



What Works Hub
for Global Education

Evidence use for policy planning and implementation from Ghana and South Africa

Insight Note

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1 | Introduction

Policy plans and implementation that are informed by data and evidence are critical for improving learning achievements. In this brief, we interview two officials who drove the use of data and evidence in Ghana and South Africa. What kind of data and evidence did they use? How did they incorporate it into the decision-making process? What would they do differently if they had the opportunity? These questions and more are discussed in the interviews below.

The uptake and use of evidence is a core What Works Hub for Global Education focus area. In the interviews below, **Dr Eric Nkansah, former Director General of the Ghana Education Service**, discusses the use of early grade reading and math data to spur policy action and the use of evidence-based differentiated instruction interventions to improve learning for marginalised students in Ghana. **Dr Nompumelelo Nyathi-Mohohlwane, Director of the Reading Directorate, Department of Basic Education, South Africa, and former Deputy Director of the Research, Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate**, discusses the use of government-implemented studies to inform programme design using new, local evidence, and the iterative process required to achieve large scale implementation and impact. Both interviews reflect on the importance of engaging stakeholders and addressing their needs to ensure integration of a new programme within existing systems.

The following conversations have been edited for brevity and clarity.

2 | Using data, evidence and partnerships to improve children's learning: Experiences from the Ghana Education Service

The Ghana Education Service (GES) is responsible for Ghana's over 8 million learners and manages a workforce of approximately 400,000 employees. GES is responsible for the implementation of national primary and secondary educational policies and programmes, including tracking progress toward national goals, and solving implementation challenges. Below, Dr Eric Nkansah answers our questions about his experiences with the GES.

Reflecting on your experience with the Ghana Education Service, can you share with us a best-case example you've seen of evidence uptake within government?

One of the classic examples to look at here is the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) and EGMA (Early Grade Mathematics Assessment) assessments in Ghana, which were done in 2015.

Their findings had to do with the abilities of our grade 2 and grade 4 children across the country. It was really alarming because with the sample they took, their findings revealed that just about 2% of grade 2 learners could read for understanding. This evidence has been used by the government. You can see this if you look at the Education Strategic Plan 2018 to 2030. In the major areas for basic education in Ghana, almost everything that the document talks about was to answer or to address the findings of that EGRA and EGMA study. Evidence – not just from this one study, but quite a number of studies, including studies by the World Bank on learning poverty and learning losses after COVID-19 – has been critical and has influenced management decisions.

The EGRA and EGMA report also talked about disparity – the inequities between the rural areas and the urban areas. You could see that the poor outcomes were mainly in the rural areas, in the hard-to-reach schools, and so all the subsequent programme designs were focused mostly on these rural areas to make sure that learning improved.

We started off looking at what we call differentiated learning, which in itself is a product of research. It is very well documented in the academic research that differentiated learning is one of the most efficient ways of addressing these numeracy and literacy levels at early grade level. In the ongoing GALOP (Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project) World Bank programme, we implemented differentiated learning in

the hard-to-reach, low-performing schools. UNICEF is also working with us on this. There were many such interventions by other development partners, including USAID from 2015 to date, all of which are addressing the issues of early grade reading and early grade numeracy.

Just about three to four years ago, we started what we call the National Standardised Test (NST). This was done on a census basis. We were trying to track all these interventions that I have just mentioned to see whether the reading and numeracy abilities in our early grades have improved over time. And in the NST results of the last year or two, we found that we had improved the grade 2 reading abilities from the 2% that EGRA had found in 2015 to 38%. Even though 38% is not so good, at least we know where we are coming from.

The EGMA and EGRA results of 2015 seemed to be pivotal in shaping education policy. Did it matter who presented the evidence and how it was presented?

Any serious government entity would not just take anything 'hook, line and sinker' without doing further checks to see whether the agency or that particular entity is credible and, most importantly, without cross-checking the results. Credibility is everything. We cannot take just any set of findings and then begin to act on it. But so long as the study and the one presenting it are credible, it does not matter who provides it. It is never the case that we are only looking out for the World Bank, GPE, USAID, OECD and other big players. In Ghana, even some civil society organisations present their findings to us, and when they do, we follow up on them.

Let me give you a typical example. A civil society organisation did a study in the five northern regions and identified some local schools within some hard-to-reach areas where the pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTTR) was very, very bad. You can walk into a school and there would be just one teacher or two teachers, whereas when you move to the cities and towns, you would see the classrooms were filled with teachers. So, we requested the data, and of course we did a double check through our district directors. That evidence actually helped us to address the PTTR issue when we began using a technology platform for the recruitment of new teachers.

Could you also speak about what evidence use and decision-making currently look like in the education sector in Ghana? Or perhaps share an example of how data and evidence are used for decision-making?

Yes, as Director General, I sit at headquarters and I have 16 political regions, each headed by a regional director of education. Whenever I meet with my regional directors and divisional directors, we discuss data from our tracking or monitoring system.

We have a monitoring system in place that tracks the attendance of teachers, the attendance of learners, the assessment of learners and the monitoring activities of the staff and learners within their respective regions. There are international benchmarks in education that influence our key performance indicators (KPIs), for example, pupil-to-teacher ratios. We use these benchmarks to see how well we're doing. So, at such meetings with the Regional Directors, we discuss the evidence, we discuss the numbers. Everything that enables a school to run properly is always the subject of monitoring and we have a monitoring tool that tracks all the data. And that is why we established GESMIS (Ghana Education Service Management Information System). GESMIS sought to digitise all these monitoring activities that we would usually do manually to make the system more efficient.

And because we are working with a number of development partners conducting multiple studies with the Ghana Education Service, all such studies are brought to my office. As far as the strategic decisions are concerned, we rely heavily on data. We rely on evidence.



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Thinking about data or evidence needs during your tenure at the Ghana Education Service, were there any questions where you felt that more data or research would have been useful to guide decisions?

Yes, quite a number. For example, we have approximately 400,000 employees, and some of them are working in the remotest part of our country. At the macro level, if you divide the number of teachers by the number of learners, your PTTR (pupil-to-teacher ratio) is fine. But when you get to the ground, something I did often, you will realise that the deployment of the teachers is not equitably done. There is a lot of human sentiment and intervention in the deployment process; Directors determine who's where and, as humans as they are, some Directors may have favourites who will stay in the cities and towns. Those who go to the hinterlands are always finding reasons to leave. This creates a certain black market somewhere where some unscrupulous individuals could actually take advantage to exploit them.

This, we believe, had something to do with our inability to get real-time data. To actually drill down to a school somewhere in Northern region for example and be able to tell how many teachers are there. So, we decided to develop an application that will give us real-time data and it will be dynamic. This system is housing the entire database of our students, our teachers and our non-teaching staff across the country.

The good thing about GESMIS (Ghana Education Service Management Information System) is that after getting all that data onto that platform, we are also using that same platform to digitise some of the manual processes that our staff would have gone through. And I'll give you an example. In Ghana, travelling from Bolgatanga to the Greater Accra region in public transport will take you about twelve hours. Now, if a teacher who is teaching there wants to be transferred, this teacher is expected to physically travel from Bolgatanga to the Greater Accra region where he wants to be, to look for a school, go to the District Directorate and check with the District Director whether there are vacancies there. Then the District Director will respond, depending on whether they believe they require the services of the person or not, and whether there is a vacancy or not. If they don't believe they require your service, no vacancy for you. Then that person moves on to another district, and another, until he or she gets a district where there'll be a vacancy for them. After that, they take an assurance letter from the district and travel back to Bolgatanga to ask for a release letter. So, you go through all that frustration to be transferred from Bolgatanga and you may still be unsuccessful.

What we understood was that if you put a teacher through this, their time on task would suffer. They will not be so motivated to deliver the best, and so your learning outcomes will suffer. Now, through GESMIS, the person at Bolgatanga doesn't need to go anywhere. All you need is your smartphone. You log on to the GESMIS platform, and you select the region where you want to go. You can see vacancies by district, and now you're not going to rely on the District Director to tell you whether there's a vacancy or not. Then you apply online and once your services are required, you are issued the assurance and the release letters in real time without talking to anybody.

It is interesting that you are using the GESMIS system not just to ensure real-time and reliable data but to address the needs of teachers around postings and transfers. This seems like it would help ensure teacher buy-in around this new system. Can you speak more about the challenge of getting buy-in for this new data management system and how you have approached it?

Yes, change management, you know, has been very difficult anywhere in the world. One thing I'll tell you worked in our case was the fact that GESMIS was so easy to use, even on your phone. And the catalyst, what got people encouraged to actually use it, was my personal involvement in the communication. I owned the process, and I was doing a lot of communication. When these communications come from the Public Relations Department or coming from the district and regional directors, yes, they take it, but not as strongly as they will take it when it comes from the Director General himself. The team recorded me on video telling staff exactly what GESMIS is expected to do for them. And

making them understand that it has come to eliminate all the struggles that they have been having, especially in postings and transfers.

We did a lot of stakeholder engagements, getting the right stakeholders to be at the table, the union leaders, and the unions were wowed. The union leaders themselves were excited about it, so they owned the campaign. And they took it to their people. So, every communication that we issued, the unions would pick it up and then put it on their union platforms, educating their people to actually fully embrace it. And the fact that we got them to be a part of the process was key. Because every employee was actually part of the onboarding system. The head teacher of the school would give us a list of teachers within the school and their staff IDs to upload onto the system. This was done in real time, so at the school level, the heads are in control of the whole system, and the teachers or staff also feel a part of the process.

The self-enrolment that we did would have cost us fortunes, several millions of Ghana Cedis, but we got them to be a part of it. So, it became a co-creation. We launched it, and the launch drew all the media houses from Ghana. The next day, boom, it was everywhere, and teachers were excited about this development, and so everybody bought into it. And now I can tell you that about 95–98% of all our employees are on it.

And we also made gains because I was already engaging the staff using social media, which is quite rare for a Director General. And I gave them the opportunity to interact directly with my office and that really did a lot of the magic in terms of change management.



The catalyst, what got people encouraged to actually use the new data system, was my personal involvement in the communication. I owned the process. And we also made gains because I was already engaging the staff using social media, which is quite rare for a Director General. I gave them the opportunity to interact directly with my office and that really did a lot of the magic in terms of change management.

This is a really helpful illustration of how you have engaged with key stakeholders – teachers, heads of schools, unions – to get take-up of a new data system. Turning to a final topic, we want to better understand the role of development partners in working with the government to support evidence-based reform. Have there been partnerships that you've witnessed that have really helped support government, and what would you say makes for a good partnership?

We work with lots of partners now and I can tell you that our partners do very good work, though they are almost always not able to work at scale. But whatever piece that they are able to pick, they are able to come up with very good evidence. For example, GALOP, the World Bank, has actually been working with over 10,500 of our low-performing schools for some time now, and there has recently even been an extension or additional financing approved by the World Bank. UNICEF is also working with us on the Differentiated Learning Plus. They have also collaborated with us to develop a system, a platform that tracks the performance of early grade learners, and their developers are even working with our developers for GESMIS to see how this can also be incorporated into GESMIS.

As you know, with differentiated learning, teaching is not based on classes. It is based on groupings. So, you can have a grade 1 and grade 2 put together if their level of reading is at par. As educators, we need to know what number of learners within a district are within a particular level and at the end of the term, we want to know the percentage changes, which would also help us to know how well the teachers are doing. The unfortunate thing is that UNICEF is working in only about 500 schools. But we want to scale it by introducing this as part of our GESMIS because GESMIS is nationwide. So that at any point in time, as a nation, we would know the literacy and numeracy levels of our learners. So a time will come when we may not even need NST to tell us this.

In terms of partners' roles, it sounds like partners are often not able to do things at scale, but they're able to take smaller pieces of the challenge and present you with some data. And government is then taking it forward and seeing how to make it system-wide.

Yes, that's usually what happens. For example, Lively Minds, who work in the North with early grade learners, have done their work over time and have gathered evidence, and found that their model has improved the achievements of these early grade learners. Now they don't have the resources to scale this. They now will come to the government for the government to scale it.

As we speak now, we have recruited an officer who is coordinating activities of Lively Minds across the five northern regions. He is an employee of the Ghana Education Service. We are now taking off from where they ended because they cannot do this in perpetuity, and they may not have the resources to do it at scale. For all the development partners that we have, they come in, they tell you that this works at a small scale, but it is then our responsibility to scale it across the country.

This conversation has been really helpful to understand how evidence is currently being used for education policy in Ghana. Any final thoughts you would like to leave us with?

As I said in the beginning, in the education space we rely heavily on evidence. If you see our education strategic plan 2018 to 2030, you will have no doubt in your mind that we took inspiration from the EGRA and EGMA research findings. If you notice, most of the interventions that we had during the COVID season have actually come to stay with us, like the development of learning management systems in our schools. This is an indication that the learning losses from COVID, as reported by the World Bank, have influenced education policy decisions post-COVID. Thus, we are not just implementing any programme in Ghana for implementation's sake – we are inspired by data! We are inspired by evidence, and this is an ongoing process because what was valid in 2015 may not be valid today.



We are inspired by data. We are inspired by evidence, and this is an ongoing process.

3 | Using locally driven, rigorous evidence to inform policy: South Africa's Early Grade Reading Studies

The South African Department of Basic Education has led a series of Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS) since 2015. The EGRS is a series of nested randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that have been implemented in more than 660 schools across three provinces and seven districts. The studies explore different approaches to teaching reading in a first language (an African language) and second language (English). The work has contributed to a growing consensus around the importance of improving South Africa's reading outcomes and has generated a local evidence base on interventions that improve reading outcomes. Below, Dr Nompumelelo Nyathi-Mohohlwane answers our questions about her experiences with the EGRS.

The EGRS is a great case of how the government has used evidence to design and run a programme. Tell me about how and why the EGRS programme got started.

Before the EGRS programme started, in 2014, reading had been an issue in South Africa. A lot of work had been done on diagnosing the problem. And not much about how to solve the problem at scale. Our research section in collaboration with the University of Witwatersrand had recently designed our first RCT that used structured lesson plans and coaching as a one-term catch-up programme for grade 4 for English. We got a null result, which we drew three key lessons from. Firstly, measuring matters; having a valid counterfactual showed us this. Secondly, intervening in the first language may be more educationally sound and thirdly, intervening earlier from grade 1 could be more effective. Evidence from other places like Kenya and Papua New Guinea also supported this. So, with EGRS, we wanted to revisit this model while incorporating the lessons we had learned.

With EGRS, you focused on getting the government to implement a new version of the model before aiming for uptake into formal policy. You also convinced the government to try the new programme even though you had a null result with a similar programme. What kind of buy-in did you need to enable this?

We spoke to our then Director General and he said, 'Look it sounds interesting but it's going to take too long to be my flagship programme. It will be completed outside the administrative cycle. But I will approve the work.' And he gave a good word to the Head

of Curriculum. We spoke to the Head of Curriculum and wanted him to choose a province, and he recommended his home province and was a very strong advocate for us to the province leadership.

Then we went around lobbying local funders for money because we had just raised enough money for two things, a baseline and an endline (through a 3ie grant), but no intervention money. The funding ended up largely coming from a local funder, Zenex Foundation, and UNICEF South Africa, as the main external funders. We then got a contribution from the Presidency and the province where we were implementing. In general, people we approached were open to funding research.

Aside from the Director General and the Head of Curriculum, did you need buy-in from others?

We'd made a centralised decision as the national government, but we needed to get the province to agree, to buy-in, to give us school halls and to be active participants. And in fact, we wanted the province to pay a small contribution as a display of commitment. They paid for venues and catering for all the teacher training.



It was interesting then to go in with, 'We know you're tired, we're constantly telling you to do different things. But this time there's an evaluation piece that's going to allow us to not scale this up if it doesn't work.'

It's one thing to send the province a letter requesting them to participate but it's another thing if the Head of Curriculum, who is from that province, is saying to them, this is the thing to do. Especially because South Africa has had quite a few curricular reforms and people were tired of this. It was interesting then to go in with, 'We know you're tired, we're constantly telling you to do different things. But this time there's an evaluation piece that's going to allow us to not scale this up if it doesn't work.'

And people were like, 'We're open.' They felt that we took seriously whether this intervention was going to work. Lastly, we saw an opportunity to raise awareness on reading and elevate it on the agenda by requesting the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation to add our study to the National Evaluation Plan. This meant that we would share the findings with the Cabinet regardless of whether they were negative or positive, and we would be required to develop an improvement plan in response to the recommendations.

It seems that one part of how you got buy-in was by building trust and a sense of being on the same team – showing people you would be open with them and willing to share with them, even about what is not working. How did you go about this?

We engaged with 230 school principals or School Management Team representatives. I think we had three school principal engagements separately because we didn't want to make any of them travel too far, we were careful about when it was – don't make it at seven in the morning, and don't make it too late.

It was a big thing to convince them to stay in their intervention groups. We informed them that, 'There's a control group that's not going to get anything, so don't give them your documents, etc.' Because the study was not randomised by districts. It was randomised across and within two districts. And they were able to accept this. Then we deliberately met them every year at the end of the school year, to give them an update, and used this opportunity to also get information from them about how they were allocating teachers and other systemic questions we had.

Another component we introduced, which was incredibly important, was engaging the Subject Advisors. They are each responsible for a group of schools and are allocated to these schools for support and accountability. We were kind of coming into the middle of that with our intervention, especially our coaches. So, it was essential to get their buy-in and for them to feel like we were not replacing them. These coaches were not replacing them and were not 'better' than them. But the goal was actually to add capacity for them, given they have hundreds of schools to go to. We wanted to make it clear that the subject advisor is in charge. 'These are your schools. We're going to be in and out, but these are your schools forever.'

Finally, we established what we call a 'Reference Group.' We have it now in every intervention, where the service provider submits their lesson plans for the subject advisor's scrutiny. They have a meeting and literally go page by page through the plans, covering things like, 'This word doesn't exist in this language,' 'This is a typo,' 'Why have you made the sequence this way?' The Reference Group meets termly to review content for the next term. What that does is, firstly, make sure we comply with the curriculum and what's being done in that province. But you're also enabling the subject advisors to read the documents in detail. So, there is less conflict at the school level. A teacher is not getting opposing views about how to teach a skill, because the subject advisors are aligned with the exact sequence of teaching. Those reference groups were incredibly important. It also felt to subject advisors like this was a place where they could raise issues with us. It was really important for problem solving.

Reference Groups are an element that has continued and expanded. We now do it in all our interventions, and recently even one of our funders began doing it. They asked us, 'How did you guys get buy-in? We have open-source books, but how can we get them used?' The funder's books were done, developed and ready. But we told them, 'If you leave it at that, these are always going to be your books. But if you do this reference group meeting process, these become their books, because they've now also contributed.' So, they added this step to their process at the end.



Insight: For any new materials, having a reference group that gives genuine input, which is incorporated, will help with uptake and use of those materials.

It sounds like you prioritised engaging people across many different functions and levels of government. How did this work?

There is a national forum where the departments of teacher development, assessment and curriculum meet from the whole country. We presented to them and they got it. We went to them maybe three or four times over the years, and initially we spent a lot of time on the methods and why our evidence is different. I knew they got it when they started asking, 'How do we scale and where do we find coaches?'

We also had a Project Management Team that included our Research Section, one or two people from the province and a few from the districts as well. Initially we were meeting monthly and having the service provider come and report to us on what's happening, what challenges they have and writing to us formally every time they wanted to change something, in order to maintain fidelity to the main design. This is now adopted into all our programmes. We would dedicate some time for discussion amongst us but also include the service provider and share feedback, progress and plans. This created a relationship between us and the service provider, they knew we were concerned about the details but also had space to raise implementation challenges and get advice and support on resolving these.

Maybe typically government or funders would just intervene with the province and then have the province handle the levels below. We've been super hands-on at every level. As the Research team, we go and meet the school principals, we attend the training each term and meet with the service providers as I mentioned, initially monthly, then quarterly. This is distinct from just getting reports from the province on implementation progress and then just coming in for the evaluation.

The district officials have also been hands-on. They also attend trainings, which is key, because otherwise you can get a conflicting message between what we tell teachers to do and what the subject advisors tell them to do. And we've seen that among our maybe ten subject advisors, there have been one or two who don't attend, for whatever reason. And that is where we would face the most problems with implementation, because they haven't bought in.

Another part of how you got buy-in to the programme was by aligning to government priorities and the existing commitments of the system and using that existing relationship of being part of the same government system. Can you speak about this?

One key thing was this intervention is not an alternative curriculum. It's a way of enacting our existing curriculum. This meant officials at the various levels viewed it as a way of deepening practice or going further in the curriculum decisions we have already made, rather than as a competing priority. Because of lessons from previous curriculum changes, we knew that assuming there is no content or skills, and starting from scratch, is a mistake and disempowers people at every level. We knew we needed to get a sense of what exists. The previous work in Gauteng province also meant we knew materials exist for all the languages, so building on these was more strategic and it meant we could refine and produce a better iteration, rather than develop untested materials.

On top of this, provinces take the National Department very seriously. And the idea that we are prioritising their home language as well, worked to our advantage. Provinces felt like, 'You chose us. You had nine provinces, but you came to us.' So, they're feeling prioritised, they're acknowledging that we are raising funds for them. They hear we're going to report to international partners about this, as well as the Presidency, which gives the study a status. Initially a lot of this is compliance and respect. But, I think, for subject advisors and even the provincial administrators, after about six months, they see the actual difference in learner outcomes. And seeing their teachers with all the materials, with training that actually makes sense, actually ready to teach, visiting schools, seeing children actually reading... that has made a difference, so they're like, 'Okay we're convinced about it.' To the point that when we've gone from one province to another, part of our advocacy is taking people from the district where we already worked, to tell the other province about their experience, rather than us presenting on it.



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Your team's engagement with the implementation process in the EGRS really stands out. Can you speak about this?

We realised at the end of the studies that you need scaffolding. It's not just producing the report and then there's implementation. There's a big gap, actually. You need building blocks to get to actual implementation. None of us knew that when we were doing the studies initially. We thought we'd finish in 2017, say, 'Here are the results. We'll now do math or science or something else.' But it's now been more than ten years of doing reading work. A big question that came up was, 'Hey, what do you mean by 'coach'? And can that be in an actual report or guideline?' And so, we commissioned all of these bits, codifying pieces like that. So, we now have a coaching course and coaching guidance on qualifications, expectations, what the ratio should be, etc.

And provinces would ask, 'How scalable is this? Can we find more coaches?' And then the next question would be, 'How much is this?' Then we knew we needed to commission a costing study and document where we are repurposing existing costs versus raising external funds. And those two things for me have been core in terms of next steps and being able to actually scale things up.

It's also become important to us that we hand over a lot of the work to the Curriculum Section, because we need Curriculum to own the implementation of this. We have had the Curriculum Section become part of our meetings more and more. Because the programme needs to become 'business as usual.' People are now not having debates about lesson plans and how they should do that. The questions now are systemic. Like, "How do we procure in the right way? Our teachers are retiring, and we've just done this massive investment – how do we deal with that?" That's not a research question. That's a 'getting it done' question.



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Some evidence-backed education interventions may succeed in getting buy-in from high levels, and even mid-level, but may still fail to get behaviour change from teachers. How did you approach this aspect?

There were two parts to how we pitched this to teachers: the first was that this intervention is compliant with the government's curriculum, and the second was that this is how we are going to help you enact the curriculum.

The first part, the 'What is my subject advisor going to say?' issue is a real concern. A second aspect we learnt early on in our studies was that, though we had these amazing lesson plans delivered by external NGOs, a big question when it came to teachers across the board was, 'Does it comply with the assessment regime?' Because they need to assess children once a term and then upload these assessments onto routine reporting systems. And it was surprising how much that issue dominated training. So, we then needed to get the Subject Advisors, who understand the assessment system very well, to come and explain this component for teachers.

For the second part, I think for most people, 'How is this helping or hindering me?' is key. Being able to pitch it as, 'this is how the intervention is going to help you' felt useful because it takes away some of that burden for them. And then the integration part for teachers was really important as well. We were giving them lesson plans that come with integrated material. For example, when you do group guided reading, the resources are there. It's not now their responsibility to go and find the right resources. And even better, we're giving coaching as well. This is someone to help them change their practice in the classroom. I think there was some apprehension about coaches initially, as teachers believed they might get reported to their principals, but after a while, they observed that they didn't get reported.

There was also how the coaches gave them feedback. They would create a 'sandwich' of, one, what do you think you did well; two, here's what I think you did well. And when it comes to criticism, coaches were only allowed to mention three things that the teacher could work on, and they were encouraged to begin with low-hanging fruit. For example, they might say, 'I think we could reorganise the class so that you don't waste time handing things out,' or 'Let's make your classroom print-rich by displaying posters, words and other materials on the walls and shelves.' These are affirming things that you can change very easily. Over time, teachers are willing to start trying the slightly harder things, like really changing pedagogy and then at the last stage, they would start calling the coach and saying, 'When are you coming to me, I want to show you some things I have been trying in the classroom.' Then they show them the learner who can now read, who couldn't read before. There was a big element of seeing and then believing, for teachers.



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Often interventions can be pitched at what feels like an unrealistic level for teachers, and teachers feel that, 'You're not in my classroom, you don't know my learners. I can't do this thing that you're doing.' But coaches would go to their classrooms and deal with their real-life situations.

Zooming out, I wanted to ask two final questions to get at some key takeaways of this experience.

First, there is no one definition of what is meant by 'evidence uptake', but some people may focus on the uptake into 'policy', while others focus on uptake into 'practice.' EGRS seems to have been especially about uptake into practice. But broadly, how do you think about this debate, and which needs to come first, policy or practice?

I often have questions about what people mean when they say policy. What's the policy? Is it a law? Because laws in South Africa change once in 20 years. So, if your target is the law, there is a serious time lag. Or is it the curriculum? And even the curriculum doesn't change very often.

So, firstly, figuring out what we mean when we say 'policy' is necessary. And then secondly, I think just targeting policy or formal documents is insufficient. It also depends on how that document will be received by your target audience. If the response would be strong, targeting a policy might make sense.

But when it's not the window for policy change, the policy is not the thing to target. For me, it's more the practice components and spending a lot of your time aligning your practice to still comply with the policy that exists. So, how can you come up with implementation or programmes that are easy to uptake and show your teachers that they are still compliant and how they could be implementing them to have an impact.

My second question is, who should be the audience for education evidence? For instance, do you think an elevator pitch to a minister is the right way to get evidence uptake? Who do you think are the best placed officials to engage for research uptake?

I think there are multiple people that you need to engage, and I don't think the minister is the ideal candidate. I wouldn't say to not engage the Minister, if you were in an elevator with them, but I would say that shouldn't be your main ambition, as you're thinking of research and you're thinking of evidence.

I would say you need a multi-level pitch and the individuals who have the actual mandate to implement are probably the people to pitch to. They're often in the ministry, but it's the people even lower than the Director General. So, directors, chief directors – it would be those people because they have the budget, they have the actual mandate.

You probably want to test your ideas with them early on. Coming when you're done with your research and trying to point to them to new work may be resisted since they have been investing and refining their own approaches, and they may be less open to change. So, it's about figuring out the right timing to introduce ideas and testing appetites.

4 | Conclusion

The conversations with Dr Nkansah and Dr Nyathi-Mohohlwane provided distinct insights into the process of integrating data and evidence into policymaking and implementation.

In Ghana, EGRA and EGMA data, alongside other studies highlighting low learning levels, proved essential in guiding national priorities. Through credible local data and evidence, they helped shape Ghana's Education Strategic Plan and catalysed targeted interventions, particularly for early grade literacy and numeracy. Dr Nkansah highlighted the complementary roles of development partners and government in translating national priorities into actionable programmes and scaling up effective interventions. A key enabler in this process in Ghana was technology, through the GESMIS system.

To ensure new programmes are accepted by actors within the education system, Dr Nkansah emphasised the value of visible, proactive leadership in engaging stakeholders such as teachers, school heads and unions and the importance of meeting stakeholder needs. By personally championing a new programme and giving key actors a stake in its success, GES was able to build broad-based support and uptake across the education system.

In South Africa, the EGRS studies demonstrate how local and global evidence can be integrated into the design of a government programme, which in turn generates evidence and buy-in for education reform. Dr Nyathi-Mohohlwane's reflections highlight the importance of deep engagement with implementation as part of the evidence generation process. The EGRS research team focused on achieving a robust implementation of structured learning programmes even before pushing for policy change. They aligned their programme to existing policies and systems and conducted sustained stakeholder engagement across multiple levels of government, moving beyond their original research questions into challenging practical implementation questions.

Both reflections emphasise the importance of partnerships in enabling evidence uptake, between government and external development partners on the one hand and within government, between researchers, administrators and implementers, on the other. The strength of these partnerships rests on technical elements – such as credible, localised data and evidence – and on the critical non-technical elements of sustained engagement over time, building trust, and responsiveness to stakeholder needs.



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