Article

Interviewing Ghanaian Educational Elites: Strategies for Access, Commitment, and Engagement

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Abstract

A review of the research methodology literature suggests that owing to the difficulty of gaining access to and obtaining commitments from *elites*, social scientists less frequently use them as research respondents, opting instead to investigate those over whom power is exercised. This article provides insights into some intricacies of elite interviewing. It recounts the experience of a novice researcher in his quest to gain access to and interview elite individuals within the Ghanaian educational system for his PhD thesis. In the process, the article sheds light on strategies and techniques (related to interviewee identification, scheduling, and researcher preparation for the interview, as well as rapport establishment with potential interviewees) that are helpful as toolkits in ensuring that elite interview processes are not unduly derailed. The article argues that the strategies discussed are useful for circumventing formalised and "public relations" responses, which elites tend to communicate with the press and public.

Keywords: Ghanaian educational elites, meso-level implementers of policy, elite interviewing, qualitative research, qualitative interviewing

> The interview process is the opportunity to listen, observe, question freely and, in the light of what is being said, interpret the individual's behaviour within context. (Robson, 1989, p. 26)

The viewpoint in this quotation holds true for all kinds of interviews. However, a review of the research methodology literature and practice suggests that whereas social scientists (including educational researchers) commonly acknowledge *elites* in their research, they less frequently use them, opting instead to investigate those without influence, over whom power is exercised (Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Although no particular empirical studies are identified as having been conducted to unravel the lack of preference for elites as research respondents, the literature on qualitative interviewing is littered with practical reasons and explanations that might have served to deter social researchers from this area of research. These factors, among other things, include: the ambiguity in the meaning of the word *elites* itself, the difficulty of identifying and gaining access to elites, the challenges of getting past gatekeepers and personal assistants, the difficulty of gaining commitment of elites to participate, and the tendency of elites to assume and maintain social distance (see Cookson, 1994; Delaney, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Dexter, 2006; Fontana, 2002; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Harvey, 2010; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Kogan, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Richards, 1996).

This article is not directly addressing the lack of preference for elites as respondents in social research but rather provides ways of engaging with and eliciting information from "society's most powerful people," mainly through the use of interviews. In the process, the article illuminates two very important issues. First, it recounts the challenges and dilemmas the author, as a novice researcher, encountered in his quest to gain access to and interview elite individuals within the Ghanaian educational system for his PhD thesis. Second, and most importantly, it illuminates in a rather telling way some strategies and practical approaches to adopt in ensuring that the information needed from elites is obtained and analysed to answer research questions and fulfil one's research agenda. Although it is not suggested that the information this article presents is a "magic pill," it is believed that the insights generated are essential in deepening knowledge and understanding, particularly of novice researchers (including postgraduate students and early career researchers) to be able to think through their own research plans and to be upfront and updated with strategies and techniques to adopt in carrying out elite interviews. Thus, the approach adopted by the article resonates directly with Goldman and Swayze's (2012) view that "lessons learned from research processes of this kind offer important strategies for those undertaking phenomenological research with elites" (p. 230).

For the purposes of this article the word *elites* is used synonymously with the term *meso-level actors and implementers of policy*, and it refers contextually to those individuals and groups of policy actors that are involved in mediating policy in the Ghanaian education system. Although they may not qualify as ultra-powerful elites, yet by virtue of their position between policy makers and politicians at the top echelons of the policy process and policy implementers (headteachers and teachers) at the school level, they are believed to wield significant influence. Hence the decision to explore how they construct meaning from "what they do" and how this affects the entire process of implementing the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) policy—the small "f" in fCUBE, and within the context of the research on which this article draws, is intended to show that there are contestations regarding the notion of "free education." The "f" demonstrates the Government of Ghana's commitment to meeting what is referred to as "public costs" of education while parents/guardians take up the "private costs." This decision to focus on elites' experiences thus falls in line with Walford's (1994) contention that

"those who have influenced events directly have a detailed knowledge of events and a sophisticated understanding that is worthy of careful examination" (p. 227).

The article is organised as follows. The next section explores the research context, where the policy implementation process within the Ghanaian educational context as well as the methodological approach and findings of the PhD research on which this article reports are briefly summarized and illuminated. This is followed by a detailed illustration and justification of the research design (i.e., the practical steps and procedures that were thought of, planned for, and intended to be followed through in the collection of data in the field). Thereafter, the challenges and dilemmas the researcher encountered regarding interviews with Ghanaian educational elites, the strategies he adopted in ensuring that the process was not truncated, and lessons learned from the interview process are recounted before the conclusion.

Education Policy Implementation in the Ghanaian Context

The preponderance of available research evidence on qualitative interviewing (e.g., Cookson, 1994; Fielding & Thomas, 2001; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Morris, 2009) suggests that elite status and elite interviewing are embedded within cultural beliefs, values, and practices, and that different cultural contexts would allow or call for different strategies of interviewing elites. Based on this fact, the researcher thought it was expedient to describe briefly how education policy enacted within the Ghanaian cultural context is implemented. The idea behind this is that knowledge about the Ghanaian educational context could facilitate understanding, particularly for international readers of this article, of lessons that can be learned by the application of the strategies and approaches suggested by the literature and that were applied in this study. By providing more information on the Ghanaian educational context, the author also aims to increase the transferability of his methodology and findings, especially for researchers who are interested in exploring similar contexts.

The act of implementing education policy in Ghana, although represented as the fourth stage of the process of policy formulation, constitutes a discrete process on its own, and it is conceptualised as a hierarchical structure involving four main levels: governmental, regional, district, and school levels. Policy implementation at the governmental level in the Ghanaian context is controlled by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The MOE has overall responsibility for education sector policy formulation, planning, monitoring, evaluation, budgeting, and coordination. The MOE is headed by a Minister who is responsible for all educational issues and reports directly to the President of the Republic. The tertiary sector management of education falls into the hands of the Governing Council of the tertiary institutions and is coordinated by the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE). The pre-tertiary level management of education is managed by the Ghana Education Service (GES), which is the legally mandated body for implementing all educational policies at the pre-tertiary level. The GES is headed by a Director-General who carries out his/her functions of implementation and advice through the regional directors of education, the general managers of mission/faith-based schools, the district directors of education, and headteachers and teachers of both public and private schools in the country. Other relevant bodies, two of which are the Curriculum Research Development Division (CRDD) and the National Inspectorate Board (NIB), play an invaluable role in the implementation process. These are independent bodies created, and their members appointed, by government for the purposes of quality improvement and control in pre-tertiary education (QUANGOS), and they are accountable solely to government. The CRDD is responsible for curriculum development, evaluation, innovation, and implementation while the NIB is generally responsible for supervision and inspection of schools to ensure educational standards at the pre-tertiary level. The functions of the NIB thus augment the endeavours of the CRDD.

The implementation of educational policy in each of the ten regions in Ghana is carried out at the regional directorates of education. Each directorate is headed by a Regional Director who is accountable to the Director-General of GES. The Regional Director is responsible for all educational matters in his/her region. He/she is responsible for liaising with regional managers of mission/faith-based schools and district directors of education in his/her region for the implementation of all educational policies emanating from central government. The regional director of education is also responsible for providing support and making available funds, educational resources, and materials from central government to all the districts under his/her jurisdiction.

At the district level, the implementation of education policy is done by the district directorate of education, which is commonly known as the District Education Office (DEO). The DEO is headed by the District Director of Education (DDE) who takes charge of all educational matters, and is thus responsible for the implementation of education policies and programmes of GES within and throughout the district. The DDE is ultimately accountable to the Director-General of GES through the regional director of education for his/her region. The DDE's responsibilities include, but are not limited to: supervising and monitoring schools within the district, organising training programmes for teachers and headteachers, providing educational resources (including furniture, books, and infrastructural facilities), managing pro-poor policy initiatives instituted by government (e.g., the capitation grant scheme), resolving conflicts between schools and communities, organising school/community participation programmes, and setting up in schools school/community organisations and district level support systems, such as the parent-teacher associations (PTAs), school management committees (SMCs), district education oversight committees (DEOCs), and district teacher support teams (DTSTs).

The activities of the DEOs are, in principle, supported and complemented by District Assemblies (DAs). The DAs are statutory bodies created by law for the primary purpose of decentralising government business at the local levels. They are charged with the development of school infrastructure and the mobilisation of local communities to support and be actively involved in the provision and delivery of pre-tertiary education at the local levels. The DAs thus have statutory duty for providing communities under their jurisdiction with education in accordance with national policy guidelines laid down by central government.

The actual implementation of educational policies formulated at the national level and recommended for action is carried out at the school level (Government of Ghana, 2001). Two very important groups of actors —headteachers and teachers—undertake this task. The headteachers are the chief executives of schools, and they are the key implementers of change that central government has at its disposal. They are responsible for the running of schools, and as such the success and/or failure of change initiatives in schools, to some considerable extent, rest on their shoulders. The responsibilities of headteachers, within the resources available, include but are not restricted to: conducting the affairs of schools (through the pursuance of achievable and measurable objectives) to the benefit of all pupils, their parents, and the communities they serve; implementing policies set by the education authority under the overall direction and guidance of the DDE; administrating and managing the general day-to-day operations of schools; and determining the job descriptions of other members of teaching staff (GOG, 2001).

The teachers—or class teachers as they are commonly called in Ghana—are, on the other hand, responsible for the management of teaching and learning of their classes. They are responsible for meeting the educational as well as other related needs of the pupils they teach, which they must conduct in tandem with national or central government policy. The class teachers are therefore regarded in the Ghanaian context as the "actual" implementers of policy, particularly those

intended to impact positively pupils' learning outcomes. Aside from their teaching roles, they are also required to liaise with parents, guardians, and communities to meet the educational needs and aspirations of the children they teach.

In summary, the above exposition describes how educational policy formulated at the national level in Ghana is implemented. In addition, this illustration has set the stage for understanding why the meso-level implementers of policy selected for the purposes of the research on which this article reports are referred to in context as elites. Essentially, this illustration has implicitly unearthed the challenges posed to the study as far as the selection, access, commitment, and engagement of the meso-level implementers of policy in the Ghanaian context are concerned.

The Research Context

The PhD research this article reports on was carried out by a Ghanaian professional teacher and researcher at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland (Nudzor, 2007). The research sought to investigate the phenomenon described in policy terms as the "policy implementation paradox"; that is, the disjuncture between policy intentions in theory and outcomes of implementation tasks in practice. The study adopted the interpretivist approach and its (supposedly) underlying qualitative strategy based on its purported aim of using the fCUBE policy implementation as an exemplar to deepen understanding of the causes of the apparent dissonance or disconnect between policy intentions and purposes enacted in theory and outcomes of implementation processes in practice. In the process, the fCUBE policy implementation was taken as a "case," and the researcher, using more than one source of evidence (i.e., interviews and documentary data analysis), studied it in its real life context.

The methodological approach involved the use of the conception of policy as both "text" and "discourse" (Ball, 1994) as an analytical framework, whereby a range of publicly available texts from documents on the fCUBE policy were subjected to critical discourse analysis (CDA). This was done with the view to exploring and documenting the intentions and purposes of the policy. This approach was complemented by the analysis of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with Ghanaian educational authorities (who, owing to the venerable positions they occupy and the power they wield, are described as elites for the purposes of this article), mainly on a range of issues concerning the extent to which they perceived the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes to be achieved. Essentially, the rationale was to ascertain the extent to which the "free," "compulsory," "universal," and "basic education" components and purposes of the fCUBE policy were visibly reflected in the implementation process.

The fCUBE policy implementation presents a rather interesting case of not only the efforts Ghana is making towards attaining Education for All (EFA) and its related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but also the issues and challenges of universal primary education (UPE) provision confronting the entire sub-Saharan African region. Essentially, the PhD research on which this article draws makes significant contributions to knowledge in three key areas, among others. First, it argues that although the fCUBE policy could be described as a rights-based policy (i.e., owing to its focus on enhancing the educational opportunities and outcomes of marginalised children in the Ghanaian community), the advent of neoliberal ideological discourse on education wrapped in the rhetoric of "skills for knowledge-based economy" has triggered the neutralisation of the social democratic and progressive ideals of the policy. As such, the research argues that as long as there is a blurring in meaning of the fCUBE policy intentions encapsulated in the policy title, the free, compulsory, universal, and basic education components cannot be said to be reflected visibly in the implementation process. Second, and following on from the first point, the study posits that accentuating policy purposes and intentions, particularly in low-income

countries, is not inherently problematic but rather the challenges appear to lie with how such policy provisions are conceptualised and operationalised, taking into account the complex socio-cultural, economic, political, and discursive contexts within which policies are enacted in these countries. Third, and based on the previous two findings, the study contends that what was described in the context of the PhD research as the policy implementation paradox was and is a natural policy phenomenon occurring as a result of the discursive shifts that occur as policy is enacted, and this needs to be acknowledged and concerted efforts made to effectively manage its effects on policy processes.

Identifying and Dealing with Initial Methodological Issues

Having explored the context of the research on which this article reports, in this section I proceed to illustrate initial decisions taken (with justifications) prior to embarking on my research trip to gather data for analysis. It is important to note, however, that because this article focuses on only one aspect of the composite data collection strategy adopted for the PhD research (i.e., interviews with Ghanaian education authorities), the discussion here is skewed to illuminate plans conceived and put in place to elicit commitment and engagement of education authorities, who for the purposes of this article are referred to as elites in the field for data collection. For the purposes of clarity in the presentation, the issues, approaches, and plans pursued are discussed under the following three sub-headings: rationale for using elite interviews; sampling technique; and identifying participants, access, and procedures for eliciting commitment.

Rationale for Using Elite Interviews

Because the purpose of the PhD research on which this article draws sought, in part, to investigate the extent to which the conception and articulation of the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes by the mediators of policy at the meso-level of the Ghanaian education system impacted on the implementation process, the rationale for choosing to interview Ghanaian educational elites was grounded in the following three reasons:

First, and according to Woods' (1998) definition, "elites are those who use their privileged access or control over resources (physical, financial, and informational) to exercise power without significant challenges; who are linked to other elites by social and professional networks; and who are deemed elites by themselves and others" (as cited in Goldman & Swayze, 2012, p. 231). In the context of the research on which this article draws, the meso-level actors and implementers in the Ghanaian education system are part of an influential policy network engaged perpetually in controlling educational discourse through the power and influence they wield. They are influential people, each of whom occupies a unique privileged position, holding important information as to what or who else is deemed to be significant within the Ghanaian educational cycles. Hence the decision to interview them to elicit first-hand, site/context-specific information as to how their views, perceptions, articulations, and interpretations of, and reactions to, educational issues impact on the fCUBE policy implementation in particular, and the entire policy process as a whole. Cookson (1994) vividly illuminates this issue of the power of elites. Drawing extensively on his personal experience through interviews with education elites, he explains that much of the power of elites is perpetuated through their control of educational discourse, and they create public conversation that sets legitimate boundaries of discourse (p. 116). Cookson (1994) goes on to posit that the resultant dominant discourse that elites produce, owing mainly to what he describes as their engagement in "symbolic dominance," then becomes accepted over time, particularly due to the concept of the "power discourse" as "authoritative narrative" that serves to suppress divergent or opposing viewpoints (p. 126).

Second, the decision to use elite interviewing follows from the acknowledgement that one of the ways to permeate the workings of any given institution is through an analysis of the "power base" within. That is, the study of the very individuals and groups who are central to or, at a minimum, influence the functioning of the entire structure of the institution. This is particularly the case when one considers the fact that what appear to be democratic, open, and accessible institutions are more often than not revealed to be closed structures operating at the behest of a few individuals. Odendahl and Shaw (2002) throw more light on this by citing philanthropic elites as a case in point. They claim that despite the existence of organizations set up to serve the public good, in the governance and operation of foundations, the idiosyncrasies of the donors are paramount (pp. 300–302). Thus, although the meso-level actors of policy that this article focuses on could not be said to lie at the apex of the "power structure" of the Ghanaian educational system, their position as mediators of policy is paramount to gaining a better understanding of the issue of power and how its exercise affects implementation and the policy process as a whole. For example, as Marshall and Rossman (1999) put it, elites usually can provide a detailed overview of the organisation and are able to discuss external relationships, organisational policies, and future plans (as cited in Goldman & Swayze, 2012, p. 232).

Third, and following on from the previous points, the preference for the meso-level actors of policy in the Ghanaian education system was based on the realisation of the ways in which an examination of the issue of power and its exercise helps in explaining the "whys," "whos," "hows," and "whats" in resolving sociological policy issues. As indicated earlier, for the purposes of triangulating data generated for the PhD research upon which this article draws, a composite data collection strategy was adopted. Documentary evidence (mainly extracts from documents on the fCUBE policy) was analysed to gather facts about the fCUBE policy regarding the intentions and purposes each document conveys or tries to convey. However, sight was not lost of the fact that these documents were limited and constrained mainly to the "official policy line"; that is, information deemed suitable for public consumption. Information related to power and its influence on the policy process, however, was explicitly unavailable in such documents. This necessitated the use of elite interviewing as a way of exploring and probing how the policy provisions were developed; why they were developed; who the beneficiaries are; and what the intended outcomes are. Walford (1994) succinctly captures this point. He contends that, "although published and documentary sources may reveal much information about policy, it is actually by talking with the participants themselves that significant gains in understanding can, and is fully made" (p. 227).

Sampling Technique

The issue of sampling is crucial and lies at the heart of any good research. Robson (2002) refers to it as "the search for typicality" (p. 135). That is, finding out the extent to which what has been observed in a particular situation at a particular time applies more generally. Walliman (2005) defines a sample as a selected number of cases in a population. He goes on to say that if researchers wish to assess the opinions of members of a large union or organisation, they will have to devise some way of selecting a sample (i.e., a kind of subset of the members of the organisation) made up of participants that they are able to question and who form a fair representation of all the members of the organisation, particularly if the researcher wishes to generalise from it (p. 276).

Walliman's (2005) description emphasises the point that a good sample should be of the right type and size that reflects an accurate profile of the population it represents. Nevertheless, in consideration of the purpose of the PhD study this article reports on, the notion of sampling was revised and taken to mean a "reflection" of broad characteristics of the population (i.e., the meso-

level implementers within the Ghanaian education system) rather than being "representative," which implies or connotes the ability to use certain statistical techniques. In line with this thinking, a purposive sampling technique was adopted in identifying and selecting interviewees. By definition, purposive sampling is the selection of respondents for an empirical study with a specific purpose in mind. That is, selecting respondents who (by virtue of their position) have experience and knowledge of the case under investigation (Berg, 2004, p. 36; Neuman, 2004, p. 138). Walliman (2005) refers to this method of sampling as "theoretical sampling." He defines it as "a method of getting information from a sample of a population that the researcher thinks knows much or has a considerable amount of knowledge about the subject in question" (p. 279). The application of a purposive sampling technique was grounded in consideration of the following three crucial conditions outlined by Neuman (2004, pp. 138–140), which were particularly relevant to the study:

- when the researcher wants to select unique cases that are informative for in-depth investigation—in the case of the research on which this article draws, to find out how, or the extent to which, the conception and interpretation of the free, compulsory, universal, and basic education components and purposes of the fCUBE policy by the meso-level actors of policy within the Ghanaian education system impact on the process of implementation;

- when the researcher wants to select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialised population—for example, the Ghanaian education authorities who mediate policy at the meso-level of the education system and who by virtue of their work, position, and influence are very difficult to reach and interview for research purposes; and

- when the purpose of sampling is less to generalise to a larger population than it is to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied—for example, gaining insight and understanding about the causes and/or existence of a policy implementation paradox, using fCUBE policy implementation in Ghana as an exemplar.

Identifying Participants, Access, and Procedures for Eliciting Commitment

A review of the literature on elite interviewing indicates that there are several ways to consider who might qualify as an elite based on attributes, behaviour, and relationships, and that there are numerous ways to further designate them. The methodological literature related to identifying participants for elite interviews further suggests reviewing business listings, databases, directories, and publications with the view to identifying whom to interview (Dexter, 2006; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Thomas, 1995; Woods, 1998). Although effective, these strategies, as Odendahl and Shaw (2002) suggest, can result in the identification of participants who may not have in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under study. For this reason, and in view of the sampling technique used, coupled with the fact that the researcher himself was a professional teacher of the primary sector of the Ghanaian education system, the identification of an initial list of potential interviewees who could be classified as elite figures was not unduly difficult. This was done by first seeking the necessary approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Strathclyde regarding the research in question. This was followed by listing all the district and regional education offices, as well as developing an improvised list of the senior-most positions that the researcher thought existed within the National Headquarters of the GES, and conveniently choosing from among this list those officials that were initially thought of as knowledgeable and easy to reach as far as the fCUBE policy implementation was concerned.

In all, sixteen officials of the GES were initially selected using the purposive sampling technique for in-depth, semi-structured open-ended interviews. The officials selected from the improvised list included: three senior-most officials of the GES, namely the Director in charge of Basic Education at the National Headquarters, the National Coordinator of the fCUBE policy, and the Director for Monitoring and Evaluation in charge of Basic Schools. The rest of the interviewees were: four Regional-Directors of Education, eight District-Directors of Education within the four regions from which the Regional Directors were selected, and an executive member of the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT). The choice and number of interviewees was primarily based on securing a reflection of broader characteristics of the population and involved the kind of variation sampling that took into account a range of sites and people. Coverage was about making meaning from the meso-level implementers' understanding and articulation of the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes. Similarly, the rationale for the choice of the four regions from which the Regional Directors of Education and the eight District Directors of Education were purposively chosen was aimed at exemplifying the diverse socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts within which the fCUBE policy was being implemented and the impacts that these have on the implementation process. Thus, overall, the process of identifying potential study participants was context sensitive and executed based on how knowledgeable and easy to reach the participants were thought to be.

Following from the initial identification and selection of potential study participants, a formal letter was written by the researcher to the education authorities in Ghana to seek permission to involve the selected officials in the study. In accordance with research ethics and general advice in the literature regarding contacting potential study participants and institutions (Delaney, 2007; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Richards, 1996; Thomas, 1995; Yeung, 1995), this letter spelled out clearly the conditions under which the study was being conducted and the benefits therein for the GES, and Ghana for that matter. The letter, for instance, explained the purpose of the study and particularly the fact that the study was being conducted under the auspices of Strathclyde University and counted towards an award of PhD to the researcher. This was done to prevent what Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe as "interview hurdles," particularly attempts by the Ghanaian educational authorities to control the interview and question the interviewer about different study elements as the research progressed.

After receiving formal approval from the education authority in Ghana, letters of consent to participate in the research, indicating the credentials of the researcher, purpose of the study, and date, time, place, and issues to be covered, were dispatched to the selected individual interviewees. This was done in line with Odendahl and Shaw's (2002) recommendation that the relative willingness of elites to take part in a study is enhanced when and where knowledge about the professional credibility and identity of the researcher is established within the elite network. Again, in keeping with good ethical principles, it was planned that upon reaching Ghana for the fieldwork, a formal letter introducing the researcher to the various participants was to be solicited by the researcher from the Director in charge of Basic Schools at the National Headquarters and attached to an introductory letter from the researcher's institution of study, which were together to be sent to the prospective interviewees. The intention was that this would further enhance access to interviewees since the researcher himself was studying abroad and was not personally known to a majority of the interviewees.

In order to maximise the depth and breadth of the insights that were to be generated, an interview schedule was developed and guidelines for administering semi-structured, in-depth interviews (as proposed by Berg, 2004; Fielding & Thomas, 2001; Kogan, 1994; Neuman, 2004; Robson, 1989, 2002; Wengraf, 2001, among others) were carefully followed in order to keep the possible problems associated with its use to the barest minimum. These guidelines included: interviewer

personal appearance and approach; introducing the interview with the appropriate introductory remarks; familiarity with items on the interview schedule; wording of questions, content, order, and style; effective communication; keeping regular eye contact with interviewees; probing and prompting; recording of answers; and concise and appropriate concluding remarks. The interviews themselves were expected to last between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interview items were drawn from a thorough search of and reflection on the wealth of literature on the formulation, implementation, and management of educational policies, and particularly, a thorough reflection and study of the fCUBE policy documents. The focus of the critical assessment of the fCUBE documents was aimed at pointing out the issues of convergence and divergence between what the documents say and how the meso-level implementers perceived, articulated, and interpreted the policy purposes and provisions. This was viewed to be important in determining the extent of the impact the process of implementation was having on the lives of the people.

The reliability, validity, and clarity of the items on the interview schedule were improved by pre-testing the interview schedule. Two steps were involved. The first was to submit the initial draft to the researcher's supervisors for the necessary corrections. This facilitated the identification of questions that were poorly worded, questions with offensive or emotion-laden wording, or questions revealing the researcher's own biases, personal values, or blind spots. The second step involved piloting. This involved several practice interviews with colleagues to assess how effectively the interview would work and whether the type of information being sought would actually be obtained (Berg, 2004, pp. 90–91). After piloting, the necessary amendments and restructurings were once again made, after which the schedule was ready for use.

For the purposes of ease of transcription for analysis, all the interviews were to be recorded on a digital tape recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim. This was planned in line with Fielding and Thomas' (2001) suggestion that verbatim transcription offers the advantage that all possible analytic uses are allowed for (p. 135). Thus, although recording the interviews on a digital tape recorder and subsequently transcribing them verbatim was seen to be labourious and time-consuming, the researcher felt that because he did not know in advance what might be the most significant point of analysis verbatim transcription meant he would not lose any data that might later become significant. The digital tape recorder was also seen to be a reliable instrument because it would provide a permanent and objective record of the proceedings in the sense that it has no value and no vested interest in the outcome of the interviews (Denscombe, 2003, p. 177). Equally important, because the research focus was on articulation and interpretation of the fCUBE policy provisions and components rather than direct issues of power, the researcher felt it was not necessary to use field notes to record observations such as the body language of the interviewees, environmental factors, and other such factors that are not possible to capture through the use of a digital tape recorder. Instead, a post-interview observational technique was developed for documenting the general impressions of the interviews and the relationship that developed and unfolded during the entire interviews.

Against the backdrop of the issues discussed in this section, it was generally not too difficult or stressful locating and gaining access to officials within GES for the purposes of this study. Also, it is equally important to note that the exploration of the issues above implicitly reflects and describes practices relating to identification and recruitment of potential elite participants, scheduling and preparation for the interviews, and the establishment of rapport with potential participants even before the actual interview encounters (Goldman & Swayze, 2012). The next section of the article presents a vivid description of the practical challenges and changes that occurred during data collection in the field, and the strategies the researcher adopted in ensuring that the interview data was collected and analysed for the successful completion of the research.

Dealing with Practical Challenges and Dilemmas in the Field

Advice in the literature for gaining access to potential elite interviewees includes, among other things: using influential people or one's own contacts to make introductions, sending a very strong introductory letter stating the purpose of one's study and its benefit to participants, and mentioning any institutional support or co-authors of note that may give legitimacy to the research (Delaney, 2007; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Richards, 1996; Thomas, 1995; Yeung, 1995). Subsequent to receipt of a formal letter of approval from the Ghanaian education authority to conduct the research, letters of consent and/or introduction were sent forth to potential interviewees, explaining why they were being selected to take part in the study, the topics and areas to be covered in the interview, and the anticipated interview duration, as well as how the data generated would be analysed and disseminated. This was followed, after a period of three months, by a visit to Ghana by the researcher for the empirical part of the study.

It is worth mentioning that in the process of conducting the interviews two key changes took place regarding the choice of interviewees, which nearly truncated the interview process. First, due to the busy work schedule of the Director in charge of Basic Schools at the National Headquarters, it was not possible to reach him for an interview. In addition, the two other senior education officers initially selected for interviews, namely the National Coordinator of the fCUBE programme and the Director for Monitoring and Evaluation in charge of Basic Schools, were found to be designated within the MOE and not within GES as was initially envisaged. Second, five out of the sixteen semi-structured, open-ended individual interviews could not be carried out the way they were intended due to reasons of unavailability and/or request by some interviewees for group interviews. As a result, the researcher was compelled to adopt innovative strategies in order to ensure that the research process was not derailed.

Regarding the first issue, the researcher resorted to what is referred to in methodological terms as snowball sampling. One senior-most official of the GES was identified and approached for the interview and, based on his recommendation, two other officials who served in various capacities of management and leadership with respect to the implementation of the fCUBE programme were approached and interviewed. With regard to the latter issue, a decision to modify the interview schedule to make it suitable for group interviews was taken by the researcher with the consent of the interviewees concerned. In one out of the five group interviews, the Director of Education for that district could not take part in the interview because she was indisposed. Consequently, this led to interviewing, instead, two Assistant Directors of Education from the same education office, whom she had recommended. In two other cases, the Regional and District Directors were hard-pressed. They were on official assignments and therefore detailed their frontline Regional and District Assistant Directors (three in each case) to hold the fort for them. In the last two scenarios, the District Directors themselves requested to be joined by their respective frontline Assistant Directors (three and five Assistant Directors respectively). They explained that they were newly appointed to their posts and therefore preferred to be assisted by their assistants, who had a lot of relevant information and experience and were directly involved in implementing the fCUBE policy.

This unexpected turn of events, particularly the shift from individual interviews to group discussion, did pose a huge challenge to the researcher. The researcher, for example, had to reorganise and revise the interview schedule in a way to take on board and reflect the level of comprehension and articulacy of each and every member of the respective groups. Also, the shift from individual to group interviews meant that the researcher had to give consideration to, and take measures to prevent, the phenomenon in group interviewing described as the drowning of contrary views (especially of quieter interviewees) by dominant group members (Denscombe,

2003; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Robson, 2002; Warren, 2002). Nevertheless, and particularly as a result of the consideration given to the issues raised above, the group interviews proved very useful in the sense that they allowed for more views than expected to be elicited on issues. The group interviews enabled consensus views to be revealed and also helped generate richer responses by allowing participants to challenge one another's views, thereby enhancing the reliability of responses generated.

As also acknowledged by researchers (e.g., Cookson, 1994; Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Morris, 2009; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Ostrander, 1993; Sabot, 1999), it is often the case in elite interviews that the interviewees enjoy greater status and power than the interviewers. This is claimed to be the case because the elites wield power and are arguably used to being treated with deference. In other words, the elites, as Cookson (1994) asserts, control the "symbolic world" and are thus able to shape and manipulate the marketplace of ideas (p. 116). In the case of the research in question, these traits played out in the way and manner the interviewees sought to treat the researcher in his efforts to ensure that the interviews took place at the right places and times and with the right atmosphere. In most of the interview sessions, the interviewees behaved in ways that sought to mark out clearly their higher status. For example, despite having previously agreed to be interviewed at a specific time, and for duration of at least 45 minutes, some of the interviewees kept the researcher waiting for hours while others during their respective interviews constantly kept signalling and reiterating the message that the interviews were going beyond the agreed time-frame. In dealing with this challenge, the researcher had to adhere to Odendahl and Shaw's (2002) word of caution about not allowing his behaviour to be subsumed under the assumptive worlds of the elites but instead to conform to expected norms, regulations, and practices. In so doing, the researcher had to assume good and appropriate ethical demeanours and courtesies, for example, through uttering specific statements such as: "I really appreciate the time you have given to me for this interview"; "I can confirm that the interview will not go beyond the agreed time"; "I apologise for taking too much of your time with this interview"; "Please I can understand your frustrations about time constraints; Please be assured that there are only two (two, three, or four) questions to ask" (Nudzor, 2007). By adopting this strategy, the researcher ensured that most (if not all) of the interviewees felt respected and were compelled to see the interviews through to the very end.

Again, while it has to be acknowledged that some of the interview questions were quite contentious, what is particularly interesting was the reticence with which most of the interviewees appeared to have answered them. For example, in responding to the question about the extent to which they thought the fCUBE policy intentions encapsulated in the policy title could be said to be reflected in the implementation process, most of the interviewees came out with the following expressions, among others, which seemed to suggest that perhaps they were reticent to subject the activities of their colleagues, the GES, and the MOE to the litmus test: "I understand the question but it's a difficult one to answer"; "Hmm, that one has many tentacles …"; "That's also a mega question to answer …"; "Well, in actual fact I cannot say anything further about that since I'm directly involved with the activities of the Ministry …" (Nudzor, 2007, p. 102). Also, in some of the interview encounters, the interviewees exhibited ostensibly what can be described as the "positive self-presentation and negative other presentation" in their responses to questions put to them. This was evident from the way the majority of the interviewees appeared to have given good accounts of their activities, while laying pitfalls and shortcomings about the fCUBE implementation process at the doorpost of other stakeholders, typically the Government.

In dealing with these two challenges illuminated above, serious consideration was given to strategies which potentially could modify the researcher's behaviour in order to change the

dynamics of the interviews to his advantage. Two techniques that Kennedy (2006), drawing on the works of Kogan (1994), emphasized in her study, and which are worth mentioning for the purposes of this article, are rule breaking and knowing how much to know. By definition, Kennedy (2006) describes "rule breaking" as "a faux-pas, an intrusion and a roll of the eyes," and she referred to "knowing how much to know" as pretending to know far less than what the researcher really knows in order to be able to probe interviewees for detailed responses on issues (pp. 86–87). For the purposes of the PhD research on which this article draws, the use of the rule-breaking technique involved the researcher taking advantage of the interview situation to break some of the ethical rules—for example, by asking the elite interviewees to express personal, non-official policy views: "Sir, am I correct in saying that this is your personal, off-records view on this matter?"; "Please, Madam, could you really go a step further to disclose to me how you personally feel about this capitation grant issue?" (Nudzor, 2007). The practical side of knowing how much to know involved the researcher pretending not to have knowledge of certain pieces of information so he could get to hear the interviewees' accounts of events. Some of the specific questions asked included the following: "You mentioned the 'capitation grant scheme,' what is it, and what is it supposed to do?"; "When you say basic education in Ghana is free, does that mean that private and ancillary costs of education such as pupils' meals, uniforms, and transportation costs are also taken up by Government?" (Nudzor, 2007, pp. 100–104). It is important to stress that in using these techniques and strategies, the researcher was guided by the need to be conversant with their strengths and weaknesses so as not to offend the interviewees and cause them to re-coil into their shells.

It is also acknowledged that the issue of psychologically separating elite interviewees from the institutions they represent can be a daunting task (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). This is generally the case because the interviewees represent institutions they work for and are prone to presenting what Walford (1994) refers to as a public relations account of events (p. 226). That is, the kinds of statements intended to propel the image of the institutions they represent. In order to curtail this phenomenon, use was made of a major technique for eliciting specific and personalised responses and opinions from the interviewees. Instead of accepting certain general responses to questions, the researcher probed for specific responses by personalizing the issues and putting them in various ways, such as: "What is your personal view on that?"; "What do you personally think?"; "What would you personally recommend?" (Nudzor, 2007). This approach enabled the interviewees to be differentiated from the institutions they served, thereby circumventing the formalised responses with which people in positions of authority, in this case meso-level actors of policy, tend to communicate with the press and public.

Also, as part of the ethical procedures developed for the research in question, formal permission to attribute quotes was sought from the interviewees after each of the interview encounters. However, out of the total number of sixteen interviews (eleven individual and five group interviews) conducted, twelve declined to having their words quoted and attributed to them. One pattern that ran through the reasons given was political. The participants expressed fear that they could be easily victimised or vilified for political expediency if their comments appeared in the public domain. This therefore resulted in pseudonyms being assigned to the interviewees as a way of protecting their anonymity and also safeguarding the validity of the data generated. In so doing, typical Ghanaian Ewe names were attached to the official titles of the interviewees, for example, Akpene, a Regional-Director of Education, Kojo, a senior-official of the GES, or Yayra, a District-Director of Education, making it impossible for readers who are familiar with the Ghanaian educational system to reveal the identities of the interviewees. This strategy enabled the interviewees to be quoted directly in the analysis and dissemination of the findings without necessarily revealing their identities. This practice thus falls in line with Cookson's (1994)

suggestion to remain very close to the words of the respondents before jumping to conclusions (p. 129).

Lessons Learned from Interviewing Ghanaian Educational Elites

Although elite interviewing is not a new topic as far as qualitative research is concerned, the strength of this article rests generally in its presentation of how generic techniques and strategies suggested in the research methodology literature work out in the Ghanaian cultural context, as well as how the researcher managed to deal with the challenges that his study presented. That notwithstanding, the article equally (although implicitly) makes significant contribution to knowledge in the following two areas.

First, the article has exemplified the intricacies involved in research with elites in an educational system that adopts a traditional top-down and hierarchical approach to policy implementation. Essentially, the challenges and dilemmas the researcher has had to grapple with in this study suggest, although implicitly, that the adoption of top-down approaches to policy implementation (with their inherent concentration of power at the "centre"), as seen in the Ghanaian educational system, means and/or implies invariably that institutional changes or changes in government and/or in national policy direction are likely to affect the positions and status of meso-level implementers. In respect of this, the article forcefully argues for setting up and adhering to good institutional research ethics to safeguard research processes from being unduly derailed. In addition to setting up and adhering to good ethical procedures, the article also contends that the words of meso-level implementers of policy have gravitas owing to the venerable positions they occupy as mediators of policy. For this reason, researchers interested in contexts such as the one in question are advised to be versatile and well-equipped with interviewing techniques and strategies to be able to engage with and circumvent any formalised and public relations responses that these elites may tend to communicate with the press and public.

Second, and as a follow up to the point above, the traditional top-down approach to education policy implementation adopted in the Ghanaian context, and which this article describes briefly, could be criticised for indicting implicitly the selection of the meso-level implementers of policy for the original research on which this article reports. The reason for this is that the approach appears to have conceptualised policy in quite straightforward terms as decisions reached by policy makers at the top echelons of the policy making process and which implementers are required to follow in solving problems (Trowler & Knight, 2002), and thereby rendering the meso-level implementers as supposedly having limited professional views on policy issues. However, the original research on which this article reports has seriously challenged this underlying assumption. The research, as well as the contents of this article, has generally demonstrated that as elites the meso-level implementers mediate policy between policy makers and implementers and/or actors of policy at the grassroots, hence their professional and/or personal "voices" are particularly relevant in re-conceptualising and re-contextualising policy in diverse socio-cultural, economic, political, and discursive contexts. Essentially, the accounts contained in this article have shown that by applying appropriate interviewing techniques and strategies, professional and personalised responses could be sought and elicited to help deepen understanding of pertinent education policy issues.

Summary and Conclusion

This article draws on PhD research (Nudzor, 2007) to provide insight into some intricacies involved in conducting elite interviews. In the process, the article recounts the experience of a novice researcher regarding the challenges and dilemmas he encountered with elite interviewees

in the field. Essentially, the article suggests some useful techniques and strategies for adoption in ensuring that interview processes are not unduly derailed. Some of the suggested techniques and strategies explicated in this article include: developing good ethical procedures and reputation within the elite network (including assuring interviewees of their anonymity and the confidentiality of data and findings); modifying the research method (especially sampling technique and items on the interview schedule) to suit a changing context; adopting appropriate ethical demeanours and postures during the interview encounters; considering rule-breaking; knowing how much to know; and psychologically separating interviewees from institutions they represent and eliciting from them specific and personalised responses. The article argues that these techniques and strategies are potentially helpful as a toolkit in circumventing formalised and public relations responses that elites and/or people in positions of authority tend to communicate with the press and public.

Although interviews (as research instruments) are commonly viewed as scientific instruments for extracting knowledge from interviewees, the discussion in this article shows that they are equally dynamic communicative events and sites for knowledge construction. Essentially, the crux of the argument in this article is that in view of the fact that the words of elites have a certain gravitas (owing to the venerable positions they occupy and the power they wield), potential interviewers need to be conversant and well-equipped with interviewing techniques and strategies to be able to engage them in ways that fulfil specific research purposes and agendas.

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