

FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY: IMPLICATIONS TO EDUCATION ACCESS EQUITY IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Equity in education is when every student receives the resources needed to acquire the basic work skills of reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. While Ghana has achieved near universal access to primary and lower secondary education, the gross enrollment rate in higher secondary education was below 45 percent in 2014, with large disparities in access. In the year 2017, the government of Ghana implemented a free SHS policy on a free access to secondary education for all. This research sought to investigate the implications of the free senior high school policy to educational access and equity in secondary education in Ghana. The document analysis approach was adopted for this study. The findings revealed that the free SHS policy has really increased enrollment figures in secondary schools' attendance. The researcher recommended that parents, teachers, school administrators, policy analysts and relevant stakeholders have the responsibility to offer alternative proposals and do so in a manner that is constructive and helpful to the policy discourse.*

KEYWORDS: Access, education, enrolment, equality, equity, free senior high school, quality

INTRODUCTION

Equity in education is when every student receives the resources needed to acquire the basic work skills of reading, writing, and simple arithmetic. It measures educational success in society by its outcome, not the resources poured into it, and speeds up economic growth. Educational inequity slows economic growth of every country (Amadeo & Boyle, 2021). The overall goal of the Ministry of Education is to provide quality education for all Ghanaians, including the underprivileged to enable them acquire relevant skills which will make them functionally productive (Mensah, 2020). The sure way to fight poverty in the country is through education (Ghanaian Times, Monday, August 2, 2021 pg. 16). For years, equity of access in education has referred to the ability of all students to receive an education from qualified teachers in buildings that are safe and conducive to learning in a district with sufficient resources that are reasonably equal among other schools in the same state (SETDA, 2021). According to Fynn, Kwegyiriba & Mensah (2021), there are auditory learners, visual learners, kinesthetic learners and tactile learners. They seemed to admit that considering the diverse ways of assimilating knowledge, the activities they engage in will certainly differ. That notwithstanding, there should be access, equity and quality in education at all levels.

The proliferation of private second cycle institutions and the establishment of satellite campuses of most private secondary schools in the urban centers of Ghana have led to the struggle for students at the expense of quality (Kwegyiriba, Agyepong & Mensah, 2021). Access to education is the equal opportunity for individual to participate in education irrespective of location, gender and status (UNESCO, 2017). UNESCO Institute of Statistics defines access to be by analysing input indicators such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), percentage of new Grade 1 intake with preschool (ECCE) intake, Net Intake Rate (NIR), Gross Percentage of Girls Enrolment, public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP among others (Sustainable Development Goal, n.d). While Ghana has achieved near universal access to primary and lower secondary education, the gross enrollment rate in higher secondary education was below 45 percent in 2014, with large gender and regional disparities in access. The poorest students from the most deprived districts, or from rural areas, were five to six times less likely to access secondary education. Increasing completion rates at the basic education level had led to increased demand for secondary education but supply had not kept pace (The World Bank, 2021).

Ghana's 2021 budget sort to restore the economy to growth following the trauma of a global pandemic that upended economies around the world, including Ghana. It also sought to consolidate the many policy gains in Education, especially the free senior high school policy. (MoF, 2021). In the education sector, the government's policy intentions appear consistent with the aims set out in the 2018-30 Education Strategic Plan (ESP), which serves as a technical document by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2018). The ESP 2018–2030 lays out Ghana's vision and goals for the education sector up to 2030, as well as detailed strategies for how these goals will be achieved. The document presents evidence-based priorities and policies formulated after wide-ranging consultations, ensuring that most education stakeholders in Ghana are in agreement on the need for the delivery of equity access in education to the nation. The ESP provides a clear roadmap for delivery, in which all actors can see where their responsibilities and contributions in relation to accountability and achievement of the vision as according to the Ghana's Ministry of Education in the year 2018. The ESP aims to boost access and equity, improve quality, increase relevance, improve efficiency and effectiveness and ensure sustainability. These are in turn linked to the overarching national objectives to meet the Sustainable Development Goals espoused by the United Nations in 2015 (UNDP, 2015). When the free senior high school (SHS) policy took off in September 2017, many Ghanaians were optimistic of the policy on account of its manifest advantages to the nation's developmental trajectory.

Problem Statement

According to Babah, Mensah, Frimpong, Ofori, Mensah and Ewusi (2020), before the introduction of free SHS, heads of very good and endowed schools capriciously and independently set high personal cut- off grade points and admission standards to attract only the exceptionally good and talented students to the detriment of the less brilliant and rural setting students. Some parents have to travel from far places just to secure placement in a school for their wards. In other instances too some wards secure placement to secondary schools but due to financial challenges in payment of school fees, their wards are unable to access secondary school education. This in away limits access to the average Ghanaian child in terms of equity to access secondary school to improve the human capital development of the nation. In view of all these challenges associated with the access to

secondary education, the government of Ghana in the year 2017 implemented a free SHS policy on a free access to secondary education for all. The policy intention was to offer equity to any Ghanaian living everywhere in Ghana the opportunity to access second cycle Education irrespective of the family's financial status. The commitment to education, was through on its ginormous ambitions with spending to match and ensuring the effective implementation of its plans. In 2017, for example, the government spent GHc 10.5 billion on education, over a billion more than the GHc 9.08 billion that was spent in 2016 (Armah, 2021). The increases in spending have continued with GHc 12.7 billion in 2018; GHc 13.3 billion in 2019; and GHc 14.7 billion in 2020. The 2021 budget, has committed to a further increase in education sector expenditure, projecting to apply GHc 15.6 billion on the education this fiscal year to argument the second cycle Education sector (Armah, 2021), to further support the free SHS on equity and access to every Ghanaian living in Ghana. According to a work done by Babah, Frimpong, Mensah and Sakyi-Darko (2020), it is reported that BECE report from 1998-2009 faced a lot of issues of imbalances in the enrolment and quality of students admitted. The report noted that whereas a few well-endowed schools were over enrolled, the community-based schools were unable to attract students. According to the Education Review Report, over seventy-five (75) Senior Secondary Schools had enrolment less than hundred (100) students as at 2002 and the well-endowed schools succeeded in admitting only the cream of candidates thereby widening the gap between them and the least endowed schools. Did the free SHS policy really offer equity in secondary education? This research sought to investigate the implications of the free senior high school policy to educational access and equity in secondary education in Ghana.

Objectives

This paper aims;

1. To investigate the implications of the free senior high school policy to offer educational access equity.
2. To find out the significance of free SHS policy impact on student's enrolment in Ghana

Research Questions

1. Has the free senior high school policy had any significant implications on educational outcomes in the second cycle system?
2. Has the Free Senior High programme made any significant impact on students' enrolment in Ghana?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the 2017 World Bank publication (Sharing Higher Education's Promise), Ghana is one of the successful cases in Sub-Saharan African, when it comes to equity in higher education. "Ghana is one of the few countries in the region wherein students from households in the bottom quintiles of income distribution represent a respectable share of high school enrolment". Philosophically, selection of pupils into schools is based on the performance of the particular

school, its aims and objectives, the course the school has got to offer and the end product the institution wants to have at the end of the day (Ahiatrogah & Bervell, 2013).

Many African countries, unfortunately, are unable to meet the increasing demand for secondary education due to their inability to build on the successes of the universal primary education system some time ago. For decades, the sub-sector of secondary education has been neglected in Africa both by the governments and donor agencies (Watkins, 2016). The apparent neglect of this sub-sector has resulted in limited access, especially for young women and rural communities, poor quality of curriculum and lack of qualified teachers and essential infrastructure (Watkins, 2016).

The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) set out goals that are relevant to and have implications for secondary education particularly in ensuring that learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access and appropriate learning and life skills programmes. It was also aimed at eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality. According to Ndong-Jatta (2006), issues such as enrolment, quality imperatives, literacy, numeracy, gender disparities, investments and returns on expenditure of secondary education need to be closely examined. Provision of quality secondary education relevant to the changing needs of young people and the society at large is a growing concern worldwide even for those countries with universal coverage. As efforts to increase the participation rates of young people in post-primary education step up, there is the need to expand school facilities or introduce the shift system to match the demand for places in the institutions. There is the need to avoid less inclusive policy measures of continued selective processes, early tracking/streaming at the end of primary education.

History records that, there have been certain measures to improve quality of education in the country since independence. Quality basic and secondary education is one of the most important educational institutions that influences and is influenced by other educational institutions. The instrumental role played by basic education in developing human resources for both personal fulfilment and social advancement has been recognized in the world over (Mensah, Frimpong, Acquah & Babah, 2020). Ghana inaugurated a Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) in September 2005 with the aim of increasing transparency and enhancing the competence of the school transition process (Babah et al, 2020). With the aim of ensuring transparency and competence with CSSPS, it has led to the introduction of free SHS in order to make education more accessible to all.

The Ghanaian government's Free Senior High School (Free SHS) education scheme started in September 2017. The policy's core themes of access, equity, and equality correspond with the United Nations revised Sustainable Development Goals, which require member countries to include those concepts into their educational systems in order to ensure that children have adequate learning opportunities (Armah, 2021). By free SHS we mean free tuition, admission fee, textbooks, library fees, science center fees, fees for ICT, examination fee, and payment of utility fee, boarding and meals. Article 25 1b of the 1992 Constitution states that "Secondary education in its different forms including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to

all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education”. Goal 4, Target 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also states that “by 2030, all boys and girls complete free equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” (Free SHS Ghana, 2018).

First, there are many who believe that the policy should have been targeted at only those who are unable to pay, understood in the social protection literature as means testing. Some parents believe that they should be allowed to pay fees in order to get better quality of facilities in school (Ibrahim, 2021). For Free SHS to be sustained in the long term, it has to be opened to all.

Second, there have been some concerns regarding the double track calendar configuration, a system that has enabled government to enroll so many more students through optimum utilization of existing facilities. Available data suggest that this innovation alone doubled enrolment at double track schools, allowing nearly two hundred thousand students into the secondary school system in the first year of implementation alone (Boakye, 2021). It can be argued that while both the traditional agrarian calendar and double track have been proven empirically to be beneficial to students, double track appears to be more challenging to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the very group who stand to gain the most from the Free SHS policy (Eveningmailgh, 2021).

Third, critics claim that the system has reduced the contact hours that students had previously, pointing at the number of days that some students spend in the school and comparing with other tracks and previous systems.

This year alone, government intend to spend GHc 1.97 billion on the policy, a significant increase from the GHc 400 million it spent in the very first year of implementation. A computation of the figures shows that GHc2,312 is spent per student per year.

Global Concerns

Without opportunities for secondary education, children have little chance to improve their livelihoods, and the progress the world has made could be jeopardized. In September, speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative, former US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recognized that “lack of secondary education holds back the aspirations of so many girls and their families. It undermines prosperity and stability around the world (Cohen, 2014).

Clinton announced a major initiative in cooperation with more than 30 organizations, including the MasterCard Foundation, Intel, and Microsoft. This group has pledged more than \$600 million over five years to enable 14 million girls to “attend and complete primary and secondary school.” It is a wise investment. In addition to the obvious benefits that education can deliver, increased enrollment in secondary schools offers advantages to all levels of society (Ahmad & Cohen, 2017).

For example, requiring girls to continue their education reduces child marriage. In the developing world, one girl in seven is married by the age of 15; nearly half become mothers by the age of 18. Girls attending secondary school, by contrast, are much less likely to marry and bear children before reaching adulthood (Ahonsi et al., 2019). The possibility that education may limit women’s exposure to pregnancy could be more relevant to teenage girls. In school, girls have fewer

opportunities to become pregnant than if they are not in school. In this context, an extension of mandatory education may generate an “incarceration effect” for teenage girls. The study on Norway’s education reform found that one additional year of schooling reduced the chance of teenage pregnancy by eight percentage points. Hence, number of years of education can impact the timing of childbearing. Since entering motherhood at a young age may hamper one’s career development, the reduction of teenage pregnancy, alone, is an important policy objective (Kim, 2016).

Providing girls with secondary education also reduces family sizes, and, when they do become mothers, it improves their children’s health and chances of survival. One study found that in developing countries where one girl in five received a secondary education, women had, on average, more than five children. Where half of the girls received secondary education, the average was just three children, and child and infant mortality were much lower (Pradhan, 2015).

In the year 2013, Education for all Global Monitoring reported that if all women in sub-Saharan Africa completed primary education, maternal deaths would be reduced by about 70% or two-thirds, saving about 189,000 lives and if these women in sub-Sahara Africa had education, child deaths would be cut in half, saving about 3 million lives.

Yet young people are the fastest-growing segment of the population in the developing world. Uneducated, they could become an unprecedented burden as their societies age. But if they are provided with secondary education, they will be able to transform their future (Cohen, 2014).

For girls, secondary education closer to home would have the added benefit of reducing the risks of sexual abuse and violence. Girls often have higher dropout rates than boys for many reasons: household responsibilities; child labour; higher opportunity cost to the family; long distances to schools from girls’ homes; early marriage and/or pregnancy; the threat of sexual harassment and violence in school and en route to school; lack of girl-friendly facilities, a particularly serious problem during menstruation; gender discriminatory teaching and learning methods; and parents and communities who are not aware of the value of education for girls (Rihani, n.d). Reflective individual are critical thinkers who make decisions and solve problems in their societies. Competent citizens possess a repertoire of skills to aid them in decision making and problem solving. Concerned citizens investigate their social world, identify issues as significant, exercise their responsibility as members of a social community (Mensah & Frimpong, 2020).

Providing secondary education need not cost a fortune. Poor countries can move swiftly to expand opportunities for education at a much lower cost than is commonly imagined (The World Bank, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The document analysis approach was adopted for this study. This method is suitable for already existing data for use. Basically, there are three purposes for conducting social research. These are for descriptive purposes, exploratory purposes, and explanatory purposes. Descriptive research is conducted to describe a problem, policy or program, whereas exploratory research is a method of research used when a problem is not yet clearly defined, whilst explanatory research is a method of research focused on explaining why the specific social issue or problem exists. A research like

this is appropriate to make use of descriptive research design by documenting enough information that will enable the researcher to effectively describe the program or policy (Mensah, 2020). Accordingly, policy analysis technique, encompassing analysing data by inferring from available literature and secondary data and references was used. Therefore, the research sought for patterned regularities on reading the documentary data severally in order to appreciate the data, the content, and scope of the relevant literature. The documents helped the research to track the Free SHS policy and did content analysis of the policy intervention. The research purposely used available documents produced by the Ministry of Education, Ghana on enrolment trends for the years under review to reflect the object of the research. Accordingly, the Researcher's arguments were based on the interpretation of development of Free SHS policy. This research, through verification, ensured the trustworthiness and the veracity of the contents of the data obtained.

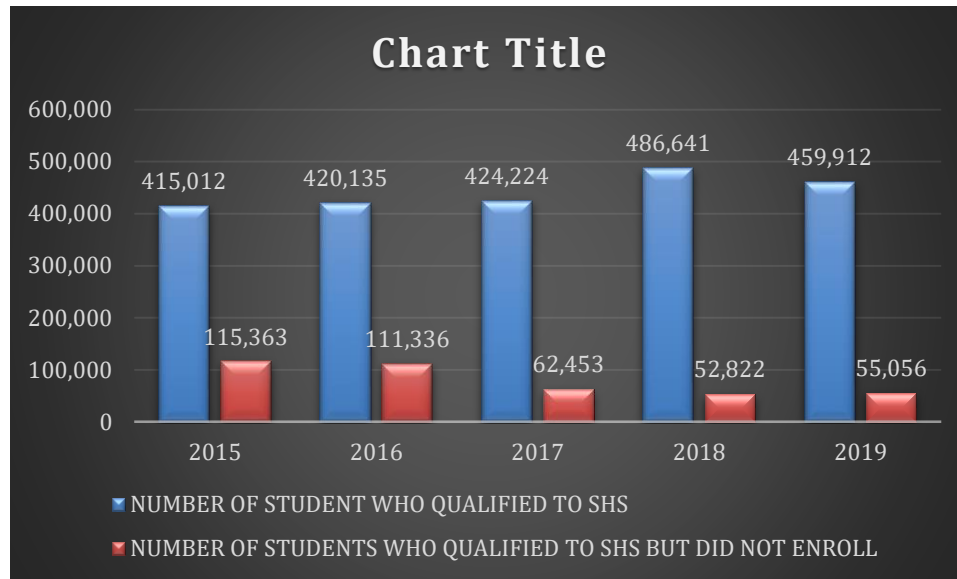
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Trend of enrollment at secondary Education (2015-2019)

YEA R	TOTAL REGISTERED BECE CANDIDATES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO QUALIFIED TO SHS	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED	NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO QUALIFIE D TO SHS BUT DID NOT ENROLL	% OF UNENROLL ED QUALIFIED SHS STUDENTS
2015	440,469	415,012	299,649	115,363	27.80
2016	461,009	420,135	308,799	111,336	26.50
2017	468,060	424,224	361,771	62,453	14.70
2018	521,811	486,641	433,819	52,822	10.90
2019	512,083	459,912	404,856	55,056	11.90

Source: Free SHS Ghana (2020)

Figure 1: The number of students who qualified to SHS against those who did not go although they qualified.



Source: Free SHS Ghana (2020)

From September 2017, the policy has allowed over 1.2 million students to attend senior high school absolutely free of charge. An analysis of the data shows that without the policy, some four hundred thousand less students would not have had the opportunity to access secondary Education in Ghana. Two years before the implementation of the free SHS programme by the government from the data above, 440,469 registered to write the Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E) of which 415,012 representing 94.2% were eligible to be enrolled into SHS and of that only 299,649 students enrolled but the remaining 115,363 representing 27.8% did not attend SHS that year as shown in Table 1 above.

A year to the implementation of the free SHS programme, 461,009 Junior High School (JHS) students registered and wrote the B.E.C.E of which 420,135 representing 91.13% qualified to enter the various SHS in Ghana and of that only 308,799 students enrolled while the remaining 111,336 representing 26.50% did not enroll in the SHS as in Table 1.

In 2017, the year the free SHS programme started, 468,060 Junior High School (JHS) students registered and wrote the B.E.C.E of which 424,224 representing 90.63% qualified to enter the various SHS in Ghana and of those qualified students only 361,771 students enrolled while the remaining 62,453 representing 14.70% did not enroll in the SHS as represented in Table 1.

A year after the free SHS programme has started, 521,811 Junior High School (JHS) students registered and wrote the B.E.C.E of which 486,641 students representing 93.26% qualified to enter the various SHS in Ghana and of those qualified students 433,819 students enrolled while the remaining 52,822 representing 10.90% did not enroll in the SHS as in Table 1.

In 2019, 512,083 Junior High School (JHS) students registered and wrote the B.E.C.E of which 459,912 students representing 89.81% qualified to enter the various SHS in Ghana and of those qualified students 404,856 students enrolled while the remaining 55,056 representing 11.90% did not enroll in the SHS as shown in Table 1.

From Table 1, two years (2015 and 2016) before the implementation of the free SHS programme, a total of 226,699 qualified students were not able to enroll into the senior high schools in Ghana but the number dropped to 170,331 in 3 years (2017, 2018, and 2019) after implementation of the free SHS programme by the government. The analysis from the documents obtained from the Ministry of Education also added to the rich revelation of the policy.

From Figure 1, it could be seen that the frequency of students who did not enroll although they qualified to the SHS declined annually but after the implementation of the free SHS program in 2017 the number of students who did not enrolled fell massively.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed that the free SHS policy has really increased enrollment figures in secondary schools' attendance. Which justify the continuing higher budget investment in the policy for human capital development of Ghana.

Also, the findings from the document implied that through the free SHS programme, anything financial burden associated with secondary education has been swallowed by the government, from tuition, to admission, text books, library, science centers, computer, examination, utilities boarding and meals, the true implication of the free SHS policy is that it has reduced or removed the financial burdens of guardians and parents of SHS students, which hindered more access and equity to secondary education.

It was observed that prior to the implementation of the free SHS programme in 2017, a higher percentage of the students who partook of the B.E.C.E and were eligible to enter the senior high schools could not attend due to financial constraints. This is so because the trend in analysis shows that after the implementation of the programme, the percentage of those who did not attend the senior high school dropped drastically. Before the programme, senior high education was only possible with parents and guardians were financially stable but now every junior high graduate who passes the exam, irrespective of the financial status of their parents and guardian can attend senior high school for free, which means true equity.

With the free SHS in Ghana, access to senior high school education has become equitable. Before the implementation of the programme, getting admitted to enter the senior high school for the junior high school graduand had been placed in by Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) came with some problems where students whose parents were quite influential, old students and sometimes leaders (religious and political) bypass the CSSPS to seek admission for their wards in the category A and B schools which is termed as "*protocol*" making it difficult for those students who were placed there by the CSSPS, but were from a poor background. Now the system of "*where you get is where you will go*" has been put in place by the free SHS

programme which is gradually eliminating the *protocol* situations. However, the challenges of contact hours and double track system seen to take away the shine of the free SHS policy.

CONCLUSION

To be certain, a policy that affects many people positively yearly is nothing to be sniffed at. In the history of this country, the free SHS policy has been one of the impactful policies, a social intervention policy so significant and so widely impactful. The government of Ghana introduced free senior secondary education and free technical, vocational education and training in 2017, which demonstrated a clear commitment to improving access. It was seen that the number of students who did not enroll although they qualified to the SHS was declining annually but after the implementation of the free SHS program in 2017, the declining rate was very huge. Additional support to these sub-sectors is essential to ensure that quality improves, while access increases. An educated and skilled workforce is essential to reducing poverty and foster employability. The Government's National Coordinated Program continues to support post-basic education and skills development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents, teachers, school administrators, policy analysts and relevant stakeholders have the responsibility to offer alternative proposals and do so in a manner that is constructive and helpful to the policy discourse.

In as much as the policy is making senior high education free to any junior high school graduate irrespective of their B.E.C.E score or grade, there should be a system in place where students who do not take their academics serious can be withdrawn from the programme to justify the huge government budget investment in their education.

Again, though the government is footing the tuition, housing and feeding of the senior high school students, guardians and parents should always make it a point to also invest in their wards by providing them with the needed resources the students will need during their study and not just leave all the burden on government.

According to a study conducted by Kwegyiriba, Agyepong and Mensah (2021) on GTEC regulations on class size and access implications to Technical University Education in Ghana, with regards to more access, it was recommended that management should put in place measures to ensure increases in classroom facilities by engaging stakeholders to provide more classrooms to enable students access since technology is the way to go now. Government of Ghana should therefore invest in secondary education by providing more classrooms and laboratories for teaching and learning. This will in effect increase the GER of Ghana.

In the light of the foregoing, it would be useful for implementers of the Free SHS (Ministry of Education, through the Free SHS Secretariat) to consider building consensus on a reliable and sustainable funding source dedicated solely to the policy. With reliable sources of funding, infrastructure could be improved to minimize the challenges associated with the Free SHS. This

will leverage the infrastructure and capacities of private schools and give parents and their wards more options in their choices of schools for placement.

Government of Ghana must admit that there are some management and accountability issues at the school and local levels that are to be addressed.

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