Revisiting Storytelling in Ghana: A Possible Link to Leadership Development Through the Agricultural Extension Service

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to explore the current status of storytelling in Ghana from the perspective of agricultural extension directors. Specifically, this study determined barriers to storytelling experienced by families, identified skills and values learned through storytelling, and identified uses of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service. Ghana and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) face a number of development challenges. Formulating solutions to these development challenges will require effective leadership. Based on culture-fit theory and a conceptual model that recognizes storytelling as a connection point for leadership development in SSA, it is important to gain an understanding of the current status of storytelling. This exploratory study was an attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

This study concluded that storytelling in families has challenges centered around leisure time priorities, image of storytelling, and technology. It is implied that the barriers to storytelling might be an indication that storytelling is becoming a dying tradition in the SSA culture. However, this study found that storytelling has a number of merits. Ghana agricultural extension directors reported that they learned skills and values such as problem-solving, honesty, responsibility, listening, and respect by their personal involvement in storytelling. It was further concluded that storytelling is used within the Ghana agricultural extension service as a communication technique, teaching method, and bringing about a common understanding within the organization.

Keywords: Ghana, leadership, organization, storytelling, sub-Saharan Africa
Introduction

Organizations and businesses across the world have been facing major changes and uncertainties. In order for organizations to remain competitive, effective leadership is needed to guide the entity through challenging times and position the organization for future growth (Oppel, 2007). Developing countries such as Ghana in SSA will need to make cultural changes if they are to overcome the challenges of education, economics, health, and power. Specifically, poor leadership performance has been identified as a major barrier that must be addressed (Crowder, Lindley, Bruening, & Doron, 1998). Fortunately, research has determined that the agricultural extension service and its emphasis on education and leadership can play a key role in empowering citizens to develop sustainable communities (Ukaga, 1999). A key avenue that leadership could be exhibited in the SSA culture is through storytelling.

Storytelling has been one of the most important and widespread traditions in Africa. For centuries, boys and girls in Africa learned about relevant skills related to leadership development, personal development, character training, and other life lessons by the fire side in the evening (Anyidoho, 1989; Barongo, 1997; Massango, 2003; Naylor, 2000). Family and community members are key participants as explained by Ben-Amos (1967):

The ibota is a family institution for the transmission of oral tradition in the West-African kingdom of Benin. In the early evening hours after the daily work has been completed, the family may gather in the ikun, the central room in the house, and discuss household matters, tell traditional narratives (oxa) and sing songs (Ihuan). Once gathered the ikun, the members of the family take their seats according to their age and sex. The head of the household usually sits near the ancestral altar, the children congregate in one comer on the floor, and the rest of the family sit on the mud benches along the walls. No restrictions or rites are involved with telling stories in the ibota. Whoever wishes may tell a story or start a song. However, two or three people often tell most of the narratives. The head of the household assumes a rather passive role as listener in the ibota and allows his wives and children to display their knowledge of Benin oral tradition (p. 54-55).

Storytelling has provided children with the opportunity to make comparisons of everyday occurrences to ideals, formulate positive attitudes, and connect their experiences with a role-model. While storytelling implies that children are the target audience, oral communication is an educational and leadership strategy that benefits people of all ages. Another important use of storytelling was to start discussions on problem solving. This was an effective way of involving community members in an open debate (De Goot & Zwaal, 2007). Children were also expected to use their initiatives to think critically and develop the capacity to be logical in their reasoning; as such, stories and riddles were used to achieve these goals. Storytelling was found to be instrumental in stimulating the imagination of African children (Ishengoma, 2005).

Although the practice of storytelling has been in existence for ages, the influence of the western culture as well as globalization has led to a myriad of changes in SSA. Instead of children being involved with storytelling within their families, stories are now told in the classroom, library, and children’s books as well as children’s sections in newspapers. (Barongo, 1997). Anyidoho (1989) summarized the changes taking place in SSA:

It was assumed that with the development of literature, the advent of electric lighting and its accompanying gadgets such as radio, video and television which provide alternative pastime, story-telling might not attract many people. Also with the emergence of formal classroom education and its resultant separation of grandchildren from grandparents, and the general desire among Africans to learn European rather than African languages, it is
feared that all this might lead to children not getting the opportunity to learn the story telling culture. One might also expect that modern job pressure that leads to parents being less involved in the activities of their children, might affect the frequency with which this activity is performed in many homes and the degree of adult participation in it. Many Ghanaian parents, especially those in the urban areas, are seen to provide videos for their children to watch rather than tell them stories, either because they regard story telling as an ‘old-fashioned’ and irrelevant practice, or because they do not have the time for it (p.73).

Storytelling has been portrayed as an effective tool of leadership development in western countries as evidenced by organizational, political, and religious leaders who have utilized this narrative approach (Schwabenland, 2006). For ages, storytelling or narratives has been an effective method of teaching, establishing cultural or moral standards, and building social relationships (Foster, et al., 1999; Miller & Jack, 2007). Rhodes and Brown (2005) determined storytelling to be an effective tool leaders could use in organizational development. They further asserted that leaders could use storytelling as an effective tool in terms of sense-making, communication, learning, politics and power, and identity and identification. Schwabenland (2006) was also of the view that stories have been instrumental in understanding organization. Stories, myths, and legends are sources of manifestation of values and basic assumptions of members in an organization. In other words, stories can be used by leaders to establish organizational culture.

The authors suggest that there are commonalities shared by storytelling and Full-Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) that provide an opportunity to introduce transformational leadership practices through international extension (Amenumey & Greiman, 2009). The synergy developed by the complementary nature of storytelling and FRLT may assist SSA to meet current and future challenges identified in the Millennium Development Goals advocated by the United Nations (UN, 2000). Baseline data is needed to determine the current status of storytelling in Ghana and its use by families and Ghana agricultural extension service personnel. This study seeks to gather this data by an exploratory study.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to explore the current status of storytelling in Ghana from the perspective of agricultural extension directors. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the barriers to storytelling being experienced by families in Ghana.
2. Identify skills and values learned through personal involvement in storytelling by Ghana agricultural extension directors.
3. Identify uses of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service.

**Methods**

This study was descriptive-survey in design (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The sample consisted of 108 Ghana agricultural extension directors who were in attendance at six regional meetings in November and December 2008, and January 2009. The data collection effort was part of a broader research effort that examined additional variables.

The sections of the data collection instrument that pertained to this study were comprised of questions focused on barriers to storytelling, skills and values learned through personal involvement in storytelling, and use of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service. These questions were developed by the authors after conducting a review of the
literature. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of nine questions regarding barriers to storytelling (e.g., television, homework for students, decision by family members to not continue the storytelling tradition). Respondents used a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 = not at all to 7 = large extent to answer the questions. The second part of the questionnaire asked participants to respond yes or no regarding personal participation in storytelling. Participants who answered yes to the question then proceeded to identify skills and values they learned through personal involvement in storytelling. A list of nine skills and values (e.g., bravery, honesty, listening) was provided for participants to select from. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of six questions on the use of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service (e.g., teaching method, communication technique, means to influence employees). Respondents used a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 = not at all to 7 = large extent to answer the questions. A final section of the questionnaire asked participants to provide demographic information.

An expert panel reviewed the data collection instrument for face and content validity. Several changes were made to the instrument based on the feedback of the expert panel. A packet of questionnaires was mailed to six Ghana agricultural extension personnel who coordinated data collection for each of the regional meetings. The extension personnel were provided with a script to read at the conclusion of the regional meeting that explained the purpose of the study and asked for volunteer participation. No attempt was made to seek participation of agricultural extension directors who did not attend the regional meetings.

Findings

A total of 102 Ghana agricultural extension directors completed questionnaires which represents a 94% response rate. As shown in Table 1, participants were 93.1% (f = 95) male and 6.9% (f = 7) female. The mean age of the agricultural extension directors was 50.5 (SD = 3.94) with a range from 39 to 59. Participants indicated they had been in their current extension position an average of 10.9 (SD = 9.51) years with a range of 1 to 33.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>39-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years held current extension position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.51</td>
<td>1-33</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The first objective of the study was to determine the barriers to storytelling being experienced by families in Ghana. As shown in Table 2, six of the nine items were classified by participants as being a barrier to a moderate extent. The barrier with the highest mean score was parents being too busy to tell stories (M = 5.03, SD = 1.89). Three items were classified as being a barrier to some extent, with Internet access having the lowest mean score (M = 2.59, SD = 1.94).
The second objective was to identify skills and values learned through personal involvement in storytelling by Ghana agricultural extension directors. Seventy-eight participants specified they had participated in storytelling while 14 denoted non-participation in storytelling. As shown in Table 3, four items were identified by over 90% of the participants as a skill and value they learned through personal involvement in storytelling: problem-solving (97.4%), honesty (96.2%), responsibility (94.9%), and listening (91.0%). Religious skills and values was the lowest rated item (59%) learned by Ghana agricultural extension directors by personal involvement in storytelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents too busy to tell stories</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling is not a high priority for families</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other leisure time priorities</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No effective storytelling role-models</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdated image of storytelling</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework for children</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision by family members to not continue storytelling tradition</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1 = Not at all, 3 = Some Extent, 5 = Moderate Extent, 7 = Large Extent

The third objective was to identify the uses of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service. The results are summarized in Table 4, and participants perceived that three uses of storytelling were being used to a moderate extent within the extension service: communication technique ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.96$), teaching method ($M = 4.83, SD = 2.05$), and bring about common understanding within the organization ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.95$). Three items were perceived to be used to some extent within the extension service and the lowest mean score was maintain organizational culture ($M = 3.86, SD = 2.06$).
Table 4

*Uses of Storytelling Within the Ghana Agricultural Extension Service*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication technique</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching method</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring about common understanding within the organization</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create organizational culture</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means to influence employees</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain organizational culture</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1 = Not at all, 3 = Some Extent, 5 = Moderate Extent, 7 = Large Extent

**Conclusions, Implications, and Application**

The purpose of this study was to explore the current status of storytelling in Ghana from the perspective of agricultural extension directors. Specifically, this study determined barriers to storytelling experienced by families, identified skills and values learned through storytelling, and identified uses of storytelling within the Ghana agricultural extension service. The authors recognize that Ghana and other countries in SSA face a number of development challenges. Formulating solutions to these development challenges will require effective leadership. Based on culture-fit theory and a conceptual model that recognizes storytelling as a connection point for leadership development in Ghana (Amenuemey & Greiman, 2009), it is important to gain an understanding of the current status of storytelling. This exploratory study was an attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

Barriers to storytelling in families are related to the changes taking place in SSA. The influences of the western culture as well as globalization of Ghana are having an impact on storytelling. This study supported previous studies (Anyidoho, 1989; Barongo, 1997) by finding that storytelling in families has challenges centered around leisure time priorities, image of storytelling, and technology. It appears that parents are too busy to tell stories and storytelling is not a priority for families. As a result, it is becoming difficult to find effective storytelling role-models and storytelling has an outdated image. Storytelling is competing with television for the leisure time of families. This study determined that the decision by family members to not continue the storytelling tradition was a barrier to some extent. Homework and Internet access were also determined to be a barrier to storytelling to some extent. It was concluded that the barriers to storytelling might be an indication that storytelling is becoming a dying tradition in the SSA culture.

From the findings of this study it was concluded that storytelling has a number of merits. A high number of Ghana agricultural extension directors learned skills and values by their personal involvement in storytelling. This study found that problem-solving, honesty, responsibility, listening, and respect received high marks from extension directors as being learned by their involvement in storytelling. This finding supports previous research (De Goot & Zwaal, 2007; Ishengoma, 2005) that identified the positive benefits of storytelling.

This study concluded that storytelling is used within the Ghana agricultural extension service. It is thus implied that the benefits of storytelling are being transferred to the workplace. Specifically, storytelling is used to a moderate extent as a communication technique, teaching method, and bringing about a common understanding within the organization. In addition, storytelling is used to some extent in creating organizational culture, influencing employees, and
maintaining organizational culture. These findings parallel previous research that found storytelling being used effectively within organizations (Foster, et al., 1999; Miller & Jack, 2007; Rhodes & Brown 2005; Schwabenland, 2006).

The current study reports the barriers, skills and values, and uses of storytelling in one of the SSA countries. Thus, readers are cautioned that the findings should only be generalized to the Ghana agricultural extension directors who participated in this study. Future studies involving storytelling and international extension should include other SSA countries to expand the generalizability of the results. Future studies should explore how storytelling might compliment educational programs for youth as well as professional development for adults in SSA.

References