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Opening Up the Academy: The Case of the Early Education for Young Deaf Children and Their Caregivers in Ghana project with Ruth Swanwick and Daniel Fobi

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Daniel Fobi

My research background is in sign language interpreting, where I am particularly interested in how to improve sign language in education, to enhance the outcomes for deaf students. I pursued my PhD along these lines, which is how I met Ruth who was my supervisor. Currently my research pursuits include looking into early-years education for deaf children, and enhancing mechanisms for learning support.

Ruth Swanwick

I've been in deaf education for most of my career after being a language teacher in UK schools. I developed the MA Deaf Education Programme at Leeds that has a sign bilingual philosophy. I've always been interested in bilingualism and how children learn multiple languages in exceptional circumstances. In the case of deaf children this involves learning sign language alongside other spoken and written languages.

What do you think of when you hear the term 'open research'?



"I would say that it [research] is visible to all, and that it has no boundaries and gives people cooperativity to assess [the work in question]" - Daniel

"Accessibility, transparency, and sharing" - Ruth

Early Education for Young Deaf Children and Their Caregivers in Ghana



"Deafness affects 32 million children worldwide and is disproportionately prevalent in low and middle-income countries where the physical, economic, cultural, and social contexts of children's lives inhibit access to inclusive and equitable early education. This project aims to investigate these challenges in Ghana where early childhood development and inclusive education for all is a development priority. The research team is working to co-produce case studies in rural and urban environments and survey extant practices and policies to inform a contextually situated and intersectoral approach to early education that builds on the proximal and external resources around the child. The development of research and practice in early language and communication as core foundations for learning supports SDG planning in Ghana and is relevant also to other low and middle income countries in sub-Saharan African and elsewhere." - project summary from the British Academy website

We developed our project design and methods in the Ghanaian context, where the early support infrastructure for young deaf children is limited. One of our drivers was the need to change the flow of knowledge about the early childhood education of deaf children that has traditionally been from north-to-south. By working with education and health practitioners and caregivers in Ghana our aim was to develop an understanding of the local contextual factors that influence early support in a low-income context and to identify what can be done in terms of the development of materials and intervention strategies to improve provision for deaf children and their families.



"We were interested in looking at the nexus between education and health, and providing that kind of infrastructure support for the language and communication of deaf people in early years." - Daniel



The project was funded by the British Academy and based across Leeds and University of Education, Winneba. The British Academy set it up so that the funds and research distribution was equitably shared across both institutions, both with their own budgets and project managements. This devolution was also symbolic of the drive to give greater say and input from the global south mentioned; positioning the project on an equal footing, as opposed to be concentrated at a northern-based university.

Methodologically we utilised mainly qualitative methods like interviewing and observational data, where we would learn from participants societal experiences in schools, churches and social clubs on deaf-related matters, and impacts and influences on families and caregivers with deaf children. We had to conduct many of these collections via online mediums like WhatsApp because of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because part-and-parcel of this project was to help and have impact for those engaged in deaf education, we regularly involved educators and parents in our discussions about their experiences with certain resources and how they thought they could be improved or new ones that may be introduced.

Open research practices used

The project has used several methods and approaches that can be considered open research:

Open education



In terms of open education one of our aims was to open up and broaden knowledge production and sharing in relation to the early support of deaf children by giving greater voice to practitioners and researchers in the global south. We identified the need to decentre concepts of early support and intervention that are traditionally developed according to Western understandings of childhood and culture and to broaden the research base to include other global contexts. Most deaf children live in the global South and so we hope that the work in Ghana serves to ensure that indigenous childrearing practices and cultural understanding of deafness, language and communication are represented in the literature.

Open access



Some of the papers we have published have been made open access, directly related to our work in Ghana and wider deaf education. Here are the DOIs to access them:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2116028>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2078650>

Shifting knowledge production away from the global north



Also part of open education (in opening up and broadening knowledge production and sharing) has been our drive to give greater voice to the global south in academic research (also known to some as 'decolonisation'). The whole project is about shifting concepts of early support and de-centring them from the 'Western Academy'. That's a very small centre, and traditionally not inclusive of other global contexts, where by focusing the project in Ghana with locally-based researchers and stakeholders we have sought to help rectify this.

Participant engagement



Those who participated in our data collection were not just used for the purposes of gathering data. Rather, we worked with them, by conversing with them, incorporating their views and inputs into our project, especially in terms of what kinds of impact they wanted. Daniel worked extensively with the deaf community and organisers in Ghana, where they helped design materials for parents and teachers, and organise and design the workshops we ran.

How do you go about forging collaboration and co-operating with external stakeholders?



It's about patience and building trust with the relevant communities and organisations that can help facilitate impact. For instance, Dani utilised his extensive network of local contacts he had built over the years, as well as spent long amounts of time building additional networks. It can be a very-laboured and bureaucratic process, like for example waiting for numerous appointments with the Ministry of Education. Technological advancements like social media had helped shorten such processes, but in a developing country like Ghana there are limits to how well such can mitigate the length the processes take. Some of these organisations can also be very small, have limited resources and busy schedules, where it can be hard schedule-in meetings and build working relationships. An example here was the Ghana National Association of the Deaf. However, at the end you make contacts for life, where people/organisations you have collaborated with could be prospective partners in future endeavours.

Developing resources for deaf accessibility

One outcome of our project was to see how we could produce and disseminate materials to support language and communication, where we found it was vital such materials be decentralised and specifically-suited for a given context. Subsequently we have designed materials based on our findings that are multilingual in the sense that they are video-based with both English captioning and Dagbani captioning. The latter is based on the importance placed on having material being locally-accessible, where in Ghana there are over 79 different local languages, where Dagbani is the dominant one with over 80 percent of Ghanaians knowing it.

These resources were led by our deaf colleagues, who also brought their own perspectives and shared their experiences as deaf people. We have also conducted various conferences, workshops and seminars, and have published quite a few papers from the project.

At the moment we are working on a book which can help with deaf education in Ghana, again utilising multilingual aspects like English and Dagbani languages. On this we are working with the Ministry of Education, the Ghana National Association of the Deaf, and National Association of Sign Language Interpreters. It will also include short stories from the various people and organisations we have interacted with.

Did you encounter any challenges?

Cross-cultural understandings, and communication and expectations are ones you encounter at the start. However, you overcome these by building trust and collaboration on an equal footing, which is what this project has done from the outset. Understanding and appreciating other peoples' expectations and workflows, and accommodating these helps in this regard to.

Of course, when working with human participants and those from marginalised communities ethical considerations are crucial, which is something we had to navigate carefully. In fact, we plan on having a chapter or section around ethics in the book we're working on in order to share our experiences and help others.

Generally-speaking being transparent in all aspects of the project work has been essential.

Future plans

Aside from concrete plans like the book mentioned, we are hoping this project will help serve as a good case study and example to try to open up the academy more to voices from the global south.

We are working on an impact plan from the project, but require funding which we are yet to attain. The overall idea of this would be in enhancing confidence and the global outreach of academia based in these countries, not just Ghana. There are many working on deaf education in the global south, who are struggling to break into the academy, and one means of this is through reaching out to others. So, we're hoping to expand this project out to other cases across Africa.

The plan also includes training deaf people, building deaf leadership and a community of deaf leaders.