

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

IN ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION

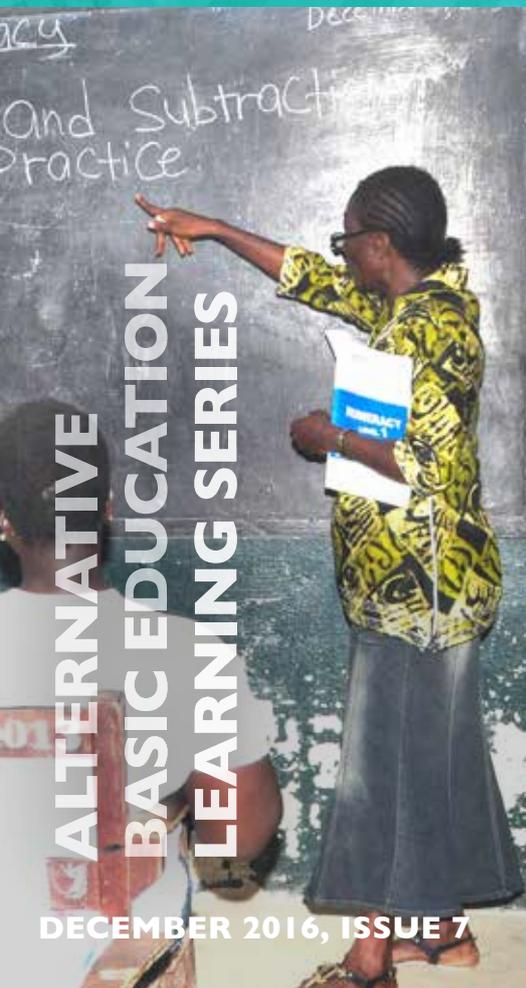
The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 13 to 35, with marginal literacy and numeracy skills. Project activities support the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support education and livelihood development of youth. The Advancing Youth Learning Agenda focuses on research questions that have arisen during project implementation, enabling the exploration of the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership, and livelihoods model.

INTRODUCTION

The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project (Advancing Youth) has provided training and professional development for key positions at ABE sites, including ABE Committee members, Youth Club presidents and ABE site administrators, with an increased emphasis on the role of the site administrator. The Learning Agenda provides the opportunity to explore more fully the factors that contribute to effective educational leadership by exploring the question:

What are the factors of success for effective educational leadership at the site level?

To more successfully support ABE site administrators and improve ABE programming, Advancing Youth examined the factors that contribute to effective educational leadership. Three case studies focused on the role of site administrators and their interactions with facilitators and other community leaders. The goal was to use the findings to encourage ABE site administrators and other leaders at educational sites to use those leadership best practices that ensure high-quality program performance and high rates of learner success.



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You must be patient, and you must have respect for everybody at your site . . . besides respect, you must develop love; you should care for your learners.’

—ABE site administrator, JJ Chessman, Grand Bassa County

BACKGROUND

Advancing Youth acknowledges the importance of strong leadership in ABE programs as a mediating factor in realizing successful outcomes for learners and facilitators. Included among the ABE site administrator’s tasks are the following:

- Work with facilitators on curriculum implementation and scheduling
- Participate in recruitment and retention activities
- Support Youth Club activities

The ABE site administrator therefore plays a crucial role in the facilitation and successful implementation of the ABE curriculum at the site level.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The three sites and three site administrators highlighted in the case studies all approached the challenges of ABE site administration from unique site-specific perspectives. Each administrator’s personal style informed his decision making on how to best ensure the smooth functioning of courses and activities at his site. At the same time, these leaders approached their work in similar ways, which suggested they shared key characteristics for effective educational leadership. Each successful site administrator modeled a democratic leadership approach, had good character, was well-trained, and was personally committed to the well-being of the learners at his site.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review for this study identified two relevant approaches to educational leadership—transformational and distributed. Transformational leadership stresses collaborative relationships structured around product and process results. Distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibility among all of the members of the educational community. These leadership approaches were used to shape the two data collection activities for this study: a series of general focus group discussions followed by three case studies on specific ABE sites.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with ABE site administrators, facilitators, and ABE Committee members to identify the characteristics of an ideal learning environment and the key attributes for educational leadership success in Liberia. These leadership attributes were then used in case studies to investigate the leadership approach of three effective ABE site administrators in Bong, Grand Bassa, and Nimba counties.

KEY FINDINGS

In Phase I of the study, a series of FGDs were conducted with the constituent members of an ABE site learning community: site administrators, facilitators, and ABE Committee members. These FGDs isolated the key attributes or critical traits for success in educational leadership in Liberia: good character, democratic approach (sharing information

and responsibility), training, and personal concern for the learners. Taken cumulatively, these attributes connect an educational leader to his or her educational site and broader community. The FGD participants believed that by exemplifying these attributes, an administrator helps to create a productive learning environment.

In an effort to delve deeper into educational leadership in Liberia, Phase II of this study probed the leadership techniques of three successful ABE site administrators to better understand how a leader’s character, training, democratic approach, and actions on behalf of learners affected facilitators, learners, ABE Committee members, and the broader community.

JJ CHESSMAN

JJ Chessman ABE site is in rural Grand Bassa County. It has a total of 62 learners, with an even gender distribution (31 each), and teaches all three ABE levels. This rural site was confronted by attendance and retention challenges due to the Liberian rainy season, the distances that learners lived from the site, and the difficulty in getting youth farmers to attend during the harvest. JJ Chessman was selected as a case study site because, despite these challenges, the site administrator employed a transformational leadership model that succeeded in keeping the site active. The model united the members of the site’s learning community and instilled in them the understanding that they

were all responsible for the site’s collective success. Involving others was of the utmost importance to the site administrator’s democratic leadership style: “*One tree cannot make a forest—you do not have monopoly over knowledge . . . so you cannot generate all the ideas to run the institution.*” For this administrator, there was a clear balance between participating within the community and enforcing policy. In order to be an effective leader, the administrator must embrace his position as a role model, while remaining part of the community.

At JJ Chessman, the site administrator focused on forming close relationships with all segments of the school’s community. By involving each group in the site’s overall success, he hoped to motivate them all to work together. In his own words, to be an effective leader “*you must be patient, and you must have respect for everybody at your site . . . besides respect, you must develop love; you should care for your learners.*” For the administrator, the ability to engage with the entire community and share authority with others was critical to the site’s success and to his success as a leader.

GARPLAY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Garplay Elementary School, located in rural Nimba County, is a successful ABE site and the largest of the three sites included in these case studies. It has a total of 75 learners (56 women and 19 men), and teaches all three ABE levels. The site administrator’s leadership style was informed by his democratic outlook and his solid reputation in the community. He liked to “*give freedom to everyone—everybody feels free to express their like and dislike.*” This inclusive democratic approach was meant to foster better community relations and interaction by sharing authority.



Figure 1: Attributes of effective educational leadership

- Good character
- Democratic
- Well-trained
- Concern for learners

Overall, the Garplay ABE administrator combined a keen focus on his learners’ well-being with a thoroughly democratic outlook. He saw community integration as critical to the site’s sustainability. Site success was dependent upon inclusivity fostered through a distributed leadership style that respected the input of different ABE constituencies. The administrator understood that this form of open educational dialogue was based on giving “*everyone the opportunity to freely interact, and treat one another fairly, [if you do] it will be good.*” Each member of the ABE community needed to feel that his or her input was respected and valuable to the site as a whole.

SANOYEA PUBLIC SCHOOL

Sanoyea Public School is located in peri-urban Bong County. The site has a total of 52 learners (45 women and 7 men) and teaches ABE Levels 1 and 2. A sense of communal integration was the underlying thread in all of the site administrator’s leadership decisions. Overall, for the site administrator, “*ABE should really work as a family.*” He extended this same democratic approach to his relationship with the learners—“*I can always tell them that you people are my neighbors . . . so we are all equal. We should give each other respect.*” He also

extended this sense of equality to the ABE Committee in particular. The administrator saw the ABE Committee as “*just like the PTA in the [conventional] school.*” They were an integral component of his community outreach approach, and he could “*have a series of meetings [with them and] call them and put this problem before them*” whenever needed.

More than any other approach, this site administrator relied on inclusivity, mutual respect, and a sense of shared communal obligation to lead his ABE site. He did not underestimate or dismiss the challenges that confronted his learners. Rather than scolding them to be on time, he relied on positive reinforcement, reminding everyone at the site that “*ABE, it’s improving the lives of our sisters and brothers in the community.*” The quiet, constant support the learners and facilitators received from the site administrator was in keeping with his inclusive community-centric leadership style.

CASE STUDY TRENDS

The three case studies revealed that each of the administrators relied on his personal demeanor and character to inform his leadership style. Others involved in the ABE program (facilitators, learners,



Photo credit: USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project

committee members) cared that their administrator was a good role model and dedicated to maintaining a positive learning environment. However, they weren't concerned about the specific attributes or beliefs that motivated him, only that he was driven to improve education in the community.

In turn, it was this personal level of dedication that motivated site administrators in their frequent interactions with ABE Committee members, facilitators, and learners. Each group needed to feel supported and mentored by the administrator in their endeavors. This democratic leadership approach relied on positive reinforcement, interpersonal connections, and a collaborative atmosphere to improve the ABE site as a whole. All three of the administrators adopted a distributed leadership approach that respected and depended upon the multiple sources of information and authority found at an ABE site. At the same time, the administrators respected the individual roles and responsibilities of the various members of the ABE site community. Overall, the key for a successful ABE site was each administrator's ability to help all members of the community see that they were equally responsible for the learners' success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The administrators adopted both transformational and distributed leadership practices at their ABE sites. They strove to foster a collaborative work environment that also respected the individual tasks of the ABE Committee, facilitators, and learners. However, the site administrators did not leave these groups to their own devices. Instead, the administrators acted as conductors, orchestrating the various players at their sites. This blended leadership approach has informed the following recommendations for ABE service provider (either NGOs or the Ministry of Education) to strengthen the leadership of alternative education site administrators:

1. Mentor and support site administrators in creating and sustaining an inclusive and democratic approach that encourages active contributions of facilitators, learners, and community members. Effective educational leaders involve others.
2. Select, motivate, and incentivize educational leaders who are good personal role models. Effective educational leadership is dependent on the strong character and reputation of the leader.
3. Provide professional development for educational leaders in mentoring staff, monitoring and supporting quality delivery of the curriculum, and advocating on behalf of learners. Effective educational leaders actively support learner success.

Successful ABE sites in Liberia are not the work of one individual. They are collective endeavors that rely on the strong leadership of the site administrator to run smoothly. As described in this study, effective educational leadership is predicated on fostering an inclusive educational network that respects the contributions and insights of all of its members.



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USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project's Alternative Basic Education Learning Series features select studies in the Learning Agenda—a set of research questions that have arisen during project implementation. The studies explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership and livelihoods model.