

**PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
GHANA'S FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY IN THE WA MUNICIPALITY OF UPPER
WEST REGION, GHANA**

ID: GJDS-UBIDS-052511

Francis Nangbeviel Sanyare¹

Fsanyare@ubids.edu.gh

Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Integrated Development Studies,
Simon Diedong Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies¹

Ernest Malir Lagnang²

elagnang@st.ubids.edu.gh

Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Social Science and Arts
Simon Diedong Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies²

Doi//https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/gjds.v22i2.4

ABSTRACT

The McConnells' theory of policy success or failure provides a framework to investigate educational stakeholders' perspectives on the responsiveness of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) program relative to its stated programmatic objectives. The perspectives of twenty (20) purposively selected heads of public senior high schools, officers of the Ghana Education Service, and leaders of teacher unions in the Wa Municipality were explored. To collect data, a qualitative case study design was employed, utilising in-depth interviews. The data was subsequently analysed using interpretive content and thematic analysis. The study revealed that the programme eliminated financial barriers and increased enrolment, but it neglected equity and efficiency. The policy's implementation lacked stakeholder engagement and focused on access rather than quality education.

Keywords: Free Senior Secondary School, Policy Implementation, Programmatic goals, Wa Municipality, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Researchers perceive education as an essential means for developing human capital, reducing poverty, fostering social mobility, determining political participation, building democratic processes, and institutional excellence (Shuaibu, 2016). Hence, developing educational policies that enhance educational systems within developing country contexts has gained pride of place over time (Haddad & Demsky, 1995; Shirley, 2014). The responsibility to provide high-quality education for citizens rests with governments. In Finland, for instance, all children receive high-quality education from preschool through age 16 (Sahlberg, 2015). Afterwards, the government continues to subsidise education to ensure that finances do not deny anyone quality education. For several decades, Japan, among other countries, has offered tuition-free senior high school education to its citizens. According to Hori and Shimizutani (2018), immediate gains realised included increased enrolments in secondary schools. Following this, African nations— Seychelles, Mauritius, Uganda, Kenya, and most recently Ghana— have also made secondary education free (Essuman, 2012).

Different models to make education suitable and meet citizens' expectations have been tried by successive governments in Ghana since independence in 1957 (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016). For instance, Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE). The 1996 implementation of this policy aimed to narrow the enrolment differences between the prosperous and the deprived (Essuman, 2012). It was, however, limited to elementary and junior high schools (Nsia, 2018). This brought positive enrolment gains of 95% in primary and 85% in junior high school. However, according to the Ministry of Education (2017), entry in secondary schools remained low (45%) because of parents' incapacity to pay rather than a lack of demand (Kuyini, 2013; World Bank, 2010). According to a Ministry of Education (2017) report, roughly one million students terminated their education in junior high school because of their inability to pay (Ministry of Education, 2017). This likely prompted the 2017 implementation of the Free Senior High School Education program (Mohammed, 2020).

Educational policy implementation in Ghana has yielded different outcomes for different segments of the population. For instance, different outcomes are reported for urban vs. rural populations, wealthy vs. poor households, and Northern vs. Southern regions (Cooke, Hague & McKay, 2016). To clearly understand these outcomes, gaining a stakeholder perspective is paramount, at least for establishing accountability in education (Shadreck, & Hebert, 2013). Stakeholders are vital in ensuring high-quality instruction by improving the effectiveness and efficiency of procedures for eminence development (Brussels, 2011), improving the decision-making process (Ndiku, Simiyu, & Achoka, 2009), and upgrading the educational system (Kamba, 2010). Education policies have a momentous bearing on the design and execution process. According to Mensah and Badu-Shayar (2016), Stakeholders' involvement in policy implementation is crucial to ensure it meets expectations. Given that educated persons are more likely to participate in national development with higher-quality input (Rehkopf et al., 2017), the government of Ghana championed the principle of access, equity, and equality in senior high education to

relieve financial stress on the majority of parents, thereby enabling eligible Ghanaian children access to public (state-owned) SHSs. This strategy increased enrolment in public sector schools by some 33.2% and bolstered the postulation (Partey, 2017). Despite the importance of FSHS for national development, there is not enough empirical evidence that the implementation is aligned with the policymakers' intent and contextual implementation challenges. This study, therefore, investigated educational stakeholders' views of the responsiveness of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy to its stated programmatic objectives and the challenges to implementation.

Historical perspectives on free senior high school in Ghana

The basis for free secondary schooling is a constitutional mandate that all forms of secondary education be made not only available but also accessible to all without prejudice (Republic of Ghana, 1992). This provision of secondary education, accordingly, should be progressive and appropriate. In 2017, the government provided free tuition, admission, textbooks, and other resources to mitigate parental stress and support human resources development (Adu-Ababio & Osei, 2018). Free Senior High School implementation aligns with SDG Goal 4, ensuring free, equitable, and high-quality education for all children.

There are historical antecedents to the implementation of this policy. Earlier regimes sought to increase access and involvement in secondary education for children of Northern descent through initiatives such as the Cocoa Board and Hardship fellowships, and the Senior High School Subsidy. The Capitation Grant Scheme, piloted in the 2004/2005 academic year, enhanced the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme, which aimed to make basic education free by removing all imposed fees. A pilot scheme increased enrolment by 14.5% in 53 districts, but faced challenges like large class sizes, delayed funds, and inadequate resources.

The school feeding programme, a recent policy, encounters challenges such as inadequate government funding and payment delays, as underscored by Essuman and Bosumtwi-Sam (2013). Despite the Food and Agriculture Organisation's support, these issues raise concerns about the programme's sustainability, particularly in the context of global economic fluctuations. Sulemana et al. (2013) further emphasise that these challenges impede the programme's effective implementation, including delayed or irregular funding releases, delayed or no supplier payments, and occasional delays or non-payment of employee salaries.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Need for investment in senior high education

International conventions provide that all forms of secondary education should be largely accessible, appropriate, and readily available to all. To this end, Lewin (2011) argues that secondary education funding should be a topical issue in national policy planning, as investments in secondary schools enhance access, leading to a surge in children completing senior school. To realise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is imperative to promote equity in secondary education for all and

eliminate inequalities in access to secondary education. Generally, the growth of secondary schools in East Asia amounted to rapid economic development.

Lewin (2011) highlights the frequent oversight of secondary education in African policymaking, arguing that secondary education policies often stem from leftover programmes. To address this, Lewin contends that secondary education should receive equal funding and support as primary education. This is because cost-free, all-inclusive basic schools have significantly augmented the proportion of pupils finishing primary education. Lewin's argument is pertinent as Target 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasises that children should have access to free, equitable, high-quality primary and secondary education by 2030. This education should produce learning results that are both relevant and efficient. Eliminating inequalities in the educational system and promoting equality, including gender and physical location, is impossible without expanding senior high school participation.

Further to this, according to Bregman and Stallmeister (2002), the problems in increasing secondary education access in Africa stem from the continent's fragile economy, which has resulted in an extremely high average cost of education. To make secondary schooling in Africa widespread, accessible, inexpensive, and impartial, increased funding for secondary education and internal efficiency are required (Lewin and Calloids, 2001). It is believed that colonialism is responsible for the exorbitant expense of financing secondary school boarding systems in African nations. This legacy is not appropriate for the mass education being offered today, as it is significantly more expensive than starting and maintaining schools (World Bank, 2005). Similar claims were made by Akyeampong (2005) and Bennell et al. (2005) regarding Ghana and Zambia, where boarding school is significantly more expensive than day school.

Problems of executing free secondary education

Research shows that providing cost-free senior high education is hindered by several obstacles that negatively impact educational quality. Firstly, as reported by Adan and Orodho (2015), parents in Kenya became hesitant to pay additional school fees. Secondly, the growing student population puts a heavy burden on teaching staff, despite insufficient resources and staff. In other contexts, free secondary education has led to centralisation, resulting in a loss of local accountability for schools' development (Morojele, 2012).

Challenges include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient resources, untrained teachers, overcrowding, and limited services. Bregman and Stallmeister (2002) highlight that numerous African countries face difficulties in enlarging access to secondary schooling due to struggling economies and inadequate fiscal resources, restricting efforts to enhance equity and quality.

Ghana's Free High School (FSHS) policy, akin to those of Kenya, Lesotho, and Uganda, seeks to elevate secondary education quality and expand accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged children. Ghana's policy stands out as fully government-funded, in contrast to the others' FSHS, which receive partial funding. Despite these

distinctions, all three countries witnessed an increase in enrolment rates. However, they encountered challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, a scarcity of qualified educators, substantial class sizes, and a decline in educational standards.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

McConnell (2010a)'s theory of policy success or failure underpins the study. It enables a comprehension of the programme dimension of policy-making and implementation. Traditionally, policy success is judged by its delivery on promised programmatic goals (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020; McConnell, 2010a). According to literature (Bovens, Hart, & Peters, 2002; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003), programme dimension failure occurs when a policy fails to translate its ideas into facts through the triumphant conclusion of the policy process. McConnell (2010b), emphasized that, in addition to program failure, there are further factors that ought to be taken into consideration if failures must be prevented. The theory suggests that policies can fail in several ways. Firstly, they can fail substantively or technically, practically or when seen to fall short of expectations, which is common in programme failures. Secondly, policies can fail in the process sense, meaning they fail to complete the many stages through the policy-making process, from conception to implementation (Bovens, Hart, & Peters, 2002; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). However, from a process perspective, a policy is often deemed successful if it passes a broad and intricate clearance procedure before being created and implemented, regardless of its actual effectiveness or efficiency (Lindblom, 1959).

Howlett (2009) classified different kinds of process failures according to where they occurred in the process of formulating policy. These involve situations in which excessively ambitious administration engages on an excessive number of projects at the same time when creating the agenda and attempts to deal with wicked challenges without clearly understanding both the root cause and resolution to produce workable policy changes (Churchman, 1967).

Another scenario is during the adoption stage, when authorities engage in circuitous negotiations that impinge the cogency of policy needs (Anderson & Heywood, 2009) or formal scenes intended for consecutive or seriatim processes may bog down policies (Jones, 1994).

The other situations fall into the execution stage, where governments attempt to implement too many policies beyond their administrative power to produce results (Meier & Bohte, 2003), or at the evaluation stage, where they neglect to adequately assess the outcomes of their policies, failing to apply that information to future policy reforms (May, 1992).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach, firmly rooted in the interpretive paradigm. This approach permitted us to delve into the emotions and motivations of participants in the free senior high school program (Kothari, 2004). Given the study's focus on the Wa Municipality, the case study design proved highly appropriate. It facilitated an in-depth exploration and

description of stakeholders' perspectives on the programmatic objectives of the free SHS policy within the specific context of the Wa Municipality.

To select twenty key informants, an expert purposive sampling method was used. This involved selecting leaders or heads of the seven public senior high schools in Wa Municipality, two officers from the Ghana Education Service, two Heads of Public Schools, the Free SHS officer at the MOE, a representative each of the teacher associations (GNAT and NAGRAT). Some of these participants shared perspectives that mirrored the views of parents, as they are parents or guardians of students enrolled in the senior high schools. The selection of this approach was predicated on the expertise of the representative stakeholders, who possess extensive knowledge and experience and are deeply immersed in the execution of the free SHS (Morra Imas & Rist, 2009).

An interview guide guided the conduct of the in-person, in-depth interviews. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. These interviews were complemented by desk studies of documents sourced from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ghana Education Service (GES). Subsequently, both researchers took turns subjecting the data to interpretive content and thematic analysis (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Through this iterative process, we were able to code and categorise the data into patterns that aligned with the study's objectives (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The study had ethical approvals from the SDD University of Business and Integrated Development Studies Research Ethics Review Board (RERB). The board reviewed the participants' recruitment procedures, consent documents detailing the engagement process and their rights, and the interview guides were reviewed and approved before the commencement of data collection.

DATA ANALYSIS

Changing perspectives on free SHS policy implementation

While the major political parties (actors) agree on the need for Free SHS, they differ in implementation strategies. For instance, NDC's Approach to Free SHS between 2012-2016, focused on infrastructure development, including increased funding for public schools and building of new SHSs, particularly in marginalised zones. The strategy was to improve educational access and standards by progressively reducing the financial burden on parents. As a participant suggests:

"Yes, it is indeed true, and you can find it included in their manifesto.... they planned to implement it gradually, and it would be feasible in 2020" (a 39-year-old male at the implementing Agency, 2022).

The strategy became obvious in the 2014 State of the Nation Address, where the president noted that *"Fees for everyday students will be abolished starting the 2015/2016 academic year, costing an estimated GH 71 million"* (SONA 2014).

The government allocated funds in the 2015/2016 academic year to cater to various expenses for 320,488-day students, including examinations, extracurricular activities,

and curriculum. This initiative has led to a surge in the student number enrolled in secondary schools. However, over 140,000 students were unable to be placed or enrolled due to financial constraints.

Conversely, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), in 2027, implemented a comprehensive approach to a universal Free Secondary School Health (FSHS) Program, expanding covered costs to include boarding, food, textbooks, libraries, science centres, computers, examinations, and utilities.

Success and effectiveness of implementation of FSHS policy

Educational stakeholders report that First-year students benefited from the policy covering initial start-up costs and providing comprehensive financial support, including regular fees and meal costs for all students regardless of boarding status. The government also replaced Parent Teacher Association dues with GHS 20 per student annually to fund teacher incentives (Prempeh, 2018; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

“The policy has been impactful by removing the cost on many parents... enrolment has increased because of the implementation of the policy. ... parents are free from the weight of the educational expenses; this has created universal access to education” (37-year-old, female, Assistant Headmaster, 2022)

“The policy has created the space for access to education, as of now, if not for the policy, many brighter children would have completed JHS as their final stage of education due to financial issues. [...] but for now, they have access to education, which they are proud of, and this is a great achievement of the policy” (54-year-old, male, Headmaster 2022)

Table 1 displays enrolment information of selected Senior High Schools in the Wa municipality from 2017 to 2021

SCHOOL	YEAR OF ENROLLMENT				
	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020	2021
WA SHS	390	415	439	617	942
WA SHS/TEC	536	722	550	543	418
WA ISLAMIC SHS	314	370	411	420	461
NORTHERN STAR SHS	—	160	186	151	194
ISLAMIC GIRLS SHS	197	211	247	232	276
T.I AMASS SHS	231	258	264	266	281

WA TEC. INSTITUTE	410	596	685	707	960
-------------------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

Source: field data survey (2022)

The data in Table 1 support the view of participants that the program aided in expanding entry. However, despite increases in enrolment, *“... the infrastructure is not adequate for us to enrol such numbers, ... but because of the policy, we are given a quota to enrol, whether the facilities are adequate or not. But we request the number we can admit, but the system would place student numbers more than we requested, and can contain”* (46-year-old, male, Assistant Headmaster, 2022)

This starkly contrasts with those who proclaim the policy a resounding success; however, high incidences of poverty and limited space, among other factors, have also adversely affected the policy's efficacy. Despite the surge in enrolment, public senior high schools face challenges due to their constrained classroom capacity, which varies across regions (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). This implies that the execution of the free SHS program has exerted significant stress on existing infrastructure, resulting in a diminished student space.

“The policy allows all BECE exam passers to enrol, increasing enrolment annually despite limited teaching space and student accommodation.” (50-year-old, male, Headmaster, 2022).

“Infrastructure is one of the most critical shortfalls we admit, so a careful intervention by the government is to expand the various schools' infrastructure to meet the demand” (44-year-old male at implementing Agency, 2022).

The quality of education can be adversely affected by inadequate educational resources, such as limited access to textbooks and a teacher-student ratio deficit. These factors are considered by the MOE and the General Education Secretariat (GES) when evaluating the quality of education. In contrast, we observed a discrepancy in the student-teacher ratio at the Secondary School High (SHS) level, as the GES benchmark suggests a ratio of 25:1, while our findings indicated the contrary.

“This school is a category (B) school; therefore, we need more professional teaching staff to ease the pressure on the existing ones. Some of the teachers are relocated to different schools based on their constant demand, as they leave, we expect a new posting” (42-years- old, Assistant Headmaster, 2022)

“Some subject area teachers are overstaffed while other areas are lacking, so teachers are forced to teach other subjects, which is not their subject area” (39-year-old, female, Vice Principal, 2022).

Secondary data supports the primary evidence. The Student Teacher Ratio remained at 20:1 in 2016, but increased to 26:1 in 2017, 32:1 in 2018, and peaked at 43:1 in

2019, significantly higher than the GES norm and the country's average of 35:1 (Mohammed 2020, Ministry of Education, 2018).

The textbook-to-student ratio declined during the 2011/2012 academic year, especially in science, compared to English and mathematics. In 2011/2012, English had 0.74 textbooks per student, science had 0.68, and mathematics had 0.75. These numbers dropped to 0.51, 0.50, and 0.44 in 2015/2016, and are expected to average 0.33 (Ministry of Education, 2018). Another issue is the hold-up in producing and distributing textbooks for the authorised new curriculum across levels.

In the beginning, we couldn't receive the necessary logistics on time... textbooks were not supplied long after the policy had already been implemented... The government needs to keep providing them because each year, new students arrive (46-year-old male Asst Headmaster, 2022).

In response to the rising enrolment, several critical issues must be addressed. Firstly, adequate textbooks are essential. Secondly, additional teachers must be hired or trained to meet the growing demand. Lastly, classroom space must be increased to accommodate the expanding student body.

However, there has been a tendency to prioritise unrestricted access to information over content standards and outcome effectiveness. This approach has hindered necessary curriculum modifications to ensure students acquire the necessary information and skills for personal and societal development.

Experience of policy efficiency of FSHS

The analysis revealed that the program exhibited ineffectiveness for several factors. The policy commences by adopting a uniform approach, disregarding the financial disparities between people with financial means to support their ward's secondary education and those who face financial constraints (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

"The policy is implemented wholesale; for every Ghanaian benefiting from the policy, the implementation does not make room for those parents who can afford to provide for their children's fees to do so ..." (52-year-old male, Union leader, 2022).

There are no adequate logistics needed to oversee the operations of the schools because it is the government that provides everything, with no support from anywhere. If people who can pay are allowed to do so, this would lessen the pressure on the state finances and curtail some aspects of the policy needs. Each year, admission increases, leading to serious demand for infrastructure, among others (37-year-old, female, Assistant Headmaster, 2022).

Despite admission, some students decline to enrol. The Ministry of Education acknowledges a substantial dropout rate, with over 25% of students assigned to Secondary High Schools (SHS) through the CSSPS failing to enrol (Ministry of Education, 2018). This situation is wasteful, as resources were allocated to constructing learning environments. However, enrolment challenges indicate that class sizes in certain regions may not be optimal for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes.

Stakeholders' experiences of the program adequacy

Adequacy is a measure of the extent to which efficacy meets the necessities, standards, or chances that give rise to an issue. The Free SHS Policy is insufficient, as many students still lack the financial means to attend SHS (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). The unsuccessful applicants who were denied admission after the policy's implementation were impoverished students, which aligns with the major aim of the Free SHS program, as elucidated by participants. They clarified that a significant factor contributing to access denial was the limited capacity of the institution. Consequently, the authority was obliged to implement the double-track method.

"To address the space issue, it's not just about temporarily placing some students in school while others stay home. Consider community day schools where these young students are placed away from their regions. They walk to school, especially for night studies, putting their safety at risk due to a poor placement system and accommodation challenges." (42-year-old, Male, Assistant Headmaster, 2022).

"Parents and guardians who have children placed outside their home districts and regions often decline the offer of admission. This prevents their children from attending secondary education due to the additional costs involved in transporting them to distant locations. This defeats the purpose of the Free SHS policy, which aimed to make SHS education accessible to all." (54-year-old male Headmaster, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the inadequacy of education is the high cost, which limits participation. Ghana's 2014 Demographic and Health Survey showed that 96% of 15–18-year-old city children enter primary school, but only 16% make it to senior secondary high school. This disparity continues, with rural areas, destitute districts, and the bottom quintile having five to six times fewer people. Low-income households may not rely solely on free secondary school, missing opportunities for the poorest pupils. Economic factors, like the social cost of schooling and lack of income support, influence whether children attend secondary school.

In some cases, the kids are the family's sole source of income, working daily jobs like farming, pottery, or dishwashing. Field observation reveals that impoverished parents view child nonwork, such as education, as a high-end item they cannot afford to avoid 'productive' activities. These results suggest that extra cost factors or family financial restrictions limit the ability to fully take advantage of the Free SHS option and limit attainment of sufficiency. To achieve the adequacy goal of a Free

SHS Policy, additional welfare help must be provided to low-income families (cash or in-kind support) (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

Policy equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness

Dunn (2015) defines equity as the allocation of effects and efforts across social groups, which is closely linked to legal and social rationality. However, it remains unclear whether the FSHS policy ensured social justice, provided equal treatment to students, or prioritised the redistribution of educational resources within the municipality.

Most students live in boarding houses, while others are day students. This suggests that the students have different levels of access to resources. Boarding students have access to all the resources available in the school thereby reducing their burden of walking to the school for those facilities, and can learn together, and have teachers nearby. However, they all sit in the same class (40-year-old, male, educational Administrator, 2022).

There's a big gap in infrastructure between schools in the municipality. Most schools that teach pure science lack the quality labs needed for physics, chemistry, and biology, while other metropolitan schools have access to these resources. This means rural schools have few options for students to choose from based on their skills and interests" (47-year-old male, Union leader, 2022).

The Free SHS policy appears to have exacerbated existing inequalities, affecting access and utilisation of educational resources and infrastructure. MOE (2018) reports that fewer women (20%) are eligible for higher education in contrast to men (26%). WASSCE results show that only a small percentage of senior high schools are primary feeder institutions for higher education, while the remaining schools account for over 90% of admission failures (World Bank, 2017). Textbook-to-student ratios vary considerably between regions, with the Central and Western regions having the highest rates and the Northern regions having lower rates. For example, in the Western region in the 2016/2017 academic year, the English textbooks per student were about 0.75, compared to only 0.23 in the Upper West region (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Based on these findings, the Free SHS program fails the responsiveness test. As Dunn (2015) suggests, a responsive policy should meet the demands, interests, or values of specific groups. However, the execution of the program has not been effectual, as students who would most benefit from FSHS are not receiving it. Differences in infrastructure, amenities, and the accessibility of instructors and support staff exist between urban and rural locations.

Several factors contribute to the policy's responsiveness. Most low-income students accept offers to study outside their home districts but decline them due to distance, lack of sleeping space options, or lack of courses tailored to their career goals (49-year-old, male Headmaster, 2022)

Field observations contradict the educational minister's views, as the policy does not address the underprivileged, and many students still fail to enrol. Ministers argue that before the policy, 1,111,336 students could not afford secondary education due to financial issues, but after implementation, this number has greatly diminished to 62,453, suggesting the program is effective (Prempeh, 2018).

Dun (2012) states that a program's objectives and assumptions should be appropriate when they are valuable. The policy aims to make education available to all, develop human capital, prepare young individuals for lifelong learning and growth, and addressed Ghana's educational expectations. These aims are crucial as an uneducated youth is costly to society (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

It leads to an illiterate and moderately productive labour force, lower adult salaries, poor health, and a complacent populace (Satz, 2003). Enrolling all qualified children in SHS education is a wise strategy.

"The fact is that without dependable financial sources, the policy's viability will be in jeopardy. The initiative dependence on the state oil support makes it unsustainable if the oil field dry out. Alternative financial options, which are exceedingly scarce, must be looked for in the strategy to continue" (40-year-old male, implementing Agency, 2022).

"Money or finances are a threat to the policy sustainability; this is so because the possibility that there won't be enough money in the future to support the policy is worrisome, because every cedi spent on it means that cedi is not available for another policy or program. This is because sunk costs would have made up the majority of the money previously incurred on the policy in the past" (52-year-old male Vice Principal, 2022).

The challenges of the Free SHS Programme and the option for improvement

Under this theme, four sub-themes are identified. These include sustainable funding, logistics, and infrastructural challenges; adequacy of teaching and learning material; and delays in grant transfer.

Sustainable funding, logistics, and infrastructural challenges

Ghana's Free SHS policy implementation has faced challenges due to financial constraints and inadequate infrastructure. A study found that amenities like classroom buildings, dormitories, furniture, computers, transportation, and other accessories are critical for the successful execution of FSHS program (Bonsu, 2019; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

"Because the FSHS policy covers all, including school uniforms, clothes, free books, free books, among others, the state provides these things, but not in required numbers, the situation makes school operation difficult in terms of finance" (51-year-old, male, Assistant Headmaster, 2022).

The quantity, quality, and distribution of resources allocated are crucial to the successful implementation of a policy (Würzburg, 2010). The challenge lies not in

resource availability but in their effective use for the intended purpose (Schleicher, 2016).

Participants identified poor infrastructure at senior high schools as the main obstacle to the FSHS program's success. The municipality's senior high schools face infrastructure deficits, making it difficult to accommodate the growing student enrolment. Teachers highlighted overcrowding in classrooms, dormitories, dining halls, libraries, and laboratories due to the lack of infrastructure.

"Because of increased enrolment, there is overcrowding in some classrooms ... which affects effective monitoring" (54-year-old, male, Headmaster, 2022).

This view is supported by a school leader who intimated that: *"...the increased enrolment coupled with limited facilities has resulted in the lack of space and consequent pressure on the boarding facilities"* (39-year-old female Vice Principal, 2022).

Optimal teacher-student ratios result in the quality of teaching and increased student achievement, according to Ankomah and others (2005). The theory is that good infrastructure is crucial to providing students with a high-quality education. In effect, the FSHS program's aims are unattainable without an analogous increase in school infrastructure.

Insufficient supply of educational materials

The survey highlighted the lack of suitable teaching and learning resources as a major challenge for senior high schools in the Wa municipality. Participants emphasised the dearth of instructional and learning materials, which significantly hinders teaching and learning activities in the local schools.

"There are no sufficient instructional materials available from the start program. However, sufficient instructional resources encourage and facilitate the attainment of high-quality education" (46-year-old, male, Assistant Headmaster, 2022).

Delay payment of grants

Teachers bemoaned the government's delay in disbursing educational grants, which enable schools to function properly. As a participant notes: *"The government frequently delays fund allocation to the various schools, which puts tremendous pressure on heads of SHS to get the schools to operate successfully"*. Aside from this, we found that, eventually, when given, these government grants were insufficient, greatly impacting how well the schools could run programs. According to the Ministry of Education (2018), the payments of capitation grants for the FSHS are not timely, and the planning and timely delivery of educational services.

"We postpone the start of the academic year by an average of two weeks due to the late release of educational resources. Instructors receive their pay as usual despite having no valid role in the semester's late commencement" (39-year-old female Vice Principal, 2022).

Stakeholder participation

Scholars emphasise the importance of stakeholder involvement in education policy making and implementation (Yaro, Arshad, & Salleh, 2016; Yaro, Arshad, & Salleh, 2017). However, there were differing opinions on whether stakeholder participation was ensured throughout the FSHS policy process. Some suggested that consultation workshops involved them, while others claimed they were not involved. It seems that stakeholder participation was largely a matter of appeasing stakeholders (Danquah, Analoui, & Koomson, 2018; Agomor, 2023).

“The consultation process was frequently politicized and poorly represented” (37-year-old female Asst Headmaster, 2022).

“Stakeholders’ engagement was not properly represented before the implementation of the policy” (45-year-old, male, Union leader, 2022).

Options to improve implementation of FSHS policy

Post-implementation assessment, the final phase of the policy process, evaluates the policy’s effectiveness (Hudson et al., 2019). During this review, gaps may be identified, leading to questions about policy deficiencies (Cerna, 2013; Cairney, 2016). Analysing these responses rationally and factually determines the appropriate action and justifies decisions on whether to prolong, curtail, or terminate an initiative (Hudson et al., 2019).

“Reviewing the policy is a better option. Engaging all relevant stakeholders will reveal issues and solutions. We’ll discover what works and what doesn’t. However, the policy was implemented hastily, so we need to re-engage it for broader consultation to improve it” (42-year-old Asst Headmaster, 2022).

“The policy needs broader stakeholder engagement to identify gaps. To improve performance, a cutoff grade should be introduced, ensuring only serious students enrol. Additionally, some fee components, such as uniforms and textbooks, should be provided to parents” (52-year-old male Vice Principal, 2022).

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The Free SHS policy in Ghana, while increasing enrolment, faces challenges in resource allocation, implementation, and equity. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and limited stakeholder participation hinder its effectiveness in providing quality education.

We explored stakeholders’ experiences with the FSHS policy regarding its effectiveness and challenges. The free SHS policy removed financial barriers to education, and the government’s promise to eliminate related costs may have been achieved, leading to increased enrolment. However, policy implementation may not be effective. After six years, other policy objectives like equity, quality, infrastructure development, and human and skill development are lacking.

McConnell's (2010a) perspective suggests the FSHS policy failed because it only increased access and enrolment. Literature emphasises that successful policy implementation requires equal attention to all dimensions. Challenges in implementing the FSHS policy include insufficient infrastructure to match increased access and enrolment, which puts pressure on limited school resources. This issue is not unique to Ghana but is common in developing countries where the FSHS policy has been implemented, as Kalunda & Otanga (2015) and Morojole (2012) noted. The implementation of the policy may not have followed political settlement processes, lacked stakeholder engagement, and ignored implementers' views. Bonsu (2019) highlighted the importance of the educational stakeholders' perspective in implementing educational system programs.

CONCLUSION

To improve the policy, a continuous review of its implementation should be conducted to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, reintroducing cut-off grade points for secondary school entry will help raise the standard and performance of students who are ready for the next level of education. This will ensure the policy's appropriateness and effectiveness, rather than relying on a universal formula that assumes any result is qualified.

We find that schools lack accessibility due to financial barriers to quality education. In the rush to implement the FSHS policy, quality education was neglected because of a limited focus on strengthening teacher-student support, altering instruction delivery, infrastructure upgrades, and curricular achievement results. Equity issues like physical and infrastructural disparities, teaching workforce capacity, facilities, and developing expertise and skills for individual and societal advancement were also ignored. The FSHS policy aligns with policy requirements and achieves its objectives of fostering human resource development and providing an inclusive SHS education, transforming young people into accountable individuals.

However, the efficiency component is more complex, with some parts realised while others need legislative and practical refinement. Some students lack access despite being qualified due to policy execution weaknesses, uneconomical use of school resources, inadequate resource release, and coexisting vacant space and qualified teachers in private second-cycle schools, amidst insufficient infrastructure in state schools.

REFERENCES

- Adan, M. A., & Orodho, J. A. (2015). Constraints of Implementing Free Secondary Education in Mandera West Sub-County, Mandera County, Kenya. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(9), 102-111.
- Adu-Ababio, K., & Osei, R. D. (2018). *Effects of an education reform on household poverty and inequality: A microsimulation analysis on the free Senior High School policy in Ghana* (No. 2018/147). WIDER Working Paper.
- Adu-Gyamfi, S., Donkoh, W. J., & Addo, A. A. (2016). Educational reforms in Ghana: Past and present. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 5(3), 158-172.
- Agomor, K. S. (2023). An Analysis of Public Participation in Policymaking Processes. In *Public Policy in Ghana: Conceptual and Practical Insights* (pp. 283-304). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Akyeampong, K. (2005). Cost and finance of secondary education in Ghana: A situational analysis. Commissioned report for the Financing of Secondary Education in Africa research project (FINSEC) based at the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, for the Secondary Education Initiative in Africa programme of the World Bank.
- Ampratwum, E., & Armah-Attoh, D. (2010). Tracking capitation grant in public primary schools in Ghana. *Ghana Center for Democratic Development. Briefing Paper*, 10(1), 1-8.
- Anderson, S., & Heywood, P. M. (2009). The politics of perception: Use and abuse of Transparency International's approach to measuring corruption. *Political Studies*, 57(4), 746-767.
- Ankomah, Y., Koomson, J., Bosu, R., & Oduro, G. K. (2005). Implementing quality education in low-income countries. University of Cape Coast, Ghana.
- Bennell, P., Bulwani, G., & Musikanga, M. (2005). Costs and financing of secondary education in Zambia: A situational analysis. Commissioned report for the Financing of Secondary Education in Africa research project (FINSEC) based at the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, for the Secondary Education Initiative in Africa programme of the World Bank.
- Biggerstaff, D., & Thompson, A. R. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A qualitative methodology of choice in healthcare research. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 5(3), 214-224.
- Bonsu, A. (2019). *Examining the Politics of Social Policy Implementation: A Case of Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Ghana).
- Bovens, M. A., T'Hart, P., & Peters, B. G. (Eds.). (2002). *Success and failure in public governance: A comparative analysis*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Brändström, A., & Kuipers, S. (2003). From 'normal incidents' to political crises: Understanding the selective politicization of policy failures. *Government and opposition*, 38(3), 279-305.
- Bregman, J., & Stallmeister, S. (2002). *Secondary education in Africa (SEIA): A regional study of the Africa region of the World Bank* (No. 34311, pp. 1-16). The World Bank.

- Brussels, M. D. (2011). *Report of the Conference of the European Network on Education Councils (EUNEC) on participation and stakeholder involvement in education policy making*.
- Cairney, P. (2016). *The politics of evidence-based policy making*. Springer.
- Cerna, L. (2013). The nature of policy change and implementation: A review of different theoretical approaches. *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report*, 492-502.
- Churchman, B. (1967). Wicked problems. *Management Science*, 14(4), B141–2.
- Cooke, E., Hague, S., & McKay, A. (2016). The Ghana poverty and inequality report: Using the 6th Ghana living standards survey. *University of Sussex*, 1-43.
- Danquah, J. K., Analoui, F., & Koomson, Y. E. D. (2018). An evaluation of donor agencies' policies on participatory development: The case of Ghana. *Development Policy Review*, 36, O138-O158.
- Dunn, W. N. (2015). *Public policy analysis*. Routledge.
- Essuman, A. (2012). The challenge of fee-free secondary education and educational access in Ghana: A reflection on the past, realities, and feasible choices. In *EDULEARN12 Proceedings* (pp. 4811-4811). IATED.
- Essuman, A., & Bosumtwi-Sam, C. (2013). School feeding and educational access in rural Ghana: Is poor targeting and delivery limiting impact? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(3), 253-262.
- Haddad, W. D., & Demsky, T. (1995). *Education policy-planning process: an applied framework* (pp. 94-pp).
- Hori, M., & Shimizutani, S. (2018). The incidence of the tuition-free high school program in Japan. *Education Economics*, 26(1), 93-108.
- Howlett, M. (2009). Policy analytical capacity and evidence-based policy-making: Lessons from Canada. *Canadian Public Administration*, 52(2), 153–175.
- Hudson, B., Hunter, D., & Peckham, S. (2019). Policy failure and the policy-implementation gap: Can policy support programs help? *Policy Design and Practice*, 2 (1), 1–14.
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2008). *Educational Research: Qualitative and Mixed Approaches* (3rd Ed.), Los Angeles.
- Jones, B. D. (1994). *Re-conceiving decision-making in democratic politics: Attention, choice and public policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kalunda, L. M., & Otanga, H. (2015). Challenges in the provision of free primary education in public primary schools in Mombasa County, Kenya. *International Journal of humanities, social sciences and education*, 2, 62-72.
- Kamba, K. (2010). Education development in Southern Sudan: A study of community participation and democratic leadership in two primary schools in Central Equatorial State, Southern Sudan. *Oslo University College: Faculty of Education and International Studies*.
- Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research methodology: Methods and techniques*. New Age International.
- Kuyini, A. B. (2013). Ghana's education reform 2007: A realistic proposition or a crisis of vision? *International Review of Education*, 59, 157-176.
- Lewin, K., & Calloids, F. (2001). *Financing secondary education in developing countries: strategies for sustainable growth*. Paris: IIEP-UNESCO.

- Lewin, K. M. (2011). Expanding access to secondary education: Can India catch up?. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(4), 382-393.
- Lindblom, C. F. (1959). The science of muddling through. *Public Administration Review*, 19(2) 79–88.
- May, P. J. (1992). Policy learning and failure. *Journal of Public Policy*, 12(4), 331-354.
- McConnell, A. (2010a). Policy success, policy failure, and grey areas in-between. *Journal of Public Policy*, 30(3), 345-362.
- McConnell, A. (2010b). *Understanding policy success: Rethinking public policy*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Mensah, F. A., & Badu-Shayar, J. (2016). Identification of special educational needs for early childhood inclusive education in Ghana. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(11), 1-8.
- Meier, K. J., & Bohte, J. (2003). Not with a bang, but a whimper: Explaining organizational failure. *Administration & Society*, 35(1), 104–121.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2016). The Education Ministry sympathizes with the authorities and students. Access on: 05/011/2018, from: <http://moe.gov.gh/index.php/education-ministrysympathizes-with-authoritie>
- Ministry of Education, Science and Sports (MoESS), (2008). Education Sector Performance Report 2008, Accra: MoESS
- Ministry of Education. (2006). Ghana education service: Education management information system. Schools Annual Census, 1–15. Accra: MoE.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). Republic of Ghana ministry of education sector performance report.
- Mohammed, A. K. (2014). Tourism development policy versus practice in Ghana: The case of Lake Bosomtwe Basin. *European Scientific Journal*, 10(7).
- Mohammed, A. K. (2020). Does the policy cycle reflect the policymaking approach in Ghana?. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(3), e2078.
- Mohammed, A. K., & Kuyini, A. B. (2021). An evaluation of the free senior high school policy in Ghana. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(2), 143-172.
- Morojele, P. (2012). Implementing free primary education in Lesotho: Issues and challenges. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 32(1), 37-45.
- Morra Imas, L. G., & Rist, R. C. (2009). *The road to results: Designing and conducting effective development evaluations*. World Bank Publications.
- Ndiku, J., Simiyu, A., & Achoka, S. K. (2009). Improving decision-making in schools through teacher participation. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 4(8), 391.
- Nsia, D. (2018). Free education in Ghana: Advantages and disadvantages. Retrieved from <https://yen.com.gh/108674-free-education-ghana-advantages-disadvantages>
- Partey, P. A. (2017). Access, equity, quality of free SHS: Farce or reality? Retrieved September 12, 2022. www.academia.edu/34838681/ "http://www.academia.edu/34838681/ Access Equity Quality of Free SHS Farce"
- Prempeh, M. (2018). Implementation of the free SHS programme and the double-track system.
- Rehkopf, D. H., Adler, N. E., & Rowe, J. W. (2017). The impact of health and education on future labour force participation among individuals aged 55–74

- in the United States of America: the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society. *Ageing & Society*, 37(7), 1313-1337.
- Republic of Ghana. (1992). *The Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*, Assembly Press, Accra: Ghana
- Sahlberg, P. (2014). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*. Teachers College Press.
- Satz, D. (2003). Child labor: A normative perspective. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 17(2), 297-309.
- Schleicher, A. (2016). What can governments do to implement education policies effectively? *Teaching excellence through professional learning and policy reform: Lessons from around the world*.
- Shadreck, M., & Hebert, C. (2013). Quality And Accountability in Education: What Say The School Heads?. *Educational Research International*, 2(2), 165-73.
- Shirley, B. M. (2014). The Asian tigers from independence to industrialisation. *Victoria University of Wellington, E-International Relations Students*.
- Shuaibu, M. (2016). Determinants of human capital development in Africa: A panel data analysis. *Oeconomia Copernicana*, 7(4), 523-549.
- Sulemana, M., Ngah, I., & Majid, M. R. (2013). The challenges and prospects of the school feeding programme in Northern Ghana. *Development in Practice*, 23(3), 422-432.
- World Bank. (2005). Expanding opportunities and building competencies for young people: A New Agenda for secondary education. Washington: Author.
- World Bank. (2010). Education in Ghana: Improving equity, efficiency, and accountability of education service delivery. *World Bank*, 1-206.
- World Bank. (2017). International Development Association project paper on a proposed additional financing credit and restructuring in the amount of SDR 28.9 million (US\$40 million equivalent) to the Republic of Ghana for the secondary education improvement project. Author.
- Würzburg, G. (2010). Making reform happen in education. OECD. Paris, 159-181.
- Yaro, I., Arshad, R., & Salleh, D. (2016). Education stakeholders' constraints in policy decisions for effective policy implementation in Nigeria. *British Journal of education, society & Behavioural science*, 14(1), 1-12.
- Yaro, I., Arshad, R., & Salleh, D. (2017). Relevance of stakeholders in policy implementation. *Journal of Public Management Research*, 3(1), 25-2.

Author Representations

I confirm that I have reviewed and complied with the relevant Instructions to Authors, Ethical Approval, Declarations of Interest, Informed Consent noted below

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

There are no human participants in this article and informed consent is not applicable.

Correspondence and requests

Francis Nangbeviel Sanyare¹

Fsanyare@ubids.edu.gh

Publisher's note: The University remains neutral to authors' published articles.