

Full Length Research Paper

Factors prompting pupils' academic performance in privately owned Junior High Schools in Accra, Ghana

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The increasing poor performance of most public schools in Ghana has made the task of Government in meeting Basic Education needs a daunting one. This study, therefore, examined, from the perspectives of pupils and teachers/heads of schools in three selected privately owned Junior High Schools in Accra, the influencing factors on their higher academic performance as compared to public schools. Findings from this study could serve as a blueprint for improving academic performance in publicly owned Junior High Schools in Ghana. Overall, 121 respondents were interviewed using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. The study found that parents and role models played a crucial role in pupils' academic performance.

Key words: Academic performance, Junior High Schools, privately owned Junior High Schools, publicly owned Junior High Schools, education.

INTRODUCTION

For the last decades the world has seen new forms of international cooperation forming around the pledge for education for all (EFA) initiatives. In spite of the fact that this initiative is a well intentioned move to resolve the world's education challenges, others have called for a rather regional and national approach to solving educational challenges, particularly in Africa (Strutt and Kepe, 2010). Students' enrolment rates in Ghana have seen steady increases as a result of efforts (such as the School Feeding Program, the Capitation Grant and the GET fund) by various governments when compared to the early 1980s (where percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) allocated to education dropped from 6.4% in 1976 to as low as 1.7% in 1983 (Ministry of finance, 1984). However, the quality of the education system in recent years has seriously deteriorated (Ministry of finance, 1984; Kadingdi, 2006). Statistics show evidence of a remarkable drop in the academic performance of

public school pupils in Ghana over the last decade (Etsey et al., 2004, USAID, 2000). For instance, over 34 public schools (4 within the Okere constituency, 5 in the Jomoro District (Mangyia D/A JHS, Anlomatuape District Assembly JHS, Edobo-Atwebanso Catholic JHS, Amokwasazo and Cocoa Town JHS), 10 in the Agona West Municipality and Agona East District Assembly (Agona Duotu District Assembly (D/A) JHS, Mankrong D/A JHS, Akokuasa D/A JHS, Keyanko D/A JHS, Amanful Salvation Army D/A JHS and Fante Bawjiase D/A, Agona Nyakrom Anglican D/A JHS, Nyakrom SDA JHS, Swedru Wawaase D/A and Otsenkorang D/A JHS) and 15 in the Hohoe Municipality) recorded 0% pass rate in the 2008 and 2010 Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). [GNA (Ghana news agency), November 30, 2009 and November 6, 2010]. This implies that no pupil from these public schools was able to gain admission to Senior High School (SHS). This trend in the BECE has been on going for several years in the public schools, especially those in rural Ghana. Should this trend continue, Ghana may not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of universal education.

This paper aims to document, from the perspectives of

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pupils and teachers/proprietors in privately owned schools, the factors that influence higher academic performance in their schools. What is more, it is hoped that the findings of this study could be used as a blueprint for improving academic performance in publicly owned Junior High Schools (JHS) in Ghana.

Factors affecting pupils' academic performance

Several factors have been identified as hampering academic work and pupils' performance in public schools. For instance, Etsey et al. (2004) in their study of some private and public schools in Ghana revealed that academic performance is better in private schools due to more effective supervision of work. Thus, effective supervision improves the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom (Neagley and Evans, 1970). Also, the attitude of some public school teachers and authorities to their duties does not engender good learning process for the pupils. Some teachers leave the classroom at will without attending to their pupils because there is insufficient supervision by circuit supervisors. This lack of supervision gives the teachers ample room to do as they please. Another factor is lack of motivation and professional commitment to work by teachers. (Young, 1989). This produces poor attendance and unprofessional attitudes towards pupils by the teachers, which in turn affect the performance of the pupils academically (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991). Apart from all the aforementioned, most public schools lack adequate infrastructure and educational facilities. For instance, reading and learning materials are mostly hardly available, especially in rural areas. Also the size of each class forms a critical determinant of pupils' academic improvement and performance (Cochran-Smith, 2006). For example, Kraft (1994) in his study of the ideal class size found that class sizes above 40 pupils have negative effects on pupils' academic achievement. This is because of the possible differences in interests and abilities of pupils, particularly in commanding attention in class (Asiedu-Akrofi, 1978).

Parents and role models also form a very important aspect of a child's training, especially in their formative years of life (Weiss and Schwarz, 1996). Some pundits have argued that a pupil's performance at school is indicative of the sort of parents or role models they have (Ausubel, 1973; Bucher, 1997; Loh, 2009; Weiss and Schwarz, 1996). The usefulness of modeling to a child is that it bridges the gap between theory and practice, as abstract ideas become realities before the very eyes of pupils (Ausubel, 1973). Anton Bucher, for example, revealed from a study among some Austrian and German pupils (N = 1150) that those personalities of social nearness to pupils (for example, parents) have greater model effect compared with religious models and media personalities such as movie and television stars and sports figures (Bucher, 1997). It is evident from this

review that finding effective solution to improving academic performance of pupils in Ghana is imperative (Okyerefo, 2005), hence the need for this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study targets all pupils, teachers and proprietors of three privately owned Junior High Schools in the Airport, Ridge and Cantonment residential areas (specifically, the Ridge Church School, Christ the King School and Morning Star School). These three schools under study have been in existence for the last decade and have proven over the years, a high academic excellence in the BECE (GES, 2009). It was against this backdrop that the study sought to discover factors influencing high academic performance in these schools in order to serve as blueprint for improving academic performance in publicly owned JHS in Ghana. The design for this study was both quantitative and qualitative. This was because we investigated the dominant factors influencing high academic performance from the perspectives of pupils and staff (teachers/heads and proprietors). The method of data collection was self-administered questionnaire and recorded interviews. Interview guide solicited information on class size, mode and level of supervision and motivation for staff and pupils, availability of teaching and learning materials, etc. Structured questionnaire consisted in issues of pupils' conditions in school and at home, peer influence, club membership, pupils' role models, etc. The sample for the study was 121 respondents (which comprised 100 pupils, 6 proprietors/heads of schools and 15 teachers) from the three schools (Ridge Church School, Christ the King School and the Morning Star School). The sampling technique employed both purposive and simple random sampling techniques.

Purposive sampling was used to select the schools and proprietors/heads of schools based on data gathered from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) on BECE results for the past six years. Random sampling was used to select some three classrooms in each school. From each classroom, 10 J.H.S pupils were selected and 5 teachers from three of the classrooms selected. For the quantitative data, univariate analyses were summarized in tables. For the qualitative data, an interpretive analysis was done (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). The study protocol was reviewed and vetted by the department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Science, University of Ghana, for appropriateness and scientific content.

FACTORS INFLUENCING HIGH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PRIVATE JHS

Factors influencing high academic performance in Junior High Schools were grouped into sociodemographic factors; the school environment (supervision, availability of teaching and learning materials, homework/class assignment, and membership of a club); the home environment (the role of parents, the role of the media, friends, and siblings of the child); and social groupings (such as membership of a club) and the influence of 'role models'. In all, 121 respondents were interviewed (100 pupils and 21 staff). Majority of respondents interviewed were Christians (95% of pupils and staff each). The ages of respondents in this study ranged from 10 to 45 years (thus, 10 to 15 years of pupils and 31 to 45 years of staff). Majority (77%) of the respondents interviewed were 13 to 15 years (Table 1) with 80% of pupils living

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of pupils (N = 100).

Variable	Percent (%)
Sex	
Male	50
Female	50
Ages	
10-12 years	23.0
13-15 years	77.0
Level of education	
JHS1*	29.0
JHS2*	32.0
JHS3*	39.0
Religion	
Christianity	95.0
Islam	5.0
Living with both parents	
Yes	79.3
No	20.7

*Junior High School.

with their parents. This was not surprising considering the fact that pupils at this level were in the formative stages of their life and, therefore, the role of both parents was necessary in guidance and placement. The study also revealed that the number of hours that pupils learned at home was relative to their educational level. Thus, the higher a pupil's educational level (as in JHS1, JHS2 or JHS3), the more hours spent on studies at home. This was partly explained by the fact that most pupils at higher levels were often given more homework/assignments.

The role of the school environment on pupils' academic performance

The three schools where this research was conducted utilized several strategies in improving the academic performance of their pupils. Supervision was one of such strategies. Effective supervision of instructors improves the quality of teaching and learning of pupils (Neagley and Evans, 1970). Data gathered from these schools revealed that teachers were present at school regularly due to effective supervision from school authorities. An interview with the proprietress at the Ridge Church School was indeed very insightful and enlightening on the different measures adopted by school authorities regarding supervision of teachers and pupils to ensure that excellence and near perfection were achieved in academics. Pupils were supervised by teachers and the teachers themselves were supervised by their various

heads of departments. According to the proprietress of the Ridge Church School, for instance:

"Sometimes I visit the class while teaching is in progress to watch and observe the ways in which the lessons are delivered and the extent to which the pupils are able to grasp what is being taught".

Another respondent, a headmaster, said: "Sometimes the teachers even invited me over to come and observe their lessons".

In the Morning Star School, for example, the headmistress also stressed that:

"Most of the teachers employed are trained and are, therefore, professionals on their job. This makes my work easier when supervising them. This is because they teach with a lot of firmness on the pupils, ensuring that everyone of the pupils' full attention is demanded by what is being taught".

Another strategy employed to improve the academic performance of pupils was the provision of appropriate teaching and learning materials for pupils and instructors. More than half of pupil respondents said that their schools always provided them with enough learning materials to aid their studies (57%). This, was done through state of the art libraries stocked with current and

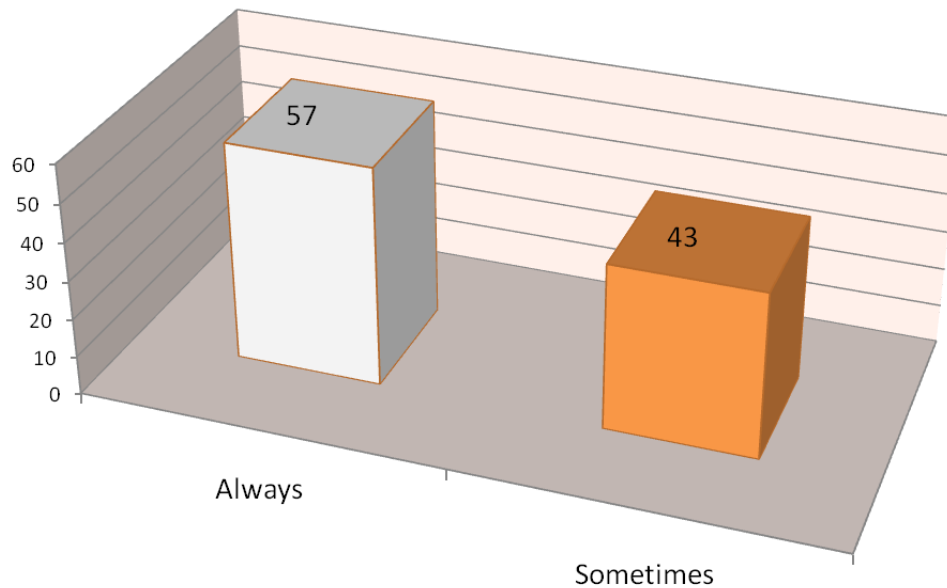


Figure 1. Availability of learning/teaching materials in school (%).

relevant books to enhance teaching and learning. According to some respondents, the state of the art libraries made a significant difference in the BECE results of pupils from the private schools (Figure 1). Etsey et al. (2004) espoused similar views. The study further revealed that the staff meetings and the respect for the views of teachers by the proprietors/proprietresses of these schools contributed to better academic performance. In the Christ the King School, for instance, some of the teachers added that there was exchange of ideas between teachers and school authorities during frequent staff meetings concerning effective teaching strategies. According to most of the teachers interviewed: "The respect our proprietor has for us motivates us to put in our best". Interestingly, a large number of pupils said that punishments (such as 'kneeling down', 'ground work' and corporal punishment) at school compelled them to perform better [(86%) Appendix Figure 1]. However, the study revealed that most punishments given pupils had no correlation with pupils' academic work. It is in this light that we argue that most pupils were rather interested in escaping punishment than improving their academic performance. Therefore, we cannot argue concretely that punishment is a manifest function of the better academic performance exhibited by pupils from privately owned Junior High Schools.

Another interesting fact worthy of note was that majority (87%) of the pupils were optimistic that they performed better in school whenever homework and class assignments were given (Figure 2). All the three schools in this study claimed they encourage their staff (especially teachers) to engage pupils, both in school and at home by giving them enough homework. To almost all

the proprietors/proprietresses and heads of these schools, class and home assignments enabled their pupils to have firm grasp of what was taught at school. For instance, according to the assistant headmistress of the Ridge Church School:

"Whenever the pupils were given assignments and more than half of the class performed poorly, the whole class was made to do the assignment all over again. This really enhanced the academic performance of our students.

The role of the home environment on pupils' academic performance

The home plays diverse roles in the facilitation of academic performance of pupils at school. This is mainly influenced by parents of pupils and activities of 'significant others' (such as siblings, uncles, aunts, etc). A parent-child relationship is one of the most important relationships a child has. Different parental styles lead to various ways of interaction with children and this forms an important component in shaping the child's worldviews. For instance, some studies have shown that parents spend less time with their children when they are within the age bracket of 6 to 10 years because the children would have begun school at this age. Also children at this stage are quickly developing their own acquaintances (Hill and Stafford, 1980). A large number of pupils said their parents always encouraged them to study (84%) irrespective of the demands of parents' jobs. According to most pupils, their parents ensured that home assignments were done regularly. Almost all pupils

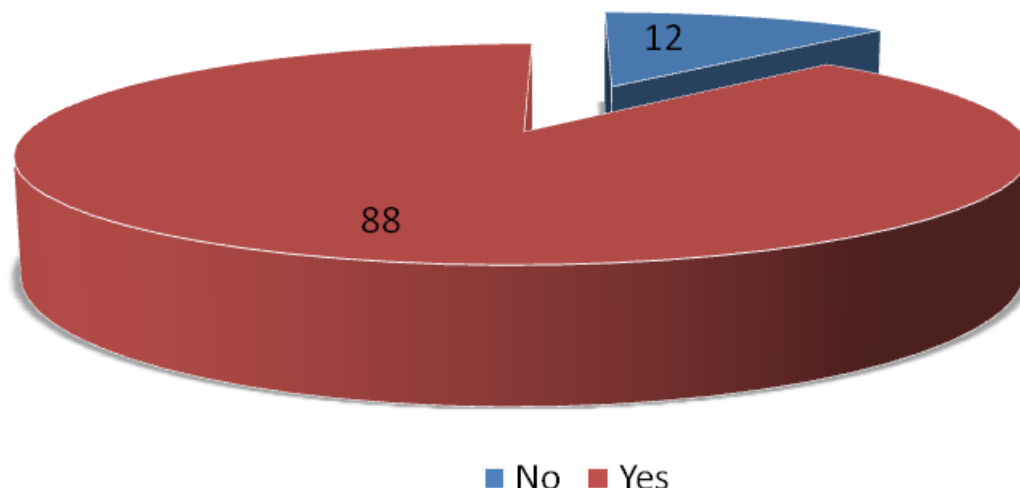


Figure 2. Homework and pupils academic work (%).

also said their parents rewarded them when they performed better in school which according to pupils influenced their zeal to perform better (91%). Most parents participated and discussed issues (bordering on academic performance) with teachers and school authorities during open days set aside by the schools. To most pupils, participation of parents in these open days' activities made them academically responsible since they would want to avoid bad reports from teachers. Thus, through these open days, parents were better informed on their wards' needs particularly in relation to the provision of enough teaching and learning materials (as text books). Indeed, motivation of children tends to come from parents' concern for their progress by visiting them in school, especially during these open days. This makes the difference between pupils whose parents are more concerned about their academic excellence and those who are not. Additionally, the role of 'significant others' also exerted lots of influence on the academic performance of pupils. These included the friends and siblings of the child. From our study we found that friends of pupils played a critical role in their academic performance. Most pupils interviewed in this study said they met their friends in school (96%). A large number also mentioned meeting their friends at church [(76%) (Table 2)]. The sort of friends pupils make is very critical to their academic enhancement. This is because these days children spend much time in school and this makes them share many things in common (such as age, lifestyle, opinion, etc) to exchange views with their friends.

According to a respondent in this study, I have a friend whose name is Jay. At the beginning of each term we set up our common goals; shared our study plan and knowledge. In the end, we got high marks in every assignment and class test we did (a JHS 3 pupil). Though we acknowledge that a child's success is significantly

affected by their friends (particularly classmates), we are of the opinion that the role of parents (parents' occupation in particular) are equally important in helping shape children's carrier aspirations. Therefore, parents need to guide their wards on their choice of friends.

Social groupings (such as membership of club) and pupils' role models

Club activities and role models are very significant in influencing pupils' academic performance. Some scholars have argued that as pupils/pupils take on roles in the game stage of life (especially in clubs) they get to know themselves better (Ritzer, 2002). The study revealed that about 78% of pupils were at least members of a club at school (Table 3). These clubs were mostly religious, educational or ethnic based. Some of the few mentioned are the drama club, the Good News Club, the Red Cross Society, Akan Club, among others (Table 3). Though pupils benefited from these clubs, the study revealed that the impact of the benefit was influenced by the type of club pupils belonged to. This was not to suggest that activities of some clubs had negative impact on pupils' academic performance. According to a respondent: "My English has improved since i joined the debate club and anytime our teacher gives us composition i always come first" (A first year pupil). Similarly, another pupil remarked that: "on Fridays when the reading club meets, we are instructed to read a full story book in 45 min and this has helped me because i feel lazy to read in the house when my small sister is around me" (A second year pupil). This means that clubs do play a role in the academic performance of pupils and, thus, are to be encouraged in schools. However, we stress that school authorities should institute measures to ensure that 'club hours' are not misused by pupils since some pupils could abuse

Table 2. Role of parents and friends on pupils' academic work (%).

Variable	Percent (%)
Parents ensured that pupils did their homework	
Sometimes	44.0
Always	48.0
Missing	8.0
Parents rewarded pupils upon good academic performance	
Always	35.0
Sometimes	49.0
Not at all	8.0
Missing	8.0
Places where pupils met with their friends*	
Neighborhood	69.6
Church	76.1
Home	34.8
School	95.7
How often pupils met their friends	
Always	80.0
Sometimes	8.0
Not at all	4.0
Missing	8.0

*N ≠ 121 and percentages do not sum to 100 due to multiple responses.

Table 3. Pupils membership of a club and role models (N = 100).

Variable	Percent (%)
Pupils membership of a club	
Yes	72.0
No	20.0
Missing	8.0
Type of club pupils belonged to	
Akan club	9.0
Boys scout	2.0
Choir	9.0
Civic education	4.0
Debate society	4.0
Drama club	12.0
Good news	15.0
Music club	7.0
Reading club	3.0
Red cross	10.0
Sports club	5.0
Missing	20.0
Pupils who had role models	
Yes	94.4
No	5.6

Table 3. Contd.

Places pupils met role models	
In the family*	46.6
In church	13.0
Magazine	4.3
Mothers party	4.3
Research	3.3
School	3.3
Travel	4.5
TV	20.7
Total	100.0
How pupils perceived qualities of their role models	
Ambition	8.0
Bluntness	2.0
Bravery	3.0
Cleverness	3.0
Confidence	15.0
Discipline	4.0
God fearing	3.0
Hard working	25.0
Intelligence	1.0
Perseverance	11.0
Smartness	10.0
Talented	3.0
Missing	12.0

*a family member.

club periods. This view was well espoused by a respondent: "Because club hours are the last periods on Fridays, some of my friends run to the house before closing time (A final year pupil).

Our findings also indicate that role models have influence on pupils' academic performance and future aspirations. Role model education is not concerned with the imparting of knowledge and information, as one might expect from an educational context. Rather, it aims to expose its target groups to specific attitudes, lifestyles and outlooks, and, in particular, to individuals who embody these attitudes and lifestyles (Rose, 2004). Almost all pupils in this study had role models who were mainly close relations (mostly parents of pupils). Quite an interesting number of pupils also met their role models through watching television [(21% Table 3)]. With regard to qualities of pupils' role models, about 29% of pupils were influenced by the hardworking qualities of their role models. Others were influenced by the confidence and Perseverance of their role models (17 and 13% each). A few also mentioned a 'God fearing' quality they associate with their role models (3%). Most of the pupils interviewed claimed that they take their studies more seriously because of their role models. This study was very informative on revealing that occupations of pupils'

role models influenced academic performance and future aspirations of pupils. This means that it is important for parents to guide and counsel their wards on choice of role models, particularly that children are encouraged to often take on 'role plays' as a way of imitating their role models. The study reveals that pupils chose their role models as a result of social nearness. Role models of pupils included super heroes and film stars that played the role of the "good guy" fighting evil. In this light we concur with Bucher's suggestion that "these answers demonstrate the distinct manner by which the identity of children and adolescents can be influenced by models, also their moral identity. Several children choose models well suited to their moral universe, characterized by a strong distinction between good and evil" (Bucher, 1997: 624).

Conclusion

This study has discussed factors that facilitate constant rise in good academic performance in privately owned Junior High Schools. Specifically, we investigated the extent to which the school environment (supervision, availability of teaching and learning materials, homework/

class assignment, and membership of a club), the home environment (the role of parents, the role of the media, friends, and siblings of the child), and social groupings (such membership of a club) and 'role models', influence pupils' academic performance. Education has an urgent need to learn more about the role of behavior, emotion, values, character and social skills in improving student academic performance. Bandura (1977), for example, argues that we learn from our interactions with others in a social context. Thus, by observing the behaviors of others, people develop similar behaviors (O'Sullivan, 2006). Findings from the study confirm the views of Neagley and Evans (1970) that effective supervision in school and at home are associated with high academic performance of pupils in privately owned Junior High Schools. At school, supervision of pupils' academic work is very important. There are checks and balances among proprietors/proprietresses and heads, heads and teachers, and teachers and pupils. Thus, proprietors/proprietresses supervise heads, heads supervise teachers for effective teaching, and teachers in turn supervise pupils for their academic performance. At school, membership of a club is also significant to the academic success of pupils and this depends on the kind of club pupils belong to. In this study, for example, pupils of the debate club were more articulate while those of the reading and drama club had more reading skills. We, therefore, suggest that public schools should also encourage club formation in schools in order to engage pupils in academic discourse (such as debate and reading competition). We, however, suggest improvement on this through rewards schemes to encourage healthy competition and rivalry among schools, pupils and facilitators of these clubs. The goal is for pupils to gain not only the knowledge, attitudes, norms and skills that they might gain from education, but also improved values, Self-esteem, family bonding, peer selection and appreciation of school.

A number of different kinds of school and home-based interventions have been developed to address problems of academic performance (Slavin and Fashola, 1998). Pupils can learn new information and behaviors through watching other people (Bandura, 1986). At home, parents do play a key role in the academic performance of their wards. Indeed, motivation of children is one of such means. This is done through counseling, care giving, and reward schemes such as buying of gifts and organizing of birthday parties where children celebrate with their friends. Data from this study revealed that parents' occupation influenced pupils' career aspirations and academic performance. What is more, occupations of pupils' role models also influenced their career aspirations. This means, for example, that it is highly probable that a pupil aspiring to become a medical doctor has a role model who is a medical doctor. Findings show that these models could be parents of pupils, movie stars or super heroes who played the good guys. This study

concur with Bandura's assertion that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning. This means learning would be difficult, if pupils relied solely on the effects of their own actions to inform what they had to do (Bandura, 1977). Consequently, parents should take a serious interest in their wards' progress at school and spend valuable time with them to find out who their friends and role models are in order to ensure they have positive influences on them. To conclude, we argue that a school with an academically and professionally qualified teacher who works under unfavorable conditions of service would be less productive compared with a teacher who is unqualified but works under favorable conditions of service with effective supervision (Agyeman, 1993). This, in our opinion, has been the success of most private schools in Ghana. Therefore, in order to avoid the attitude that translates from various Ghanaian languages as "government or public work is not my father's business; i should not kill myself for something that does not benefit me personally", and ensure that public schools improve upon their standards; the government should guarantee effective partnership with the local communities. This will make the communities feel more responsible towards their schools and also help provide some of the resources the schools need. This can be done by empowering the local communities to take up some of the tasks themselves in making certain that their systems run better.

As communities provide resources for the schools they would also feel obliged to seek accountability from the teachers as well as carefully follow outcomes and results. This would also make the teachers feel accountable and responsible to the community in addition to the government. Effective participation of communities in education would also reduce the burden on the government in the provision of resources and facilities for schools. The issue of inadequate infrastructure and resources can all be dealt with if there is effective community participation in making sure that public schools get better attention. It goes without saying that the communities can monitor the system more effectively since they are closer to the schools. Programme planning should be done with the communities to guarantee the sustainability of the educational system. To this end, we believe the school management committee and the Parents-Teacher association (PTA) system should be strengthened by collaborating effectively with the Ghana Education Service (GES). The GES should also strengthen its monitoring and supervision systems to ensure that problems are identified at early stages and dealt with.

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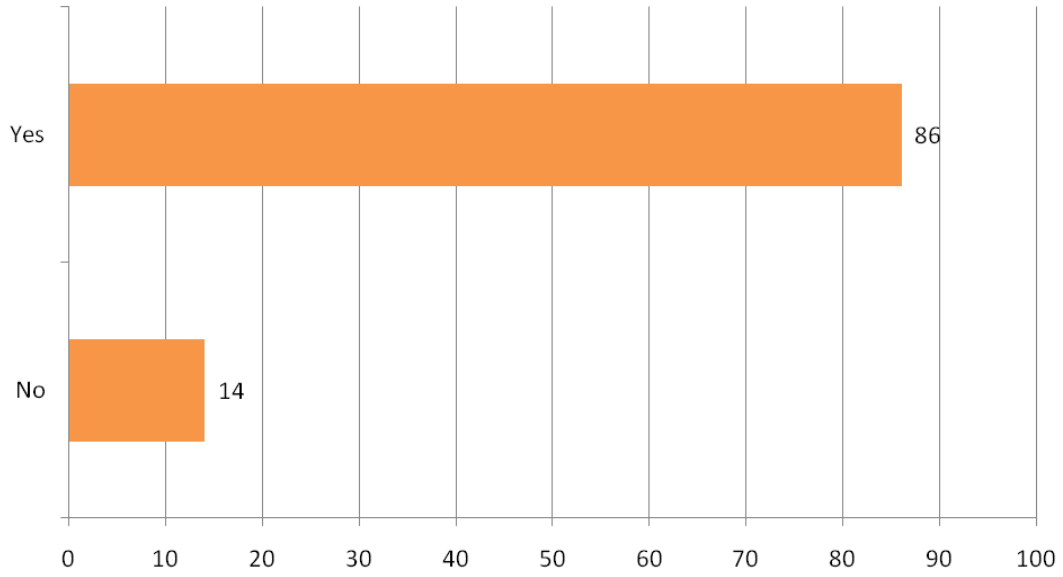
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APPENDIX.



Appendix 1. Punishment and pupils' academic work.