

## The Role of Experiential Learning During a DRUSSA Fellowship

### Community Social Capital Performs a Miracle.

Bisoboka is a rural Universal Primary Education school with 1,714 pupils, where the community and parents have embraced their role to work with and/or support UPE activities. In their AGM, parents agreed to voluntarily pay a contribution of 10,000/= per term to support the buying of more scholastic materials, teacher welfare and general school maintenance. Parents attend class meetings to follow up their children's performance. The PTA and SMC work in consultation and harmony with local communities to mobilize resources. The school has realised high level of pupil attendance. Parents encourage their children to come to school. They agreed that slow achievers repeat the class. They object to automatic promotion. 75% of the parents do not oppose developmental ideas of the school (Wagumba, 2016).

A delegate trainee from the Directorate of Basic Education collected the above story as a demonstration of what evidence is available to policy makers. The delegate selected a topic of concern from a list that the representatives of the directorate had identified as requiring further scrutiny in the ongoing policy process in basic education. She chose to identify and analyse data on school and community social capital as an important area where formal policy is required if UPE is to deliver on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Uganda. The story lists challenges such as scholastic materials, a more involved PTA, parents following up their children's welfare at school, and automatic promotion. More importantly for the Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA) Fellowship, the case demonstrated that some delegate trainees were able to reflect at least one of the competences the Fellowship was supposed to impart namely recognising policy relevant data.

### General Background

Despite the increasing evidence in Uganda that the universal education policy and its implementation are failing to deliver on the second millennium goal of providing quality basic education to all, stakeholders seem unable to find remedies to stem the downward spiral of deteriorating education outcomes with special reference to learning outcomes. The few detailed attempts at understanding the reasons for the downward spiral such as Muwanga et al (2007) and Munene (2011) seem to have little impact on the problem. This may be due to difficulties in generating and implementing evidence based policy. The broad objective of the Fellowship was to strengthen /enhance the use of evidence within the on-going policy process and ultimately strengthening capacity within the then Ministry of Education, Science and Sports (MoESTS) in the use of research evidence to inform its policy formulation, implementation and evaluation mandate. The objective assumed that the Ministry was already actively engaged in the review and my role would be that of facilitating the use of academic or rigorously assembled data to guide the review in addressing quality consideration in education service delivery in Uganda. The fellowship proceeded in two phases: a case study and an informal survey of existing policy relevant data.

### Phase 1: Using a Case Study Approach to Interrogate Academic Data for Policy Making

The traditional public service context in which the fellowship was embedded, the overall objective of the fellowship and the role definition of the fellow provided an opportunity to re-engage our emerging, individually oriented theory of change. The local theory of change adopts contextualised but known concepts in organisational and individual learning such as reflection, situated learning and work

based competences.<sup>i</sup> Following the localised theory of change, I set out to develop a concept paper focusing on a number of key performance areas (KPA) or key results areas (KRAs) that guided the fellowship. These are listed below:

1. Build organisational capacity by working with human resources directors to design policies, which emphasize skills in using and valuing research evidence:
2. Work with MoESTS officials to develop practical guidelines addressing how to locate, appraise and utilise research evidence effectively:
3. Work towards developing and aiding MoESTS to adopt approaches that embed evidence in the policy making process
4. Quality assure DRUSSA project activities relating to the development of evidence based policy within MoESTS
5. Undertake literature searches, including production of policy reports, policy briefs, and other MoESTS related publications on quality of education and service delivery
6. Provide in-house technical support to MoESTS staff in processes that entail the identification, analysis and communication of research evidence for policy and planning purposes:
7. Collect and synthesize research evidence to support the review of Uganda's National Educational Policy especially in areas that address the existing quality considerations in education service delivery
8. Facilitate the organisation of MoESTS symposia on topical issues pertaining to design and implementation of evidence based policies:

Listing the key results areas as above brought home an important fact namely that I would not be able to get results in at least half of the above areas. Importantly to get credible results, I would have to prioritise or redefine the opportunity (you could read problem) as emerging through the lenses of the KRAs/KPAs. I also justified my self-criticism because I developed a self-imposed latent questions that I really had to answer. The question was, "what activities delegates/ trainees would perform to feel confident that they can undertake evidence based policy reviews and formulation after the fellowship"? This question was important to me because it would respond to our local theory of change that is based on capacity to demonstrate work based competences that are also defined more in terms of operations than in knowledge or attitudes. We refer to such competences as operant competences and are described generally as the relationship between the individual and the task environment.

To begin to answer the latent question, I discovered that I already enjoyed a head start when the Programme Officer at UNCST advised strongly that I focus on a book I published in 2009 on the Management of UPE and was reprinted in 2011. The book based on earlier efforts by USAID to improve education quality, in which I had had the privilege to be a key investigator, had explored in five chapters the role of a number of social cognitive factors in school performance measured in terms of literacy and numeracy scores at various levels including Primary Leaving Examinations. These social cognitive factors had emerged in the work that had been commissioned by USAID to examine the factors that were attendant on the efforts the Agency had undertaken to improve the quality of education several years before the introduction of Universal Primary Education. The social cognitive factors the book focused on included School Community Social Capital, School Social Capital and School Climate, and Pupils' Learning Readiness. The book ends with a chapter outlining policy implications directly drawing from data on the identified social cognitive factors.

With the ready made source of "academic research" data now found in one source, I set out to implement a modified Action Learning approach based broadly on Marquardt model that we had recently tested in an educational setting in Uganda. I started by explaining briefly that action learning

was an approach of acquiring work based competences by working on a real work problem that has consequences on one's immediate job and task results. I then made a presentation on the objectives of the DRUSSA Fellowship where I outlined the facilitation or coaching method I would use to execute the task at hand.

- 1) I would request members of Basic Education to take charge of learning about evidence policy making rather than listening to me lecturing them on how one utilises academic data to interrogate existing policy or practices on UPE.
- 2) The members of the Department of Basic Education would individually and as team members extract academic and any other systematically collected data on the performance of UPE for the purpose of reviewing the current UPE policy and guidelines.
- 3) The starting point of learning about recognising, extracting, interpreting and utilising academic data to review and formulate policy would be conducting a symposium on the status of UPE as captured in a book I had published on the subject. I also added that the book was available at \$20 a copy since I had distributed free copies in 2010 including five copies sent to the Department of Basic Education.
- 4) The Commissioner, Basic Education would appoint a team leader whose role would be to organise preparatory and reflection meetings on conducting the symposium and addressing any ongoing concern about the exercise.

The Commissioner, Basic Education, who had owned a copy of the book bought at least three copies for his team and I encouraged everyone to purchase their copies as a personal commitment to the exercise. At least three other members of a team of ten that the Commissioner had identified as most relevant for the fellowship purchased copies. In the meantime, the Deputy Commissioner was assigned the task of coordinator and proceeded to lead the process of organising how the team would distribute themselves so that each of the five chapters would constitute an oral presentation paper during the symposium to be held within the next two months. In addition the team formed themselves into a working group with a dedicated email address where information about group activities would be sent to every one. The purpose of the dedicated email was one way of converting the group of ten into a temporary community of practice.

To continue building a community of practice the team agreed on a fortnightly meeting with the broad objective of tracking each other on the task at hand. As it turned out, the meetings provided opportunities to reflect on what to do to formulate and or review policy using systematically collected data including but not exclusive to academic data. In the process, the team members understood the need to interpret data with a central social reality in mind. In their case the social reality was the title of the chapter each team was addressing. They reflected on why it was important to calibrate each figure or story of interest back to the chapter title and especially to the meaning of the title with reference to the performance of the UPE policy or guidelines. It would be only in this sense that they would see that the numbers or stories have meanings, that data could "talk" to each team or team member, and that if they listen to the message behind the numbers or stories, they would be tacitly starting on the process of reviewing existing policy and guidelines. We reflected on a practice of continuously creating working hypotheses as we examine the available data and to reject or uphold such informal hypotheses depending on whether data emerges in a pattern or without a pattern and to keep looking for patterns until we are confident that data are random rather than patterned. We reflected on the obvious reality that data could come in a form of numbers or in stories. We were able to achieve this precisely since the book under review was composed of case studies, vignettes as well as numerical tables.

One unanticipated outcome of the reflective meetings was the need to include a presentation on critical linkages between early childhood education performance and UPE. This topic had been treated indirectly in the chapter on Learning Readiness, but it was deemed too important to be presented under the same chapter during the symposium because of what UPE schools were experiencing with special reference to underage enrollment. Finally members of the teams made power point presentations in readiness for the symposium as a rehearsal as well as identifying areas that needed fixing either in terms of emphasis or interpretation. Interestingly, the reflection may have opened a wider understanding of what Education in Uganda is facing in terms of implementable policies as the following remark implies:

“As a result of your coming we are realising more and more that we have “mouth” policies. We have little statistics to back these policies that emerge from policy statements. The science policy for instance assumes that there are data. No science teacher numbers are known, no numbers were anticipated.”

The realization contained in the above observation suggests that to a certain extent, the experiential learning approach was delivering some of the intended objectives of the Fellowship. We now briefly summarise the results of the first symposium.

The symposium attracted 35 participants composed of practitioners in education and generally responsible for generating data related to UPE performance. These included District Education Officers, District Inspectors of Schools, and Assistant Commissioners as well as officers below these grades. The participants listened to and reflected on the following book chapters:

- 1) Critical Factors in Primary School Performance in Ugandan Schools (Chapter 1)
- 2) School Community Social Capital and Education Quality in UPE (Chapter 2)
- 3) Social Capital and School climate under the UPE Policy (Chapter 3)
- 4) Learning Readiness and Universal Primary Education in Uganda (Chapter 4)
- 5) The Relevance of Social Capital and its Policy Implications at the Community and School Levels (Chapter 5) and
- 6) Critical Linkages between Early Childhood Education performance and UPE

The symposium lasted five hours after which individuals were requested to evaluate the experience.

Generally, learning seemed to have taken place in reference to the main objective of the fellowship, at least at the level of appreciation of the relevance of rigorous data in policy making. The extracts below are examples:

It is a timely intervention. A lot has been going on failing the implementation of UPE and discussions at various levels held without referring to existing data. Using available data to solve issues affecting UPE implementation is very good.

(I have) Learnt how to extract academic data to generate policy direction; Learnt how to Use research findings/monitoring reports findings to write policies.

The symposium is timely as it handles the management of UPE in Uganda since its inception in 1997. I have learnt about the social cognitive factors that had hither to not been emphasised yet they are very crucial. I have learnt about the use of data and how critical this is in coming up with relevant and successful policies that will positively enhance the education sector. I have also learnt about incorporating the emerging issues for the future policy making

## Phase 2: Deepening Practical Understanding of UPE Implementation Practices

The first symposium demonstrated that delegates who participated in the reflective groups and studied the data examined on UPE as presented in the book they were required to use as a base had indeed learned to appreciate what policy relevant data were. The next phase required them to go beyond the five chapters in the book and identify issues of concern to UPE performance, seek out policy relevant data, analyse the data, and provide policy points from data on education outcomes and outputs.

The relative success of the first symposium appropriately energised the emerging Community of Practice to list nine UPE practice guidelines and policy areas that they thought required robust policy. The list below presents what the group wanted to concentrate on in the second phase:

1. School feeding,
2. Instructional materials;
3. Classrooms, infrastructure,
4. Financing including capitation grant
5. Book policy
6. The teacher factor
7. Engaging the community i.e. the social capital (i.e. PTA)
8. Transition from Early Childhood setting to primary education
9. Assessment and automatic promotion

Continuing with the fortnightly reflective meetings the Community of Practice agreed on the following steps:

- 1) Allocate all nine topics to relevant individuals including one or two interested parties from the Policy Directorate
- 2) Assemble sources of data for each topic
- 3) Extract and present the relevant data for vetting by the Learning Team (Community of Practice) before detailed analysis and interpretation of what the data means in terms of UPE performance
- 4) Attend a presentation on components of policy making by a willing member of the Policy Directorate
- 5) Review the data vetted by the Learning Team and make a presentation of what the data means in relation to the relevant UPE component
- 6) Draw lessons for reviewing existing policy, policy guidelines and the relevant aspect of the Education Act
- 7) Present in the second Symposium whose theme would be: "Deepening Practical Understanding of UPE Implementation Practices and their Impact on Existing Policy"

Overall, the Community of Practice had mastered the process and the reflective groups continued to operate though with relatively less frequency since the government financial year was coming to the end. Despite the timing, the Team members were able to find the required data to address each of the nine topics, analyse and present the data during the reflective sessions and prepare for the second symposium which they managed as flawlessly as the first one. I also believe that by the second symposium, the experiential learning method I had selected had delivered on the reframed question namely: "what activities delegates/ trainees would perform to feel confident that they can

undertake evidence based policy reviews and formulation after the fellowship?” The case study that opened this article is part of the testimony to this relative success.

John C Munene,  
DRUSSA Fellow on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2017

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- <sup>i</sup> Bwegyeme, J.; Munene, J.C. (2015); Account of practice: Action learning, the tool for problem-solving in universities; *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2015.1001551>
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