work may be to accumulate sufficient capital to start as independent cocoa or rice farmers, producing the paradox of high occupational aspirations coexisting with esteem for self employment (expressed by 80 per cent).

In Mexico, the greater propensity of certain groups of parents to use their children's labour in the family economy—due, amongst other things, to the near certainty that they would never return should they once leave—is exacerbated by the nature of that economy. In two villages, the

<sup>1</sup> This figure includes the 4 per cent who see primary schooling as a way to secure access to secondary on the assumption (to be discussed) that the objective is improved employment prospects.



Photographs in this article show pupils in a rural school of Ichinton, near San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico.

two which showed the lowest levels of occupational aspirations, the majority of parents are artisans producing, in one case, pottery, and in the other, furniture. The marginal utility of the child's labour in such activities is higher than in agriculture, leading both to higher opportunity costs for secondary education and a correlation between occupation and aspirations that is independent of income. The relative availability of local employment is, therefore, a factor of importance, although only 45 per cent of Mexican parents see self employment as preferable to salaried employment.

### Geographic, Cultural and Social Isolation

The parents of the Mexican sample, belonging to the 40 per cent of the total population of 70 million who live in rural areas, are more isolated

than their Ghanaian counterparts, representatives of the 60 to 70 per cent of the 10 million inhabitants who live in the countryside. The Mexican parents are, on average, less knowledgeable about city life and jobs and about the schedule of correspondence between educational qualifications and levels of employment. In part their isolation is geographical; distances are greater, communications poorer, and the disjunction between rural existence and that of the city more marked (Accra has 800,000 inhabitants, Mexico City some 14 million).

A part of their isolation is also cultural. Mexico is an ethnically and culturally complex nation. Our sample reflects this complexity. The two artisan communities with lower levels of aspirations are populated by Tarascan Indians. They view city life as largely alien, even dangerous. The values they uphold, the forms of dress, housing and language that they employ and their attitudes towards outsiders all serve to differentiate them from the dominant urban culture. They are pessimistic about the opportunities for their children and may even feel intolerant towards those of their own members who connect too closely with the outside world. In one of these villages parental experience of urban employment was negatively correlated with occupational aspirations for the child.

However, there is ample justification for regarding this pattern of values, not as ethnically determined, but as the self-protective response of the most underprivileged members of Mexican society to their subordinate role in relationships that cross the Indian-Mestizo social boundary. In the face of prejudice, discrimination, racial taunts, a lack of respect, and, perhaps more importantly, a denial of opportunities in relation to jobs, there has developed an awareness of their low social status and understanding of the limits to what can be accomplished by themselves or their children in a *mestizo* society. While only 33 per cent of parents in the two *mestizo* villages felt that personal recommendations or contacts were more important for securing city jobs than educational qualifications, 74 per cent of Tarascan parents were of this opinion. All other things being equal, the Tarascan is at a severe disadvantage in any job competition and must rely more heavily on patrons.

At the same time, Mexican society is more clearly differentiated than that of Ghana. Although the *mestizo* parents of the Mexican sample are more closely identified with the nation, show greater economic ties with the region and more

adventurous patterns of emigration, they too are largely without the brokers who might mediate their rise into the élite.

In both objective and subjective terms, the social distance between a rural background and the occupations of the modern, urban sector is greater in Mexico than in Ghana. President Liman of Ghana has, and maintains, his roots in a small agricultural community, in common with past leaders, such as Nkrumah, and the majority of the present civil and military élite. For a similar example of mobility in Mexico, one has to return to the middle of the last century, to the figure of Benito Juarez, the Zatopec Indian who rose to the Presidency.

The feasibility of such inter-generational social mobility in Ghana, denoting the absence of a sizeable urban hereditary élite, is a function of the recency and limited extension of western occupational roles. Prior to the arrival and subsequent entrenchment of the British in the second half of the last century, what status differentiation existed had been on the basis of lineage [Foster 1965]. With a population dedicated almost exclusively to agriculture and without formal educational facilities, occupational or educational differentiation was out of the question. Only with the extension of British economic and political control did the imitation of a European lifestyle with its concomitant status inequalities become an option.

The effect on social mobility aspirations of narrower and less entrenched social class differences is visible in the normative support for the institution of education in Ghana. Unlike in Mexico, where drop-out from 'compulsory' primary school is the norm, Ghanaian parents who fail to send their children to primary and middle school are subject to unofficial sanction; an attitude that would appear to extend, in some cases, to further schooling:

*Failure to send a successful pupil to an institution of higher learning could bring not only frustration to the child but disrepute upon the parents and the lineage in the eyes of the community.* (A teacher)

The 1961 policy of wholesale promotion from grades 1 to 10, in contrast to the Mexican system of repetition, and the consequent absence of effective feedback on the relative capacity of the child, might serve to foster such attitudes as well as to strengthen demands for further schooling.

### **The Concern for Certificates**

The more instrumental attitudes of Ghanaian parents—their use of education as a mechanism of mobility—might be expected to produce a general concern for their children's progress towards the acquisition of certificates. There is some evidence to this effect: 65 per cent of parents knew of their child's general level of performance and 53 per cent were able to supply the position of their child in the latest class exam. This contrasts with the level of awareness of Mexican parents, 66 per cent of whom had no knowledge of their child's grades.

However, neither group can be described as playing an overly active or supportive role. In both countries only one in five parents had ever visited their child's teacher and, as often as not, these visits were for administrative rather than academic reasons. Very few offered anything in the way of homework assistance (to be expected, perhaps, given that 50 and 60 per cent in the two countries had never been to school themselves).

### **Classroom Practice in Ghana**

But was there evidence that the interest of Ghanaian parents in the progress of their children towards modern jobs was influencing the nature of teaching? Was there an undue emphasis on exam success? In particular, did teachers tend to deviate from the official recommendations for good teaching? Various behaviours, considered to be indicative of exam-oriented classroom practice, were analysed. It was discovered that, in line with expectations, exams did play an important role in fixing the priorities of teachers. There was heavy reliance on chalk and talk with no examples of project work. Teachers agreed that rote learning was an appropriate and effective method for securing MSLC success, with consequent emphasis on the assimilation of facts. The extra time dedicated to exam subjects was at the cost of arts and crafts, PT and music. Group work was not in evidence. Teachers were in verbal favour of such cooperative activity but one might doubt how firmly held these opinions were, as they do not give homework for fear that the pupils will copy from each other, and 77 per cent believe that it is right for individual pupils to hide their answers from others.

However, the absence of comments and questions designed to stimulate their pupils' curiosity, appeared as much a function of the passivity of their pupils as a concern to stick to the straight and narrow of the exam curriculum. Teachers were favourable in their responses to the occasional objects brought to school by the

pupils. Similarly, the tendency for teachers to concentrate their attention on some pupils more than others was not induced by the MSLC. Their desire was to bring the weaker members up to the standards set by the group rather than those of the exams. The finding that classroom teaching was not influenced by the needs of the, on average, 30 per cent of pupils who were to sit the CEE was another indication that teachers do have other criteria in mind.

In their task, the Ghanaian teachers find the MSLC exam a useful device for purely pedagogical reasons. In other words, the need for feedback from their own performance and for an incentive to motivate greater effort in their pupils is as important as the desire to satisfy parental expectations. Indeed, there is greater variation between teachers than between communities in the level of concern for exams, suggesting that attitudes towards the MSLC are more a function of pre-existing teacher characteristics than of the way in which parental concern is interpreted. One component of the attitudes is undoubtedly the desire to maintain school prestige, a function, in part, of exam success rates. The exam has taken on a life of its own, based on its importance both as an index of teacher performance and in the chase for jobs, but largely independent of the needs and aspirations of the particular pupils with whom the teacher is confronted.

### **Classroom Practice in Mexico**

The suggestion that the style of teaching observed in Ghana was a function of more than just the demands imposed by a selective exam with an allocative function was supported by the study of Mexican teachers. Despite the absence of such an exam in Mexico and the unimportance of grading procedures, the pattern of teaching was remarkably similar. A neglect of official recommendations, an absence of group work and

enquiry-based activities, the tendency to concentrate on memorisable material, the infrequency of verbal attempts to stimulate curiosity, the lack of importance given to some components of the curriculum, and the failure to design activities in line with local needs and interests are all common denominators.

In only a limited proportion of their activities can the grading or assessment practices of Mexican teachers be seen to contribute to the maintenance of traditional teaching habits. There was evidence that two teachers avoided group work partly because it precluded the ranking of individual pupils in terms of ability and there was the suggestion that such non-academic activities as singing and dancing were sometimes excluded because they were less amenable to assessment. A concern with grades and grading cannot, however, explain an emphasis on memorisation nor can it be seen as a major deterrent to a style of teaching appropriate to the needs of those who do not propose to continue their studies.

### **Towards an Explanation of the Similarities**

The similarity between Mexican and Ghanaian teachers in their emphasis on academic material, despite very different frameworks, is, in part, a function of the uniformity imposed upon teachers by curricula designed to give priority to such criteria as 'national unity' and 'cultural homogeneity'. The idea of differentiated or relevant curricula, designed with the different needs of a heterogeneous population in mind, is rejected by education ministries on the basis of a functionalist belief that dominant, urban values are both non-controversial and desirable. And it is rejected by teachers and pupils on the basis of a preference for standardised material, that is intrinsically more examinable, for the purpose of maximising educational 'success'.

A further explanation of the similarity in teaching styles appears to cast some doubt on the viability of a progressive model of education in the Idcs. In both Ghana and Mexico, the teachers were largely unable to arouse the interest and enthusiasm of their pupils because of the latter's passivity and introversion. This lack of communication was exacerbated in some Mexican villages by the absence of normative support for cooperation and a sharp sense of cultural differences between parents and teachers that restricts the scope for parental involvement or for school-community collaboration on learning projects.



David Mangurian, UNICEF



*Children weeding their school garden.*

This is not to suggest that, but for parental lack of interest, Mexican teachers would have pursued the progressive techniques as explained in the teaching guides supplied by the Ministry of Education. The strategy with which these techniques were adopted by the Ministry caused considerable confusion and, in the absence of support facilities, supervision and in-service training, traditional definitions of the purpose of primary education still prevail. For many, the job of teaching is still seen as communicating as much information as possible by employing the well-tried techniques of previous generations.

But at the heart of the similarity between Mexican and Ghanaian teachers is the affinity between the aspirations of Ghanaian parents and those of Mexican teachers. Even if Mexican teachers do not see the parents of their pupils as pressing for urban jobs, they hold this aspiration themselves. In this they are unlike their Ghanaian counterparts, many of whom are content to live and work in a rural environment. This difference is related to the disparity in the quality of life between urban and rural centres, to the status to which Mexican teachers believe

they are heirs, to the relative availability of urban jobs and to the promotion practices which offer the opportunity of access to these.

With regard to promotion, it is easier for Mexican teachers both to secure the teaching qualifications required for secondary school posts (part time study in a Higher Normal School at state expense, as opposed to 'O' and 'A' levels through private study, plus two years in a highly selective Advanced Teacher Training College), as well as to secure transfers to the prestigious posts in towns that offer the chance of employment in other activities. The relative rigidity of the Ghanaian system might explain the current pattern of mobility of Ghanaian teachers in the direction of Nigeria, Gambia and Sierra Leone rather than towards Ghana's cities.<sup>2</sup>

The aspirations of Mexican teachers towards urban jobs, and their belief in an education for social mobility, exaggerated by their own uncommon promotion through schooling from

<sup>2</sup> Between 1974 and 1978, Ghana lost 8,000 trained teachers to neighbouring countries [Bediako 1979]. This figure represents 26 per cent of the total of trained primary and middle school teachers in 1977-78.

humble rural origins, has a number of consequences. While it does not necessarily imply a concern for certificates *per se*, it militates against any sort of interest in rural affairs. The result is a demonstrable lack of enthusiasm for relating teaching and learning to the characteristics of the rural community, or for observation and investigation of the environment. It also implies a lack of interest in those pupils who will not continue their studies. Teachers are concerned predominantly with those whose intention it is to 'progress' and who, therefore, share the same pattern of aspirations as themselves. Given their belief, largely correct, that such attributes as curiosity and problem-solving ability will be irrelevant to the success of their favoured pupils in either secondary school or urban jobs, they see little purpose in orienting their teaching in this direction.

If Mexican teachers were in harmony with rural life would the absence of exams facilitate local relevance? And if Ghana abolished exams would the Ghanaian teachers abandon their exam oriented style of teaching for more progressive techniques? It would appear that before any answers to these questions can be given, a more detailed analysis of the applicability of progressive educational models in developing countries would be required, along with a more comprehensive understanding of the numerous factors limiting the implementation of such models.

### Conclusions

- 1 The ten communities of Ghana and Mexico demonstrate that not all rural parents, perhaps not even a majority in Mexico, see the school as a stepping stone to nonmanual employment.
- 2 There is some evidence in Ghana that selection practices do influence the style of teaching in favour of memorisation and to the detriment of curiosity or other process skills appropriate to continued, self-directed learning.
- 3 However, there is much less evidence that 2 is a function of parental pressure for exam success or of teachers' interpretations of parental demands.
- 4 The evidence suggests instead that teachers treat their pupils' performance on the MSLC

as an index of their own competence and, for that reason, adopt teaching methods which are successful for exams.

- 5 That there are many factors involved in the explanation of teaching style, of which exams is just one, and probably not the most important, is demonstrated in the Mexican case.
- 6 The instrumentality of Mexican teachers, rather than of parents, is a critical factor in the determination of their teaching style. This means that Diploma Disease explanations of the quality of teaching do not necessarily require the intermediate variable of selective examinations. The values of teachers are as potent a reinforcement of a 'modern sector' orientation as are exams, and what some educationists see as bad education, the teachers perceive as precisely what the market requires.
- 7 The appropriateness of western-inspired teaching techniques, on the criteria of their ability to achieve the same objectives as in their countries of origin, and of the relationship between these objectives and the process of development, must, as yet, be considered doubtful.
- 8 It might just be that the search for a style of teaching appropriate to development is a red herring until the conditions for effective teaching, of any sort, have been achieved.

### References

- Bediako, T. A., 1979, in *West Africa* no 3248, London, February
- Dore, R. P., 1976, *Diploma Disease*, Allen & Unwin, London
- Foster, P., 1965, *Education and Social Change in Ghana*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London
- Little, A., 1978, 'The Occupational and Educational Expectations of Students in Developed and Developing Countries', *IDS Research Reports* 3, IDS, Sussex
- Mayo, J. K., E. G. McNary and S. J. Keas, 1973, *The Mexican Telesecundaria: a Cost-Effectiveness Analysis Approach*, AID Studies in Educational Technology