

POLITICIZING EQUITY: GHANA’S FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS’ WORK.

HILARIUS KOFI KOFINTI

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Abstract

In 2017, the Government of Ghana adopted a Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) to universalize secondary education access across the country by removing cost barriers. The policy originated as a campaign promise by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and has since dominated political debates. While FSHSP increased enrollment significantly, little is known about how its politicization has shaped its implementation and its implications for equity and teachers' work. This dissertation considers power through FSHSP policy, particularly how it operates at two scales/moments. In Part One of the dissertation, I focus on the broader context of influence in which FSHSP was justified and promoted. Drawing on a Critical Discourse Analysis of the pronouncements and documents circulated by political figures of Ghana's two major political parties—the NPP and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), I consider the political context and debates surrounding the FSHSP. This helped me understand the broader discursive terrain around FSHSP to set the stage for school-based research. In Part Two of my study, I draw on an Anthropology of Policy Frame, four months of school-based participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to understand how teachers made sense of and experienced FSHSP, paying particular attention to their role in the policy process, and the implications of the policy for teachers' work and equity. I argue that the government excluded teachers from the policy formulation process while increasing teachers' workload significantly, adversely affecting teachers' health and social life and restricting opportunities to engage in secondary employment beyond for-profit tutoring. While the policy affected all teachers, it disproportionately impacted female teachers and teachers in less-resourced schools. At the same time, I argue that the government's new student placement system and non-targeted approach to reform across differently resourced schools exacerbated previous inequities, including those born from the colonial era. For these reasons, a policy justified by its commitment to equity perpetuated existing forms and differences and created new ones along gender, region, and class. Together, I demonstrate how a multi-scalar analysis of education policy reveals how power operates in the education policy arena and the resultant effect on teachers and students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

My headmaster summoned me and four other teachers to his office. He gave each of us a list of students and said, “These are the names of those owing fees. Your task is to move around and drive them out. Remember to go with the cane, without which they will not go.” We went and did as we were ordered. I came to school the following day and headed straight to the headmaster’s office. I told him I couldn’t go on with the task since I felt terrible driving kids out of school. He got angry and blurted out, “Look here young man, how do you expect me to run this school if students don’t pay fees?” I told him how driving students out of class reminded me of how I was driven out some years ago.

Background to the Problem

For over a decade, I worked as a professional teacher in rural Ghana, and I witnessed how financial constraints served as barrier to secondary education for many students, especially girls. There were times when, on the orders of my headmaster, I begrudgingly drove students out of the classroom for owing fees. Though the Ghana Education Service (GES) insists that no student be forced out because of the inability to pay, removing students from class for lack of fees was a regular feature of the secondary education system. It was not a coincidence, either. Since its inception, formal schooling in Ghana has been an elite making institution, imagined by the missionaries and colonial government that sought to serve the needs of the colonial administration and the economic interests of the colonizers (Graham, 1971; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). To this day, Ghana grapples with the tensions of trying to universalize access in a system designed to produce and perpetuate difference.

In September 2017, the Government of Ghana (GoG) introduced the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP), at once removing school fees and thus the single most significant barrier

to secondary education. At the policy's launch, President Akufo Addo declared it an effort to create opportunities and empower every citizen (Ernest, 2017). The effect of FSHSP has been swift: Within six years of FSHSP implementation in Ghana, secondary school attendance rose astronomically—from 813,448 in the 2016-17 academic year to 1.3 million in the 2022–23 academic year (African Education Watch, 2023). This surge in enrollment is not counterintuitive, given that direct costs (school fees) have hindered many people, particularly females and rural folks, from accessing secondary education (Duflo et al., 2021).

Despite the massive increase in enrollment after the FSHSP implementation, its shortcomings are becoming increasingly clear. As with the expansion of free primary education across sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers and government officials have prioritized educational access over quality (Akyeampong, 2009; Sifuna, 2007). Though the average Tertiary Education Qualifying Grades in 2019 and 2020 were better than the years preceding the FSHSP (Asante & Agbee, 2021), there have been serious concerns regarding infrastructural deficit and teacher-student ratio. Many education scholars have drawn attention to FSHSP's implications for access (Essuman, 2018; Duflo et al., 2021); equity (Akuffo, 2024; Chaninmbe & Prah, 2020; Kwegyiriba, 2021); and quality education (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Duah et al., 2023). At the same time, others have concentrated on the challenges of implementing the policy (Adarkwah, 2022; Chaninmbe & Dankwah, 2021). Mohammad (2020) found that the FSHSP was inconsistent with the policy cycle, while Kyei-Nuamah and Larbi (2022) juxtaposed policy intentions vis-à-vis policy outcomes. Furthermore, the Public Interest & Accountability Committee (PIAC) (2020) reviewed the FSHSP by monitoring 51 schools in eight regions across Ghana to obtain information on the implementation progress and challenges. They found that despite increasing

access and enabling students to report to school promptly, infrastructural challenges, inadequate staff, and the lack of elective textbooks hamper quality teaching and learning.

This recent and increasingly robust body of literature responding to FSHSP, however, pays little attention to how power operates in policy inception, negotiation, and implementation. Further, it ignores the central role of teachers in the policy process. This is a significant oversight because, in Ghana, like many parts of the world, teachers are known as the “actual implementers” of educational policies (Nudzor, 2014, p. 5). From my experience as a native Ghanaian and professional teacher with over ten years of teaching experience in the Volta Region, I have noticed a tendency to scapegoat teachers whenever education policies fail. It is, therefore, essential to ascertain teachers’ understanding of their own roles in the policy cycle, because teachers serve as the bridge between what educational policies purport to achieve and what they achieve. Teachers act on policy directives, usually emanating from governments.

As policy actors, teachers make meaning of policies and practicalize them within the context and confines of their schools (Alfrey et al., 2017; Ball et al., 2011). In this vein, teachers are policymakers in practice (Croll et al., 1994) or street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). As street-level bureaucrats, teachers exercise discretionary powers over what pertains in their schools or classrooms as they translate policies into action (Farhadi & Winton, 2022). Given teachers' central role in the implementation of national education, it is vital to ascertain teachers’ involvement in policy formulation process and to understand how teachers make sense of the complicated world of policy implementation while being guided by the fact that schools differ in many and varied ways (Braun et al., 2011).

Furthermore, in Ghana, public debate preceding the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections focused on the FSHSP. While the Ghanaian public is deeply aware of how education policies

have become politicized, and many scholars note the prevalent politicization of education policies and the subsequent effect of the politicization on education in Ghana (Adam-Yawson et al., 2021; Amarh, 2017; Gunu, 2019; Owusu-Kwarteng et al., 2018; Partey, 2017), little scholarly attention has been paid to how politicians use FSHSP in their political negotiations, and how this relates to what happens in schools. This dissertation thus focuses on the multiple and multi-scalar ways in which power operates through FSHSP, including in both formal politics and interpersonal, daily interactions. I pay particular attention to two policy sites or arenas: (1) the formal sphere of influence in which political figures discursively construct and debate FSHSP, using it to advance party goals; and (2) the school level, in which teachers make sense of, implement, and contest FSHSP in practice. Together, I consider how these power negotiations relate to the policy's formulation and implementation and their implications for equity in both student and teachers' lives.

I conceptualize the dissertation in two parts: In Part One, I explore how political figures¹ of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana discursively constructed and framed the FSHSP. I draw on Greene's (2022) assertion that the politicization of something entails concentrating mainly on how to use it to gain an advantage in the quest for power and status. With a view of policy as discourse (Bacchi, 2000) and focusing on political party officials as policy actors (Hajer, 2006), I draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to highlight how officials of the two major political parties operationalize various discourses to politicize the FSHSP and, thus, use the policy as a campaign tool to garner support

¹ In this work, I define political figures as people who are professionally or actively involved in party politics. The officials of Ministry of Education (MoE), Ghana Education Service (GES), and the entire publication on the Free SHS Website is considered to represent the voice of the ruling NPP party.

for their parties. Focusing on the FSHSP, I argue that because Ghanaian parents put a premium on education as a means to formal employment and achieving upward social and economic mobility (Opoku, 2016), Ghanaian politicians consider the education sector as an aperture to engage in non-stop political campaigning. Throughout, I was guided by the proposition that "participants in professional roles often don't speak 'for themselves', but as representatives of an organization or institution, and as representatives who in principle can be replaced by other institution member" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 223). This way, any utterance by a party member is taken as their political party's voice, aiming to mobilize party support. After examining the concept of power within discourse in the realm of formal politics, I shift my focus to the educational setting, specifically focusing on teachers and examining how the power dynamics present in formal politics relate to their involvement or absence of involvement in FSHSP formulation and the resulting implications on teachers' work and daily lives. The shift from formal politics to teachers is understandable given that "policies are always unfinished as they are mediated and translated, refused, inhabited and reworked by those they summon"—in this case, teachers (Lendvai-Bainton & Stubbs, 2024, p. 1). New education policies alter what goes on in schools, thus impacting teachers' work and daily lives. Yet, teachers make decisions on a daily basis regarding what goes on in their schools, and these decisions impact policy outcomes.

Consequently, in Part Two, I examine how teachers were (or were not) involved in the policy making process by exploring teachers' views regarding their involvement in the FSHSP policymaking process in Ghana. Drawing on the anthropology of policy frame, and with a view of policy as a sociocultural practice, I highlight how teachers understand their role and positionality in relation to the government, and how the Ministry of Education (MoE) excluded teachers from the policy formulation stage. I also examine some underlying reasons and

assumptions for this exclusion while elucidating the implications of excluding teachers from the policy formulation.

After that, I explore how, as policy implementers, teachers experienced the impact of FSHSP by shedding light on how the FSHSP shaped teachers' work and daily lives. Here, I pay particular attention to context and its mediating role in how teachers experience the policy. Finally, I explore the concept of equity in relation to FSHSP from the teachers' perspective by discussing how teachers understand the FSHSP's implications for equity in Ghanaian secondary education. By showing how FSHSP operated in formal politics and schools, I demonstrate how power operates in the education policy arena, highlighting why teachers were sidelined and the consequences of this on policy implementation.

Research Questions

The following questions guided my research:

1. What strategies do the NDC and NPP officials employ to politicize Ghana's FSHSP?
2. How do teachers understand their involvement in the FSHSP formulation?
3. How does the FSHSP shape teachers' work and daily lives?
4. How do teachers perceive the implications of the FSHSP regarding equity in Ghanaian secondary education?

I work to bridge the two parts of my study by considering how power operates in FSHSP through discourse and practice, and across scale. While formal politics and the lives of teachers are seemingly distinct, they are related given that, in Ghana, like many parts of the world, those at the realm of public education are political figures, and these figures' pronouncements and decisions regarding education policies inform what happens in school, directly impacting

teachers and students. This was particularly the case with the FSHSP given that the policy emerged from a political campaign promise.

CDA and Anthropology of Policy are complementary because they both emphasize and pay attention to social actors, in the case of this research, government officials and teachers. They both pay attention to context and power distribution, as well as power relationships and how these interact to shape social realities. Aside from that, they both are interested in social practices. Both CDA and Anthropology of Policy provide critical lenses through which I investigate the FSHSP. Combining insights from these two led to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the FSHSP. For instance, by employing CDA, I identified and elucidated the politicization of the FSHSP. At the same time, the anthropology of policy frame facilitated a critical exploration of the interactions among bureaucracies, highlighting the power dynamics between government officials and teachers during the formulation and implementation of the FSHSP and the consequences thereof on teachers and policy outcomes (Tate, 2020, p. 87).

Significance of the Study

This study centers the role of power in education policy, with particular focus on FSHSP. Despite scholars indicating that many educational policies are adopted and implemented as a matter of political expediency (Amarh, 2017; Chapman et al., 2010; Donkoh et al., 2019; Donkoh et al., 2023; Gunu, 2019; Nudzor, 2014; Sifuna, 2004; Sifuna, 2007), many have not accounted for how power operates in discourse, and to what affect. This research analyzes the pronouncements of politicians in order to better understand how politicians leverage the education policy arena to engage in perpetual campaigning.

At the same time, even though free secondary education policies have been implemented across Africa, most scholarship and grey literature concentrate on access and quality issues.

Aside from that, many scholars have focused on students or schools as their unit of analysis, not teachers. Very little is known about FSHSP implications for equity, teachers' work, and teachers as policy actors. Yet teachers make FSHSP real in practice, and can even be complicit in some of the inequities that continually bedevil the education system.

By focusing on teachers, this research will emphasize the central and agentic role of teachers, while helping to complicate understanding of the policy's implications, including for equity in both teacher and student lives. Drawing on the Anthropology of Policy, it will critically examine and highlight the role of teachers in the policy process and will argue for greater involvement of teachers at the initial stages of policy formulation.

In addition, this study will illuminate the unintended consequences of FSHSP in Ghana, including on gendered and regional gaps in access and retention. I pay particular attention to whether and how the policy eliminates, maintains, or exacerbates the historical inequities inherent in secondary education in Ghana. Indeed, FSHSP cannot be made sense of without first examining the colonial context in which formal schooling was first introduced in Ghana. By adopting a multi-site ethnographic approach, this study will contribute to theory development regarding the role of context in the policy process, highlighting how the micro factors within the different schools affect the government's overall plans and actions. This will further explain why and how policies produce different outcomes depending on the context within which they operate. Finally, given its empirical nature, this study will offer a rich portrait of how FSHSP looks in practice in the Volta Region. The study will, therefore, serve as a springboard for other researchers who would like to embark on similar studies in other parts of the country. Finally, I will offer recommendations for the practice of making education more equitable in Ghana and Africa.

Dissertation Outline

There are nine chapters in this dissertation. In Chapter 1, through an autobiographical reflection, I introduced the research setting (Ghana) and the theme (Free Senior High School Policy). I then discussed my study's purpose, research questions, and significance.

In Chapter 2, I provide a brief historical overview of formal education in Ghana, and I also offer a snapshot of Ghana's political landscape. This is important because the power dynamics inherent in FSHSP cannot be understood in a vacuum. I pay particular attention to the colonial origins of formal schooling and the role of schooling in sowing internal divisions; the history and context of FSHSP and the political landscape into which it was introduced. I then review the literature on FSHSP in Ghana and beyond focusing on the feature of the policy, and the major debates concerning the policy, including the gains and the challenges of the FSHSP. I end the chapter by drawing attention to relationship between education and politics.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the theoretical frameworks for the study. Here, I theorize the meaning of policy and discuss how various scholars conceptualize the study of policy. I situate this study within the critical orientation to policy studies, highlighting my view that policy extends beyond text into discourse and practice. Following this, I provide a brief overview of the Anthropology of Policy, focusing on its relevance to the examination of FSHSP. I end the chapter by conceptualizing teachers' role in the policy process.

In Chapter 4, I reflect on my positionality and discuss its impact on my fieldwork experiences. I then describe the study's methodology, including data sources, data collection, and data analysis. I then provide a snapshot description of the research sites. Mention is also made of some ethical considerations in the data collection process.

Chapters, 5, 6, 7, and 8 discuss the research findings. Chapter 5, “FSHSP, an Avenue for Non-Stop Political Campaign,” delves into the diverse strategies NPP and NDC officials employ to politicize the FSHSP. Here, I discuss how officials of the NPP and NDC operationalize various discourses to politicize and use FSHSP as a campaign tool to garner support for their parties. I draw on the conceptual lens of critical discourse analysis to uncover the subtleties and nuances involved in the discourses of party officials as policy actors as they attempt to mobilize voter support for their parties and stoke resentment for their political opponents.

Chapter 6, “Teachers as Cogs in the Wheel,” focuses on the policy formulation process, highlighting how the government excluded teachers. Here, I explore teachers' views regarding their involvement in the FSHSP policymaking process in Ghana. I highlight how teachers understand their role and positionality in relation to the government and how the MoE excluded them from the policy formulation stage. I examined some underlying reasons and assumptions for this exclusion while elucidating the implications of excluding teachers from the policy formulation.

In Chapter 7, “Teachers as Collateral Damage,” I explore how, as policy implementers, teachers experienced the impact of FSHSP by shedding light on how it shaped teachers’ work and daily lives. Here, I pay particular attention to context and its mediating role in how teachers experience the policy. This way, I demonstrate how teachers in different schools experienced the policy differently.

Chapter 8, “FSHSP and Equity in Ghanaian Secondary Education,” examines the concept of equity in relation to FSHSP from the teachers' perspective by discussing how teachers understand the FSHSP’s implications for equity in Ghanaian secondary education. Here, I draw

attention to the fact that teachers understood equity in relation to access and quality, yet teachers pointed out that it required more than merely eliminating fees to make education equitable.

Chapter 9 summarizes and reflects on the interconnections and interrelationships of the main findings, thereby shedding light on how the findings reported in chapters 5–8 intersect and reinforce each other. I also discuss the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes by proposing policy recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: The Context of Secondary Schooling and FSHSP in Ghana

A critical analysis of FSHSP requires paying attention to the history of formal education in Ghana. This is essential in making sense of equity concerns related to the FSHSP. In this chapter, I draw attention to the origin of formal education in Ghana, emphasizing how formal education began as an elite enterprise. I then shed light on the massification of primary education, paying attention to how the massification of primary education precipitated the need for commensurate investment in secondary education. Next, I discuss the emergence of free secondary education in Africa before narrowing it down to the history of the FSHSP and the role of partisan politics in implementing FSHSP. Here, I provide a snapshot of the political landscape of Ghana, focussing specifically on the NPP and NDC and their different approaches to universalizing secondary education in Ghana. The next section reviews scholarly and grey literature on FSHSP, including how it came about and how it is related to formal politics, key debates, and implementation concerns. The final section addresses the potential risks associated with politicization of education policies.

History of Formal Education in Ghana: The Buildup to the FSHSP

In Ghana, like most African countries, formal education had a history of elitism and exclusion. The first schools established, known as the castle schools, only targeted the sons of European merchants born by African wives and “not wholly African pupils” (McWilliam & Kwamenah-Poh, 1976, p. 17). The castle schools also provided education for children of prominent traditional leaders and traders (Boadu, 2021). It is worth noting the relationship between the castle schools and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Though initially built for trade and defense, the castles later became the harbor for enslaved people shipped from the Gold Coast. Because the schools were in coastal towns, access to the castle schools was only for those

along the coastlines of Ghana. After the castle schools came the mission schools, established by missionary groups such as the Wesleyan, Basel, Bremen, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic Missions during the 1830s. Like the castle schools, the mission schools were also in the coastal towns (Boadu, 2021). Then came colonial schools, which maintained the status quo by concentrating on only elite males positioned to staff the colonial state's civil service.

The colonial government intentionally made educational access geographically uneven. For example, there was a significant bias against northern Ghana regarding formal education in colonial Ghana, as the colonial governments located almost all initial schools in southern Ghana. According to Bening (1990), this was a conscious effort to marginalize northern Ghana by limiting the number of government and mission schools in that part of the country to ensure that north Ghana remained the hub of unskilled labor capable of working in the mines and plantations in southern Ghana.

However, the most bias in missionary and colonial education had to do with gender, as there is ample evidence that mission schools discriminated, in no small measure, against females from an “institutional and family perspective” (Darkwah, 2010, p. 2). The castle, mission, and colonial schools focused on educating boys and discriminating against girls. By 1890, the ratio of boys to girls in primary school in Accra, the capital, was 100 to 11, respectively (Fant, 2008).

This discrimination against girls was not only limited to access. It also manifested in the subjects learned by the few girls who enrolled. For example, while the boys were taught subjects to become teachers, interpreters, clerks, and traders, girls, on the other hand, were taught subjects that would make them good wives, following Victorian principles. Graham (1971) maintained that the primary objective of girls' education during the colonial period was to provide them with

the necessary skills and knowledge for marriage, to become good wives. As such, the girls were taught subjects such as needlework, singing, and culinary expertise.

There were many attempts by subsequent colonial and post-independence governments to increase educational opportunities in the country. The most significant effort was under the rulership of Sir Gordon Guggisberg (1919 to 1927), who introduced the Education Ordinance of 1925, which expounded his famous “Sixteen Principles of Education.” Notable among the sixteen principles included the provision of Universal Primary Education (UPE), quality secondary education, and equity in education for boys and girls (Boadu, 2021).

After Ghana attained independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, made educational expansion a significant part of his postcolonial project (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016). To this end, Nkrumah introduced the Education Act of 1961, which also made provision for UPE (Boadu, 2021). To address the North-South gap specifically, Kwame Nkrumah, having noticed that Northern Ghana lagged in formal education, introduced free education for the northern part of Ghana (Darkwah, 2010). Despite all these efforts, huge disparities regarding access to education between the urban and rural communities still existed (Fentiman et al., 1999).

After the overthrow of the Kwame Nkrumah government in 1966, Ghana experienced a long period of political, social, and economic instability due to blatant economic mismanagement and frequent coups, which invariably affected the education sector as well (MacBeath, 2010). In 1979, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings seized power and ruled the country for less than four months, after which he handed over power to a civilian government led by Dr. Hilla Limann. In 1981, Rawlings returned to overthrow the same government to which he had handed power (Owusu, 1989). It was only after the second coup by Rawlings that Ghana began to enjoy

a prolonged period of political stability. As a military leader, he ruled the country from 1981 to 1992.

As of 1980, the country's economy was in shambles. Consequently, in 1983, like many other African countries, Ghana turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for support. The suggested remedy was Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). If there is a single word that is synonymous with the IMF bailout, it is “conditionalities.” While IMF conditionalities are many and varied, there is a consensus that conditionalities are stricter for developing countries (Dreher, 2009). IMF conditionalities usually range from government budget cuts, increased interest rates, and limited credit availability to eliminating subsidies for popular consumer goods and food (Naiman & Watkins, 1999). While the conditionalities aim, first and foremost, to drastically limit government spending and thereby safeguard IMF’s monies, they have been counterproductive in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conditional debt relief tied to continued compliance with IMF structural adjustment plans has been ineffective in reallocating resources toward activities that promote economic development or alleviating poverty (Naiman & Watkins, 1999). According to Mohammed (2024), fiscal austerity measures have been inimical to Ghanaian children’s education and efforts to reduce poverty in Ghana. For example, under the 1983 SAP, the government sector in Ghana experienced shrinkage due to commercialization, retirements, redeployments, and retrenchments, with expected higher wages for those remaining, but salaries remained below private sector standards (Mensah, 1993).

Through SAPs, the IMF and World Bank compelled the Ghana government to drastically reduce expenditure on social services such as education and health (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). According to Bamora (2010), SAPs further stretched the education sector due to less funding

from the government. Concomitantly, the government pushed the extra cost onto parents (Akyeampong, 2009). In this context, Rawlings and his military regime introduced and implemented the education reform of 1987 to expand access and improve education. The 1987 reform made primary education free and compulsory (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016; Boadu, 2021). Ostensibly, in a bid to reduce cost, the 1987 education reform reduced pre-tertiary education from 17 years to 12 years, which helped the country save some money and commit more to universal primary education. According to Akyeampong (2009), the SAP improved Ghana's economy, paving the way for a better investment in education; however, Adjei et al. (2014) contend that "the availability of better educational facilities meant nothing, insofar as their prohibitive user costs made them inaccessible" (p. 54). As a result, as of 1990, Ghana was still contending with issues of access to education, as many parents could not afford to send their children to school since schools continued to collect maintenance fees, which resulted in several students not enrolling at all or dropping out entirely.

Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE)

In 1992, when Ghana returned to constitutional rule, the 1992 constitution made provision for UPE for all children. Regarding the massification of secondary education, Article 25 1b of Ghana's 1992 Constitution states: "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" (Republic of Ghana, 1992). This aligned with the broader global push for universal access to primary education, as enshrined in the Education for All initiative, launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. In 1996, the Ghana government, led by President Jerry John Rawlings (now democratically elected), introduced the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE)

with the aim of enhancing access, equity, and quality of primary education (Akyeampong, 2009; Nudzor, 2013; Tuwor & Sossou, 2008). The FCUBE initiative led to increased investment in the education sector. The government built more schools and expanded existing school infrastructure, thus increasing enrollment (Akyeampong, 2009).

Nevertheless, Akyeampong (2009) contends that the increase in enrollment was at the expense of quality, as the increase in student enrollment was not matched with a similar increase in teacher population. Thus, the government turned to untrained teachers, which invariably impacted the quality of education provided. Also, there was low retention since many headteachers still charged indirect levies (Abukari et al., 2015; Akyeampong, 2009). Aside from that, many parents could not afford school supplies such as school uniforms and stationery for their wards. Due to these, the target of achievement of universal basic education by 2005 was not met.

In 2000, 164 governments, together with five multilateral institutions—(UNESCO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF), World Bank—recommitted to the EFA initiative at Dakar, Senegal. This initiative, known as the Dakar Framework, was championed by UNESCO to ensure that all children would receive primary education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2011). Spurred on by the Dakar Framework and with the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the government of Ghana, now led by John Agyekum Kufuor, intensified efforts towards achieving the goals of the Dakar Framework. For instance, in 2003, the MoE formulated the Education Strategy Plan for 2003-2015, which encapsulated the Capitation Grant, the School Feeding Program, and the Free School Uniform. The Capitation Grant, aimed at abolishing all school fees at the basic school level in Ghana, commenced in the 2005/2006 academic year.

With the inception of the capitation grant, GoG forbade schools from collecting school fees from students. In place of parents paying fees, the state provided all basic public schools US \$3 annually for every pupil enrolled (Akyeampong, 2009). The government also introduced a School Feeding Program in 2005 to provide pupils in public primary and kindergarten schools in the deprived communities of Ghana with one hot meal each day in school. According to the government, the School Feeding Program's primary aim was to promote school attendance and retention of students in deprived areas (Quaye et al., 2010; Salifu et al., 2018). The program also sought to improve pupils' health in deprived communities by providing one nutritional meal each school day (Salifu et al., 2018). In addition to the capitation grant and school feeding program, the state provided free school uniforms to students in some parts of the country (Ananga, 2013). These initiatives, especially the capitation grant, sought to help Ghana meet the Millennium Development Goal target of achieving universal basic education by 2015.

There is unanimity that the culmination of these initiatives achieved considerable success in boosting enrollment at the basic level of Ghana's education (Adamu-Issah et al., 2007; Akyeampong, 2009; Seshie, 2019). In addition to boosting enrollment, free primary education resulted in a massive increase in the number of children completing basic education. Significant gains were also made in girls' education. By the end of 2014, the completion rate among both boys and girls improved considerably, and the net enrollment of girls matched that of boys (World Bank, 2016). While these were positive developments, they nevertheless exposed the lack of attention to the secondary level of education, given that at the secondary level, direct costs (school fees) continued to pose a significant barrier to secondary education (Duflo et al., 2021). Aside from that, it was also evident that infrastructure-wise, the expansion of primary education did not coincide with adequate investments at the secondary level.

According to Mohammed and Kuyini (2020), “the net effect of increased primary enrollment was increased demand for secondary education” (p. 9). However, because the massification of primary education did not meet with commensurate investments at the secondary level, this created a bottleneck where many basic school graduates could not transition to the secondary level. According to Nugba et al. (2021), before 2017, only 70% of those who successfully finished basic school in Ghana could attend secondary school, as financial limitations kept the rest from enrolling. As with the basic level, financial constraint was the main reason for the inability to acquire secondary education (Akyeampong, 2009; Duflo et al., 2021). This financial constraint has to do with the payment of tuition and other ancillary fees associated with enrolling and attending secondary school. It is not uncommon in Ghana to find parents being asked to pay Parent Teacher Association (PTA) fees and Project levies.² Together with the tuition fees, these fees made it difficult for low-income families to enroll their children in secondary schools. Thus, household income becomes a major determinant to access secondary education, as poverty hinders many families from sending their children to secondary schools. In the case of girls, these financial obstacles are exacerbated by cultural constraints (Seshie, 2019). When families face financial difficulty and must choose between educating boys or girls, they often opt for the former (Seshie, 2019). It is essential to note that some of these so-called cultural constraints, especially regarding girls, are motivated by financial constraints. For instance, most early marriages are precipitated by financial motivation or the financial constraints of parents (Ahonsi et al., 2019). Thus, the gains made at the basic level exposed the neglect of the secondary education sector and engendered the demand for commensurate investment at the secondary level (Jacob & Lehner, 2011; Kerr, 2020; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

² With the introduction of the FSHSP, the Government of Ghana barred headteachers from taking these monies from parents.

Secondary Schooling, an Elite Enterprise in Sub-Saharan Africa

For a long time in Ghana and indeed the entire sub-Saharan Africa, secondary education has been an elite enterprise reserved for a privileged few, mainly males and the rich (Clignet & Foster, 1964; Fredriksen & Fossberg, 2014; see also Ngware et al., 2007; Zubairi & Rose, 2019). This situation could be attributed to the reluctance or the slow pace at which the various colonial governments established secondary schools in their colonies and the fact that the first few secondary schools were mainly for boys (see McWilliam & Kwamenah-Poh, 1972; Sharra & Silver, 2023). Also, secondary schooling is expensive due to the boarding system. Though the boarding system of education has long been associated with secondary education in Africa, it is costly and has in no small way contributed to making secondary education an elite enterprise (Kakuba & Pilon, 2023; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). It is, therefore, not surprising that Clignet and Foster (1964) referred to African secondary schools as “elite reservoirs” (p. 350).

Jacob and Lehner (2011) describe secondary education as an “intermediary step” between primary education and tertiary education (p. 14). Secondary education is crucial in connecting primary education to the tertiary level. Aside from this, secondary education prepares youth for the future by equipping them with the competencies required for productive adulthood, thus helping a nation to meet its human resources needs in the short and long term (Jacob & Lehner, 2011). Secondary education increases learning, improves health, and helps delay marriage, particularly for girls (Duflo et al., 2021). To this end, secondary education, apart from being an intermediary between basic and tertiary education, opens employment opportunities for most African youth. Furthermore, sub-Saharan African governments believe that secondary education leads to high economic growth for the nation, poverty reduction, and the creation of employment opportunities in the formal sector for the individual (Burns, 2020).

Nevertheless, the relationship between education and employment is blurry, making some scholars question the link between education and formal employment in the face of massive unemployment (Adonteng-Kissi, 2018; Ansell et al., 2020; Kendall & Silver, 2014). When students or parents see that education no longer holds the key to social mobility and economic freedom, they will likely lose motivation and not take their education seriously. For example, in a study conducted by Adonteng-Kissi (2018) in a rural town in Ghana, a parent asked: “Why should I enroll my children in school if they’re going to be unemployed after finishing?” (p. 59). This highlights the lack of interest in education if education does not lead to formal employment or an assurance of an economically stable future.

The Emergence of Free Secondary Education in Africa

As already discussed, the EFA initiative and the Millennium Development Goals have been instrumental in improving access to primary education, particularly in developing countries. In countries where UPE has been achieved, the massive enrollment and completion rate increase has engendered the call to democratize secondary education through fee-free policies (Jacob & Lehner, 2011; Kerr, 2020). Considering that cost constitutes the single most significant barrier to accessing secondary education, attempts to reverse the situation focus on cost reduction or, in other cases, cost elimination. Uganda took the lead in this regard, introducing Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, ten years after adopting Universal Primary Education (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015). Uganda’s USE policy increased enrollment from 50% to 69% within a year of its implementation, and the completion rate also witnessed a 54% increase (Kavuma, 2011). Kenya also introduced Free Secondary Education (FSE), thereby experiencing a surge in enrollment figures (Ohba, 2011). Malawi, Ethiopia, and Ghana have also, in varied ways, universalized access to secondary education through fee-free policies (Adarkwah, 2022).

The latest to adopt fee-free secondary education is Zambia in 2022 (Chanda, 2023). In Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda, the government absorbed some aspects of the cost associated with secondary education, while parents paid the rest (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021).

According to Marshall (2014), “the most influential group” that exerts the most influence on education is “those who form the government” (p. 68). This assertion holds when we consider Ghana’s education system, where the two major political parties, NPP and NDC, spearheaded initiatives to universalize secondary education, each adopting its distinct approach to this goal. Consequently, in the next section, I discuss efforts to universalize secondary education in Ghana, following a brief discussion of Ghana’s political landscape.

The Political Landscape of Ghana

Ghana operates a multi-party system, and political parties are regulated by the Political Parties Act 574, which was established in 2000. As of October 2023, there were 27 political parties listed on the website of the Electoral Commission of Ghana³. Despite this, only two of them, namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), possess the capability to win elections (Osei, 2013). Only these two parties tasted power after Ghana returned to constitutional rule from military governance in 1992. Thus, in practical terms, Ghana has functioned as a two-party state since 1992. Two individuals pertinent to this study are NDC’s John Dramani Mahama, who governed Ghana from January 2013 to January 2017, and NPP’s Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo, who was in power from January 2017 to January 2025.

³ <https://ec.gov.gh/>

New Patriotic Party (NPP)

Founded on the 28th of July 1992 and with an African elephant as its emblem, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) describes itself as a center-right, liberal, conservative party (Ofori, 2015). The motto of NPP is Development in Freedom. After its formation, it stayed in opposition from 1992 until 2000, when it wrestled power from the NDC party. From 2000, the NPP ruled for eight years, after which they lost the 2008 election to NDC, only to bounce back in 2016. The NPP was re-elected in the 2020 election, thus forming the 2020-2024 government. The NPP receives most of its votes from Akan-dominated areas, including Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, and the Eastern, Western, and Central regions. It is, however, unpopular in the Volta, Upper West, Upper East, and Northern regions (Ofori, 2015).

National Democratic Congress (NDC)

The NDC, a social democratic party, was founded in 1992 under the leadership of Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings. The NDC party's symbol is an umbrella with a dove's head on the tip. The party's colors are red, white, green, and black, and the party motto is "Union, Stability, and Development". NDC won both the 1992 and 1996 elections. They did, however, lose to the NPP in the 2000 and 2004 elections but were triumphant in the 2008 and 2012 elections before succumbing to defeats in the 2016 and 2020 elections. The NDC is not very popular in the Akan-speaking regions of Ghana, but it is popular among the Volta and Northern regions (Ofori, 2015).

Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana

The FSHSP became arguably the most popular campaign message in Ghana's political history. Before the 2012 presidential elections, Nana Akufo Addo, the NPP flagbearer in opposition, promised to introduce free senior high school should the electorates give him the

mandate. The NDC party criticized him for adopting a populist gimmick to win an election. For instance, at a rally in Kumasi, President John Dramani Mahama remarked, "...because he (Nana Akufo Addo) wants power, he is preaching free education, but I say is it 'sakawa'⁴ and should not be trusted" (Smith, 2012). Nana Akufo Addo and the NPP party lost the 2012 presidential election to the NDC. However, in September 2015, in a move many believed was aimed at deflating the campaign of the NPP, the NDC Government, under the leadership of President John Dramani Mahama, introduced the Progressively Free Senior High School Education (PFSHSE), which provided partial funding for day students (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018).

Although the PFSHSE aimed to boost enrollment in secondary education by alleviating some of the financial burdens on parents and students, the government continued to impose admission and tuition fees—the primary barriers for low-income families (Asante & Agbee, 2021). Given that poverty remains the major obstacle to accessing secondary education, the persistence of registration fees (admission fees) and tuition fees failed to reduce the financial burden on parents. While Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2018) found that learning outcomes improved during the PFSHSE era, Asante and Agbee (2021) suggested that the policy did not significantly address the bottleneck regarding access to secondary education. Indeed, though about 400,000 students benefited from the PFSHSE (Arhinful, 2020), Takyi et al. (2019) revealed that even two years after the rollout of PFSHSE, over half a million primary-aged youth could not enter secondary schools due to "financial constraints" (p. 2).

Consequently, before the 2016 elections, Nana Akufo Addo reiterated the promise of FSHSP, emphasizing that his concept of free secondary education encompassed all fees, unlike the NDC's PFSHSE. Just as in 2012, his message was met with stiff opposition by the NDC. For

⁴ The term Sakawa is originally a Ghanaian term for internet fraud mainly targeting foreigners. The term is now used to describe any type of scheme targeted at outwitting someone through deceit.

example, the then President and leader of the NDC, John Dramani Mahama, insisted that "Ghana must not introduce Free SHS on the whimsical promise of a desperate politician" (Safo, 2024, para. 7). However, unlike in the 2012 election, the public bought into NPP's ideas regarding free secondary education, and Nana Akufo Addo prevailed in the 2016 general elections. Nana Akufo Addo was sworn into office in January 2017. In a bid to fulfill his campaign promise, as early as May of that same year, he inaugurated the FSHSP committee, chaired by the Minister of Education. On 12th September 2017, Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo launched the FSHSP. The government touted the policy as a pro-poor social intervention. At the policy launch, President Akufo Addo stated that secondary school education in Ghana would be entirely free, as the government would absorb all the fees that hitherto parents paid. Thus, unlike the PFSHSE, with the FSHSP, students did not have to pay any fees associated with secondary education, including tuition, textbooks, and utility fees. Accommodation, uniforms, and meals were also free (MoE, 2017). Essentially, the government assumed total fiscal responsibility for secondary education.

Launching the policy, President Akufo Addo also expressed optimism that the FSHSP would provide equal educational opportunities to all Ghanaians, irrespective of their economic status. He declared his belief that "knowledge and talent are not for the rich and privileged alone" and added that free education "widens the gates of opportunity for every child, especially those whose talents are arrested because of poverty" ("President's speech at," 2017). The president also touted the move as a step towards achieving SDG 4.1. He further noted the positive effect of massification on countries such as the US, Singapore, Malaysia, and Korea and expressed optimism that by adopting this policy, Ghana would achieve similar gains both at the micro and

macro level ("President's speech at," 2017). Aside from these, he framed the policy as a relief to parents who were burdened by the payment of school fees. He declared:

We lift the financial burden off our parents, and the heart-rending anxiety that accompanies the beginning of every school term. We have a sacred duty to our children and the generations beyond in ensuring that, irrespective of their circumstances, their right to an education is preserved. (GhanaWeb Tv, 2017)

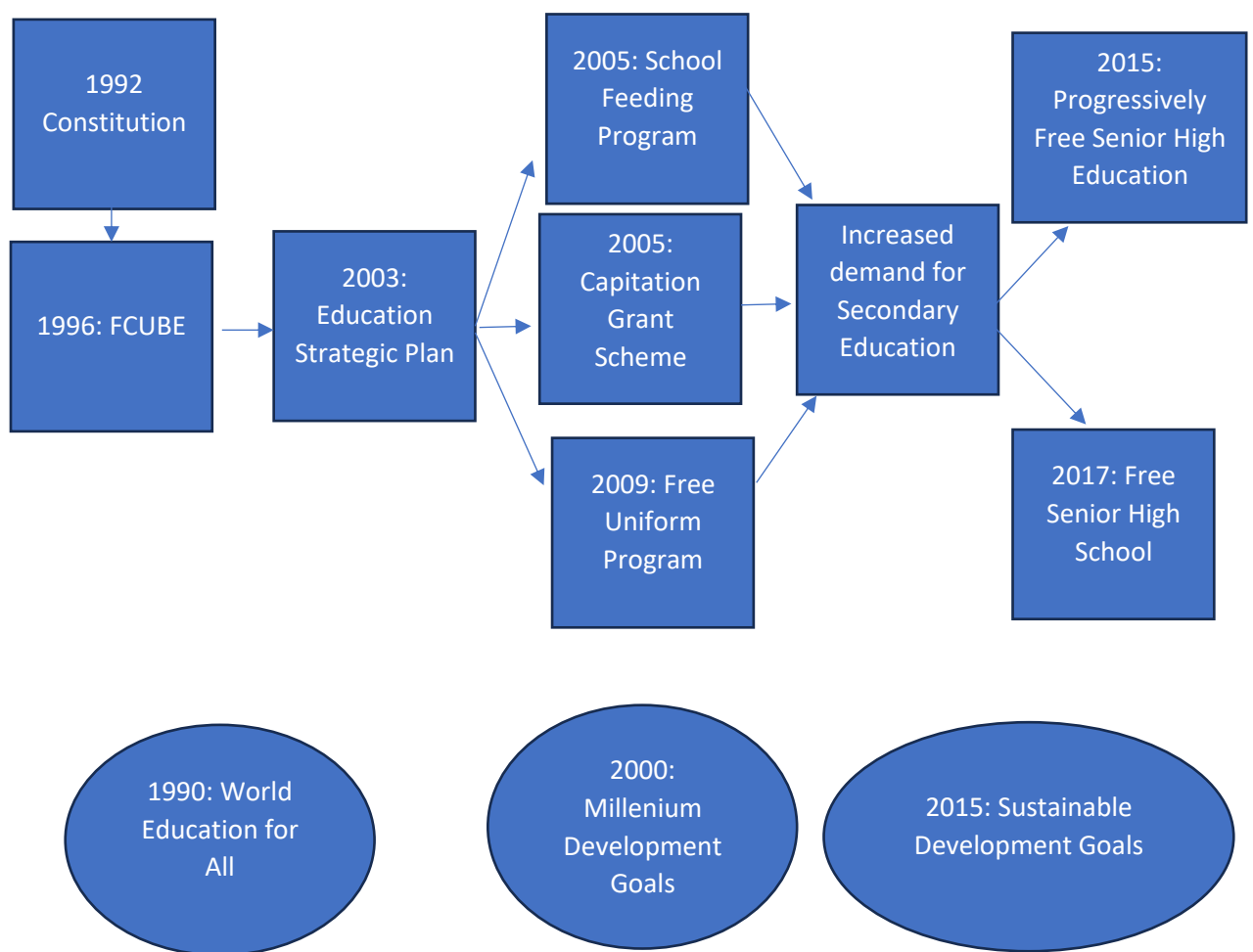
Embedded in the statement above is the concept of education as a right. Thus, in addition to addressing the bottleneck, FSHSP has been justified in other ways, including through a discourse of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that education is a fundamental human right for everyone, and this right is not only applicable at the primary level but also includes secondary education (UNESCO, 2020). Also, Goal 4, Target 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) states, "By 2030, all boys and girls complete free equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."

Further justification for FSHSP is framed within the human capital theory (Marginson, 2019), which holds that having a more educated populace leads to economic growth. Thus, opening access to secondary education is an investment since the graduates will function as agents of national development. In line with this, the Minister of Education, Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh, stated that the policy would prioritize offering students employable skills and thus increase the human capital base of the country (Free SHS Policy Ghana, 2018). Closely related to the human capital theory is the belief that education reduces poverty and ensures social mobility, which I indicated earlier is presently a highly contentious proposition in sub-Saharan Africa, given the prevalence of unemployment.

Figure 1 presents a visual of the national and global dynamics in the build-up to the FSHSP. As established thus far, efforts to expand access to secondary education were not a sudden development. The FSHSP represents a culmination of global and national dynamics to decrease the number of out-of-school adolescents.

Figure 1

National and Global Dynamics Leading up to Ghana's FSHSP



Features of Ghana's FSHSP

Tamanja and Pajibo (2019) highlighted the features of Ghana's FSHSP. They noted that the policy is available to all Ghanaian students placed in public secondary schools. The government pays all tuition fees and other ancillary fees and provides infrastructure, and a student can only benefit for three years. This corroborates the inscription on the FSHSP website, which reads: "By free SHS we mean free tuition, admission fee, textbooks, library fees, science center fees, fees for ICT, examination fee, payment of utility fee, boarding and meals" (Free SHS Policy Ghana, 2018). Moreover, the government pays boarding fees for boarders while providing lunch daily for day students. The government also introduced what they called "equitable access policy" which entailed allocating or reserving 30% of spots in the elite schools to graduates from public junior high schools (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). Elite schools are schools that have the best facilities and have performed very well over the years. They are usually called Category A and B schools (Bart-Plange, 2019). Reserving 30% percent of spots in the elite schools to graduates of public basic schools is not counterintuitive given that the results of students in private schools are usually better than those graduating from public schools. Aside from that, private education is more expensive than public education at the basic level in Ghana, and it is usually for the privileged (Tooley et al., 2007). This is despite the prevalence of several low-cost private basic schools in the nation (Brion, 2020).

The FSHSP is funded by proceeds from Ghana's oil revenue (Kwarteng, 2021). The Public Interest & Accountability Committee (PIAC) is an independent statutory committee set up to ensure the accountability and transparency of Ghana's oil revenue. In line with Tamanja and Pajibo (2019), PIAC (2020) observed that the government supplied most schools with sufficient core textbooks and the requisite school uniforms and jerseys on time. They also found that the

feeding of students improved drastically in terms of quality and variety. Nevertheless, there were concerns that the dependence on the country's oil revenue raises doubts regarding the program's long-term feasibility (Asante & Agbee, 2021; Cudjoe, 2018; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

However, the main criticism against the policy is that the same level of support is given to every student/school regardless of individual circumstances, and this concern translated into several calls for a targeted approach.

Calls for a Targeted Approach

Many people have raised concerns regarding the government's non-targeted approach to the FSHSP. The government made the same provision for every student regardless of their circumstances (Akuffo, 2024; Partey, 2017). While many people have called on the government to ditch the wholesale or blanket approach, the reasoning for this call varies. Even though most people agreed that the policy represented a viable way to ensure that those who have historically been unable to access secondary education were not left behind, they insisted the policy should be exclusively for low-income people. For example, a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Prof Addae-Mensah, stated that the government should allow the rich to pay and let the poor enjoy free education. According to him, this represents how the rich can help the state provide quality educational facilities and help those who are incapable of affording secondary education (Akakpo, 2021). The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Reverend Professor Joseph Obiri Yeboah Mante, also expressed the same view:

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana is of the strong opinion that the state can churn out some of these cost for parents who are capable of paying to do so. There are several parents who are capable of funding their ward's studies. (Arhinful, 2022)

The comment by the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana is significant because, since the colonial era, religious bodies have played a crucial part in formal education in Ghana (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975).

Yet, the argument that the policy should be exclusive to those who needed it raised confusion, particularly regarding distinguishing between those who needed it and those who did not. How, for instance, do you determine those who, without the policy, cannot enroll and those who, regardless of the policy, can access secondary education? To this end, some, including Kofi Asare, the Director of Africa Education Watch, suggested that students who graduated from private basic schools should not benefit from the policy (Ankrah, 2022). This is not farfetched since private education is more expensive than public education at the basic level in Ghana (Tooley et al., 2007), and any parent who can afford the exorbitant fees charged by private basic schools should be able to cater to their ward without government assistance.

Furthermore, in determining those who really needed the policy and those who could thrive even without the policy, several Ghanaian scholars have suggested using mean testing to identify the haves and the have-nots. Dr Peter Partey, a lecturer at the University of Cape Coast, was one of the foremost advocates of means testing, an administrative process used to determine whether or not an individual or their family is qualified to receive one form of benefits or another from the government based on the income or other income-related factors of the individual or their family (Partey, 2021). He was not the only one with this view. Prof. Aryeetey, the current Secretary-General of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, stated:

I believe strongly that we need to target people, and the most appropriate way is by means-testing. Means testing by the government will reduce the cost of tuition to the

government, and the monies saved channelled to improving the facilities and providing quality service. (Boakye, 2022)

However, Appenteng (2022) believed that given that most people in Ghana are in the informal sector, means testing did not appear to be a feasible suggestion, as it would not generate accurate data upon which to base a means-tested financial aid targeting the poorest students.

Nevertheless, Dr Peter Anti Partey, an education economist at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, opined that students could be grouped into three distinct categories based on data extracted from basic school students at the time of registering for the gateway examination, Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Thus, depending on their financial ability, students who deserve a total absorption of their fees would be granted full scholarships, while others benefit from partial scholarships, and those who could pay are allowed to pay (Partey, 2021). This view of Dr Peter Anti Partey was echoed by Akuffo (2024) when she suggested that collecting background information about students, particularly household income per year, would enable policymakers to determine those who should be targeted as beneficiaries.

Relatedly, the Africa Education Watch (2023) also suggested that the government could draw on the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP)⁵ program data to identify economically disadvantaged families. In a study by Nkegbe (2024), he found that most parents were willing to support their children's senior high school education financially, particularly in terms of covering the cost of meals. Dwomoh et al. (2023) also insisted that cost-sharing with parents, especially the rich ones, represented one feasible way of sustaining the policy.

⁵ LEAP is a government initiative that offers financial support and health insurance to households living in extreme poverty throughout Ghana.

The main reason mooted for a targeted approach was that the FSHSP, in its current form, takes a huge toll on the country's economy. Expressions such as "burden," "financial burden," "financial challenges," "huge expenditure," and "economic challenges" were associated with the policy. For instance, Professor Adei insisted that "Free SHS must be reviewed. It is costing Ghana too much" (Nyavor, 2022). This position was reiterated by the Institute of Statistical, Social, and Economic Research (ISSER) at the University of Ghana. ISSER revealed that the government's revenue position would make it impossible for the FSHSP to be sustainable. To this end, ISSER suggested that the FSHSP focus on low-income households. This way, only the families who need free secondary education would get it while saving the country huge sums of money (Searyoh, 2019). This stance is akin to the one held by a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Professor Ernest Aryeetey, who insisted that targeting only students with "genuine financial needs" would help "lessen the burden on government's treasury" ("Free SHS Targeted," 2022).

Similarly, Cudjoe (2018) noted that the implementation of the policy would negatively impact the country's economy since the budgetary allocation for the policy in its current form would exert undue pressure on the country's finances. Cudjoe (2018) thus suggested that, rather than implementing this policy wholesale, the government should adopt a targeted approach, focussing on only the poor. The targeted approach could comprise scholarships and quotas, thus allowing wealthy parents to pay fees while the poor benefit from the policy. To Cudjoe, this would relieve the government of the burden of paying for every student, thereby allowing funds to be channelled into other sectors. Advocates for a targeted approach thus contended that the wholesale approach of paying for every student was not sustainable since revenue generated from Ghana's oil is finite. These corroborate earlier research results by Mohammed and Kuyini

(2021), Dwomoh et al. (2024), Nkegbe (2024), and Adarkwah (2022) that cost-sharing represents one way of sustaining the policy.

These calls for a review of the FSHSP to save the country's economy became more rampant following the economic decline the country experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent decision of the Ghana government to apply to the IMF for a bailout (Inveen & Savage, 2022; Medina, 2024). For example, Mr. Seth Terkper, a former finance minister in the erstwhile NDC government, insisted that FSHSP constituted a significant drain on the country's economy and needed to be reviewed to revive the economy (Donkor, 2022).

The Africa Education Watch (2023) revealed that the budgetary allocation for the FSHSP in 2023 was 2.95 billion Ghana Cedis. To put this in perspective, the budgetary allocation for the year 2017 was 400 million Ghana Cedis. The over-concentration of the country's revenue on secondary education was thus preventing the government from making funds available for other equally important sectors of the economy. For example, in 2021, the FSHSP accounted for most of the nation's spending (Sasu, 2023), preventing the government from making adequate fiscal provisions for the health, transportation, or agriculture sectors. Even in education, the over-concentration of the government on secondary level alone posed a threat to other levels of education, such as early childhood education, primary education, and tertiary education.

Others also raised concerns regarding the inequitable nature of the wholesale approach. This group argued that providing the same support to all students without taking cognizance of their peculiar circumstances would disadvantage people experiencing poverty and maintain the status quo. For example, Dr. Agyapomaa Gyeke-Darko, a senior lecturer at the University of Ghana Business School, insisted that “We need to be able to look at the segment of people who need it. If we carry out wholesale policies, what happens is that we widen further the [in]equality

gap” (Yeboah, 2022). To her, the wholesale approach of implementing the policy would exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor. This concurs with the findings of Akuffo (2024) that the rich were benefitting more from the policy than the poor. Akuffo (2024) spoke to students and found that children from wealthy homes and children from poor households experienced the policy differently. Thus, while the children from wealthy homes contended that the policy enabled equitable access, children from poor households thought otherwise. She advised that the government needed to acknowledge that some students needed additional support in addition to waiving school fees. This advice is not farfetched, given that low enrollment at the secondary school level in Ghana transcends financial barriers. For instance, even after the rollout of the FSHSP, enrollment at SHS stood at 45% compared to 95% and 85% for primary and junior high school, respectively (Takyi et al., 2019). This might be because of the opportunity cost of secondary education vis-a-vis the expected returns of secondary education (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). In sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana, unemployment is always on the rise, and most low-income families invariably depend on children who have to engage in income-generating activities to supplement their families' income (Nguyen & King, 2022; Ngware et al., 2006; Ohba, 2011). Akyeampong (2009) thus concluded that household demand for education is influenced by how the parents appraise education as an investment and the opportunity costs of education.

Chanimbe and Prah (2020) examined whether Ghana's FSHSP ensures equity among students from the different schools. They noted that since secondary schools in Ghana were categorized in terms of how well-resourced they are, it was preposterous to think that removing cost barriers to access would provide all students with the same educational experience. They therefore argued that students in the less endowed schools were heavily disadvantaged despite

the policy. Thus, they concluded that the “cost per child approach” does not augur well for less-resourced schools, so giving all schools equal amounts based on the number of students enrolled does not ensure equity. Mohammed and Kuyini (2020) noted that the fact that some of the students were boarders, while others were day students, was a testament to the inequitable nature of the FSHSP. They also found that inequities manifested when the most qualified teachers were concentrated in the so-called elite schools in the cities, leaving the rural areas to employ the average teachers. Furthermore, they noted inequity regarding the distribution of textbooks, as urban schools received the whole consignment of their textbooks on time, which was not the case with rural schools.

FSHSP and Enrollment Drive

Access to SHS in Ghana has been limited in two main ways: a gateway examination, Basic Education Certificate Education (BECE), and cost (Duflo et al., 2021). For instance, from 2014 to 2018, at least 28% of those who sat for BECE failed, and the failure rate was profound in rural communities. Moreover, even among those who passed and were admitted to secondary school, only 70% enrolled the following year due to financial constraints (Nugba et al., 2021). Takyi et al. (2019) asserted that the Government of Ghana introduced FSHSP to offset the financial hurdle to accessing secondary education in Ghana, leading to a 32% increase in enrollment.

The policy has achieved considerable gains, including and especially in broadening access to secondary education (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Duah et al., 2023; Takyi et al., 2019; Salifu & Ayamba, 2018). For example, an education think tank, African Education Watch (2023), noted that the FSHSP increased the population of secondary students from 813,448 in the 2016–17 academic year to 1.3 million in the 2022–23 academic year. The most plausible

explanation for this surge in enrollment is the elimination of fees, which have long served as a significant barrier to accessing secondary education (Adarkwah, 2022; Akyeampong, 2009; Takyi et al., 2019). Direct costs (school fees) have been a significant barrier to secondary education across sub-Saharan Africa. Due to this, major initiatives to boost school enrollment, retention, and completion rates have targeted cost reduction or elimination of fees (Akyeampong, 2009). Thus, the FSHSP eliminated cost, which served as a barrier to secondary education. This led to over two million basic school graduates who would not have been able to access secondary education enrolling in various secondary schools. In February 2020, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia declared the FSHSP to be "the most significant social intervention since independence" ("Free SHS... social intervention", 2020).

Abolishing fees thus presented many basic school graduates, who otherwise might not have made it to the secondary level, the opportunity to transition from the basic level to the secondary level⁶. Upon implementation, the FSHSP led to a boom in the population of students entering secondary school. Within a year of implementation, enrollment rose from 308,000 in 2016 to 430,000 in 2018 (Kerr, 2020). By 2023, the student population in most secondary schools in the country had doubled compared to the pre-Free SHS era (Duah et al., 2023). It improved access for poor and rural people (Animah, 2018; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) and improved enrollment and completion rates for girls (Stenzel et al., 2024). Regarding the massive increase in girls' enrollment at the secondary school level, the vice president noted that, with the advent of the FSHSP, it had become difficult for people to acquire domestic servants since all the

⁶ In Ghana, basic education comprises six years of primary school and three years of junior high school (JHS). After the basic education, students write the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), organized by the West African Examination Council (WAEC), after which they proceed to the secondary level.

girls were enrolled in the various schools (“Free SHS made,” 2021). Consequently, many parents reported being satisfied with the policy (Addae et al., 2019).

Boateng (2019) noted that even though poor urban households benefitted more than poor rural households, it is undisputed that the FSHSP has the propensity to reduce poverty overall. Adu-Ababio and Osei (2018) also found that the policy reduced poverty to a small extent. They further stated that female-headed households and households with children benefitted most from the policy, as resources that otherwise might have gone into fees are channeled into other projects or endeavors. Given the role of FSHSP in poverty reduction, it is not surprising that Salifu and Ayamba (2018) also found that the policy will make it easier for parents to get their wards to the tertiary level as parents can save for the tertiary level. PIAC (2020) noticed that the FSHSP led to an enrollment surge in almost half of the schools visited, though the rise in girls' enrollment was significant compared to boys. PIAC also observed that, unlike the pre-FSHSP era, students benefiting from the policy reported to school very early anytime school reopens. Similarly, Salifu and Ayamba (2018) found that FSHSP increased enrollment, leading to a corresponding decrease in teenage pregnancy and early marriages. They indicated that the policy has been beneficial to orphans and needy students. Also, Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) stated that FSHSP increased enrollment in all the schools they researched except those in Northern Ghana. The situation in Northern Ghana is unsurprising because of the Northern Grant, which covers tuition, lodging, feeding, and some ancillary fees for students of Northern ancestry. The Northern Grant had been in existence long before FSHSP.

Though the policy ensured an increase in enrollment, parents argued that it did not necessarily guarantee an entirely 'free' education (Addae et al., 2019). This finding brings to the fore the hidden cost associated with non-tuition costs such as uniforms, boarding fees, and

learning materials (Kerr, 2020). In this case, the offered education was not entirely free but relatively affordable. However, affordability can be relative, meaning these ancillary fees meant different things to students of diverse economic backgrounds. Therefore, according to Kerr (2020), the priority of governments regarding free education should be to ensure equity by paying attention to the various disadvantaged groups, not equality. To ensure that policies achieve equity, policymakers must ensure that the policies target the disadvantaged, poor, or marginalized students with more scholarships, bursaries, cash transfers, or offering them tokens for transportation.

Infrastructural Challenges and the Double Track System

Mohammed and Kuyini (2020) argued that while much attention was paid to removing the cost barrier to increase access, there were no corresponding efforts to improve infrastructure or the teacher-student ratio. As such, the increase in enrollment exposed the huge infrastructural and teacher deficit in the country's education system. In this way, the increase in enrollment did not correspond to quality. In short, the facilities in the schools were not commensurate with the enrollment boom that came with the FSHSP. Likewise, in Kenya, Nzuki (2008) noted that the implementation of FSE was negatively affected by the lack of infrastructure to keep up with the increase in enrollment. In the case of Tanzania, the rise in enrollment put additional pressure on school administrators, as schools could not meet students' logistical and academic needs (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020).

Several studies regarding Ghana's FSHSP have noted infrastructural challenges, such as a lack of dormitories, an inadequate number of classrooms, and a lack of beds in the dormitories (Adarkwah, 2022; Bart-Plange, 2019; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). The massive increase in enrollment and the accompanying lack of infrastructure forced the government to introduce a

Double-Track System (DTS). The DST system divided students in a year batch into two tracks (gold and green tracks) so that all students could use the same limited facilities, albeit at different times (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Takyi et al., 2019). So, while the first batch of students, referred to as the “green track,” started their term in September and ended in December, the second batch, the “gold track,” started in January and ended in April. This arrangement was meant to be a stopgap measure even as the government made efforts to build more schools to resolve the huge infrastructural deficit that the FSHSP had exposed (Asante & Agbee, 2021; Offei, 2018).

The DTS increased schools' capacity to take more students, which would not have been possible with the single-track system (Tamanja & Pajibo, 2019). Osei-Owusu and Akenten-Appiah (2021) assessed the DTS in the Sekyere Central District in Ghana, where they found that the policy led to a better teacher-student ratio and increased contact hours, leading to judicious use of the limited resources available to the government. However, teachers view the DTS as harming quality teaching and learning due to the government's inability to provide the needed resources and funds to keep up with the DTS. They also indicated that there is enormous pressure on limited school resources.

Though Osei-Owusu and Akenten-Appiah (2021) insisted that the DTS increased contact hours and improved the teacher-student ratio, Tamanja and Pajibo (2019) found that, even with the DTS, teachers were not able to complete the syllabus. They also found a lack of stakeholder consultation before resorting to the DTS. Though the DST enabled the schools to admit and retain more students, it compromised quality (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Takyi et al., 2019).

Tamanja and Pajibo (2019) stated that teachers working in both tracks earned more while contact hours and vacation periods increased, thus pointing to the efficient use of the teaching force. They also identified reduced class size as one advantage of the DTS. However, they found

that though the policy led to the recruitment of an extra 8000 teachers, the government did not pay them for at least five months following the assumption of duty, a situation that can demotivate teachers and consequently affect the quality of teaching. Therefore, Tamanja and Pajibo (2019) contended that the policy aims were quite over-ambitious given the Ghanaian socio-economic and educational context. Takyi et al. (2019) stated that the DTS increased enrollment while reducing costs since different tracks used the same facilities. However, they indicated that the DTS could adversely affect academic performance, teacher motivation, and increased expenses for maintaining school facilities. Recruitment of teachers for the two tracks can also undermine quality, as was evident in recruiting over 8000 extra teachers, most of whom were not professionals. Finally, they indicated that DTS could negatively impact students' educational experiences since there is not enough time to engage in co-curricular activities. It is, however, essential to note that anecdotal evidence pointed to how parents had to scramble for extra private tuition for their wards to prevent them from being idle because of the long vacation periods. This situation further exacerbated inequities as only certain classes of the populace possessed the financial wherewithal to afford private tuition.

FSHSP and Private Schools

Bray and Kwo (2013) argued that while the Education for All (EFA) agenda increased enrollment in schools, there was a corresponding decrease in the quality of education provided, particularly in developing countries. Aside from this, the study's findings also indicated that fee-free education led to the rise in private supplementary tutoring, a phenomenon they referred to as “shadow education” (p. 481). For Bray and Kwo (2013), shadow education provided some states and governments with a covert way of privatizing education, which the authors argued had dire consequences for reproducing social inequalities. They also found that the private tutoring

industry tended to deplete mainstream education as it continued to attract talented tutors from the mainstream.

Surprisingly, according to Cudjoe (2018), the FSHSP rendered private schools redundant in Ghana. The implementation of the FSHSP adversely affected private secondary schools, as enrollment in the various schools dropped drastically after the policy was introduced. For instance, the Ghana National Association of Private Schools claimed that the FSHSP led to the closure of 20 private schools (Kwarteng, 2021). This concurs with Mohammed's (2020) findings that private schools became redundant due to the FSHSP. This is notwithstanding the fact that most of these private schools boasted of adequate facilities and could thus absorb some of the students, having been licensed by the GES to operate. Cudjoe (2018), therefore, suggested that the government partner with over 300 private secondary schools, as is the case in Uganda and Mauritius.

Some Downsides of the Policy

PIAC (2020) raised several concerns regarding the implementation of the policy. They noted that, although core textbooks were provided to students, the government did not inform parents that they were required to purchase elective textbooks. As a result, the absence of elective textbooks had a negative impact on teaching and learning. PIAC also asserted that the abolition of cut-off grades affected students' performance, as students who might not have otherwise qualified for admission found themselves in secondary schools. Additionally, some schools complained about the delayed arrival of the FSHSP fund from the government and the lack of adequate infrastructure and equipment to handle the enrollment surge.

PIAC (2020) revealed that the DTS made teachers teach all year round without adequate holidays. This was the case with the non-teaching staff, including matrons, cooks, pantry hands,

cleaners, and security officers. Working all year round can lead to fatigue and impact the quality of teaching. Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) researched some of the challenges associated with implementing the FSHSP by conducting a study that comprised six different schools, five in Southern Ghana and one in Northern Ghana. They found that, while it was evident that there were not enough teachers in the rural schools, urban schools had to contend with overcrowded classrooms, which increased the workload on teachers, especially those teaching core subjects.

Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) noted that issues with poor teacher-student and student-to-class ratios predate the FSHSP era. However, the student-to-class ratio remained abysmal despite the government introducing the DTS. For instance, in 2019, on average, 52 students were assigned to a class that, prior to 2017, had an average of 35 students (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) also found that schools in urban areas received adequate textbooks, while the situation differed for rural areas. There was unanimity in the fact that funds for the policy were not released on time. Additionally, the increase in student population led to an increase in indiscipline among students, as the number of students outnumbered the teachers (Salifu & Ayamba, 2018).

Implementation of the Policy

Scholars have decried the rushed implementation, arguing that essential stages, such as consulting stakeholders and considering alternatives, were neglected (Adarkwah, 2022; Mohammed, 2020; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). Mohammed (2020) asserted that the FSHSP did not follow the required policy cycle, which includes problem identification, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation. In this regard, Mohammed (2020) noted that President Akufo-Addo, rather than setting the agenda by first identifying the problem, "started with a solution looking for a problem to solve" (p. 13). This might mean the concept of

FSHSP was devised as a vote-buying tactic. Mohammed and Kuyini (2020) assessed the FSHSP in Ghana, focusing on the policy's process and political dimension. They elicited stakeholder perceptions about the policy's implementation and the challenges confronting the implementation of the FSHSP in Ghana. They revealed that the government placed an undue emphasis on the policy's political gains, specifically winning an election. Consequently, little attention was paid to the process, as the writers note that the government did not follow the established procedure for implementing policies. They contended that some essential stages of the policy process were neglected or poorly executed. Furthermore, the General Secretary of the Ghana National Association of Teachers disclosed that his union was sidelined from initial discussions regarding the FSHSP (Adogla-Bessa, 2017). Also, the policy was not subjected to parliamentary debates and approval as had been the case for policies such as the Ghana Industrial Policy (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020) and the National Health Insurance Scheme (Christmalls & Aidam, 2020).

Education Policy and Politics

As already established, the NPP government introduced the FSHSP to fulfill a campaign promise. Many scholars have noted the link between FSHSP and politics, with many stating that the government was overly concerned with fulfilling its campaign promise (Adarkwah, 2022; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). These concerns regarding politics and education in Ghana are not novel. Indeed, several scholars have bemoaned the inclusion of educational policies in the manifestos of political parties, indicating that it weakens the process of ascertaining feasibility and serves as a hindrance to adopting evidence-based policies (Amarh, 2017; Donkoh et al., 2019; Donkoh et al., 2023; Gunu, 2019; Nudzor, 2014). This is because political transitions are often associated with changes in education policies, thereby disallowing continuity (Adam-Yawson et al., 2021; Akuffo, 2024; Nudzor, 2014; Owusu-Kwarteng et al., 2018). The duration

of secondary education is demonstrative—In 1974, the National Redemption Council mandated a 4-year duration, which the Provisional National Defense Council changed to 3 years in 1987. In 2000, the NPP reversed it to 4 years; the NDC later changed it to 3 years in 2009 (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016). Furthermore, in 2015, the NDC implemented the PFSHSE, which was later changed to FSHSP by the NPP in 2017. Adam-Yawson et al. (2021) argue that it is necessary to separate national politics from educational issues to improve education in Ghana. Amarh (2017) noted that politicization of education hinders Ghana from attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is also the view that political parties include education policies in their campaigns without first considering the implementation cost, resulting in an impasse (Gunu, 2019). Peter Anti Partey, an education economist, researcher, and curriculum expert at the University of Cape Coast, described FSHSP as a political policy (Partey, 2021). Apart from these, there are anecdotal claims of politicization of education policies in Ghana.

Ghana's situation is not peculiar. Across sub-Saharan Africa, politicians increasingly harness education policies to garner support for their political aspirations. Increased educational access, in particular, becomes a promise made to garner votes. In the early to mid-1990s, new governments in Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda announced Universal Primary Education (UPE) immediately after winning elections, as they had promised it during the election campaign (Riddell, 2003). President Hakainde Hichilema's introduction of free secondary education in Zambia in 2022 fulfilled a campaign promise (Zenda, 2022). Apart from these, the introduction of free secondary school policies in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda fulfilled campaign promises (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). Writing about Uganda's USE, Chapman et al. (2010) asserted that, through USE, the Ugandan government tried to achieve both political and educational goals.

They, however, added that it was not feasible to achieve both goals simultaneously. The terms free and universal helped in getting votes from the citizens (Chapman et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that this phenomenon is not exclusive to sub-Saharan Africa. Writing about education policies in the US, in his bestseller, *Children as Pawns: The Politics of Educational Reform*, Hacsí (2009) posited that elected officials develop policies that are in line with their political interests, paying little heed to educational research regarding feasibility:

It would be wishful thinking to expect politicians to make evidence a leading determinant in the policies they choose to advocate. Being [re]elected drives most politicians, not the public good; or to be somewhat less cynical, politicians define the public good largely in the terms espoused by those who voted for them, by the stand of their political party, and by those who fund their campaigns. (p. 209)

The above quote points to the fact that, regardless of the rhetoric politicians advance, their primary focus is winning the next election. Moreover, politicians have a very short time (four years) to impress their base; therefore, rather than follow the proper democratic processes, which has the potential to slow the process, they proceed with a focus on their politically feasible timelines, which most, often than not, are at odds with due process and practical implementation (Hess & McShane, 2018; Hudson et al., 2019).

Politicians tend to implement populist policies that enhance their chances of winning elections, and this leads to the formulation of education policies without consulting and collaborating with major stakeholders, who would have provided vital information leading to more feasible policies. Consequently, elected officials sometimes formulate policies that are too idealistic and doomed to fail (Hudson et al., 2019). Such failures could be attributed to a lack of

proper feasibility analysis to determine the contextual practicality of these policies. For example, the bottlenecks in implementing UPE in Kenya (Sifuna, 2004) and USE in Uganda (Chapman et al., 2010) were due to their governments implementing these policies for political gains rather than as a response to educational concerns. Thus, the implementation exposed their unreadiness in terms of infrastructure and personnel.

Politically motivated populist education policies often sidestep important discussions regarding affordability or feasibility, overly concentrating on the acceptability of the policy by the masses. Nevertheless, "even a widely accepted policy may run into trouble while being implemented" (Patton et al., 2013, p. 288). Politicizing education policies keeps curriculum experts and teachers away from policy discussions, denying the nation the benefit of their valuable insights and expertise. Moreover, when teachers feel overlooked in the formulation process, they are less likely to be motivated to implement the policies. Politicizing education policies undermines the credibility of formulated policies and hinders implementation, resulting in numerous failures and bottlenecks (Donkoh et al., 2019).

Chapter Three: Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations upon which I built this dissertation. I begin by highlighting the difficulty or impossibility of arriving at a straightforward definition of policy, noting that scholars define the term according to their orientation. Next, I review the two main orientations to policy studies—the traditional and critical approaches—emphasizing how scholars within these orientations view policy. I then introduce the anthropology of policy frame, locating it within the critical policy orientation and highlighting how it offers a valuable lens for studying education policies as more than a text but encompassing discourses, practices, interpretations, and how various policy actors experience policies in their daily lives. I end the chapter by highlighting teachers' role in the policy process.

What is Policy?

Coming up with a simple definition of the term policy has proved difficult because policy means different things to different people. Torjman (2005) maintains that "there is no simple answer" to the question "What is policy?" (p. 1), while Stephen Ball admits to having "theoretical uncertainties" about the meaning of policy (Ball, 1993, p. 15). Despite these uncertainties, there is a consensus that how scholars define and analyze a policy is contingent on the approach they adopt. While there are many approaches to studying policy, most fall into two broad groups: Traditional and critical.

Traditional Policy Analysis

The traditional perspective of viewing and understanding policy assumes "a logical and scientific approach for examining policy processes and impact" (Young & Diem, 2018, p. 80). It adopts a positivist orientation and views policies as formalized acts or objective decisions made after rational deliberations by official units such as the government or school board (Molla,

2021; Yang, 2014). Thus, policies emerge after these authorities have systematically and carefully considered all options and arrived at the best option (Yang, 2014). Consequently, the traditional approach aims to identify the “best” solutions after objectively analyzing all possible options (Yang, 2014). Policy analysts adopting the traditional approach consider the policy a linear process comprising predictable stages (Diem et al., 2014; Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). For this reason, some scholars refer to the traditional approach to the study of policies as the scientific approach to the study of policy, whereas others call it the rational orientation to policy analysis. The traditional approach aims to inform decision-making by producing "objective knowledge" that helps predict policy outcomes, ascertain whether implementation is going according to plan, advise policymakers, and improve government practices (Diem et al., 2014; Molla, 2021; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Simons et al., 2009).

Consequently, within a traditional orientation, policies are usually defined in relation to the government, the state, or an authority such as a district or provincial school board, assuming that the policies emerged after considering all possible alternatives and settling on the best course of action. Most scholars within the traditional orientation associate policies with the government. Dye (1972), for instance, defines policy as "whatever governments choose to do or not to do" (p. 2). Thus, the "purpose of policy in this model is to solve problems and/or achieve stated objectives" (Simons et al., 2009, p. 36). To this end, an education policy can be viewed as a course of action undertaken by governments to address educational issues or enhance educational outcomes. Viennet and Pont (2017) view education policies as “the actions taken by governments in relation with educational practices, and how governments address the production and delivery of education in a given system” (p. 19). Similarly, Hartshorne (1999), cited in Barnett (2021), defines education policy "as a course of action adopted by governments, through

legislation, ordinances, and regulations, and pursued through administration and control, finance and inspection, with a general assumption that it should be beneficial to the country and its citizens” (p. 390). Consequently, in understanding education policies from the rational perspective, the policy analyst focuses on “the technically best course of action” (Yang, 2014, p. 289) emanating from the government regarding access expansion, students’ assessment, education funding, educational equity, learning outcomes, and preparing students for the future, among others.

The traditional approach has been criticized for ignoring policies' complex and political nature and assuming that policy processes are orderly and value-neutral (Yang, 2014). Aside from that, critics highlight the impracticality of considering all alternatives before arriving at the best option (Yang, 2014). The traditional or the rational approach has also been problematized for ignoring the power dynamics inherent in societies (Savage, 2021) and the fact that societies are heterogeneous and “agreement among different people cannot be reached easily” (Yang, 2014, p. 290). Moreover, although “the state plays a central role in education policy” (Winton, 2011, p. 249), merely defining policy in relation to government or authoritative bodies represents a limited understanding of what policy entails (Farhadi & Winton, 2022). This assertion is particularly unsurprising in the education sector, given that other agencies, including international development organizations and non-governmental organizations, can also propose and push through education policies.

Implicit in the traditional approach is the presupposition that policies inure to the benefit of all parties involved since policies emanate from a consensus regarding the best course of action. However, this way of thinking elides the fact that, in every consensus, compromises are

made, and these compromises can benefit some people at the expense of others or, at the very least, benefit people disproportionately.

Critical Policy Analysis

The critical policy orientation, developed from a range of disciplinary orientations in response to the limitations of the traditional orientation to policy analysis, rejects the positivist approach to policy analysis (Simons et al., 2009; Winton & Staples, 2022). Yang (2014) refers to this way of understanding policy as the “conflict perspective,” recognizing that societies are diverse in terms of values and access to power. Thus, policies do not emanate from consensus. Instead, policies emanate from a conflict of interest—“Policies do not emerge in a vacuum but reflect compromises between the competing interests” (Yang, 2014, p. 292). Scholars refer to this approach differently. For example, some scholars (e.g., Diem et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 1997; Winton, 2013; Young & Diem, 2018) use the term critical policy analysis (CPA), whereas Rizvi and Lingard (2010) refer to it as critical education policy analysis. Others, such as Ball (1997) and Regmi (2017), use the term “policy sociology in education,” while Molla (2021) refers to this approach as “critical policy scholarship.” As the name suggests, this approach is “critical” in that it considers the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts within which policies are formulated and implemented (Taylor et., 1997).

The critical approach thus offers a foil to the traditional approach because it holds that policy processes are not linear, that policies are not value-neutral, and that policies tend to benefit certain groups at the expense of others (Winton & Staples, 2022). Yang (2014) asserts that societies comprise diverse groups with different interests and values, making it difficult to define what is best for every group. These diverse groups wield and exercise power differently, and the critical education policy orientation pays attention to issues of power and politics within

education (Simons et al., 2009). Thus, policies are inherently political, which is unsurprising given that the terms "policy" and "politics" are etymologically related (Regmi, 2017). As such, Molla (2021) explains policy as “a deeply human process” that impacts and is, in turn, impacted by “assumptions, aspirations, biases, and political preferences” (p. 4). Researchers adopting this approach also argue that policy processes are messy and, often, policy outcomes are unpredictable since they exist in and are impacted by various contextual factors (Taylor et al., 1997).

Consequently, a critical orientation to policy analysis sheds light on “who gets what in education systems, whose values are being authoritatively allocated in policy instruments, and whose voices are silenced in policy processes” (Molla, 2021, p. 4), illuminating CPA scholars’ commitment to social change, justice, and reform (Simons et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1997). Importantly, critical policy analysts contend that policies are not limited to authoritative texts or decisions emanating from governments but rather transcend formalized government decisions into the realms of practice, impact, and effect. For example, Taylor et al. (1997) note that;

Policy is much more than a specific document or text. Rather, policy is both process and product. In such a conceptualization, policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice.

(pp. 24-25)

Implicit in the above quote is Ball’s (1994) famous conceptualization of policy as “both text and action, words and deeds” (p. 10). However, the most distinctive feature of researchers that ascribe to the critical orientation to policy analysis is their interest in the distribution of power in the policy process while at the same time making visible how historical and contemporary contextual factors impact policy formulation, enactment, and outcomes (Molla, 2021; Taylor et

al., 1997; Yang, 2014). While noting the salience of power in the policy process, critical policy analysts acknowledge that power is context-specific. Yang (2014) opines that “a person of authority in one setting does not necessarily hold the same amount of authority in other settings” (p. 292). For instance, while governments and, sometimes, non-governmental agencies wield enormous power during policy formulation, their power, at least in practice, does not always extend to the policy implementation environment in the same measure. The policy implementation literature is replete with teachers exercising their power by doing whatever they choose, regardless of authoritative mandates (Duarte & Brewer, 2022; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). Young and Diem (2018) note that education scholars who draw on CPA typically pay attention to one or more of the following:

- (a) Interrogating the roots and development of educational policy; (b) probing the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality; (c) examining the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge and the creation of “winners” and “losers;” (d) scrutinizing the complex systems and environments in which policy is made and implemented; (e) exploring social stratification and the impact of policy on relationships of privilege and inequality; (f) investigating the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of historically underrepresented groups. (p. 82)

CPA scholars are often, therefore, interested in how policy decisions are arrived at, focusing on whose voices dominate the policy formulation and whose voices are silenced in the policy process. In other words, CPA scholars investigate power-specific or power-informed domination, marginalization, and exclusion that prevail in policy decision-making and implementation. Concomitantly, CPA scholars also investigate compliance and resistance by policy actors. CPA scholars pay attention to the discrepancy between policy proposals and policy realities. Aside

from these concerns, CPA highlights how policies affect diverse groups differently, paying attention to policy's role in eliminating, (re)producing, maintaining, or even exacerbating historical and contemporary marginalizations. CPA scholars illuminate how policies influence policy contexts and how these contexts, in turn, impact policies. Finally, CPA scholars pay attention to policy discourses and the discursive construction of policy problems (Ball, 1990, 1993; Bacchi, 2000; Hajer, 1995; Woodside-Jiron, 2011). According to Ball (1990),

Discourse provides a particular and pertinent way of understanding policy formation, for policies are, pre-eminently, statements about practice—the way things could or should be—which rest upon, derive from, statements about the world—about the way things are.

They are intended to bring about idealized solutions to diagnosed problems. (p. 22)

Bacchi (2000) explores this further, contending that how a problem is framed invariably determines whether action is required or not. She states that policy-as-discourse concerns "ways in which language, and more broadly discourse, sets limits upon what can be said" (p. 48). The study of discourse involves understanding how language functions and what users of language aim to accomplish. It encompasses what is said, who said it, whom it was said to, and for what purpose. Studying discourse thus entails paying attention to the speaker, the listener, the message and deciphering the purpose of the message. Discourse is intrinsically connected to the study of policy because policy is not only a text but also a form of discourse (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1993). Discourse is "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices" (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). Similarly, Shore and Wright (1997) view "discourse as configurations of ideas which provide threads from which ideologies are woven" (p. 14).

Policy actors draw upon and produce discourses to "impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices and criticize alternate social arrangements"

(Hajer, 2006, p. 71). In this way, discourse is a political activity. Siedel and Vidal (1997) note that “discourses are not purely symbolic resources and arguments, but resources that may be politically invested by social actors (such as government or non-governmental organizations) to particular ends” (p. 59). Thus, speakers use discourses to describe themselves and others because “it is through language that one goes about constructing their [own] identity, ascribing identities to others, [and] positioning others” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 3).

Yet, discourse is not merely a way of representing the world but rather connected to the structures of power, helping perpetuate or resist power imbalances and the consequent (re)production of dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; Hernández, 2016; Lester et al., 2016; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Woodside-Jiron, 2011). Policy discourse, then, represents a form and source of policy for persuasion, not information (Apthorpe, 1997).

Anthropology of Policy

Following earlier critical scholars (e.g., Diem et al., 2014; Fahadi & Winton, 2022), I view policy as encompassing more than decisions mandated by authoritative bodies, such as governments or school boards. Thus, I view policy not only as official mandates from authoritative bodies but also as extending to the realm of discourse and practice, including how people operationalize and practicalize external policies while being cognizant of the contextual factors within and without. Within the critical policy orientation, I draw on the anthropology of policy frame (Levinson et al., 2020; Shore & Wright, 2011; Wedel et al., 2005).

The anthropology of policy involves applying anthropological tools to the study of policies. Anthropologists have traditionally been interested in how people make sense of things. As a result, applying anthropology to policy studies entails investigating how policies impact people as they make sense of and interact with them and how people’s sense-making or

meaning-making of policies influences how these policies are actualized. According to Shore and Wright (1997), policies are inherently political, yet policymakers often conceal the political nature and intentions of policies, presenting them as utterly neutral. Therefore, apart from fieldwork to ascertain the impact of policies, anthropologists of policy pay particular attention to policy documents since policy documents can function “as rhetorical devices and discursive formations that function to empower some and silence others” (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 11-12).

Thus, the anthropology of policy interrogates the policy document because it is only through a critical study of the policy that a researcher can examine the processes or outcomes to determine whether they align with the policy objectives. However, Shore and Wright (1997) caution that instead of using the policy document as a “framework for analysis,” the anthropology of policy views the language of policymakers as “ethnographic data to be analyzed” (para. 1). Wedel (1999) asserts that the study of policy and anthropology are mutually inclusive because the study of policy concerns anthropological issues like “institutions and power; interpretation and meaning; ideology, rhetoric, and discourse; the politics of culture, ethnicity, and identity; and the global and the local” (p. 694). Anthropologists of policy refute the claim that policies are linear, objective, diagnostic, and responsive to social problems. To them,

Policy is a generative realm of cultural production, producing and shaped by values, norms, identities, and practices. Policymaking does not diagnose but rather produces problems to be solved through policy. Policy written as neutral and universal guidelines reproduces hierarchies of value through implementation. (Tate, 2020, p. 85)

As Levinson et al. (2018) submit, policy “lives in the liminal space between cultural norms and laws” (p. 25). With a view of policy as a socio-cultural practice (Shore et al., 2011) and policies functioning as instruments of governance and power (Levinson et al., 2020; Shore & Wright,

2011), the anthropology of policy focuses on the policy actors and institutions engaged in the policy process (Levinson et al., 2018; Pajo & Powers, 2017; Wedel et al., 2005). It explores the connection between various policy actors while attending to issues of power within the policy arena, highlighting “how the local or regional level is connected with the national level or the local, regional, or national level with the international” (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 40).

Employing the anthropology of policy frame in a study investigating the involvement of teachers in FSHSP formulation thus enables me to ascertain not only the relationship between teachers and the Government of Ghana but also situate the policy within global discourses regarding universal access to education. This way, the anthropology of policy frame helps to “uncover the constellation of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy decisions” (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 39). Following Tate’s (2020) suggestion that the study of policymaking requires “examining bureaucracies in relation to one another” (p. 87), I drew on the anthropology of policy frame to explore the power distribution in the policy formulation stage by highlighting how teachers understand their role and positionality vis-a-vis the government and how the government excluded teachers from the policy formulation stage. Also, against the backdrop that “policy [re]organizes social settings whose actors may have quite different levels of awareness or agreement about how they are being organized” (Levinson et al., 2020, p. 364), I noted how the changes wrought by FSHSP impacted teachers’ work and their daily lives.

A key component of the anthropology of policy frame relevant to this research is the concept of policy appropriation. According to Levinson et al. (2018), policy appropriation involves how “official top-down policy practices are negotiated, contested, accommodated, or transformed ‘on the ground’” (Levinson et al., 2018, p. 26). This is consistent with Farhadi and Winton’s (2022) assertion that policy encompasses how people interpret, translate, and

practicalize policies emanating from external sources into action. To this end, Farhadi and Winton (2022) contend that policies do not only come from the government but also include policy actors' "decisions, texts, and practices" (p. 50), thus evoking Ball's (1994) assertion that policies are "text and action, words and deeds" (p. 10).

To investigate teachers' appropriation of FSHSP, I focus on how teachers interpret and translate the policy in various schools, while acknowledging that these interpretations and translations are contingent upon contextual factors. The concept of policy appropriation underscores teachers' agency in the policy process. For example, since policy texts are prone to multiple interpretations, policy actors interpret these texts in line with "their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action..." (Levinson et al., 2018, p. 28). Teachers' power or agency is inherently present in their exercise of discretion in everyday practices related to policies. Policy appropriation, then, is an exercise of discretion and, by extension, power.

Therefore, because anthropologists of policy focus on the policy players, they can discern when and why a dichotomy exists between policy intentions and policy outcomes. Policy actors have the capacity "to make, remake, and unmake policy through their practices" (Koyama, 2017, p. 66), further corroborating Braun et al.'s (2011) assertion that policy outcomes are affected by the context within which the policies are enacted, particularly by policy actors and availability of resources. Therefore, I adopt a multi-sited ethnography for my research, focusing on teachers as policy actors while showing that how teachers enact the policies in their various schools is contingent not only on their dispositions alone but also on the (un)availability of resources in their schools.

Fundamental to anthropology is the concept of "studying up" (Nader, 1972, as cited Wedel, 2005). However, Wedel (2005) proposes "studying through" policies. He explains

“studying through” as a “process of following the source of a policy – its discourses, prescriptions, and programs—through to those affected by the policies” (p. 695). Shore and Wright (1997) also argue that “‘studying through’ entails multi-site ethnographies which trace policy connections between different organizational and everyday worlds, even where actors in different sites do not know each other or share a moral universe” (p. 11). It is essential to investigate the factors that may have necessitated the policy by paying attention to its discursive framings and examining how policy consumers (in this case, teachers) make sense of and are affected by it. Anthropology of policy thus becomes a framework for me to analyze Ghana's FSHSP. I paid attention to the historical and situational context that might have necessitated the adoption of the policy. Anthropology of policy, then, helps to highlight how FSHSP is created and to reveal the discursive conflicts that influence interactions among various participants, whose voices may be heard or silenced in education politics and policy change.

Against the backdrop that policies function as governance tools and considering policy "as a complex, ongoing social practice of normative discursive cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts" (Levinson et al., 2018, p. 24), I investigate how the various actors within Ghana's public school system affect, and are in turn, affected by the FSHSP while paying attention to the context within which they operate. Here, I focus on how the policy affects teachers' work and its impact on equity. I draw on a multi-sited ethnographic study of teacher experiences of the creation and rollout of the FSHSP across three distinct schools in the Volta Region of Ghana. I focus on teachers as the unit of my analysis in this dissertation. While highlighting how teachers were excluded from the policy formulation and yet impacted by the policy, I also acknowledge that teachers "remade" the policies as they translated them within

their context (Farhadi & Winton, 2021, p. 119). Yet, teachers' translations had profound implications for policy outcomes.

Conception of Teachers' Role in the Policy Process

Teachers are one of the most critical groups of people in matters of education. In the formal sector, teachers and students must be present for education to happen. Ball et al. (2011) assert that teachers are invariably policy subjects or policy actors. As policy subjects, teachers receive policy texts from the central government and must comply with the dictates of the policy texts. However, as policy actors, the role of teachers in the policy process, though invaluable, is fraught with many ambiguities (Ball et al., 2011). Croll et al. (1994) appropriate four major models for teachers in the policy process, with each model corresponding to teachers' different roles in the policy process.

The first model conceptualizes teachers as partners in the policy process. As partners, teachers collaborate with other major stakeholders in education to formulate education policies. This conception frames teachers as part of the policymaking process, whereby teachers are among those who determine the way a policy comes out. It means teachers have a seat at the table, where they are a part of the conversation and have as much to say as anyone else. Croll et al. (1994), however, admit that the involvement of teachers in this sense might be restricted to teacher unions, which act as representatives of all teachers.

The second model, teachers as implementers, which contrasts with the first model, frames teachers as people who carry out the policy dictates. In this model, a clear distinction exists between the designers of a policy and those who implement it. This model typifies the hierarchical image of the education sector, where decisions emanate from a centralized location occupied by the state and expert bureaucrats. In this model, the role of the teacher is to carry out

the dictates of the policy in an unadulterated fashion. Here, the teacher receives and acts. In cases where teachers require additional preparation, training is provided to assist them in implementing the policies. Croll et al. (1994) describe this as "managerially led implementation" and teachers as "unquestioning implementors of education policies" (p. 337). One main issue with this model is that there is usually a gap between policymakers and policy implementers. This aligns with Ball et al.'s (2011) assertion that teachers are policy subjects. Ball et al. (2011) add that, in this view, teachers receive prepackaged policies as products, making teachers consumers of policies who are not involved in producing policies.

The third model frames teachers as opposers of education policies. Often, this model is a consequence of the gap between [what] and [what], as mentioned earlier in the second model. Here, teachers resist or contest some of the dictates of the policies if they are not in congruence with their practice. According to Croll et al. (1994), teachers' resistance sometimes stems from concerns for their students' welfare, and at other times, it arises from teachers' worries about the workload resulting from new policies and conditions of service.

The fourth model, teachers as policymakers in practice, emphasizes how teachers make sense of policies through interpretation and how they practicalize the decisions contained in policy documents. According to Croll et al. (1994), this model encompasses teachers making unavoidable choices that align with what they believe is the best course of action given the circumstances under which they conduct their day-to-day work. This model emphasizes the decision-making agency of teachers and does not view them as passive implementers, instead reflecting a view of teachers as policy actors. Ball et al. (2011) refer to this as policy enactment. To Ball and his colleagues, "policy enactment involves different sorts of policy actors in the work of interpretation (decoding) and translation (recoding) of policy" (p. 619). According to

Hinnant-Crawford (2016), Croll et al.'s (1994) fourth model is more closely aligned with the Street-Level Bureaucracy Framework proposed by Lipsky (1980). Going by this logic, we can see teachers as street-level bureaucrats since teachers exercise discretionary powers over what goes on in their schools or classrooms as they translate formal policies and directives into practice (Farhadi & Winton, 2022). Teachers, therefore, make meaning of policies and practicalize them within the context and confines of their schools, thereby co-creating, enacting, and reflecting on policies from governments (Alfrey et al., 2017).

In this chapter, I discussed the two main perspectives for understanding policies. I then drew attention to the anthropology of policy frame, locating it within the critical policy orientation. The anthropology of policy frame enabled me to investigate the FSHSP not only as a text emanating from the Government of Ghana, but also as a discourse, an instrument of governance, and a socio-cultural practice. My view of policy, then, directs my attention to investigate how the officials of the two major political parties in Ghana operationalized discussions regarding the FSHSP to garner support for the respective parties, how teachers view their role in the policy process and distribution of power within the policy process, how the policy impacts teachers and how teachers impact the policy. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology of the study.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology employed for this dissertation. I begin by discussing my positionality as a researcher in this study, followed by an examination of the methodological components of the study, including the nature of the study, data collection, and analysis.

Researcher Positionality

According to Holmes (2020), positionality comprises three elements: (1) the subject under investigation, (2) the research participants, and (3) the research context and process (p. 2). Qualitative researchers are not independent of the world they study because, in qualitative research, the researcher generates, analyzes, and interprets the data. Because of this, in qualitative research, the researcher is viewed as a "research tool" (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 2). As a research tool, qualitative researchers exercise discretion regarding where to conduct their research, which data to collect, and from whom. They also choose how to analyze and interpret the findings. However, since "knowledge is always mediated through the political position of the researcher" (Hatch, 2002, p. 17), it is likely that methodological as well as analytical decisions will be influenced by the researcher's characteristics—such as race, gender, social class, and personal assumptions. For this reason, I discuss my positionality in relation to this research, as this is crucial for my continuous reflexivity (Jamieson et al., 2023). Tilley (2016) notes that researchers must apply critical reflexivity throughout the research process. According to her, researchers engaging in reflexivity acknowledge and question the subjectivities and assumptions they bring to the research process. Acknowledging these assumptions and biases ensures that researchers do not impose their subjectivities on the research process. Therefore, in the spirit of self-reflexivity, it is important to explicate my positionality to help the

readers of this dissertation “to better understand how I produced the data” (Jacobson & Mustafa, p. 2), and to acknowledge the biases I come to this project with.

I am a Ghanaian from a working-class background. I had my primary, secondary, and undergraduate education in Ghana before moving to York University, Canada for graduate studies. I became a professional teacher in 2006, and I taught with the GES from 2006 to 2017. During my time as a teacher, I experienced two different governments with very different approaches to secondary school education. My graduate work has enabled me to better understand and reflect on the impact this experience has had on me, both personally and professionally. Thus, I came to this study with several assumptions.

First and foremost, be it in the hallway, under the mango trees, or at staff meetings, Ghanaian teachers have always talked about how the government “is doing politics” with the education system and how the government does not regard teachers, culminating in their exclusion from major decisions about educational matters and lower salaries relative to other workers with similar qualifications. Secondly, as a student, I observed that many of my classmates, with whom I completed basic education, were unable to progress to the senior high level due to financial constraints. After I became a teacher, I realized that the situation is worse for girls and rural people. Thirdly, I also acknowledge that the country's secondary schools vary in quality, with the best-resourced schools primarily located in urban centers. Finally, given my experience with the secondary education system in Ghana—both as a student and later as a professional teacher—I view the FSHSP as an important intervention.

This project is rooted in my experiences, both as a student who navigated the Ghanaian education system and as a professional teacher with over ten years of classroom experience in Ghana. Given that I hail from the same region where I conducted the research and because I

shared many of the experiences that teachers at the secondary level in Ghana hold, I considered myself an insider in this research, and some of my participants also saw me in that light.

Yet much has changed since my time in the classroom in Ghana. For example, when I taught at a senior high school in Ghana, students were required to pay fees before attending class and to purchase their school uniforms. Also, during my time in Ghana, students were required to pay for their feeding. However, in the very month I moved to Canada to enroll at York University in 2017, the government rolled out the FSHSP. With the FSHSP, students were exempt from paying any fees associated with secondary education, including tuition, textbooks, and utility fees. Accommodation, uniforms, and meals were also provided free of charge (MoE, 2017). Essentially, the government assumed total fiscal responsibility for secondary education. This ushered in a completely different era for secondary education in Ghana, an era I did not experience, thus making me an outsider. I returned to the Volta Region as a graduate student at a foreign university. For this reason, even though I shared my history as a teacher with my participants, I was viewed—and rightly so—as a student researcher, not as a former teacher. My affiliation with a foreign university also contributed to many of them viewing me as an outsider. In this regard, I consider myself an insider-outsider (Tilley, 2016).

My position as an insider-outsider had implications. Those who viewed me as an insider were more casual with me, and it did not take long to establish rapport with them (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). My insider status provided a foundation for a trusting relationship with the teachers. They saw me as one of them, felt safe, and were not measured in their conversations when I was around. Thus, these teachers did not perceive me as a threat and introduced me to some of their colleagues, many of whom were pleased that my research focused on the welfare

of teachers in the wake of the FSHSP. This trust is reflected in the in-depth interview responses I got from them.

Nevertheless, being seen as an insider had its downsides. For example, some teachers were more concerned about knowing about Canada than knowing about my research. Some of the teachers also expected me to assist with certain teacher duties, such as disciplining students. For example, at Mawunya SHS⁷, as I was observing an entertainment session, two girls got involved in an altercation and I was the closest “teacher” to them. I did not know exactly how to act and in what capacity. Of course, the students viewed me as an outsider, and my presence did not dissuade them. The teacher in charge of entertainment came around and separated them with a whip. After separating them, he gave me a look as if to suggest I should have acted. Another problem with being seen as an insider was that some of the teacher participants perceived some of my questions as unnecessary. For example, when I asked participants about some of the challenges they faced prior to the adoption of the FSHSP, one participant stopped in the middle of his answer and concluded, “You know what I mean.” My last challenge with being considered an insider had to do with my concern about remaining in touch with many of the participants even after data collection. Truncating the relationship just after data collection felt exploitative to me.

Those who saw me as an outsider were not forthcoming with me when I tried to build rapport with them. The main people that considered me an outsider were the headteachers. Their responses were mechanically constructed. Despite the letter of introduction from GES, one of the headteachers asked for a letter of introduction from my university and even demanded to see my school identification card. I showed him my ethics approval letter and my York University ID.

⁷ Mawunya SHS is a pseudonym. Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS are also pseudonyms.

Also, in one school, I noticed that one male teacher would always leave the scene whenever I appeared. I felt uncomfortable and consequently avoided him as well. At Edem SHS, a female teacher was willing to talk to me only if I would not record the conversation.

Yet, in all of this, it was the assistant head of Elikplim SHS who made me realize I was situated in “the space between insider and outsider” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). After his headteacher directed me to him for an interview, I went to him, and I could sense the tension in the room. I felt he had agreed to grant the interview only because his superior had asked him to. So, even though he had my letter of introduction in front of him, he asked that I introduce myself and explain the exact reason I was at his school and not another. I told him, and I also mentioned that I was a teacher before leaving for Canada, just to establish myself as an insider. Switching to the local language (Ewe) and with his gaze entirely focused on his table, he told me:

It is a good thing that you are from this area, and you were once a teacher. I do not know the exact questions you will ask. But I see you as a former teacher and a younger brother.

I don't think you will be the one to take bread out of anybody's mouth.

I smiled and explained to him that my visit to him was purely for academic reasons. I also told him that participating in the research was voluntary and that he did not have to grant me an interview just because his head asked him to. After that, I assured him that the name of his school and his name would not appear in the dissertation. This assurance seemed to have calmed him down. He signed the consent form and was very open in the one-on-one interview. After the interview session, I thanked him. This was his response:

You are very welcome, my brother. We, in this school, are usually very helpful when it comes to helping student researchers climb the academic ladder. The only reason some

people might be reluctant to help you is the political nature of this FSHSP. These days, we do not know “who is who,” and one word can get you into trouble.

His answer echoed that of several other teachers who expressed fear about discussing the FSHSP. It also gave me an inkling of why some teachers avoided me. However, my greatest take from this interaction was that my outsider status became magnified mainly because of the subject under investigation.

Research Methods

The following questions guided my research:

1. What strategies do the NDC and NPP officials employ to politicize Ghana's FSHSP?
2. How do teachers understand their involvement in the FSHSP formulation?
3. How does the FSHSP shape teachers' work and daily lives?
4. How do teachers perceive the implications of the FSHSP regarding equity in Ghanaian secondary education?

I relied solely on document analysis to answer the first research question. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluation of documents— both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) materials” (p. 27). Also, Garman (1982) states that in document analysis, the researcher relies on a “variety of written materials for data, insight, and judgments about programs or events” (p. 2). My decision to adopt document analysis is motivated by the fact that documents are stable and do not alter their behavior or story as respondents in an interview (Garman, 1982). Furthermore, Bowen (2009) insists that “documents provide background information as well as historical insight. Such information and insight can help researchers understand the historical roots of specific

issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation” (p. 29).

The collation of documents began in Canada, long before I entered the field. I drew on different documents, including news stories, press releases, and pieces of publication on the Free SHS website. I also collected documents produced by the Government of Ghana and the Ministry of Education (MoE), party manifestos, and party campaign posters between 2016 and 2022. News stories were collected from two leading online news portals: Ghanaweb and Myjoyonline. These sites were selected because of their credible and comprehensive coverage of news items (Bronteng et al., 2019). I searched these websites using relevant keywords such as "Free Secondary Education," "Free SHS," "Free Senior High School Policy," and "Free Education," concentrating on publications attributed to figures of the NPP and NDC, spanning from 2016 to 2022. I focused on the period between 2016 and 2022 because, although the idea of FSHSP was mooted before the 2012 election, it gained traction almost immediately after the implementation of the PFSHSE in the latter part of 2015. I also chose this period because it encompassed the two most recent general elections, during which discussions about FSHSP were particularly prevalent. The search generated over 500 results, including duplicates (the same news reported by both portals). Duplicates were eliminated, after which I winnowed the documents to 175 key sources. All the documents were publicly available online.

In determining how power operates through and with FSHSP in the realm of formal politics, I was guided by the proposition that "participants in professional roles often don't speak 'for themselves', but as representatives of an organization or institution, and as representatives who in principle can be replaced by other institution members" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 223). This way, any utterance by an official party member was taken as the voice of their political party.

The discourse analysis gave me insight into the debates surrounding the policy and helped inform some of the questions I asked my teacher participants during the fieldwork. As Yorke and Vidovich (2016) suggest, preliminary document analysis provides a researcher with insight into where and when to start data collection, thereby offering guidance on what to observe and what interview questions to ask. The discourse analysis also contributed to the preliminary analysis and interpretation of interview data and fieldnotes, providing insight into the underlying power dynamics and political context within which the teachers implemented the FSHSP.

To answer questions 2, 3 and 4, I engaged in a multi-site ethnography of three senior high schools in the Volta Region of Ghana. In ethnography, a researcher enters a social setting, studies the setting, and tries to understand events in the setting “from the points of view of the actors involved in the events” (Erickson, 1984, p. 52). Using an ethnographic approach ensured that I was able to maintain participants' voices and perspectives. Living with the participants and following them in their day-to-day activities gave me access to the emic perspective of the participants. For example, it was during my time at Mawunya SHS that I learned that many teachers were displeased about not being consulted prior to the adoption of the policy. Living with the participants also exposed me to the amount of care work teachers had to contend with.

My fieldwork began in the middle of May 2023 and ended in September 2023. Prior to leaving Canada for Ghana, I submitted my research proposal to the York University ethics review board and received approval. Once in Ghana, I had to seek permission from the GES headquarters in Accra to conduct research in three schools in the Volta Region. The process of obtaining permission from GES took longer than I anticipated, mainly because everything had to be done in-person. I dropped off the permission note in person, followed up on more than five

occasions, and when the permission was signed, I went for it in person. After being granted access at the national level, I had to apply for another permission at the regional education office. The process at the regional level was supposed to be easier because of the earlier endorsement from their superiors at the national level. Nevertheless, it took at least three days for them to sign the letter granting me access to the schools for the research. I showed these permission letters, along with the ethics approval letter, to the headteachers, and they allowed me to speak with teachers in their respective schools.

Research Sites

This research took place in three distinct senior high schools in the Volta Region of Ghana. I chose the Volta Region because I have a deep connection to the region, having been born and brought up there. I can speak Ewe, the native language of the Volta Region, fluently. Fluency in the Ewe language was very important to me as a researcher because, outside the classroom, my conversations with most teachers were conducted using a mix of the native language and Pidgin English. I also taught in the Volta Region for over a decade. I also chose the Volta Region because of my desire to find schools in urban, peri-urban, and rural locations. Thus, I selected three mixed-sex schools in different locations (urban, peri-urban, and rural) through purposive sampling. The three schools for the research were co-educational (mixed-sex) schools, which enabled me to understand the implications of the policy in relation to gender. The Volta Region is home to about 77 government-assisted Senior High Schools. Out of these, 3 are category “A” schools, 13 are category “B” schools, and 55 are category “C” schools. The rest belong to category D. Ghana has a tiered secondary school system, classifying schools into categories A, B, and C (Baidoo-Anu et al., 2022). While category A and B schools are well-resourced, category C schools are under-resourced and often understaffed (Baidoo-Anu et al.,

2022). The three schools utilized for this research, Mawunya SHS, Elikplim SHS, and Edem SHS⁸, were all within an 18-mile radius, with Elikplim SHS situated between Mawunya SHS and Edem SHS. Mawunya SHS and Edem SHS were category B schools, while Elikplim SHS was a category C school.

I opted against choosing a school in category A because, out of the three category A schools in the region, two were single-sex schools and thus did not meet the mixed-sex criteria for selecting schools. Utilizing the sole mixed school classified as category A would jeopardize their anonymity. Apart from this, the current government has blurred the gap between the various categories. To put pressure on teachers and headteachers, the government, based on students' performances, promoted and relegated schools into different categories, much like football clubs. In the past, a school's category was primarily determined by prestige, infrastructure, and human resources (Bart-Plange, 2019). For example, Mawunya SHS was formerly a category A school. However, at the time of my research, it had been moved to category B, according to the assistant headmaster. Additionally, Edem SHS, located in a rural area and lacking many facilities, was moved from category C to category B solely based on its performance in the final examination. Next, I discuss the features of the three schools included in this study.

Mawunya SHS

Mawunya SHS is a mixed school located in an urban area of the Volta Region. The school was established before Ghana attained independence. It is a category B school. The school offers courses in Business, Agriculture, Home Economics, Visual Arts, General Arts and General Science. Prior to the FSHSP, the school had approximately 1,500 students. The student population increased to more than 3,500 after the FSHSP. This school mainly serves

⁸ Names of schools are pseudonyms.

socioeconomically advantaged students, most of whom have parents working in the formal sector. Being a prestigious school located in a municipal capital, it attracts students from all over the country. Over 90% of the student population are boarding students, while the rest are day students. The teacher population was less than 100 in 2016, but this increased to around 164 after the introduction of the FSHSP.

The school has about 60 classrooms. With the advent of the FSHSP, the school converted its dining hall into makeshift classrooms. The school canteen was also converted into a classroom. The school has a fairly well-stocked library and an ICT lab with approximately 100 computers, of which almost half are not functioning. The school boasts of four science laboratories (Chemistry, Biology, Physics, and Agric labs). The head of the science department described the science laboratories as a “laboratory with only tables and chairs.” He also told me that the old students’ union provided the few equipment in the science lab. This school operates a double-track system due to its large student population. The school provides accommodation for the headteacher and his assistants, and nearly 50 teachers reside on campus. The school has a government clinic, with at least three female nurses, on its premises. In 2018, less than a year after the policy rollout, the government built a three-unit classroom block to address the increase in student population. No new dormitory was constructed.

Elikplim SHS

Elikplim SHS is a mixed-sex school located in a peri-urban area of the Volta Region. The school was established at least 10 years after Ghana attained independence. It is a category C school. The school offers courses in Business, Agriculture, Home Economics, Visual Arts, General Arts and General Science. Before the FSHSP, the student population was less than 700, a figure which has since risen to around 1,800 with the introduction of the FSHSP. Over 95% of

the student population consists of boarding students, while the remainder are day students. This school serves mostly children from the surrounding communities. The teacher population, which was previously less than 80, has since increased to approximately 97 following the implementation of the FSHSP. Elikplim SHS has approximately 25 functional classrooms, a wall-less dining hall, and about 10 partially completed classroom buildings. The school converted a classroom into the headteacher's office. The school has a library that is more accurately described as a reading room, lacking books. The school also has a small science lab with outdated equipment and an ICT lab equipped with approximately 30 computers, of which only 15 are in good condition. Only the headteacher and four other teachers live on campus. Like Mawunya SHS, this school also has a government clinic, with at least three female nurses, on its premises. No new classroom or dormitory was constructed after the FSHSP.

Edem SHS

Classified as category B, Edem SHS is a mixed school located on the outskirts of a rural community. This school was established at least ten years after Ghana's independence. It offers courses in Business, Home Economics, Visual Arts, General Arts, General Science, Technical and Vocational Education. Before the FSHSP, the school had about 500 students; during my research, the population was around 1,380. Approximately 70% of the students reside on campus, with the remaining portion being day students. This school mainly serves mostly children from the surrounding rural communities. The teacher population, which was around 60 prior to FSHSP, increased to around 75 after the implementation of FSHSP. The school has a library stocked with outdated textbooks and a science laboratory that lacks essential equipment and chemicals. This school has an ICT lab with no functional computer. The assistant head of this school informed me that the school was facing serious problems with infrastructure and

retaining qualified teachers. Only the headteacher and two other teachers live on campus. Edem SHS has about 28 functional classrooms but does not have a clinic on its premises. No new classroom or dormitory was constructed after the FSHSP. Table 1 summarizes the specific characteristics of the three schools utilized for this research.

Table 1

Characteristics of Schools Utilized for this Research

School	Mawunya SHS	Elikplim SHS	Edem SHS
Location	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural
Category	B	C	B
Residence type	Boarding/day	Boarding/day	Boarding/day
Period of establishment	Pre-independence	Post-independence	Post-independence
Total number of teachers	164	97	75
Number of male teachers	130	80	62
Number of female teachers	34	17	13
Boys' Population	1475	620	550
Girls' Population	2124	919	830
Number of classrooms	64	25	28
Number of functional computers	52	15	0
Number of Teachers resident on campus	48	5	3
Availability of School Clinic	Yes	Yes	No
Demographics of students	Mostly, advantaged children from all over the country	Mostly, children from surrounding rural communities	Mostly, children from surrounding rural communities

Data Collection Methods

Participant Observation

Participant observation is “a method of gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities” (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 188). To obtain a deep impression of how teachers enacted the policy, I conducted participant observation in each of the schools of my research. I engaged in full time participant observation for five weeks. I spent the first one week gaining a general sense of the school site and establishing rapport with the teachers. The next weeks, I followed a cohort of teachers through their routines (including in and out of class, the teachers’ rooms, meetings etc.). The participant observation preceded the interviews. This proved useful because, through the observation, I discovered patterns that I explored further during the interview sessions. I also observed school assembly sessions, staff meetings, prep and entertainment sessions. To avoid being a passive observer, I took part in some of the day-to-day affairs of the school to the extent that was deemed possible by the authorities and to the extent to which my respondents were comfortable, and this led to me immersing myself in their environment (Emerson et al., 2011). For example, in Mawunya SHS, I helped the language department in sorting and stapling examination questions for their end of term examination.

In line with ethnographic methods, I engaged in casual conversations with some school administrators, casual workers and students. These interactions gave me valuable insights into the school setting (Ferguson, 2000). As suggested by Emerson et al. (2011), I wrote my field notes on the nights of my observation.

Interviews

I also collected data using interviews. The interviews proceeded in two stages: In stage one, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten teachers and one assistant headteacher from each of the three schools. Stage two involved focus group discussions in two of the three schools. In total, I conducted 30 teacher interviews, as well as two separate focus group discussions involving 10 teachers from Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS.

According to Adhabi and Anozie (2017), an interview is “an interactive process where a person asks questions to seek particular information” (p. 88). In the traditional sense of the process, interviews involve oral questions from a researcher seeking information from a research participant. I chose interviews because interviews allow researchers to build trust and rapport with the participants (Gall et al., 2007). Specifically, I drew on semi-structured interviews, as this approach allowed me to facilitate the interview sessions, steering the interviewees away from discussing irrelevant topics (Tilley, 2016).

During the interview, I asked teachers how they perceived the policy. I also asked questions relating to teachers’ understanding of equity and their views on the possibility of the FSHSP to ensure equity. I also asked questions relating to the period before and after the policy, emphasizing whether and how they have experienced shifts in their day-to-day work. Some of the interview questions were also drawn from insights gained from participant observation. All interviews were conducted in person in the respective schools. All interviews were conducted in English, the country’s official language and the language of instruction and assessment at all secondary schools. Settings for the interviews included offices, abandoned or uncompleted classrooms, under mango trees, and, in some cases, teachers’ cars. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 100 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped with the consent of all

the teachers. The interviews helped me gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of teachers' subjective perspectives on the FSHSP.

The focus group discussion allowed for interaction among teachers and enabled me to get an idea of the general feeling among my participants. I watched their countenances for cues, such as the nodding of heads when someone made a point they all agreed with. I also noted areas that were of genuine concern to the teachers, as they were not required to answer every question. My initial concern before the focus group discussion was that, due to the policy's political nature, teachers might not be willing to express their feelings freely during the discussion. This did not happen; I found that the group format rather made them feel more secure.

Selection of Interview Participants

Using purposive sampling, I selected 10 teachers from each of the three schools, resulting in a total of 30 interviewees. Interview participants were identified based on the length of time they had worked in their institutions. Thus, I selected teachers whose work in their various schools predated the adoption of the FSHSP. Attempts were made to ensure gender balance in selecting the teachers for the research. This was, however, not possible because male teachers far outnumber female teachers at the secondary level in Ghana. I also attempted to recruit teachers across all the academic programs offered in the schools. This also proved difficult as some teachers declined or ignored my request for them to participate. Significantly, all three headteachers politely declined to participate in the research, albeit they delegated their assistants to conduct the interviews in their place. While their excuse of being busy looked plausible, it also underscores the anecdotal reports that heads who “open their mouths too wide” were either demoted or transferred as punishment.

Methods of Analysis

For the analysis of documents regarding the politicization of the FSHSP, I followed the procedure suggested by Bowen (2009). Thus, I selected, organized, and categorized extracts of these publications in relation to the first research question: What strategies do the NDC and NPP officials employ to politicize Ghana's FSHSP? After that, I resorted to critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the political figures' pronouncements about FSHSP within their social and political context.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA plays a crucial role in revealing "underlying issues of power, social, (re)production of dominance, as well as the formation of identities within policy 'talk' and/or legislative texts" (Lester et al., 2016, p. 2). It examines text or talk to uncover the relationship between discourse and power by unpacking what is "implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious" in text or talk (van Dijk, 1995, p. 18), highlighting subtle manifestations of power indices in speech and text (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Following Foucault's (1990) assertion that power is always accompanied by resistance, CDA's focus on power extends beyond how the powerful in society use language for dominance and also examines how less powerful individuals in society use language to resist power.

In CDA, the primary unit of analysis is language. CDA aims to expose the overt and covert ways in which people manipulate language to empower or disempower sections of society. This focus on language is unsurprising given that "language is not an innocent reflection of how we think; the terms we use control our perception, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement" (Haberman, 2000, p. 203). To this end, language is not neutral but a means through which various actors represent and construct the world (van Hulst et

al., 2024, p. 4). Yet, CDA is not solely dependent on language but also on the historical and sociopolitical undercurrents that impact how language is used and for what purpose.

CDA scholars employ various approaches, including the dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough, 1995, 2003), the sociocognitive approach (van Dijk, 1993, 2018), feminist CDA (Lazar, 2007), and the discourse-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). CDA has practical applications in both theory and methodology. CDA has been used extensively in education (Rogers et al., 2016). For instance, it was used to explore how school leaders interact with formulated policies (Hernández, 2016). Little and Cohen-Vogel (2016) also used discourse analysis to explore the arguments for and against academic content in kindergarten. CDA has also been used to analyze teacher-student interactions (Brooks, 2015; Wallace, 2020). Furthermore, using CDA, Lester et al. (2016) investigated how "formalized actors espouse and reproduce particular ideologies" (p. 3).

I draw on CDA to interrogate the texts in their social and political context, bringing together contributions from the frameworks suggested by Fairclough (2003) and van Dijk (1993, 1998). Fairclough's (2003) dialectical-relational approach entails a 3-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis. The first dimension, text analysis, takes place at the text level, where the text is examined critically. Concerned with the production process of spoken or written text, this dimension includes paying attention to the linguistic resources that a speaker or writer employs through close reading. The second dimension focuses on the process of interpretation. Fairclough (2003) refers to this discourse practice analysis, which encapsulates how texts are produced and received. The second dimension examines the context of production, deciphering the authorial intent and the possible implications of discourse practices on how readers or listeners make sense of the text. However, as stated by Fairclough (2003), "it is very difficult to

be precise about the processes involved in meaning-making for the obvious reason that they are mainly going on in people's heads, and there are no direct ways of accessing them” (p. 11). This difficulty is unsurprising, given that different people interpret utterances differently, depending on each individual’s frames of reference (Hall, 1997). Given this difficulty, Fairclough’s (2003) third dimension treats discourse as social practice, requiring careful analysis of discourse's historical, social, political, and economic context. As Hall (1997) states, “language can never be a wholly private game...language is a social system through and through” (p. 25); the third dimension is essentially the explanation of the interpretation in the second dimension because every "piece of discourse is embedded in sociocultural practice at a number of levels; in the immediate situation, in the wider situation or organization, and at a societal level" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97). Hall (1997, p. 6) calls this a "discursive turn,” emphasizing that every piece of utterance is only understood in relation to its production and reception context. Research that takes a discursive approach analyzes micro-analysis of individual statements (words, phrases, sentences, etc.) to expose how they reveal broader ideological discourses (Fairclough, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). A discursive approach also extends to social and historical systems of thought, emphasizing that the meaning of a phenomenon does not reside exclusively within a text (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Thus, CDA entails moving beyond the texts to examine the historical and sociopolitical context of language use in order to understand its full significance and impact. An aspect of CDA relevant to this study is the concept of intertextuality, which Fairclough (2003) defines as “the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text – quotations” (p. 39). This is particularly vital in policy analysis, where pre-existing policies (sometimes outside the education field) tend to influence how policies are interpreted and enacted.

van Dijk's (1993, 1998, 2018) sociocognitive approach to CDA emphasizes how social cognition shapes discourse production and comprehension. van Dijk (2018) contends that researchers must recreate speakers' reasons, interests, intentions, and objectives to decipher the rationale behind a particular speech or text. Within the Sociocognitive Approach, the concept of othering is critical. Othering involves defining and maintaining one's identity by naming or establishing oneself as the normative standard and categorizing others as deviants (Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021). Othering can be a valuable framework for exploring the pronouncements of political actors, as politicians often rely on presenting themselves positively to the electorate and negatively framing their political opponents.

Political parties are apparatuses that produce and reproduce ideologies (Althusser, 2006). Ideology is a "one-sided perspective or worldview composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations" that members of a specific social group share (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88). Ideologies are subjective positions that make members of a social group act in unison, and political allegiance can be a manifestation of ideology (van Dijk, 1997). van Dijk (1998) proposes the "ideological square" concept for analyzing ideological communication. The aim of adopting any of these moves is either to present oneself positively or to portray others negatively. The ideological square comprises four main moves that dominate ideological communication.

- (a) expressing or emphasizing information that is positive about *Us*,
- (b) expressing or emphasizing information that is negative about *Them*,
- (c) suppressing or de-emphasizing information that is positive about *Them*, and
- (d) suppressing or de-emphasizing information that is negative about *Us*." (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267)

In this project, I apply CDA to draw attention to the socio-semantic role of the linguistic resources that political actors within the NDC and NPP employ to frame the FSHSP. I show how political figures of both the NPP and NDC discursively framed and operationalized FSHSP as a campaign tool to garner votes. I draw attention to the subtleties and nuances involved in the discourses of party officials as policy actors as they attempt to mobilize voter support for their parties and stoke resentment for their political opponents. I argue that NPP officials' pronouncements about FSHSP aimed to maintain their incumbency, while NDC officials sought to advocate for regime change. The ideological square, for example, provided a valuable lens for ascertaining how official members of the two parties framed each other and the FSHSP, with the aim of garnering support for their parties while stoking resentment for their opponents. Consequently, the analytical procedure for the CDA followed a three-stage process of (a) close reading to identify politicization strategies, (b) interpreting these strategies, paying close attention to contextual and historical information, and (c) explaining the possible impact of these strategies on readers or listeners (adapted from Narthey, 2021). In addition, I paid attention to the following questions:

1. Who are the key figures in the documents? How do they intersect with each other?
2. What/who is obvious in the document? What/who is conspicuously absent in the document?
3. What are people's emotions, and what undercurrents can be felt?
4. When do the events occur? Is there a pattern for meetings and events? (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017, p. 69).

These questions helped to examine the broader context of influence in which policy debates take place. As van Dijk (1998) stated, context influences how participants produce and understand

discourse because participants in a discourse adapt language or its interpretations to the communicative situation at each stage of communication.

Thematic Analysis

For the analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, Yin's (2011) five-stage framework for analyzing qualitative data proved helpful. Yin (2011) identifies data compilation, disassembling, data reassembling, data interpretation, and concluding as the stages of qualitative data analysis. In the data compilation stage, I imported all the documents, including fieldnotes and interview transcripts into *ATLAS.ti*, a qualitative data analysis software. The software helped with data organization. The data disassembling and reassembling were realized through multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I drew on deductive codes, such as “increasing access,” “increased workload,” “quality concerns,” “infrastructural deficit,” “mobilizing voter support,” and “criticizing political opponents,” as well as “stress” from personal experience and extant literature. Emergent codes were generated through iterative readings of the documents. Relevant emergent codes were reapplied to the entire data, resulting in a process of coding and recoding.

Consequently, I reassembled and reduced the data to the essential parts that provided answers to the research question. I employed semantic and latent coding. According to Byrne (2021), semantic coding focuses solely on identifying the explicit or surface meanings of data. In contrast, latent coding focuses on uncovering "hidden meanings or underlying assumptions, ideas, or ideologies that may shape or inform the descriptive or semantic content of the data" (p. 1397). The coding process was accompanied by concurrent memo writing, which involved recording thoughts as they arose during the analytic process. The data interpretation phase involved transitioning from individual data items to identifying "meaning and meaningfulness

across the dataset" (Byrne, 2021, p. 1403). The search for meaning culminated in the development of themes. Through analytic memoing and conversational and formal prompts from my supervisor, some initial themes were refined, renamed, and some discarded. The analysis proceeded even into the writing stage as new insights were gained (Holley & Harris, 2019). I sent initial drafts to my supervisor, and she always responded with several notes and suggestions regarding how I interpreted some of the findings. Aside from this, I remained in touch with some of my research participants, whom I contacted frequently for clarification regarding specific findings.

Chapter Five: FSHSP, an Avenue for Non-Stop Political Campaign

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of my critical discourse analysis, paying attention to policy as discourse. Following the critical orientation previously described, I show how discourse entails power, and I discuss how this power operated through different context of influence, specifically regarding policy debates involving officials of the two major political parties. I argue that political figures of both the NPP and NDC discursively framed and operationalized FSHSP as a campaign tool to garner votes. I draw attention to the subtleties and nuances involved in the discourses of party officials as policy actors, as they attempt to mobilize voter support for their parties and stoke resentment for their political opponents. I argue that the aim of NPP officials' pronouncement about FSHSP was to maintain incumbency while NDC officials sought to advocate for regime change. Overall, I demonstrate that public education is inherently political, providing a platform for political actors to engage in perpetual political campaigning.

Strategies Adopted by the NPP to Politicize FSHSP

Advertising the Policy on Campaign Posters

Advertising FSHSP on campaign posters was the most overt way that this policy was politicized. Before the 2016 general election, the NPP mounted large billboards with the inscription "Free SHS Now. Not in 20 years. Your vote can make it happen." This inscription sought to assure the public of NPP's desire to implement the policy immediately, unlike NDC's stance that the policy was feasible only after building more schools and expanding infrastructure in the existing schools (Afrane, 2022; Awuni, 2015). The expression, "Your vote can make it happen" calls the electorates to vote for NPP to implement the policy "now." It is essential to note the expression "Not in 20 years." As of 2016, the NPP was in opposition while the NDC

was ruling. This statement was meant to convey to the public that retaining NDC would delay the implementation of the FSHSP. This was because the NDC insisted that the country needed be infrastructurally ready before implementing the policy. However, at no point did any official of the NDC give a specific time. Thus, emphasizing 20 years was supposed to negatively project the NDC to the Ghanaian public and make the implementation agenda of the NDC look very distant to the public.

Figure 2

An NPP Campaign Poster for the 2016 General Elections



The NPP used the same tactic before the 2020 presidential elections. Campaign posters bore the inscription: "Free SHS is here to stay. Let's go out and vote massively for Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP to protect the progress and secure the future of our children. #VoteNumber1 #4MoreForNana." While this highlights another overt way of politicizing the FSHSP, it suggested that a vote for NPP would protect and secure the future of Ghanaian children. The NPP sought to say that a vote for the NDC would constitute a reversal of all the progress made by the NPP regime from 2016 to 2020.

Figure 3

An NPP Campaign Poster for the 2020 General Elections



The backgrounds of *Figures 2* and *3* feature jubilant children, wearing broad smiles, with hands raised. Yet there is a difference between the children used for the 2016 and 2020 campaign posters. While the children used for the 2016 campaign posters wore uniforms for basic school students and mufti, the students in the 2020 campaign poster wore secondary school uniforms. In 2016, the FSHSP was a hope for basic school students, while in 2020 the hope became a reality. Moreso, only female students featured in the 2020 poster. This suggests that the colonial marginalization of girls and patriarchal structures (Darkwah, 2010; Seshie, 2019) that have hindered girls' education are being dismantled by the NPP via the FSHSP.

Contrasting the Tenure of the NPP and the Tenure of the NDC

The most dominant discourse associated with the FSHSP is that of access. In this discourse, NPP officials explicitly mentioned the policy's enrollment boost, often contrasting it to the period before the rulership of the NPP. Here, NPP officials produced statistics showing the number of people who could not access secondary education in the past or who are benefiting

from the policy now. Explicit or implicit reference was made to the fact that access to secondary education had been limited by past NDC administrations and that the implementation of the policy sought to address the situation caused by the NDC. NPP officials did this by contrasting the current situation versus the situation predating the implementation of the FSHSP. For example, the President stated that "between 2013 and 2016, there was the unfortunate situation in Ghana where, on the average, 100,000 children, every year, who passed the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), could not take up their places in Senior High Schools" (Myjoy Online 1/12/ 2019).

In this excerpt, the President boasted about enrollment growth while lamenting the pre-FSHSP situation. Throughout the data, there were subtle instances of blaming the previous administration for the previous system, where children had to pay fees. President Akufo Addo mentioned "between 2013 and 2016," which corresponded to his predecessor NDC's term. Additionally, the President's use of the past tense in the statement implied that the "unfortunate situation" had ended. Contrasting the two periods enabled NPP officials to frame the policy to indicate a dramatic break from the past—a rupture. This was to suggest that there was a reversal or correction of past wrongs perpetuated by the (in)actions of previous administrations.

Intended to politicize the policy and urge listeners to solidarize with their party, many government officials used this technique to associate a feeling of hopelessness and pity with NDC's rule while positioning the FSHSP as a significant factor responsible for turning around the "unfortunate situation" of the Ghanaian youth. Contrasting the two periods performed a dual function of projecting the NPP as having moral superiority and integrity and being responsive to the populace while simultaneously projecting the NDC as a party that did not care for the citizens. The choice of lexemes such as "unfortunate situation" to describe the NDC periods of

ruling sought to blame the previous administration for causing the problem but not doing enough to remedy the situation.

For NPP, the FSHSP represented a significant distinction between the past NDC government and theirs, noting that the difference was made visible through access/enrollment numbers and shifting gender relations. Thus, the administration change had effects that trickled down to the household level, leading to more equitable educational opportunities irrespective of gender, location, or socio-economic background. Historically, educational access had been geographically disproportionate, as the colonial authorities concentrated on Southern Ghana and neglected Northern Ghana (Bening, 1990). The colonial authorities also made education primarily available to sons of prominent merchants or chiefs (Boadu, 2021). The FSHSP was thus framed as a way to make educational opportunities available to all to level the playing field for all, regardless of status or geographical location, including both NPP and NDC strongholds, as the president emphasized in his speech at the launch of the FSHSP:

The policy is not about the NPP or the NDC. The beneficiaries will not only be those belonging to NPP members or sympathizers. They will be Ghanaians from all walks of life and from all political persuasions. This is about Ghana, and how best to build a progressive and prosperous nation for this and future generations. (GhanaWeb Tv, 2017)

Framing NDC as a Threat to the Policy

NPP officials created a narrative suggesting to the public that NDC's desire to return to power was to cancel FSHSP. This was done overtly and covertly by the NPP officials. Take, for example, the utterances Vice President Bawumia made to the people of Saboba in Northern Ghana:

When we gave Mahama the chance, what did he do to teacher trainee allowance? He cancelled it. We gave him the chance, what did he do to nurse trainee allowance? He cancelled it. We gave him the chance, what did he do to Arabic teachers' allowance? He cancelled it. So, what will he do to free SHS? He will cancel it (GhanaWeb, 07/09/2020).

Here, the vice president used parallel structures to state that a vote for NDC was a vote against the FSHSP. He referred to the cancellation of the teacher trainee allowance, nurse trainee allowance, and Arabic teachers' allowance as evidence that the NDC was capable of canceling the FSHSP. The teacher trainee allowance is a monthly cash incentive offered to trainee teachers to encourage individuals to pursue a career in teaching. However, the previous NDC government canceled these payments in 2014 (Kpessa-Whyte, 2024). Because Northern Ghana has traditionally been a stronghold of the NDC (Ofori, 2015), Bawumia used the personal pronoun “we,” creating the impression that he and the community had given Mahama a chance. The reference to the Arabic teachers' allowance cancellation was to whip up opposition to the NDC, given that most inhabitants of Northern Ghana are Muslims. Here, the vice president used history to demonize the NDC and construct them as a threat to the FSHSP. Similarly, President Akufo Addo, on a campaign tour, stated:

I know that there are people in this country who don't want this policy, who have been campaigning against this policy. They are dreaming that they are going to come back to power to cancel the policy. I want them to know that they are not coming back to power, and the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy has come to stay. (Myjoy Online, 13/08/2019)

In the above extract, the President, like his vice, framed the NDC party as a threat to the FSHSP, suggesting that the only way to sustain the FSHSP was to retain the NPP government. Notice the

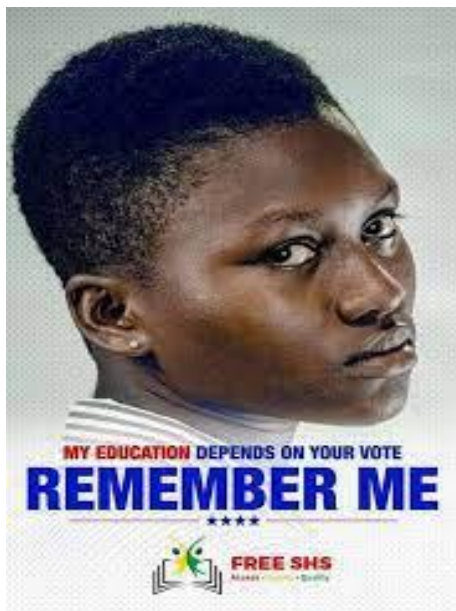
distancing implied in the sentence through the pronouns 'they' and 'them.' A further illustration of framing NDC as a threat to the policy is in an extract posted on the official Facebook page of NPP: "Let us protect the Free SHS policy for future generations. Register now and vote NPP in December to protect the Free SHS policy... Register now to protect the policy from those who want to cancel it" (NPP, 2020).

Framing NDC as a Threat to the Education of the Poor and Girls

The NPP officials framed the opposition NDC as a threat to the education of the poor and girls, suggesting that with the NDC, the poor and girls had no hope of secondary education. Before the 2020 presidential election, NPP mounted large billboards featuring a girl with the inscription "MY EDUCATION DEPENDS ON YOUR VOTE, REMEMBER ME." This campaign message has only one meaning: a vote for NDC is a vote against girls' education.

Figure 4

An NPP Campaign Poster for the 2020 General Election



In *Figure 4*, the girl appeared in a school uniform, signifying that at the moment, she was in school, a situation that would change should the NPP lose power to the NDC. The sunken eyes

of the girl and her unkempt hair convey a sense of dejection, appealing to the emotions of the voters. The girl's poster implicitly conveyed a narrative that NDC would not proceed with the policy and that voting against NPP was tantamount to voting against FSHSP, which would mean the end of the girl's education. It is important to note the differences between the girls in *Figure 3*, who all wore broad smiles and looked well groomed, and the girl in *Figure 4*, whose dejected look was supposed to display her anxiety and fear that the NPP could lose the 2020 general election, which would signify the end of the FSHSP—her education. The girl's helplessness was compounded by the fact that she had not yet attained the voting age of eighteen, and her fate lay in the hands of those eligible to vote. In this case, the girl is presented as appealing to the public to vote for the NPP and the FSHSP to prevent her from dropping out.

Furthermore, there were many government- and party-sponsored advertisements featuring students, mostly girls, who purportedly came from impoverished homes, sharing stories of how their education would have been impossible had it not been for the NPP's FSHSP. For example, the viral story of Faith Louis circulated via the official YouTube page of the education minister, Matthew Opoku Prempeh:

I was 14 years when I dropped out of school because I was pregnant. That was in the year 2009. I was 14 by then. Since then, when I had my first child, I was having this desire to go back to school, but because of financial constraints, I was hawking to provide for myself and child. So, I decided that I will go back to school so as I was preparing, I got pregnant again because I was staying with the man. So, I had to drop that desire again and start all over. But along the line, I had the desire that I wanted to go back to school and unfortunately, I got pregnant the third time but after that, I decided that I would go to school, I left the man, and I started my life. From there, I started selling to provide for

myself and the children and many people were advising me that I was brilliant and that I should go back to school. So, I took the bold step, and I went to Sorkorde Gborgame MA JSS form two. That was 2018 and in 2019 I wrote my BECE, and I passed. I was admitted in Mawuli Senior High School, which was last year. I want to thank the government. I know it is not only me that is going through this and because of the Free SHS have come back to school. There are a lot out there. To me, it's a good thing, and I thank the government. I want to become a midwife. (Prempeh, 2020)

According to Hajer (2006), "the essence of a story is that it has a beginning, middle, and an end" (p. 69). This story begins with the girl dropping out of school during NDC's tenure, staying home, and getting pregnant twice during that period. The happy ending comes when the girl returns to school during NPP's reign. The word "desire," mentioned three times in this short story, suggests that with the NDC, secondary education could only be a distant dream for girls like Faith Louis. There is a subtle suggestion that Faith, having to stay home and give birth to three children, would have been averted if there had been FSHSP. It is worth noting that Faith returned to school in 2019, a period corresponding to the governorship of the NPP. The video concluded with Faith thanking the government and declaring, "I want to become a midwife," to demonstrate that the policy offered hope and was crucial for human capital development. Notably, the video premiered on November 15, 2020, less than a month before the 2020 general election.

Using girls in such advertisements is significant, as girls have historically been marginalized in terms of educational access in Ghana (Darkwah, 2010). It was, therefore, not strange when the Vice President stated that FSHSP was a "game changer for females" since it had "ended a disturbing trend, which saw the education of many females from poor families

being truncated in favor of sponsoring a male child due to lack of funding." To buttress, he added, "Now, people find it difficult to get young girls to be their house girls" (MyJoy Online, 13/10/2020). The adverb "now" indicates the positive change in girls' education in the current regime. The phrase "disturbing trend" was used to portray the time the NDC was in power in a negative light.

Creating Ambiguity Regarding the Policy Targets

NPP officials made a conscious effort to create ambiguity regarding the policy targets. While some sections of government officials construed FSHSP as a policy for the poor, others projected it as a policy for all, regardless of economic situation. For example, according to Dr Prempeh, the Minister of Education, the FSHSP sought to "address inequality, ensure opportunities, and remove cost barriers" (Ernest, 2017). In this context, he dubbed policy as a pro-poor intervention. The President further corroborated this stance during the launch of the policy: "I know that knowledge and talent are not for the rich and privileged alone and that free education widens the gates of opportunities to every child, especially those whose talents are arrested because of poverty" ("President's speech at," 2017). Here, he presented himself as a leader against elitism. He used the first-person singular "I" to draw attention to himself. This was an instance of self-promotion, as he centered himself and his government. Further self-promotion was evident in phrases like "this government," "my government, "this government's view," and no mention of the state.

On the other hand, the information minister presented the policy as non-discriminatory when he argued: "FSHSP is a heritage of the Ghanaian child. It is not necessarily based on whether your parents are rich or poor" (Myjoy Online, 3/11/2019). While this statement framed the policy as non-discriminatory, it contradicted the point made by other NPP officials, who

heralded the policy as a pro-poor social intervention. The point I seek to advance here is that, although the government touted the policy as being for the poor, it did not want to risk the ire of the affluent by presenting a policy that catered solely to the poor. By creating an all-encompassing narrative, government officials ensured that FSHSP gained acceptability as a non-discriminatory policy and thus could garner support for the NPP from both the rich and the poor.

Framing Parents as Beneficiaries of the Policy

Although children of secondary school-going age are the direct beneficiaries of the policy, NPP officials insisted that, since fees were a burden for parents, the burden was lifted from their backs through FSHSP. Thus, parents were framed as the policy's indirect beneficiaries, as illustrated in the extract below.

The President Akufo-Addo Government has eased the burden of hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians and invested in the future of our children. Apart from building a strong human capital for the future there are immediate cash benefits to the parents... FSHSP has really lifted a burden off the shoulder of parents (GhanaWeb, 25/09/2018).

The vice president made several claims about parents' difficulties paying fees in the above extract. The phrase "The President Akufo-Addo government" in the subjective position was intended to present the President and his government in a positive light. Additionally, as of this pronouncement, the policy had been in place for more than a year, and one would have expected the vice president to be aware of the official enrollment numbers. However, he chose to be vague and used "hundreds of thousands" to exaggerate the number. He then discussed how saving money on school fees would benefit parents financially. His argument was bolstered by citing statistics demonstrating parents' immediate financial advantages. For instance, the vice president noted that "this has translated into GH¢2.2 billion in savings" for their parents (GhanaWeb,

25/09/2018). Here, he used figures (GH¢2.2 billion) to justify the policy. Also, at the policy's launch, the President stated: “We lift the financial burden off our parents and the heart-rending anxiety that accompanies the beginning of every school term.” By advancing the argument of relieving parents of their burden, the President again presented himself as the savior of the parents. Notice the pronoun “we,” used by the President to refer to himself and his party, creating the impression that he and his government were parents of the parents. In using “we,” he created a sort of dichotomy between “we” and “them,” where “we” referred to the NPP and “them” referred to the NDC. The President used “burden” as a metaphor for school fees, meaning that school fees had burdened parents, and the NPP came to “lift that burden” off parents—something the NDC could not do. Moreover, framing parents as beneficiaries of the policy was vital for NPP since parents were undoubtedly the voters.

Referencing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

NPP government officials project the FSHSP as part of the concerted efforts being made at the global, regional, and national levels to improve educational access, particularly in developing countries. They posited that the FSHSP conformed to best practices worldwide. For example, at the launch of the policy, the President stated:

In so doing, we would be on the way to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 4... As co-chair of the Advocacy Group of Eminent Persons of the SDGs, their implementation is a matter of the highest public priority for me. (“President's speech at,” 2017)

By referring to the SDGs, NPP government officials sought to, on the one hand, politicize the policy in the Ghanaian context while simultaneously depoliticizing it by suggesting that the policy was a universalizing strategy that aligned Ghana with global conventions and not a vote-

winning scheme as the opposition claimed. Thus, implementing FSHSP was a move toward world culture, which holds that irrespective of one's local culture, they are nonetheless exposed to and significantly impacted and influenced by a more all-encompassing world culture (Ramirez & Boli, 1987).

Meant to politicize the policy, the President used the personal pronoun “we” to solidarize with the citizenry. Notice the personal pronoun “me” to suggest personal responsibility and agency. Furthermore, on the FSHSP website, there is the following: “The NANA AKUFO ADDO-led government has given full effect to SDG 4.1 with the implementation of FSHSP” (Free SHS Policy Ghana, 2018). Here, it is vital to note the block capitalization of “NANA AKUFO ADDO” to draw full attention to the President and suggest that he introduced the FSHSP, even though the SDGs predated his reign. The revised SDGs were adopted in 2015 (when the NDC was in power). Therefore, the NPP's implementation in 2017 demonstrates its commitment to providing students with a world-class education. There was also a hint that the previous administration (NDC) failed to work toward achieving SDG 4.1.

Evidently, NPP officials focused on politicizing the policy through positive self-promotion of their party and negative other representation of the NDC. While this manifested in diverse ways, the aim was to maintain incumbency. In what follows, I discuss the various ways NDC officials discursively framed and operationalized discussions regarding the FSHSP to politicize the policy, positively representing the NDC and negatively representing the NPP, in an attempt to instigate a regime change.

Strategies Adopted by the NDC to Politicize the FSHSP

Perhaps the most significant evidence that NDC thought the FSHSP played a role in the 2016 election and could play a pivotal role in the 2020 general election was reflected in their

choice of running mate for John Dramani Mahama. The NDC chose Professor Nana Jane Opoku-Agyeman, a well-accomplished educationist, to partner with Mahama heading into the 2020 election. She was a Minister of Education and a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast. The expectation, I suppose, was that, due to her immense experience in the education sector, she could dominate arguments about the FSHSP. In the sections below, I discuss some strategies the NDC adopted to politicize the FSHSP.

Referencing the Constitutional Irrevocability of the FSHSP

To counter the narrative that NDC would cancel the FSHSP, NDC officials insisted that FSHSP was irrevocable. This stance was vital for two reasons: first, it assured the electorates that the NDC government would continue with FSHSP. Second, it portrayed the FSHSP as a constitutional provision—something the NPP should not take credit for. For instance, John Dramani Mahama stated at an NDC event, “Indeed, no government either present or in the future can reverse the policy because it is captured in our 1992 constitution” (MyJoy Online, 15/08/2019). Also, an NDC member of parliament (MP) noted:

Yes, it's constitutional that we allow our children have access.... No one is against that but the way they are implementing it is not helping ... politicians under the current administration would have lost their jobs were they in the US. (MyJoy Online, 29/10/2019).

In this excerpt, the NDC MP criticized the policy’s implementation, clarifying that FSHSP was a constitutional provision. Significantly, he indicated that no one was against the policy to allay fears that NDC would cancel it. Stating that the NPP officials “would have lost their jobs” if they were in the US amounted to a negative representation of the NPP and a subtle call on Ghanaians to vote against the NPP.

Claiming the Policy

Apart from referencing the constitutional irrevocability of the policy, NDC officials noted that the NDC was the originator of the policy by referencing the PFSHSE introduced in 2015, which emphasized a piecemeal approach. For instance, the National Communications Officer of the NDC, Sammy Gyamfi, stated, “It doesn’t matter the number of lies that the NPP tells, the facts show that it was indeed President Mahama who launched the program with 360,000 day students” (Myjoy Online 26/11/2020). Thus, the NDC communicator first asserted that NPP officials had been peddling lies before referring to the “facts” using numbers. Moreover, within a month of the 2020 election, while on a campaign tour, the NDC flagbearer remarked, “We started the program, and the NPP came and continued it.” To take a swipe at the government, he continued, “Unfortunately, the implementation has been very poor...” (Myjoy Online, 29/11/2020).

Denying the Claims of NPP Officials

To counter the allegation by the NPP that NDC was a threat to the FSHSP, NDC officials made it explicit that NDC was not against the policy. For instance, the General Secretary of the NDC, Johnson Asiedu Nketia, placed his political career on the line if any claim that the NDC would cancel FSHSP was valid.

If President Akufo-Addo or any other Ghanaian can produce a recording, either pictorial or vocal recording of President Mahama saying that he will cancel FSHSP when he comes to power... I will resign...(MyJoy Online, 16/10/2019)

Similarly, in August 2020, four months before the general election, during a campaign tour, John Dramani Mahama declared: “FSHSP has come to stay. If anybody tells you that I, John Dramani Mahama, son of E. A Mahama, will abolish FSHSP when I come, tell the person he is a bloody

liar.” The flagbearer debunked the notion that he sought to cancel the FSHSP if voted into power. He made it explicit that the NPP officials suggesting he would cancel the policy were “bloody liars.” He used the personal pronoun “I” to indicate his commitment to continuing the policy and mentioned his official name for emphasis. He invoked his dead father's name to enhance his credibility and to coerce the gathering to trust him. His father, E. A. Mahama, was a presidential adviser during Ghana's Third Republic and the first Member of Parliament (MP) of the West Gonja constituency. In Ghana, ancestral worship is common, and the dead are held sacred, so mentioning his dead father's name allowed him to use history and the credibility of his dead father to make the people trust him.

Relatedly, NDC resorted to debunking some of NPP's claims regarding FSHSP. For example, in their 2020 Manifesto, NDC claims that FSHSP has somewhat increased the cost for parents due to the prevalence of “hidden costs” (NDC, 2020, p. 71). There was no description of what constituted the “hidden cost,” as it was stated to be taken as a universal truth known to all Ghanaians. They continued to demonize the NPP further; “without proper planning, the NPP introduced the Free Senior High School Programme, which was to come at no cost to parents, as promised. Unfortunately, it has rather increased the cost burden on some parents” (NDC, 2020). Significantly, Mahama calls the initiative “program” as opposed to “policy.” While this may be due to the absence of a clear policy document, it also suggests that Mahama believes the initiative does not meet the standard to be considered a policy. As suggested earlier, the policy was not debated in parliament (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020), and many other stakeholders, including teacher unions, were not adequately consulted before its implementation (Adogla-Bessa, 2017).

Problematizing the Implementation of the Policy

The opposition NDC officials drew a clear line between criticizing the policy and criticizing its implementation, because any direct criticism of FSHSP would confirm the NPP's claim that the NDC would cancel the policy if elected. For instance, Mahama said this.

What I am against is the poor implementation of the FSHSP which is creating great inconvenience for the parents, for the students and for the teachers ...If this government had followed our plan of continuing with the 200 new schools that we were building, we will not have the current situation... (Ansah, 2020)

Mahama noted the NPP's "poor implementation" in the above excerpt to represent the NPP negatively. He also noted the "great inconvenience" wrought by the FSHSP. To promote his former administration, he claimed that the NPP could have avoided policy implementation problems by following the NDC's plan. Also, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe, an NDC MP, stated, "The silencing of these heads has given a false impression as though all is well with the FSHSP. We are sitting on a time bomb which can explode with devastating consequences anytime, maybe soon" (GhanaWeb, 7/11/2019). The phrase "false impression" suggested that even though all seemed to be well, "all is not well," and the metaphor of a "time bomb" highlighted the imminent danger the NPP and their handling of FSHSP posed to Ghana's education. All these were moves aimed at discrediting the NPP government.

Offering alternatives was an inevitable corollary of problematizing the implementation. For instance, at the NDC's 2020 Manifesto launch, John Dramani Mahama's running mate said, "We have every plan and desire to make the FSHSP much better by ensuring that numerous challenges are addressed and that higher operational and academic standards are introduced and sustained." Saying the NDC would address "numerous challenges" and ensure that "higher

operational and academic standards are introduced and sustained” implied that, at that time, the system was substandard with the NPP in charge.

Blaming FSHSP for Teenage Pregnancies

The opposition NDC officials argued that teenage pregnancies increased due to long vacations occasioned by the DTS. For instance, speaking at an NDC press conference, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe stated:

One major disadvantage of the DTS is the area where many heads of second-cycle institutions are afraid to comment. That has to do with high rate of teenage pregnancies being recorded in some Senior High Schools. Within a spate of one year, alone (2018-2019) over 1,433 girls at Senior High Schools across the country were impregnated...(GhanaWeb, 7/11/2019)

In addition to citing a rise in teenage pregnancies, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe said heads were being silenced. To him, that explained why the public was unaware of the policy's adverse effects. The use of huge numbers, such as 1,433, painted a dire picture of the teenage pregnancy situation in the country. Similarly, the NDC Deputy General Secretary reiterated:

The last time we conducted a survey in Ghana, and realized that averagely, in every constituency, 20 teenage girls under the DTS are pregnant ... if this is not a bad government, then I don't know another definition for a bad government. (GhanaWeb, 29/08/2019)

The NDC deputy General Secretary blamed the NPP for rising teen pregnancies in the above excerpts. He did not indicate who conducted the survey or when the survey was conducted. He used numbers to prove his claim and to convince listeners that the NPP government was terrible and should be voted out to stop teen pregnancies. Negative other presentation occurs in the

sentence, “if this is not a bad government, then I don't know another definition for a bad government” (GhanaWeb, 29/08/2019). However, this stance of the NDC officials discounted the fact that the problem of teenage pregnancies predated the implementation of FSHSP (Tetteh et al., 2022). Therefore, blaming only the FSHSP and the DTS for the surge in teenage pregnancy was geared toward a negative portrayal of the NPP government.

Raising Concerns Regarding Quality

Raising concerns about quality under the FSHSP was the primary means of expressing opposition to the policy. As stated earlier, the NDC officials attempted not to undermine the policy but rather to criticize the NPP's implementation strategy. By portraying the ruling party in a negative light and positioning themselves as the party with workable solutions, the opposition NDC sought to assure the public that they would implement policies better if given the mandate, calling on voters to vote out the NPP to enable the NDC to implement policies more effectively and ensure quality education. For example, an NDC MP, Zanetor, said: “It’s about quality education, not just education (MyJoy Online, 24/11/2019). Also, Mahama stressed the importance of decoupling increased access from quality: “What is the use of education if it does not have the quality to give the learner a chance and opportunity in life?” (Citi Newsroom, 17/08/22). These two quotes illustrate NDC’s stance that the prevailing system lacked the needed quality. This was an apparent response to NPP officials waxing lyrical about the increase in enrollment.

Furthermore, critiquing the DTS provided NDC officials with a valuable opportunity to portray the NPP negatively and, more significantly, promote the NDC positively. In their 2020 Manifesto, the NDC assured Ghanaians of “a better and improved FSHSP” and to “end the dreaded DTS which has increased cost of SHS education for some parents” (NDC, 2020, p. 68).

This promise was meant to assure citizens that the NDC would sustain and improve the policy by abolishing the DTS. It refuted NPP's claim that FSHSP had relieved parents of the secondary education costs. It is also important to note the use of the word “dreaded” to modify DTS. NDC also noted that DTS “has brought untold inconvenience to students, teachers, and parents and negatively impacted quality teaching and learning.” Notably, the flagbearer of the NDC promised to abolish the DTS within 100 days if elected to office.

Another NDC MP, Eric Afful, noted, “If the government wants to see quality education, the best thing is to eradicate the DTS for students by building enough school blocks” (GhanaWeb, 26/03/ 2021). This statement presupposed that, at that time, there was no quality. To him, quality education was contingent on abolishing the DTS. This NDC MP seemed to offer a solution by suggesting that the government should build more schools. However, he aimed to positively project NDC’s long-held claim that FSHSP was only feasible after building more schools (Afrane, 2022).

What is Missing in this Discourse?

CDA scholars maintain that what is included in a text is as important as what is excluded. Ozga (1999) asserts that presence and absence tell stories in policy analysis. A cursory analysis of the documents reviewed for this study revealed that teachers received a scanty mention in this discourse. The most notable mention of teachers was in President Akufo Addo’s speech at the launch of the FSHSP:

Central, too, to the prospects of this policy is the teacher. A well-trained, confident, and contented teacher is essential in the delivery of quality education. If we are to succeed as a nation, and if we accept that education is central to national development, then it is

clear that quality teacher training is vital to our nation's development. ("President's speech at," 2017)

The word "central" indicates that teachers remain the fulcrum of the policy, and everything revolves around not only the availability of teachers, but also the quality of the teaching force. However, a critical analysis reveals that the president primarily focused on “quality teacher training,” with a particular emphasis on preservice teachers and capacity building through training. Thus, he spoke about two initiatives exclusive to teachers under training—the Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) and the restoration of the teacher trainee allowance ("President's speech at," 2017). Nana Akufo Addo’s reference to “the restoration of the teacher trainee allowance” can be seen as a form of positive self-presentation, indicating his government’s commitment to quality education through the production of quality teachers. The president did not address the current teachers on the field—people charged with the immediate implementation of the policy. Mahama also noted that the FSHSP was “creating great inconvenience for the parents, for the students, and for the teachers” (Ansah, 2020).

Aside from the instances mentioned earlier, the discourse from both parties, particularly the ruling government, has almost wholly ignored teachers, both as voters and as policy implementers, and as a group with something at stake here, while disproportionately focusing on discourses of education as a human right and education for economic growth. They also highlighted relieving parents, increasing student access, aligning with and actualizing global goals (SDG 4), and trustworthy governance, but provided very little information about what goes on in schools and the role of teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on CDA (van Dijk, 1997, 1998, 2018), I have shown that the ruling party's desire to stay in power was reflected in glorifying their regime, painting a picture of massive, unprecedented strides in secondary education that resulted in an enrollment surge, gender parity, and relief for parents. While these arguments sought to shore up regime support and maintain incumbency, they were corroborated by empirical evidence that the policy increased enrollment (Adarkwah, 2022; Kwegyiriba, 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). Furthermore, NPP officials' claim that the policy has been instrumental in improving access for many girls is corroborated by Stenzel et al. (2024) and Duflo et al. (2021), who assert that the policy has positively impacted girls' education relative to the period preceding the FSHSP. The claim that the policy has been responsible for the massive enrollment of the poor and rural people is consonant with Animah's (2018) finding. However, politicization manifests itself in touting these claims as indications of good stewardship under the NPP rulership and juxtaposing these achievements against those of the NDC. This thus amounts to a positive representation of the NPP and a negative representation of the NDC.

Equally, the NDC resorted to painting a gloomy picture of the current state of secondary education by highlighting implementation bottlenecks, especially regarding the infrastructural deficit, which is consistent with the findings of Adarkwah (2022), Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) and Mohammed and Kuyini (2021). Furthermore, consistent with the literature (Duah et al., 2023; Dwomoh et al., 2022), the NDC notes the decline in the quality of secondary education occasioned by the FSHSP. Importantly, given parents' satisfaction with the FSHSP (Addae et al., 2019), the NDC avoided criticizing the policy but instead focused on blaming the NPP government for its poor implementation. This is reminiscent of the bipartisan support that the

“No Child Left Behind” policy received, with leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties disagreeing only on issues of funding (Hursh, 2007; Torres, 2005).

Significantly, NDC officials framed the NPP as a threat to Ghana’s education and created the narrative that the situation could only be redressed by giving power back to the NDC. This is consistent with the assertion of Darmoe et al. (2024) that political opposition parties view themselves as a “government in waiting” and act as “watchdogs over the ruling government” (p. 12). The findings align with earlier research that political parties in Ghana, through their party manifestos and public education, are at the forefront of policy formulation and implementation (Darmoe et al., 2024; Gunu, 2019).

In sum, in their attempt to politicize the FSHSP and utilize it as a campaign tool to win elections, both parties adopted a strategy of either expressing or suppressing information in the interest of their parties (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267). Thus, NPP officials emphasize information that is positive about NPP while suppressing information that is negative about NPP. On the other hand, NDC officials “emphasize positive information” about NDC while suppressing “negative information about NDC. Conversely, while NPP officials emphasize the negatives of the NDC and suppress the positives about the NDC, officials of the NDC also emphasize the negatives of the NPP while suppressing the positives of the NPP. Both parties did this overtly and covertly. Thus, the NPP glorified the present while bastardizing the erstwhile NDC regime and their handling of secondary education, while the NDC officials problematize the present NPP regime, while promising a better future implementation. Ultimately, the aim of NPP officials’ pronouncement about FSHSP was to maintain incumbency, while NDC officials sought to advocate for regime change. Yet, in the quest to politicize the policy and lay claim to having the best ideas regarding the best course of education for Ghana, these political figures almost wholly

ignored teachers. This is surprising when we consider that teachers, by default, are the ones responsible for operationalizing their visions regarding education.

I contend that the prominence gained by the FSHSP in political debates in Ghana is not necessarily a function of the concern the political parties have for education; rather, it is because both parties believe that talking about it can help sway voters in their favor. This is understandable, given the premium placed on education not only as a tool for the nation's economic prosperity but also as a means for social mobility. However, letting politics take center stage in educational issues presages a dangerous future for education. This is because the principal aim of every political party is to win elections, and when education policies become campaign tools, the policies lose their educational focus, leading to an over-concentration on winning the next election.

In this chapter, I focused on policy as discourse and illuminated how the FSHSP was politicized by officials of the NPP and NDC, through their politically skewed lenses. I demonstrated how discussions about educational issues provided politicians an avenue to engage in perpetual campaigning. Yet, the discussions disproportionately focused on the constitutionality or otherwise of the FSHSP and education as a fundamental human right. They also discussed the FSHSP in the context of economic growth and human capital development while pointing out how it aligns with global policy frameworks and best practices worldwide. Aside from these, the conversations about the FSHSP concentrated on parents, students, quality education, and indicators of good or poor governance, with little focus on teachers. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to teachers and explore policy as practice. I shed light on how the power to determine the shape of the FSHSP was distributed, focusing on the government and

teachers. I ask whether and to what extent teachers were involved in the formulation process of the FSHSP.

Chapter Six: Teachers as Cogs in the Wheel

In this chapter, I present teachers' views regarding their involvement in the FSHSP policymaking process in Ghana. I examine how teachers perceive the politicization of the policy and assert that this significantly influenced the distribution of power in the FSHSP formulation process. I also consider how teachers understand their role and positionality in relation to the government, and how the MoE excluded teachers from the policy formulation stage. I explore some of the underlying reasons and assumptions for this exclusion, while elucidating the implications of excluding teachers from the policy formulation process. I begin with the stories of Man Charsey and Christopher (Pseudonyms), focusing on how they learned about the policy.

Learning About the Policy

Christopher taught English Language and Literature. He was posted to Mawunya SHS in 2014 and has remained there until the time of the research, 2023. At the time of data collection for this research, Christopher was the assistant head of the language department, which comprised himself and 24 other teachers. On my first day of visit to Mawunya SHS, Christopher told me about how he and his colleagues learned about the FSHSP:

I heard a lot of things in the air. But the first time I heard something “official” about the policy was at a staff meeting when my headteacher told us to brace ourselves for the ‘pioneers of the Free SHS.’ It was in September 2017. Even the headteacher was not sure of what he was saying.

Christopher then told me he did not care much about the policy because his work was to teach and not to think about those who paid fees. He, however, intimated that he was happy that the policy would open doors for poor kids. Christopher noted that, perhaps, because the policy did not change the teaching curriculum, the government did not deem it necessary to consult

teachers. To him, the policy concerned only those in charge of monetary issues in the school. Consequently, the government or GES trained only those who handled official school money, like the school accountants, bursars, and headteachers. Thus, teachers only got information about the policy from the news or during staff meetings with their head teachers. “So, eventually, the students came, and we did what we were supposed to do as teachers,” he concluded (Fieldnote, 01/06/2023).

Man Charsey, a physics teacher from Elikplim SHS, noted that he heard about the policy “just like any other member of the public” in the form of campaign promises and slogans such as “Free SHS is coming” and “Vote Nana for Free SHS.” According to Man Charsey, the “reality of the policy dawned” on him and his colleagues when the first years started coming to school, and their headteacher cautioned teachers to “handle the first years with care because they were Akufo Addo's children” (Fieldnote, 01/07/2023).

The stories of Christopher and Man Charsey typify the dominant themes in my conversations with teachers during my fieldwork. Like Christopher and Man Charsey, many participants reflected on the lack of consultation and teacher involvement in adopting and formulating the FSHSP. Their stories highlight the complexity of representation and marginalization in teacher unions' activities, trace the policy's origin, and reveal the power dynamics inherent in policy formulation and implementation. At the same time, teachers recognized the mediating role of politics and the tendency of the Ghana government to adopt policies from other countries and implement them—purely based on the success of the policies in those countries—in shaping teachers’ lack of involvement in the formulation of FSHSP. While attributing implementation difficulties mainly to the policy being a political campaign tool and the fact that it was implemented in a rushed manner, these teachers argued that their insight

could have significantly improved the policy and mitigated various implementation challenges. Ultimately, teachers recognized their role as key policy actors and called for more holistic inclusion in all stages of the policy-making process, rather than just its implementation.

Teachers' Roles in the Policy Process

Among the most prominent themes in my conversations with teachers was the perception of a lack of involvement in the policy formation process. All participants indicated the absence of proper consultation before the government rolled out the policy. These teachers believed that education policymaking was centralized at the MoE or the GES head office, and the policy itself was rolled out without room for their input. Take, for example, my interaction with Philip, a mathematics teacher in Mawunya SHS:

Kofi: Do you think teachers were consulted before-

Philip: (not allowing me to finish the question) No. Teachers were not consulted.

Kofi: How do you know?

Philip: Yeah. I'm a teacher, and I've not heard of any consultation (04/06/2023).

Daniel, a social studies teacher at Elikplim SHS, held similar views:

Most of the policies, especially the current policy, I have not seen any special engagements with the teachers before the policy was put in place generally. But if some people were engaged somewhere, some of us are not aware ... That is why I am saying that teachers were not aware or engaged before the policy was formulated (27/07/2023).

Given a lack of transparency about how policy decisions are made, particularly at the MoE level, teachers acknowledged the limits of their knowledge. The Assistant headteacher of Edem SHS followed the same line in his response: "As far as I am concerned, hardly will you be [consulted] or your ideas are sought. We will only be there, and they will say the policies are formulated...

for you to implement" (02/08/2023). Other teachers prefaced their answers with phrases such as "in my view," "I am not sure," and "I can't say yes or no." While these individual responses highlighted the overall lack of involvement of individual teachers in policy formulation, they also reflected the lack of transparency in the education policy formulation process in Ghana. All FGD participants agreed that no individual teacher was contacted prior to the policy's implementation. These stories substantiate earlier research results (Boadu, 2021; Seshie, 2019; Nudzor, 2014) that the policymaking process in Ghana's education is centralized.

Moreover, these responses highlight the hierarchical nature of the Ghanaian education sector, where the government (sometimes) consults with very few teachers yet implements policies with wide-ranging consequences. Education policy implementation in Ghana encompasses four levels: governmental, regional, district, and school level. At the governmental level is the MoE, headed by the Minister of Education, appointed by the President and accountable to the President. Under the MoE, the GES is responsible for implementing education policies at the primary and secondary levels. The Director-General of the GES oversees implementation through the regional directors of education, general managers of mission/faith-based schools, district directors of education, headteachers, and teachers. At the regional level, there is a regional director of education who is accountable to the Director-General of GES. The Metropolitan, Municipal, or District director of education comes next, and they report directly to the regional director of education. Then comes the headteachers, who are accountable to the district director of education and responsible for the everyday administration of the various schools. The headteachers supervise their teachers, who are mainly responsible for teaching and learning (Nudzor, 2014). There are 16 Regional Education Offices (REOs) and 212 Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Education Offices (MMDEOs), which oversee schools in

their respective jurisdictions through a network of school improvement support officers (SISOs) (UNESCO, 2022). Figure 5 presents a visual of the FSHSP implementation process.

Figure 5

The FSHSP Implementation Process

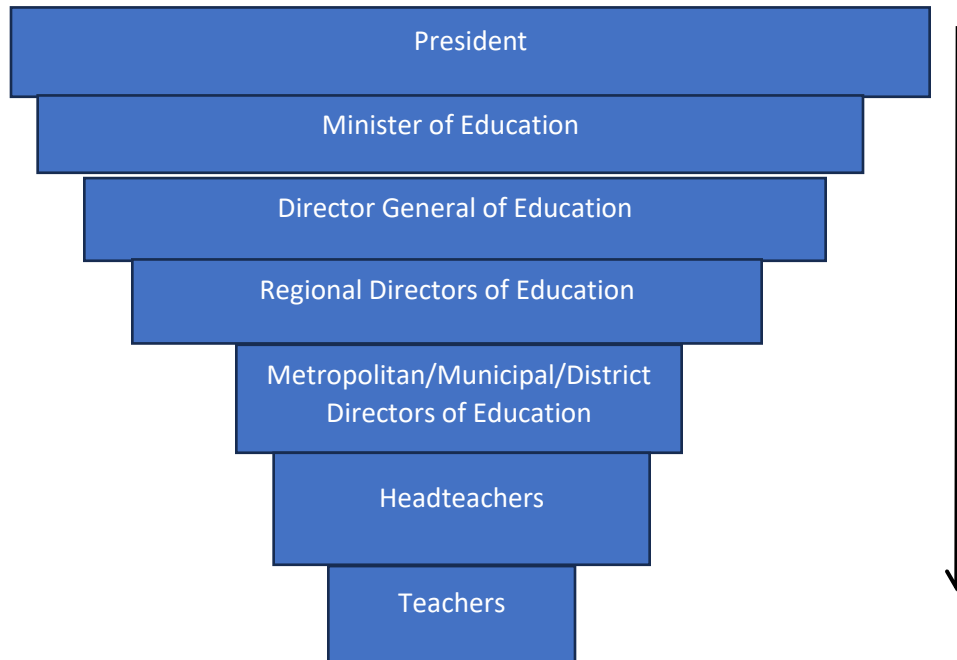


Figure 5 demonstrates the FSHSP implementation process. The arrow pointing down signifies how power, which is concentrated at the top, moves down with the president wielding the most power, followed by the Minister of Education, who reports directly to the president. Under the Minister of Education is the Director General of Education, who supervises the Regional Directors of Education and the managers of faith-based schools. The Metropolitan, Municipal, or District Directors of Education take instructions from their Regional Directors of Education, which they in turn pass on to their immediate subordinates, who are the headteachers. Power decreases as it moves further down. Each level directs the members of the level directly below it. These members report to or are accountable to the level immediately above them. For example, headteachers are accountable to the Metropolitan, Municipal, or District Directors of

Education, who, in turn, are accountable to the regional directors of education. To further consolidate power at the top, the government set up the Free SHS secretariat, which receives instructions directly from the Minister of Education. The Free SHS secretariat is led by the national coordinator, who oversees the various regional coordinators of the FSHSP. It is worth noting that these coordinators are political appointees.

Ghana adopts a centralized and hierarchical approach to policymaking, where power and authority over education policies converge at the center. Thus, policies are usually formulated at the national level, often championed by "political figureheads and technocrats, and then 'pushed down' for implementation at the local level through regional and district representatives of the Ghanaian education authority" (Nudzor, 2014, p. 2). Wadja (2019) also notes that education reforms in Ghana adopt a traditional, linear, top-down approach, which excludes the input of teachers and other stakeholders, thereby making teachers feel alienated from the policy formulation process.

Yet, the practice of concentrating power at the top did not begin with the FSHSP. Centralization was a key component of the colonial plan for education. Before 1852, educational management in the Gold Coast was sort of decentralized as the Wesleyan Missionary Society, the Basel Missionary Society, the Bremen Missionary Society, and later the Roman Catholic Missionaries operated schools, and their missions superintended schools in the Gold Coast (Boadu, 2021; Graham, 1971; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). To centralize education, in 1852, the colonial state passed the Education Ordinance of 1852 to regulate schools, mainly through the provision of funds. One notable aspect of this Ordinance, and perhaps the reason for its failure, was the exclusion of the mission schools. The failure of the 1852 Ordinance ushered in a collaboration between the colonial government and the missions as the government started

supporting the mission schools. Due to disparities in how the missions managed their schools, in 1882, the Gold Coast Legislative Council passed the Ordinance for the Promotion and Assistance of Education in the Gold Coast Colony, which gave the Governor the power to nominate a Board of Education and an inspector, who reported to the board (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975).

Then came the Education Ordinance of 1887, which recognized two types of schools: Government and Assisted schools. The government schools comprised schools built and managed by the government, whereas the assisted schools were mainly the mission schools. The assisted schools were required to meet specific conditions to receive funding from the colonial government (Graham, 2013; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). Through the provision of funds, the colonial government exerted central control over education.

The colonial government's first attempt to decentralize education was based on the Education Committee's 1937-41 recommendation that each district should establish a District Education Committee. The first district education committee was established in Akyem Abuakwa to advise the government on the needs of the local population. Another attempt was the establishment of District Councils in 1952 to help in the administration of primary and middle schools (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975).

After Ghana's independence, the 1957 and 1960 constitutions granted Regional Assemblies (Eastern, Western, Ashanti, Northern Territories, and Trans-Volta Togoland) the authority to manage primary and middle schools. Afterward, the Kwame Nkrumah government passed the Education Act of 1961, which gave the Minister of Education "the power of making Regulations, which has the force of law, dealing with all matters of education" but also endorsed decentralization of education by empowering Local Education Authorities to oversee primary and middle schools in their various localities (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975, p. 97).

After the overthrow of the Nkrumah government, several successive civilian and military governments: the National Liberation Council, 1966-1969; the Progress Party, 1969-1972; and the National Redemption Council, 1972-1975, attempted to decentralize governance generally. In education, however, the National Redemption Council under the National Redemption Council Decree (NRCD 247) established the GES in 1974.

In 1988, the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) passed the Local Government Law 1988 (PNDC Law 207), which decentralized all aspects of governance, including education, to the district and municipalities. The 1992 constitution consolidated this. In the education sector, although the central government recruited and paid teachers, it also allowed for more community involvement in the running and improvement of schools through parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and school management committees (SMCs). In 2016, the Local Governance Act 2016 (Act 963) led to the establishment of a Department of Education, Youth, and Sports in every District Assembly. The Department of Education, Youth and Sports was empowered to manage basic education, special education, and library services. However, Nudzor (2014) claims that these were attempts by the central governments to micromanage at the local level. Also, UNESCO (2022) insists that the decentralization in Ghana education is merely nominal because the decentralized units “rely heavily on guidance and directives issued by the GES head office in Accra” (p. 8), and policymaking remains at MoE or the GES headquarters.

Teacher Unions and General Policy Formulation

In the context of the decentralization of school governance, yet centralization of MoE policymaking, teachers found representation across scale (school management, the leadership of the various education units and the various teacher unions). Participants presented four divergent views regarding teachers being represented by their leaders when it came to policy formulation.

The first strand of argument came from teachers who believed their leaders, particularly the union leaders, represented them in the policy formulation stage. Teachers in Ghana belong to many professional associations. However, the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), and the Coalition of Concerned Teachers (CCT-Ghana) are the most vibrant. These associations enhance the teaching profession's standing by ensuring teachers' welfare and are expected to provide input on vital educational issues. The GNAT, which was established in 1962, for instance, aims "to cooperate with the government in the pursuit of educational development" (Ghana National Association of Teachers, 2022, p. 3).

Some teachers equated the government consulting the various teacher union leaders or the leadership of GES as consulting teachers. The view of Linda, a science teacher at Elikplim SHS, is illustrative:

Well, we have...we have an organogram⁹ anyway like from the director general and all blah blah blah. We have representatives, headmasters also are there so I'm sure that those who matter at the top of the organogram have a say over the formulation of policies. They are more or less representing teachers. So, whatever they say covers us (27/07/2023).

According to Linda, education leaders, rather than individual teachers, are responsible for formulating policies. While admitting that individual teachers were not involved in the policy formulation process, she highlighted that their leadership acted as their mouthpiece: "Whatever they say covers us." She acknowledged and seemed to accept the existence of a hierarchical

⁹ Organograms help visualize how an organization is structured, who reports to whom, and the flow of authority and responsibility.

order, which she referred to as an organogram. This stance aligned with the thinking of Mawuli, a social studies teacher at Edem SHS:

Mostly, it is the union leaders that play most of the roles in the formulation of policies on our behalf. Teachers, we belong to the most popular teacher unions, the GNAT and the NAGRAT, and our leaders represent us at the national level when the need arises for policy formulation. And we send information from the grassroots, let me put it that way, through our local leaders to the district, the region, and the national office for them to send to the policymakers. So, I may say we have been contributing towards the policy formulation. However, as to whether most of our contributions have been taken into consideration, some of us are still in doubt... (08/08/2023).

For Mawuli, union leaders or their representatives serve as liaisons between teachers and the government, providing input on behalf of teachers. Thus, Mawuli believed that teacher unions' leadership, particularly GNAT and NAGRAT, engaged in education policy formulation, not individual teachers. Edward, who has been a mathematics teacher in Elikplim SHS for the past sixteen years, also reasoned along the same line, though with a bit of hesitation:

In Ghana, maybe at the top, the union leaders, you know and those in charge, as far as GES is concerned, are the ones that are involved in the policy formulation with government through the MoE. That is my understanding. But as to what extent their contributions or input impact the direction the government wants to take education is another thing. It's another thing altogether (19/07/2023).

Significantly, both Mawuli and Edward had serious reservations about the impact of the unions.

Watkins (2022) argues that, generally, teacher unions are not accorded much respect when it

comes to educational issues. Additionally, as illustrated in Table 2, the history of teacher unions in Ghana portrays them as primarily concerned with financial issues rather than policy issues.

Table 2

The Evolution of Teacher Unions in Ghana

1926	1929	1937	1958	1962	1998	2011
Government School Teacher Union (GSTU): Established by the colonial government.	Assisted School Teachers Union (ASTU): Formed by teachers themselves in protest of salary cuts.	The merger of GSTU and ASTU into Gold Coast Teachers Union (GCTU).	The CPP government compelled the GCTU to come under Ghana Trade Union Congress as Teachers and Cultural Services Union.	Establishment of Ghana National Teachers Association of Teachers (GNAT) for all teachers.	Establishment of the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), to ask for better conditions of service for graduate teachers.	Establishment of the Coalition of Concerned Teachers (CCT-Ghana). The founders of CCT-Ghana accused GNAT and NAGRAT of failing to negotiate better conditions of service for teachers.

The colonial government established the first teacher association, the Government School Teacher Union (GSTU), in 1926. The GSTU excluded teachers who did not teach in Government Schools, notably mission schoolteachers. The GSTU aimed to improve the teaching skills of its members (Amoako, 2014a). However, in 1929, because of the economic depression, the colonial government reduced the expenditure on education, including teachers' salaries. In protest of the salary cuts, the second teachers' organization, the Assisted School Teachers Union (ASTU), was formed in 1932 (Amoako, 2014a; Manu, 1984; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). The ASTU was financed and controlled entirely by mission schoolteachers. In 1937, the GSTU and ASTU

merged into the Gold Coast Teachers' Union (GCTU). Until 1958, the GCTU remained the main teachers' union in Ghana. However, after independence, the CPP government compelled the GCTU to come under Ghana's Trades Union Congress (TUC) as the Teachers and Cultural Services Union (Amoako, 2014a).

In 1962, the government dissolved the GCTU and authorized the formation of a teacher professional group. This association became the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT). Although the GNAT was a non-political association, the post-independence political climate meant that the CPP and subsequent military governments interfered in the GNAT's affairs, thereby forcing the GNAT to do the bidding of governments (Amoako, 2014a; Amoako, 2014b). Nevertheless, the crux of the issues between the government and the GNAT concerned salaries and favorable working conditions rather than policy issues. The GNAT remained the only representative body for pre-tertiary teachers in Ghana until the formation of the Ghana National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) in 1998.

The NAGRAT began as a pressure group of graduates within GNAT who advocated for graduate teachers to be better remunerated than their non-graduate colleagues. The founders of NAGRAT argued that graduate teachers were underpaid and lacked favorable working conditions, compared to graduates working in other fields (Amoako-Gyampah, 2015). The GNAT and NAGRAT remained the two main bodies representing teachers until 2011, when the Coalition of Concerned Teachers of Ghana (CCT-Ghana) was formed (Amoako-Gyampah, 2018). The CCT-Ghana accused GNAT and NAGRAT of failing to advance the course of teachers, especially during negotiations for better conditions of service. Thus, like the situation in Cameroon (Konings, 2006) and Nigeria (Egboro, 2019), teacher unions in Ghana remain

primarily focused on working conditions, what Amoako-Gyampah (2015) calls “bread and butter unionism” (p. 61).

Moreover, the teacher unions are weak and incapable of effecting any serious change because they lack a united front and are constantly in conflict with each other (Gbontir Bed, 2012). The teacher unions must also constantly navigate the delicate path of being perceived as either working for or against the government. For example, in 2006, when NAGRAT declared a strike, the NPP government accused the leadership of NAGRAT of working with and for the opposition NDC party and attempted to pit GNAT against NAGRAT (Amoako-Gyampah, 2015).

The second strand of argument regarding policy formation and teachers came from Koagbe, the staff secretary of Elikplim SHS. Koagbe presented a contrasting view to that of Mawuli and Edward:

Apart from our unions, NAGRAT, GNAT, CCT, and Teachers Alliance, who influence policies at the top, we hardly have a teacher like me at this level influencing policies because we interface with the management of our schools through the headmasters... I might even say that headteachers are also virtually conveyor belts. They carry from policymakers. So, we hardly influence policies (28/07/2023).

Koagbe's comment highlighted the difficulty individual teachers face in influencing education policies. To him, the government only deals with teachers through the headteachers—the unidirectional "conveyor belts" carrying information from the MoE to teachers. Tarius, an English teacher in Edem SHS, echoed and amplified Koagbe's view:

To the best of my knowledge, the involvement of teachers usually takes the form of teacher unions at the helms of affairs of the teachers, who are sometimes invited to sit

with the government over certain policies...the involvement of teachers is at the level of the union leaders (02/08/2023).

Tarius's response brings to the fore the "Free SHS Implementation Committee." On May 26, 2017, the Minister of Education, Matthew Opoku Prempeh, inaugurated the "Free SHS Implementation Committee." This committee, chaired by the minister, comprised representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Scholarship Secretariat, Buffer Stock Company, the Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS), Auditor General's Department, GES, Teachers Union, the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools (CHASS) and National Security. The committee's mandate was to advise the Minister of Education on the way forward regarding the adoption of the FSHSP policy (Kale-Dery, 2017).

While the inclusion of GES officials, Representatives of the Teachers' Unions, and the CHASS on the committee created the impression that teachers were involved in policy formulation, it should be noted that the President directly appointed the Director-General of GES and his two deputies. Including representatives from teacher unions and the CHASS in the committee implied that, to some reasonable extent, teachers were involved in the policy formulation.

Nevertheless, the General Secretary of the GNAT, David Ofori Acheampong, in an interview on Eyewitness News, disclosed that the government did not properly involve the GNAT:

Before we were aware, the implementation committee had been done already. We were only asked to come and serve on one of the subcommittees, and definitely, we sent people to go, but we thought that it was unrealistic. The best thing to have been done was

that you write to us as teacher unions because at least, the law says that there must be one union which holds the collective bargaining certificate. (Adogla-Bessa, 2017)

The union representatives were only brought on board to check the box, and to oversee teachers as mere implementers of the FSHSP. Aside from that, the committee's mandate was to advise the minister on the way forward, implying that the decision had already been made, and the committee's formation was merely to create the impression of a broad consultation. Watkins (2022) makes a similar observation of teacher unions in the US: "Opportunities to become involved in the process [of policy making] rely on the systemic creation of advisory groups that consciously seek out the teacher's perspective. These groups and their impact are occasionally overshadowed by perceived or actual tokenism" (p. 15). Moreover, the teacher unions in Ghana have been criticized as being more concerned about economic issues than educational issues (Manu, 1984).

The third strand of views on policy formulation came from those who were ambivalent about the entire process. That is, these participants were uncertain about how much the government sought input from the teacher unions. Even as these participants noted that individual teachers were not consulted, they held the view that perhaps some form of consultation had occurred at the union level. Take the response of Daniel, for instance, when quizzed on whether teachers were consulted before the policy was rolled out:

I can't say yes. I can't say no. Because I personally was not consulted, and I don't know the number of teachers that were consulted. And you know, in Ghana, what we normally do is, we have what we call the teacher unions. So many of the times, they will just consult the teacher unions for and on behalf of the teachers (27/07/2023).

In the same vein as Daniel's "I can't say yes, I can't say no," Tagbedze, a teacher of English language who doubled as the guidance and counseling coordinator in Mawunya SHS, noted:

If some people were engaged somewhere, some of us are not aware because we don't know whether they've engaged our leaders, the GNAT, the NAGRAT and the other teaching bodies. We don't know whether they engaged any of them (03/06/2023).

These responses reflected a high level of uncertainty regarding the involvement of their unions in the policy formulation of the FSHSP. The responses from these participants highlighted the complexity of representation and marginalization, invoking the "dual marginalization of teachers" in the education sector (Govender, 2008, p. 13). Writing about teachers, teacher unions and the education policy formulation process in South Africa, Govender (2008) notes:

Teachers as individuals, therefore, experience dual marginalization in the policy arena, firstly, because state policymakers do not consult or engage them, and secondly, because teacher unions themselves are often unable to adequately involve grassroots members in policy formulation activities within their organizations. (p. 13)

Govender's (2008) assertion resonates with the situation in Ghana. Even if the unions were consulted, they did not solicit individual teachers' views. I taught in Ghana for over a decade, from 2006 to 2017. The first five years of my teaching were at the primary level, where I was a member of the GNAT. After graduating from the University, I joined the NAGRAT and remained a member from 2014 to 2017. My teaching period coincided with eight (8) years of NDC's rule and four (4) years of NPP's rule. Although I experienced two governments and two teacher unions, to the best of my knowledge, my colleagues and I were never consulted by

anyone, either from the education office or from GNAT/NAGRAT, on any educational issue. We only received directives through our headteachers.

Fourthly, one teacher, Caleb, declared that there was no consultation at all, whether at the individual teacher level or among teacher unions. When I inquired about whether teachers were consulted before the implementation of the policy, this was his reply:

Not at all. Not at all!!! (shaking his head and smiling) So the evidence is even there!!!

You know when the policy started, the teacher unions had to call the government that, no, why won't you consult us? You are going to use our teachers in this policy, and they are going to do more work, so what package do you have for our teachers? So, teachers were not consulted on this policy at all (04/06/2023).

Caleb's view that the government consulted neither teachers nor their unions was based on "evidence." Caleb was the secretary for NAGRAT at his school. His position, therefore, placed him in a privileged position to declare with certainty that there was no consultation. A cursory look at Caleb's comment, however, suggests that the interest of the teachers' unions was not in the policy details but rather in the compensation package that teachers would receive for implementing the policy. This stance further emphasizes that teacher unions prioritize financial matters over policy issues.

Meanwhile, John, a teacher from Elikplim SHS, after clarifying that individual teachers did not have a direct role in policy formulation, provided some justification for the exclusion of individual teachers. According to John, the government considered engaging GES officials and teacher union representatives equivalent to seeking teacher input. According to this teacher, this reasoning was premised on the fact that many of the officials in the GES and the teacher unions previously worked as teachers:

But there's also this belief that you know, most of the people that rise to the top were in the classrooms before. So, they feel that maybe when they consult those at the top, they have consulted teachers. But the thing is that somebody that is still on the job and experiences the challenges that are coming every day...is better placed to speak to it than those who have left the field and are now in their offices. So, to a large extent, teachers who are on the field are not directly involved in the policy formulations (19/07/2023).

John laid bare the conventional thinking that is often used to justify excluding individual teachers (those “on the ground”) from the policy formulation process. Nevertheless, John reflected on the flawed nature of that reasoning by noting that teachers in the field are more attuned to the current issues in the education system. Thus, to John, excluding teachers on the field amounted to losing their valuable insight and input. Smit (2005) refers to this insight as “local knowledge” (p. 294). According to Smit (2005), disregarding teachers' perspectives results in a failure to acknowledge the valuable classroom knowledge and experience they possess, which are essential in the development and execution of policies. In the case of FSHSP, the policymaking process was turned "upside down" because the problem identification and solution options were defined solely by government and political actors (Adarkwah, 2022).

Teachers are generally excluded from the policymaking process worldwide. Many studies have noted the exclusion of teachers from the policymaking process (Kumar & Scuderi, 2000; Smit, 2005; Derrington & Anderson, 2020; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016; Kadzamira & Rose, 2001). Although teachers are excluded from the formulation of education policies, they are nevertheless expected to implement the policies that have been formulated (Derrington & Anderson, 2020; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). Hinnant-Crawford (2016) asserts that the conception of teachers as implementers "was put in place a century ago and continues to shape the policy landscape" (p.

3). In Africa, teachers being seen as implementers can be traced to colonial times. Fabunmi (2005), writing on the policy formulation process in Nigeria, traces the top-down approach to policy to colonialism, where policies were virtually prepackaged in England and brought down to the colonies to be implemented. This assertion by Fabunmi (2005) also holds for Ghana, as we share the same colonial past. Thus, policies during the colonial era were more geared toward imperial interests than the needs, aspirations, and values of the colonies. This top-down approach to the policy process became more pronounced due to the long period of military and autocratic rule that prevailed in Ghana between 1960 and 1992, during which policies were often issued in the form of decrees, thereby mirroring the colonial era (Donkoh et al., 2023).

Furthermore, empirical studies in diverse African contexts demonstrate how development actors and projects shape government agendas in the education sector. For example, between 2012 and 2017, Malawi's MoE, Science and Technology made the United Kingdom's Department for International Development's project "Keeping Girls in School" a national policy, which it imposed on female teachers to implement (Morley, 2019a). Similarly, in 2017, Ghana's MoE, in partnership with USAID, introduced the "*Learning Project*," which aimed to support mother tongue and phonic-based instruction in primary schools in the country. In both cases, teachers had no say but ended up "just receiving" the new policies from their governments and donors "in the form of curricula, trainings, and mandates" (Morley, 2019b, p. 194). Writing about Malawi's USAID-funded reading reform (Malawi Early Great Reading Improvement Activity), Morley (2019b) notes that "separating an International Development project from a "government policy" is impossible since the two operate in tandem" (p. 42).

In Ghana, education policies, particularly those related to curriculum, are often shaped by global forces such as the IMF, the World Bank, or UNICEF. For example, the 1987 education

reform, which reduced pre-tertiary education from 17 years to 12 years, was adopted as a cost-saving measure imposed by the IMF and World Bank's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) (Abukari et al., 2015). Also, the FCUBE policy, though precipitated by the UNICEF's EFA, was funded by the World Bank (Akyeampong, 2009), while the UNESCO and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) championed the attempt to introduce Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) in Ghana (Fuller, 2022). There is, therefore, no denying the fact that "global imperatives underpin a host of policy prescriptions" (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 54).

Government Formulate, Teachers Implement

In a study involving teachers in Georgia (US), Hinnant-Crawford (2016) found that teachers predominantly perceived their role in the policy process as that of executors of directives issued by others. This was not dissimilar to what I found in my studies, as many teachers associated policy formulation with the government while restricting teachers to implementation. Here, teachers drew a clear line between policy formulation and policy implementation as separate processes performed by different units. Tarius, a core science teacher in Edem SHS, highlighted this thinking:

Formulation of policies is usually done at the government level. We, as teachers, especially at this level, are only implementers of the policies, so we just receive directives from our bosses as to what to do as far as these policies are concerned (02/08/2023).

These teachers saw policy formulation and implementation as two distinct phases. This thinking reflected the rational policymaking cycle where policy formulation precedes policy implementation and policy formulators differ from policy implementers (Taylor et al., 1997).

Participants stated that teachers were primarily responsible for implementing the policy, and implementation was viewed as encompassing teaching and its associated duties. Teachers

qualified ‘implementation’ using the words “only” or “just” to reflect their limited role. For example, Tarius stated, "We, as teachers, especially at this level, are only implementers of the policies, so we just receive directives" (02/08/2023). Here, participants seemed to describe policymaking as an intellectual activity reserved for those at the MoE, while teachers focused on the practical division of labor. This finding aligns with the notion of policymaking as a "forbidden zone for teachers" and highlights teachers' tendency to view themselves as “mere implementers of policies” (Tohidian & Nodooshan, 2021, p. 40). It is also reminiscent of Malawi teachers’ view of themselves as mere receivers of new policies from their government (Morley, 2019b).

At the launch of the FSHSP, President Akufo Addo declared, “Central, too, to the prospects of this policy is the teacher. A well-trained, confident, and contented teacher is essential in the delivery of quality education” (GhanaWeb TV, 2017). My participants expressed similar sentiments about the centrality of teachers to a successful FSHSP. For example, Ransford, a teacher in Elikplim SHS, noted that "the teacher is the center of the teaching and learning" (27/07/2023). Solomon described teachers as the "Frontline workers...who are directly involved in the implementation of the policy" (05/06/2023), while Cate mentioned that "teachers are the final people who implement the policies" (24/07/2023). In general, participants viewed themselves as key policy actors, without whom it would be impossible for any education policy to be implemented.

Despite their exclusion and consequent lack of involvement in the FSHSP formulation, many participants believed that their involvement would have improved the policy and helped avoid some of the problems that accompanied the policy rollout. Akos, a home economics teacher from Edem SHS, stated that “if teachers were involved, there are certain decisions the

government cannot take” (10/08/2023). Benjamin, a social studies teacher in Elikplim SHS, indicated that he would have advised the government to first and foremost expand infrastructure before implementing the policy. Doreen, another teacher from Edem SHS, elaborated on the need for teachers to be part of the policy formulation:

We have to be part of what we do so that we can influence policy a bit because we are the professionals in the field, and we know where the problems are, and we should be part of the solution (08/08/2023).

Ivy, the senior housemistress of Elikplim SHS, shared what was lost because the government excluded teachers from the policy formulation:

Most of the policies if teachers had been involved from day one, things would not be the way they are. Like this free education, personally, if I had the chance to be part, I could have advised that they should have started it from the technical and vocational schools (19/07/2023).

Thus, like teachers in Iran (Tohidian & Nodooshan, 2021), these teachers believed they could make meaningful contributions at the policy formulation stage if given the opportunity. This contrasts with Hinnant-Crawford’s (2016) findings that teachers initially lacked confidence in their ability to influence policy. Significantly, Doreen indicated that teachers were the professionals in the field, stressing that teachers “know where the problems are, ... and should be part of the solution” (08/08/2023). The reasoning of Doreen, and indeed most participants, is conventional wisdom because you cannot provide a solution if you don’t know the problem. In fact, during both FGDs, participants agreed that teachers were better placed to make vital inputs during education policy formulation.

According to Croll et al. (1994), teachers make choices congruent with what they believe is the best, given the circumstances under which they work. In this vein, they referred to teachers as policymakers in practice. In considering teachers as policymakers in practice, there is an emphasis on the decision-making agency of teachers, where teachers are viewed as active implementers. Ball et al. (2011) refer to this policy enactment as the process of policy actors “interpreting and translating policy” into action (p. 619). Croll et al.’s (1994) conceptualization of teachers as policymakers in practice is similar to the Street-Level Bureaucracy Framework proposed by Lipsky (1980). Teachers, as street-level bureaucrats, exercise discretionary powers over what pertains in their schools or classrooms as they translate policies into action (Farhadi & Winton, 2022). Teachers, therefore, make meaning of policies and practicalize them within the context and confines of their schools, thereby co-creating, enacting, and reflecting on policies from governments (Alfrey et al., 2017).

To a considerable extent, the points advanced by these teachers highlight the importance of firsthand knowledge of teachers—what Kumar and Scuderi (2000) refer to as “teachers’ insight” (p. 61) and what Smit (2005) terms “local knowledge” (p. 294). Given that teachers possess firsthand knowledge of how things work in the classroom, their involvement at the initial stages of the policy process will help establish a strong link between policy and practice, thereby bridging the policy-practice gap (Smit, 2005; Derrington & Anderson, 2020). Akos, the head of the economics department at Edem SHS, insisted that if she had been consulted, she would have suggested to the government that they include the provision of free sanitary pads in their policy. According to her, that was the biggest problem girls faced in her school.

It, therefore, did not surprise me when the assistant headmaster of Mawunya SHS noted that the government had lost touch with the situation on the ground since “they are just doing

some armchair policy" (08/08/2023), instead of engaging with teachers for valuable insights. In the next section, I explore teachers' view regarding why they were excluded from the process.

Two main themes emerged: Politics and policy borrowing.

Politics and the Policy

Addo (2019) argues that because FSHSP was a campaign pledge, it had a limited scope of consultation. My participants fully agreed, as they directly tied their lack of involvement, in part, to politics. Doreen, a teacher in Edem SHS, put it this way: "This free SHS policy, as far as I can remember, is the heartbeat of the sitting president, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo" (08/08/2023). Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo's promise of FSHSP was the most crucial factor that catapulted him to the presidency, after he had failed in his first two attempts. Therefore, reneging on his promise would have been a political suicide.

When asked to elaborate on the lack of consultation, teachers pointed to the political nature of the policy. To the teachers, despite the many reasons advanced for the policy, the government was, first and foremost, interested in fulfilling its campaign promise. Take, for example, the point made by Solomon, the head of the Department of Languages at Mawunya SHS:

The policy happens to be a campaign promise. A party used this policy during the campaign process... So, when the party was voted into power, in an attempt to fulfil the campaign promise, they introduced the policy without consulting... those who are directly involved in the implementation of the policy (05/06/2023).

Stephen, an economics teacher at Mawunya SHS, took the same line when expounding on the lack of teacher involvement in the policy formulation process. This was our conversation:

Kofi: To what extent are teachers involved in the formulation of FSHSP?

Stephen: I want to believe there's zero engagement.

Kofi: Why?

Stephen: ... It [FSHSP] comes out of some campaign promise. So once the party has won power, they were compelled to roll it out as they have said it. So, I can confidently say that there have been no engagements of teachers in formulating that policy (05/06/2023).

Thus, in its quest to fulfill its campaign promise, the government alienated teachers from the policy formulation process. The assistant headmaster of Elikplim SHS also added that the inclusion of FSHSP in NPP's manifesto led to teachers not being consulted. This was our interaction:

Kofi: Were teachers consulted before this policy was introduced?

Assist B: No.

Kofi: Can you explain?

Assist B: Oh! it has no explanation. Teachers were not. We only heard that it is part of the government's manifesto program or agenda that if he wins election in 2016/17 he is going to rollout the free SHS program, and when he won... they just started (27/07/2023).

What is contained in a political party's manifestoes is an index for judging its regime.

Governments worldwide thus prioritize projects and policies contained in their manifestoes.

Consequently, the NPP government prioritized fulfilling its manifesto commitment, neglecting due processes such as consulting teachers. This finding highlights the need for a national education plan that is immune to changes in government.

Copy and Paste: Policy Borrowing

Another recurrent view expressed by participants was that the government borrowed the FSHSP from other countries without ascertaining its suitability to the Ghanaian context.

Teachers referred to this as “copy and paste.” For example, during the FGD in Elikplim SHS, a teacher had this to say about the FSHSP:

You also realize that in Ghana here, we like just picking policies or copying from other people without localizing it ...we don’t normally consider those things before we implement policies. Because this country is doing it and they are doing well, we copy, copy and paste ...without looking at our own needs, the resources that are available, and what is needed for that policy to work. So that’s what this policy is about (28/07/2023).

While this teacher spoke, every teacher nodded, and there was a sense of unanimity about his response. The point advanced by this teacher was not far-fetched. At the launch of the FSHSP, the president referred to the economic success that resulted from free education for countries like Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, and the US, after which he declared: “Ghana, under my leadership, is determined to follow suit” (GhanaWeb TV, 2017). This indicated that the president sought to adopt what worked in those countries, as he framed the FSHSP as a way to catch up with the rest of the developed world. This perhaps explains why he does not cite any African country in his list of nations Ghana seeks to emulate, even though Kenya, Uganda, and Botswana had implemented universal secondary education at the time of this speech. As I demonstrate in the following lines, this omission is not an oversight but rather a politically motivated one. During the campaigns leading up to the 2012 and 2016 general elections, in their effort to dissuade voters from supporting Nana Akufo-Addo and his FSHSP idea, officials of the NDC consistently pointed to the challenges faced by African countries that had adopted universal

secondary education. For example, on a campaign trail in 2012, NDC's John Dramani Mahama said:

Countries like Botswana, Uganda, Kenya have implemented free SHS. Today, as I talk to you Botswana has announced a reintroduction of secondary school fees. Kenya has appealed for international assistance to prevent their secondary system from falling apart. A recent study done on free SHS in Kenya shows that it is running into difficulties.

(GhanaWeb, 29/11/2012)

Thus, according to the president, the FSHSP would set Ghana on the path of economic prosperity, just like Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, and the US. So, in effect, those countries were more or less policy donors, while Ghana was the policy borrower (Phillips & Ochs, 2003; Hogan et al., 2022). Policy borrowing, therefore, led to the exclusion of the voices of teachers and other stakeholders because governments felt that the success of policies in a different country was a sufficient indicator of their feasibility in Ghana. Ramirez et al. (2016) refer to this phenomenon of policy borrowing as the "ideology of best practices" wherein "educational reforms are grounded on the premise that countries can learn from other countries and their 'best practices'" (p. 44). The President further noted that the policy would help Ghana achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 4. (GhanaWeb TV, 2017). This finding has profound implications for Ghanaian education, particularly in how policy borrowing may hinder efforts to make education relevant to the needs and aspirations of the Ghanaian people. In the next section, I take up the issue of power as it relates to teachers and the government in the policy formulation process in Ghana.

Power Dynamics

Teachers also noted the hierarchical nature of the education sector and the power dynamics that accompany it. The government was seen as an all-powerful agent in charge of policy formulation, while teachers, lacking power, were tasked with implementing policies over which they had no say. My discussion with Timothy, a teacher of English in Elikplim SHS, is illustrative:

But here in Ghana, it comes from the top and to the bottom. So, before it gets to the bottom, I am just implementing. Whatever I say cannot get back to the top again. We begin to implement them and when challenges come then we are forced to just push it through. We are just implementers. If you don't implement, you are in trouble so, just do as they say (18/07/2023).

Timothy's testimony reflected how teachers understood the structure of the education sector and the uneven distribution of power between the government and teachers. Thus, teachers had no significant say over what was contained in the policy but bore the brunt of the challenges that arose from it. Teachers only viewed themselves as mediators between the government and the actualization of policies. This notion framed teachers as people who run errands for the government rather than policy actors. Information could only travel from the formulators to the teachers, as captured in the expression, "Whatever I say cannot get back to the top again" (18/07/2023). These teachers considered the government to be a powerful agent in terms of policies, while teachers were deemed powerless and passive agents, ever ready to do the government's bidding.

It is also important to note the powerless and vulnerable position of the teacher, as illustrated in the statement, "If you don't implement, you are in trouble, and so just do as they

say” (18/07/2023). This suggested that teachers sometimes implemented certain policies to avoid trouble —specifically to keep their jobs (Levy, 2019). Given Ghana’s unemployment rate of 14.7 percent in the first three quarters of 2023 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2024), coupled with a hiring freeze for civil and public servants (Ministry of Finance, 2022) as part of contingency measures towards the 2022 IMF bailout, this is not far-fetched. Timothy’s story illustrated the precarity of the teaching profession in a highly partisan context like Ghana, where the major devaluation of teachers’ work and wages started in the early 1990s with SAP’s implicit emphasis reducing public expenditure on education and by extension, teachers’ salaries.

My data thus illuminates how teachers spatialized the relationships among the government, the GES offices, the headteachers, and teachers as far as the education sector is concerned. Teachers constantly referred to superordinate versus subordinate relationships in the service. For example, Ransford noted that “policies are formulated from the top and down to the teacher, and the teacher is not considered in formulating policies” (27/07/2023). Also, during the FGD in Elikplim SHS, Timothy stated:

This one is just like a top bottom approach where somebody up somewhere, imagined the whole policy and then dumped it on the implementers to implement. Then, when the challenges come, they are not even ready to dialogue and sit with those people who are implementing the policy to find a way of going around it (28/07/2023).

Cate, another teacher from Elikplim SHS, put it this way:

When the bosses at the front or at the top make the policies, the implementation comes to the grassroots, whilst teachers serve as facilitators to promote those policies... teachers are, in a way, the mediators between the policy and the feedback from the policies (24/07/2023).

In the above excerpts, the teachers demonstrated their understanding of the hierarchical nature of Ghana's education sector. Two of the teachers referenced above used the words "top" and "down" in describing the MoE/GES and teachers, respectively. In the case of Cate, she used the term "bosses at the front or at the top" to describe government/GES and "grassroot" to describe teachers. This top-down approach invariably constructed teachers as policy consumers whom policies were made for and not with. This conception of teachers corresponded to Croll et al.'s (1994) second model of teachers as policy implementers while mirroring the situation in Iran, where teachers saw themselves as "powerless and pliant people who can be easily manipulated" (Tohidian & Nodooshan, 2021, p. 39). Croll et al. (1994) describe this as "managerially led implementation" and teachers as "unquestioning implementors of education policies" (p. 337). One main issue with this model is that there is usually a gap between policymakers and policy implementers, which aligns with Ball et al.'s (2011) assertion that teachers are policy subjects. As policy subjects, teachers receive policies from the government and comply with its directives.

Further evidence of the spatialization and hierarchical relationships in GES was apparent on my initial visit to Edem SHS. After introducing myself to the headteacher and handing over to him the letter from the GES permitting me to conduct the research in his school, the headmaster remarked, "Since they have agreed, what can I say?" (Fieldnote, 1/08/2023). The use of "they" depicted not only the power dynamics within the service but also a certain distance between the government/GES officials and headteachers and teachers. Hierarchic arrangements intrinsic to Ghana's education sector made it difficult for headteachers and teachers to take initiatives vis-a-vis the government. This situation prevailed in all three schools. Still, teachers demonstrated resistance.

Teacher Resistance

According to Kumar and Scuderi (2000), teacher involvement in policy formulation is crucial because teachers demonstrate greater dedication to the implementation process when they are engaged in crafting the policy. The converse is true: Teachers resist policies they perceive as an imposition (Smit, 2005). Imposition is a function of power, and power is accompanied by resistance (Foucault, 1990). Only one teacher, Doreen of Edem SHS, explicitly referred to any form of resistance:

We just heard that the policy has been formulated, then we are to implement. So, I think the involvement [of teachers] hasn't been very great, and that is why we see teachers sometimes opposing some of the policies that we are to implement (08/08/2023).

From my experience as a trained teacher, I must admit that overt opposition to education policies among teachers is absent in Ghana due to the political undercurrents inherent in adopting and formulating education policies. In most cases, opposition to policies occurs at the school level and is expressed in a collegial manner through informal complaints to colleagues and superiors—similar to what Ball et al. (2011) referred to as “discontents, murmurings, indifference, and disengagements” (p. 150). Koagbe, an English teacher in Elikplim SHS, said: “We only critique some policies at our staff meetings, which virtually, we can conclude don't go anywhere” (28/07/2023). Although these criticisms are not overt, I considered them forms of resistance to the policy.

However, resistance is complex and often covert (Smit, 2005), making it difficult to recognize (Ball et al., 2011). Covert resistance is usually at the individual level (Morley, 2019b). I noticed some covert forms of resistance. I gained this insight by spending a considerable amount of time with participants as they performed their official duties, discussed football

matches, engaged in heated political arguments, complained about losing their bets or even gossiped about their headteachers. In what follows, I present an extended vignette illuminating some covert resistance at Edem SHS:

After extra classes, I stayed on to see how preps were conducted in the school. Many teachers had left to their homes, and about four teachers were in the staff common room watching the 7 pm news and conversing. I saw the assistant headteacher in charge of academics talking to a group of students who, according to him, were making noise. After he dismissed the students, I walked toward him, and we conversed. He complained bitterly about the lackadaisical attitude of his teachers towards extra-curricular activities. After going on a monologue for close to five minutes, I suggested to him that maybe the teachers were tired after teaching for the whole day. My suggestion prompted a lengthy response from the assistant head: "Listen to me, my brother," he said while tapping me on my shoulder, then continued, "I have been in this job for a long time. I know if a teacher is being lazy. I know when a teacher is tired. I know when a teacher is not giving his best. Since the inception of this Free SHS, my teachers are only interested in doing the bare minimum. They will come to school and teach alright. They prepare lesson plans, give assignments, and they mark the assignments. They make sure to do all that is required of them but will not do anything extra. They are no longer interested in helping to maintain discipline. They don't help in monitoring prep sessions. They don't help supervise entertainment sessions. Apart from the Young Christians Society (YCS) and Evangelical Presbyterian Students Union (EPSU), all the clubs on campus do not have patrons, and teachers have refused to accept the positions...They just don't care anymore" (Fieldnote, 10/08/2023).

The assistant headteacher noted how teachers were only “doing the bare minimum.” The fact that only the YCS and EPSU clubs had patrons was notable, as these two groups were religious organizations, and the teachers who volunteered to lead these groups were offering service to the various churches rather than to the school. While it was easy to assume that the teachers at Edem SHS were inundated with work, leaving them with no time and energy for anything extra, the assistant headteacher believed the teachers were deliberately holding back and not giving their best.

Duarte and Brewer (2022) argued that compliance and resistance should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, as actions of resistance might be present within compliance. These teachers simultaneously resisted and complied with the policy, engaging in a form of passive compliance. According to Levy (2019), passive compliance is a type of resistance to policy that manifests in reluctantly engaging with a policy as long as it guarantees job security. Scott (1985), as cited in Morley (2019b), refers to this as “routine resistance” or “weapons of the weak,” which, according to Morley (2019b), typically takes the form of action or inaction (p. 128). Thus, the teachers in Edem SHS demonstrated their resistance through inaction, as observed and reflected on by their assistant headteacher.

The rural setting of Edem SHS contributed to the behavior of these teachers. Like in Malawi and Zambia (Mulkeen, 2005), transfer to rural areas is sometimes used as a punishment for misbehaving teachers in Ghana. Therefore, teachers at Edem SHS felt they had little to lose, while those in the urban and peri-urban areas were more cautious, as they did not want to lose the privileges their location offered.

Summary

This chapter focused on teachers' experiences of and sensemaking around the policymaking process regarding Ghana's FSHSP. The government adopted a top-down approach to policymaking, concentrating power to determine the shape of policy at the top, thereby neglecting and marginalizing teachers. Like teachers in other parts of the world, and as a result of how the Ghanaian school system was formed during the colonial era, Ghanaian teachers are generally not involved in policy formulation, and indeed, were not involved in formulating the FSHSP. Whereas some teachers equated the involvement of representatives from teacher unions in the policy process with consulting teachers, I found that teacher unions were only brought on board after the government had made its decisions regarding the policy. I argue that the government treated teacher unions as mere appendages to the policymaking process. Moreover, the teacher unions prioritized remunerations over and above policy issues. Furthermore, teachers experienced marginalization from their union leaders and the government. Teacher unions and their representatives acted as the mouthpiece of teachers in the policymaking process, yet did not consult teachers on the ground for input or bring feedback to them.

Although I admitted that the marginalization of teachers in the policy arena is not peculiar to Ghana, I argued that Ghana's situation was compounded by the fact that the FSHSP was a campaign promise which the NPP government, desirous of fulfilling, pushed through using bureaucratic powers, thereby making political actors dominate the policy formulation stage. Furthermore, policy borrowing significantly contributed to marginalizing and suppressing teachers' input in the policymaking process.

I also discussed the power relations inherent in the policy process and the education sector in general. Here, I noted that even though teachers believed in their capacity to positively

influence policy and mitigate implementation challenges, they seemed to accept their role as mere implementers rather than formulators of education policies. This role, though characterized by job precarity, powerlessness, and compliance, was also imbued with some covert resistance, especially at Edem SHS. However, teachers' feelings of alienation and marginalization were the same, regardless of the school in question.

Still, despite their exclusion, teachers considered themselves the "actual implementers" of the policy (Nudzor, 2014, p. 5). Drawing on the concept of teachers as "key actors in the policy process" (Braun et al., 2011, p. 586) and against the backdrop that policies often have disproportionate effects on different groups of people, I now turn to the implications of the policy for teachers. Specifically, I ask: How does the FSHSP shape teachers' work, and how does it impact teachers' daily lives?

Chapter Seven: Teachers as Collateral Damage

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that it is unclear whether teachers were consulted before the rollout of FSHSP. Nevertheless, they were still regarded as the actual implementers of the policy. In this chapter, I examine how, as policy implementers, teachers experience the impact of FSHSP by illuminating how the FSHSP influences teachers' work and daily lives. I pay particular attention to context and its mediating role in how teachers experience the policy. In other words, I illustrate how power operates in policy implementation at the school and staff levels. I divide the chapter into two parts. The first part focuses on the impacts of the FSHSP on teachers' school-based work, while the second part discusses the impact of the policy on teachers' lives.

Part One: Impacts of FSHSP on Teachers' Work

Early Reporting to School

Study participants noted that, as a result of the policy, newly accepted secondary school students reported to their schools promptly, which allowed schoolwork to begin early. This was not the case in the past when students not only had to secure a spot in a secondary school but also had to pay the fees before reporting to school. Until they paid, they could not start the term, and given the challenges of fee payment, the term used to have a slow buildup as students cobbled together the money. Consequently, most first-year students reported late to school.

Teachers at all three schools raised this issue, with teachers at Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS particularly concerned. As noted earlier, Mawunya SHS, an elite school, was usually oversubscribed. Therefore, newly admitted students to Mawunya SHS usually paid and reported relatively early to school to avoid their place being offered to those on the waiting list.

Additionally, because Mawunya SHS is located in the city, most of their students' parents work in the formal sector and do not have problems paying fees.

However, this was not the case in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS because most of the students' parents worked in the informal sector and found fee payment arduous. According to John of Elikplim SHS, before the FSHSP, less than half of the admitted students reported to school in the first term. John went on to explain that this was because most of the parents of their students were farmers and petty traders who could not pay the admission fee and buy all the items on the prospectus. Similarly, Gabi of Edem SHS recounted her experience prior to 2017, when she had to wait to start teaching in the second term because only a handful of first-year students reported in the first term. This resulted in the loss of valuable learning time, especially in lower-ranked schools. Teachers in these schools were prevented from covering the entire curriculum, resulting in lower exam scores compared to those in elite schools.

Yet, after the policy was implemented, the fee payment stipulation was removed, so students not only came promptly, but they also came early. John (Elikplim SHS) told me that early reporting of newly admitted students was the “first major change” he observed after the rollout of the policy, while his assistant headteacher intimated that he observed “an improvement on the side of their reporting to school” (19/08/2023). This finding echoes PIAC's (2020) findings that FSHSP made students report to school more promptly than in the pre-FSHSP days.

Regarding the importance of first-year students reporting early, John stated, “It makes it easier for us to begin academic work on time” (19/08/2023). On a similar note, Gabi of Edem SHS explained:

Now, I'm able to start lessons with the form ones from when they come. Within a week or two of reopening, most of them are in school, so it means that it's possible for every

teacher to start work, and so it means you can also cover a lot as compared to before. We are still not able to probably finish the syllabus, but then it's better than before.

(09/08/2023)

While an earlier start date helped teachers to teach more of the syllabus, it is important to note that teachers were still unable to complete the official curriculum. This was because the classrooms now included students with diverse abilities and the lackadaisical attitude of students¹⁰ in the wake of the FSHSP. This finding exemplifies how policy effects can be subjective and how policies can transform schools and teachers' work (Taylor et al., 1997). Furthermore, this finding reinforces the notion that cost functions as a barrier to secondary school (Duflo et al., 2021). Finally, it demonstrates how the use of the policy in formal political spheres had little to do with or paid little mind to, the realities of implementing it.

During the pre-FSHSP era, continuing students also faced difficulties returning to school early after vacations due to financial constraints. Headteachers frequently tasked teachers with expelling students who arrived at school without paying their fees out of the classroom. Many teachers considered driving students out of class a painful and challenging duty. Consequently, some participants expressed delight that FSHSP saved them from the emotionally taxing duty of driving students from class. One teacher revealed that he did not want to be remembered as the one who drove a child out of the dining hall or classroom.

Increased Workload

All participants expressed concerns about how the policy increased teachers' workload. The concerns regarding increased workload manifested in many forms, but most simply, more students meant more labor. Indeed, a significant increase in the student population led to an

¹⁰ This is discussed later in the chapter.

increase in the student-to-classroom ratio (SCR) and the student-to-teacher ratio (STR).

Participants described the difficulty of teaching classes with as many as 70 or 80 students. This concern cut across all three schools. However, it was more pronounced in Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS. This was because, in relation to Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS, Edem SHS, located in a rural setting, was understaffed even before the FSHSP. For example, Ransford of Elikplim SHS juxtaposed his class sizes before and after the policy. He told me, “I used to teach a class of not more than 35. The highest was 40. But later, some of my classes are 60, 70, 65, and 55. None is less than 40 with the same facilities” (27/07/2023). Sister Dema of Mawunya SHS elaborated:

You have a class of 60, 68, 70 students. There is no space to even pass through these students and check on what they are doing. The only space you have is at the front, where you will stand. Sometimes you don’t even have a chair to sit on because when you bring the chair, you will block the way (03/06/2023).

As mentioned above, there was concern that the class sizes were too large to be academically functional. The quote highlights the difficulty of teachers moving freely and monitoring students during lesson delivery. This extract becomes more insightful when we consider the fact that most classrooms were originally designed to accommodate, at most, 30 students but now have as many as 70 students crammed into them. Consequently, this affected classroom engagement and the teachers' ability to devote individual attention to students. This finding aligns with that of Mohammed and Kuyini (2020), who noted that within the first two years of FSHSP, the SCR stood at 50:1, while the STR, which had stood at 19:1 in 2014, rose to 43:1 in 2019.

Relatedly, many teachers pointed out the difficulties involved in marking students' assignments. One conspicuous sight in the staff common rooms of Mawunya SHS and Elikplim

SHS was the significant number of unmarked exercise books. Koagbe, a teacher of English in Elikplim SHS, explained the difficulty/impossibility of giving students timely feedback:

If I go to a classroom and I say...write a story. And a [each] student writes two pages ... I have 60 of such exercises to mark... I'm supposed to go to about five [other]classes today and I give the same assignment. Can I finish marking today before I start my lessons again tomorrow? So, we have backlogs and it's affecting our efficiency (28/07/2023).

The effect of this was that some teachers no longer gave assignments because there was no point in assigning class exercises if they could not be marked. It is worth noting that while Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS primarily complained about large class sizes, Edem SHS's primary concern was a shortage of teachers. This was because, in relation to Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS, Edem SHS, located in a rural setting, was understaffed even before the FSHSP. The influx of a large number of new students, therefore, worsened their plight. According to Akyeamong and Stephens (2002) and Yeboah and Adom (2016), many teachers refuse to accept postings to rural areas, resulting in a shortage of teachers in rural schools. The primary reason for this refusal stems from the lack of essential needs, such as access to safe drinking water and inadequate toilet facilities, both in public and private settings. Additionally, social amenities, including restaurants, libraries, and recreational spaces, are notably absent in the rural areas, while schools in rural areas are often under-resourced, and the condition of the road networks is poor. In recent years, the lack of internet connectivity has also emerged as a significant factor that deters teachers from accepting postings to rural communities. This problem has only been exacerbated by the absence of incentives for teachers working in rural schools (Opoku et al., 2020).

Apart from the student population, teachers also contended with working more periods per week. However, this was also disproportionate across the three schools. While the teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS worked at least 30 hours per week, those in Mawunya SHS averaged 18 or 20 hours per week. Mawuli, a teacher at Edem SHS, told me this: “I’m handling about 30 periods a week... because we don’t have enough teachers, and then the students are here” (03/08/2023). Mawuli noted that a lack of teachers caused the situation. The situation in which teachers at less-resourced schools worked more than their counterparts in elite schools predated FSHSP, but the policy exacerbated this.

Perhaps unexpectedly, as the number of periods increased, the duration for each period also increased. Prior to the adoption of the policy, the duration of a lesson was 45 minutes, which the MoE increased to one hour after the policy to compensate for the shorter number of days students spent in school¹¹. This situation existed in all three schools because it was a directive from MoE. Stephen, an economics teacher at Mawunya SHS, put it this way:

With the contact hours, first, it was 45 minutes a period. Due to the introduction of the free SHS, one period is now 1 hour instead of 45 minutes (05/06/2023).

Given that the number of subject periods stayed the same, but the time per lesson increased, teachers spent a longer time in school, as classes began very early and closed very late. In all three schools, classes began as early as 7:00 a.m. and closed at 4:00 p.m. Sometimes, classes organized for final-year students began at 6:00 a.m. Consistent with Takyi et al. (2019), some teachers reported feeling tired during the latter parts of the day.

¹¹ Students spent a smaller number of days in school because of the track system. This is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Beyond longer classes and more students, teachers worked outside of their official contact hours. Dela of Elikplim SHS spoke about spending time researching before coming to teach:

Always, I have to make research before I come to school. I have to be always with my books doing research you know, marking, working. So, we don't rest anymore. You are always thinking of how to prepare before you come to school (18/07/2023).

This teacher emphasized the importance of pre-lesson preparation before the actual teaching work, highlighting the intangible aspects of teachers' work. The aspects of teachers' work that could be described as invisible varied depending on the schools and teachers involved. However, some activities cut across schools and participants. For example, as a GES directive, all teachers were supposed to prepare lesson plans, mark exercises, and fill out report cards. In fact, some of these activities had to be taken home to be completed over the weekends and sometimes during the holidays. Yet, many people did not view these as part of teachers' working hours. Beyond these, there were other duties that were not necessarily teaching-related but took a toll on teachers. These kinds of work existed before the policy but became increasingly onerous in a context with more students. In the following vignette, Sister Dema highlighted some of her duties outside of teaching:

So, in the morning, as a house parent, I have to go and inspect work at the various dormitories and then the compound...when something is happening to any girl from my house, I have to be called. And quickly, I have to attend to that student. ...There are also some other official duties assigned to me to perform in the school. An example, when reports are printed for the students, I have to meet the class captains, give it to them. So, the whole day, you are doing your normal teaching job and then doing all the others too.

So, this makes me stay on campus... Sometimes... I will wait until preps is over before I will go home (03/06/2023).

Sister Dema and other teachers engaged in care work in addition to formal instruction. Most of this care work fell on the female teachers. Two reasons accounted for this. First, like all women in Ghana, female teachers are generally and naturally associated with caring for children (Wang & Samba, 2019). Second, after the FSHSP, the female student population outgrew that of the male students, even though female teachers were fewer in number compared to male teachers. This massive surge in the female student population in the context of fewer female teachers invariably increased the care work of female teachers. As suggested by Morley (2019a, p. 5), female teachers were often framed as “responsible for girls’ education” as they served as role models for girls, supported girls learning, advised girls on good menstrual hygiene, and offered advice on prevention of pregnancy through sexual abstinence.¹² Female teachers also felt intrinsically tasked with the duty of protecting their teenage female students from sexual abuse from men in general and, in some cases, the male teachers in their various schools.

Aside from care work, both male and female teachers also ran administrative errands for their superiors and engaged in many activities to improve hygiene in their schools. For example, I joined teachers at Mawunya SHS and supervised students as they weeded the football field in preparation for hosting the interschool competition. This incident occurred on a Saturday and lasted nearly 4 hours. I also joined the language department as they stapled examination questions. This activity also lasted for close to two hours, after which the teachers went and invigilated the real examination for three hours. Furthermore, in all three schools, teachers were expected to supervise students during prep sessions, entertainment sessions, and occasionally

¹² The Ghana Education Service has always championed abstinence from sex. Condom use is only mentioned when talking about prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

during church services. Many teachers, especially females, were entrusted with students' money for safekeeping. Students also contacted their parents via teachers' phones, and parents sent money to their wards through teachers' mobile money accounts. Again, most of these duties predated FSHSP, but they became more taxing due to the larger number of students involved.

Issues with Salaries: “What am I even killing myself for?”

Given the increased workload, teachers raised concerns that, like previously, they were overworked and underpaid; however, the underpayment became more glaring due to the significant increase in their workload. Concerns regarding teachers' salaries could be traced to the period before Ghana's independence. Though teaching was considered an elite position, teachers' salaries left much to be desired. The mission schools, for instance, considered teachers' jobs sacrificial¹³ and paid them meager salaries. This resulted in a high turnover rate among teachers (Bame, 1972; McWilliam & Poh, 1975).

However, Ghana's post-independence government, led by Kwame Nkrumah, invested massively in education. Noting that the success of the Accelerated Development Plan of 1951 and the Education Act of 1961 hinges on teachers,¹⁴ Kwame Nkrumah announced a “New Deal for Teachers.” With this new deal, teachers experienced a considerable improvement in their salaries and overall working conditions. Though this improved the retention rate of many teachers, it could not stop graduate teachers' attrition, as their qualifications offered them a wide range of opportunities. To forestall this, the government raised the salaries of graduate teachers to the level of other public servants in the country. This improved not only education in general

¹³ This was usually the case when the teaching is combined with working as a catechist.

¹⁴ The 1951 Accelerated Development Plan (ADP) and the Education Act of 1961 were legislations aimed at achieving universal primary education (UPE) for all, through abolishing tuition fees.

but also the status and prestige of the teaching profession (Bame, 1972; McWilliam & Poh, 1975).

According to Bame (1972), two external factors influenced the substantial investment in education and, by extension, the conditions of service for teachers. First, the rise in the price of cocoa on the international market made the country economically buoyant, allowing it to invest in education. The second was UNESCO's emphasis on universal education. However, after a period of severe drought, political instability, coupled with corruption and mismanagement, plunged the country into huge debt, the PNDC government, in 1983, turned to the IMF and the World Bank for assistance. This led the country to the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Under SAP, the government reduced social spending, resulting in decreased funding for education and teachers' salaries (Abukari et al., 2015; Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). This period marked the beginning of the devaluation of the teaching profession, as salaries were frozen relative to inflation. Many teachers quit teaching, fled the country (Kraus, 1991), and were quickly replaced by unqualified teachers. Thus, as it happened in Malawi (Kendall & Silver, 2014), SAP contributed significantly to the devaluation of the teaching profession in Ghana, a situation that persists to this day. Several studies have noted the teachers' salary complaints (Agezo, 2010; Osei, 2006; Salifu, 2014).

Many participants referred to the lack of adequate remuneration. As already noted, teachers in Ghana have consistently been asking for better pay, perceiving their salaries as inadequate. However, with the rollout of the FSHSP, participants maintained that the increase in workload warranted an increase in their pay. Koagbe elaborated on this:

The salary remains the same. Our periods of work have been extended, and no extra allowances are paid. We still earn per our ranks and qualifications, but there is no extra.

Meanwhile, the state has made provisions or budgets for the free SHS, but there is no provision for the teacher (28/07/2023).

Ransford noted similarly:

We are creating more burdens for the teacher without considering the teacher. Nobody mentions the teacher in policy formulation. It is always the pupil, forgetting that the teacher must be there for the students to also excel for the policy to be successful (27/07/2023).

Articulated here was the fact that despite the long hours spent in school and the large student population, teachers still received the same pay. They, therefore, argued that the pay was not commensurate with the increased amount of work wrought by the FSHSP. The mismatch between workload and remuneration had implications for teachers' commitment to the job. The assistant headteachers of Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS noted an increase in teacher apathy. According to the assistant headteacher of Mawunya SHS, "Sometimes you realize that apathy sets in. Yes. Apathy sets in [because] they [teachers] feel they should be given a rest. They feel they should be remunerated better than it is right now" (08/08/2023). The assistant headteacher of Elikplim SHS also elaborated:

It [FSHSP] rather increased the burden of teachers because it has increased our contact hours, without the remuneration to motivate the teachers to do the work. So, at a point you become so tired, and you ask yourself, what I'm I even killing myself for? (27/07/2023).

The assistant head of Elikplim SHS brought up an important point regarding teachers' motivation to work. His question, "What am I even killing myself for?" raises two vital issues: the increase in teachers' workload with the advent of the FSHSP and the lack of adequate

financial motivation. Regarding the latter, Sister Dema of Mawunya SHS intimated, “If the government is unable to provide food adequately to feed the students, how can they motivate us?” (03/06/2023). The point made by Sister Dema becomes more insightful when we consider the broader economic context, as Ghana had to seek an IMF bailout in 2022 (Ministry of Finance, 2022). Thus, to Sister Dema, the lack of monetary motivation was a function of the country’s economy. Stephen, an economics teacher in Mawunya SHS, also alluded to this:

People argued that the policy in itself is taking a huge toll on the economy of Ghana, which I seriously disagree with because I think the economy of Ghana is having its toll on the policy (05/06/2023).

Resource Scarcity

Contrary to the government’s claim that the policy would be accompanied by infrastructural expansion (MoE, 2017), the increase in enrollment was not matched by a commensurate expansion of infrastructure. After the policy rollout, only Mawunya SHS, which had seen its student population almost tripled, benefited from a 3-unit classroom block from the government. Notably, however, Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS got nothing, even though their enrollment had, at least, doubled. Indeed, while this has been the case across the continent at significant moments of expansion in school access (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015; Nzuki, 2018; Sifuna, 2007), it also reflects a failure of international funders to fulfill commitments made through major international policy platforms like EFA and the MDGs (Colclough et al., 2003; Kendall & Silver, 2014).

Consequently, the most critical concern for all participants was the infrastructural deficit. School administrators had to adopt innovative strategies to navigate this situation, including improvisation and the multipurpose use of certain school structures. I also observed that, in all

three schools, students took turns having their meals since the dining halls could no longer accommodate all students at the same time. Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS went further to convert their dining halls into ‘temporary permanent’ classrooms. While this was innovative, it had trade-offs:

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be at the dining session, but today I shadowed Christopher, whose lesson was right after ... Christopher taught in the dining hall. Together with Christopher, I waited for the dining session to end. First came the Form Ones. Halfway through the meal, the students were ordered to stop eating. The students sent the pantry bowls back to the kitchen to be refilled for the Form Three’s who were eagerly waiting. By the time the Form Threes finished eating, 15 minutes of the Christopher period was lost. Christopher looked at me as though it was his fault, and said, “This happens every day.” The dining hall hosted up to 3 classes, and classes went on simultaneously. I sat in Christopher’s section of the hall as he taught. There, I soaked in a 3 in 1 lesson as I could hear what the other two teachers were teaching. I felt so bad for the teachers who had to deal with this every day, and for the students, too (Fieldnote, 15/06/2023).

The above vignette highlights the disruptions associated with using a dining hall as a classroom and the valuable teaching and learning time that is lost, resulting in teachers being unable to accomplish much during a lesson. The situation was worse in Elikplim SHS, which, even prior to the policy, relied on a wall-less temporary structure for their dining sessions. Benjamin, a social studies teacher who was also in charge of dining, spoke about the time lost:

The enrollment has increased, [but] the same structure is supposed to be used for them. So, in order to manage that, we have to put the students, for instance, in three groups to eat within the same break period of 40 minutes. So, you let first batch eat, second batch

eat then the third batch. Before you realize it, you have already eaten into the subsequent lesson, the next period (17/07/2023).

Moreover, participants complained about the lack of on-campus accommodation for teachers.

As of the time of my research:

Mawunya SHS had about 164 teachers, a student population of around 3800, only 48 teachers lived on campus. Elikplim SHS had about 90 teachers, a student population of around 1800, only 5 teachers lived on campus. Edem SHS had about 80 teachers, a student population of around 1500, only 3 teachers lived on campus (fieldnote, 10/08/2023).

As a result of the lack of on-campus accommodation, teachers spent money and time commuting to and from campus on a daily basis. Apart from the cost incurred, daily commutes were tiring and hazardous due to the poor road conditions. Moreover, public transport was unreliable. Consequently, most teachers in Elikplim SHS, and particularly those in Edem SHS, were compelled to purchase motorbikes or cars for commuting. However, as suggested by Bart-Plange (2019), this extra financial commitment made these teachers spend more money relative to their contemporaries who lived on campus. This burden was most acute for teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, where nearly half of the teachers resided in the township of Mawunya SHS.

Reflecting on how the lack of on-campus accommodation affected their work, participants noted the positive correlation between teachers living on campus and discipline. Nora, a teacher in Edem SHS, said: “I’m supposed to train and serve as a role model to my students. How can I do it when I sleep in town and then the students are left here?” (11/08/2023). These findings corroborate earlier research results (PIAC, 2020; Adarkwah, 2022; Duah et al., 2023; Essuman, 2018; Tamanja & Pajibo, 2019) that most schools lack adequate infrastructure

for the smooth implementation of the FSHSP. It also reflects the general trend of infrastructural deficit in Kenya (Nzuki, 2018) and Uganda (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015) after they adopted FSE and USE, respectively. The findings also reinforce the stance of the drafters of the 1992 constitution that free secondary education should be progressively implemented and re-echo the stance of the NDC government that building more community schools should precede the adoption of universal secondary education (Afrane, 2022). Following Ghana's independence, the Kwame Nkrumah government provided on-site accommodation for teachers and their families. According to McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh (1975), the government provided rent-subsidized accommodation for teachers on the premise that "if teachers are better paid and have adequate housing, they will be expected to provide a high standard of service" (p. 126). This was part of the prestige that came with teaching, but with the disinvestments in the sector, teachers were no longer guaranteed housing. In addition, most participants expressed concerns about the lack of adequate teaching-learning materials (TLMs). Concerns over TLMs included the absence of chalk, insufficient markers, inadequate paper for conducting examinations, and insufficient equipment for vocational and technical courses. In all three schools, despite the massive increase in enrollment, the science laboratories did not get even a single piece of science equipment from the government. The situation was the same for the libraries, except for Mawunya SHS, where the old students' association donated a few books to the library.

Every participant expressed dissatisfaction with the insufficiency of textbooks for all courses. Also, consistent with the findings of Chanimbe and Prah (2020) and Addo (2019), teachers noted that the government did not supply textbooks for elective subjects. According to participants, although the government supplied textbooks for all core subjects in 2017, the

number of students grew in subsequent years, but the government did not provide any more textbooks. Sister Dema's comment is illustrative:

[The] first batch [was] 450 [students], so they provided the exact [number of] textbooks... But in the following years, the enrollment increased and then textbooks were not enough. So, if you have 450 textbooks, and now, they will hand over those textbooks to 1000 plus [students], you could just imagine how they will use it (03/06/2023).

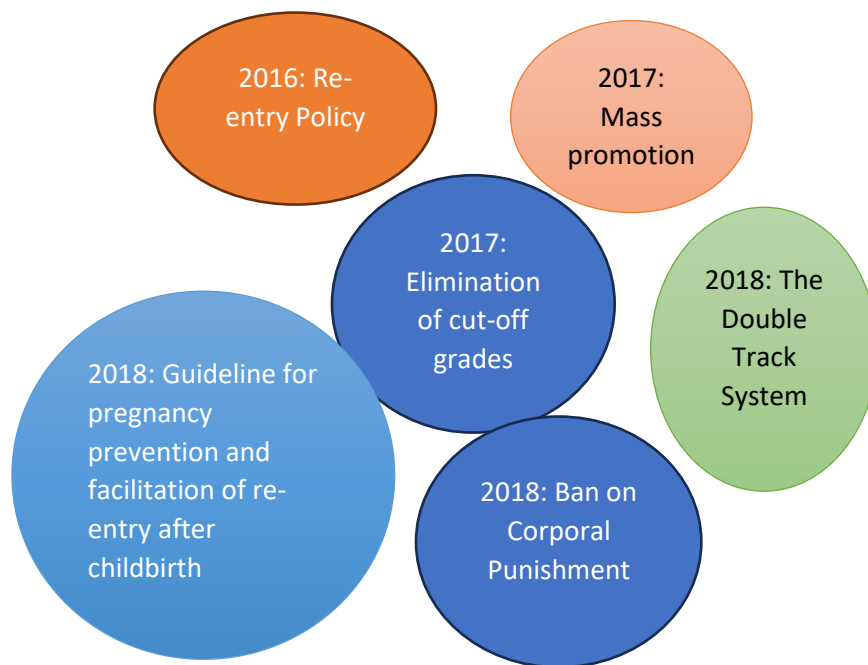
Teachers, then, had problems using the textbooks in subsequent years since the textbooks were not enough for the subsequent batches of students who far outnumbered the first batch of students. So, rather than sharing the textbooks among the students, which would have aided their learning, the textbooks were kept in the school's storeroom. When teachers needed textbooks for their lessons, they would approach their respective Heads of Department (HoDs), who would then provide them with the textbooks. When the teachers finished their lessons, they returned the textbooks to the HoD. Apart from the insufficiency, teachers raised serious concerns about the quality of the textbooks.

Elective subject teachers argued that a lack of textbooks affected the quality of teaching and learning. Although this situation had been a longstanding issue, it became pronounced during the FSHSP era, when parents, due to the "free" nature of the policy, became reluctant to purchase textbooks for their children (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). The issue was more significant in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, primarily because the students from these schools came from less affluent backgrounds compared to those at urban-based Mawunya SHS. As indicated earlier, most students in these two schools come from the immediate community, and their parents are mostly engaged in informal occupations. This is because these communities have weak economic bases and lower revenue-generating capacity. While teachers dealt with the

large student population, extended teaching periods, and massive resource scarcity, they also had to contend with the quality of student intake and some directives from the MoE and GES. Figure 6 presents a visual representation of some of the major directives from MoE and GES that interacted with the FSHSP to impact how teachers work. I then demonstrate teachers' views regarding how this web of directives emanating from the government impacted their work.

Figure 6

Directives Interacting with the FSHSP and Impacting Teachers' Work



Removing Cut-Off Grades

Duflo et al. (2021) noted that, apart from cost, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) also served as a blockade to accessing secondary education. Thus, students who did not attain certain thresholds on the examination that culminated primary schooling were not admitted to secondary school. To this end, in 2015, the erstwhile NDC government, in collaboration with the West African Examination Council (WAEC), introduced remedial

examinations for those who could not achieve the threshold in their first attempt (Appiah, 2013). However, with the adoption of the FSHSP, the MoE abolished cut-off grades to admit as many students as possible (“No cut-off point,” 2019). As a result, the MoE admitted many students with poor grades (PIAC, 2020). Furthermore, in a move to achieve equity, the government allocated 30% of the space in elite schools to students from public basic schools within every elite school’s catchment area (Chanimbe & Prah, 2019; Tamanja & Pajibo, 2019). With these, the government intended to make access more equitable for rural and poor students from substandard public basic schools¹⁵.

Yet, PIAC (2020) found that “the abolition of cut-off grades in the admission of students has led to a situation of dumping of poor-grade students in schools, particularly deprived schools” (p. 2). My participants affirmed this as they complained about the quality of the students during the FSHSP era. For example, Naomi, an English literature teacher at Mawunya SHS, told me she had secondary school students who could not write their names. Although this may seem exaggerated, I received similar reports from teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS. According to the teachers, the poor grades with which the students entered high school increased their workload. This extract from my interview with Koagbe is illustrative:

The type of students we have... because of the quality and the qualifications they bring, you will have to return to the basics, and it involves more talking, more engagement... So, you work more. You give an assignment, they would not do... because they don’t have the ability for the secondary level education (28/07/2023).

To this teacher, because the students were not academically prepared for secondary education, he spent a longer time teaching concepts that they should have mastered at the basic level.

¹⁵ At the basic school level in Ghana, students from private schools usually performed better than their counterparts in the public school. Private schooling at the basic level is an elite enterprise.

According to him, this required more talking and engagement with the students, which resulted in an increased workload for the teacher. Cate, a teacher of English language and literature at Elikplim SHS, also talked about how the removal of cut-off grades translated into more work for her:

It has made teaching and learning difficult because all these forms of students are in your class. It's a mixed ability class. So, when you get to a class, as you are teaching, you are thinking that you are teaching at the same pace for pupils to understand, but no. When you assess them, you will see that they are different. Some people, even at the SHS, cannot write their names well, their handwriting is bad, their spellings, their grammatical errors... (24/07/2023).

This quote indicated that weaker students translated into more work for teachers, as teachers constantly adjusted their teaching to accommodate students with different ability levels. Cate continued to point out that the poor quality of students aroused anger or a feeling of frustration in her because of the extra work needed to bring those students to an acceptable level:

When I'm marking and I see some of the works of those types of students, it gets me pissed off because I have to call them and have special attention for them, and it has become extra work for me as a teacher... it has doubled my work (24/07/2023).

This quote illustrates that, to achieve equity in outcomes, there was a need for more instructional or remedial work. Yet, this teacher's frustration was partly because teachers did not receive sufficient training for mixed-ability/mixed-level classes and were not adequately supported to do so. This parallels the situation in Ontario, Canada, after the abolishing of streaming, when principals reported that teachers in de-streamed classes encountered significant challenges in assisting struggling students (Balintec, 2023). Similarly, a report by CBC entitled "How

classroom complexity has made learning complicated” noted that the quest for more inclusive classrooms in Saskatchewan, Canada, resulted in the cramming of students with different abilities into large classrooms, adversely impacting not only teachers’ workload but students’ learning (“CBC News,” 2024).

The concern about the removal of cut-off grades was more profound at Mawunya SHS, which, hitherto, had only received the best students. The extract from Berebe, a teacher of English in Mawunya SHS is illustrative:

Gone are the days, you are to **have a particular grade before you come to Mawunya SHS**. But for now, even people with grades from 32 and above are all in Mawunya SHS. I understand the government wants to help them, but the workload [falls] on the teachers. [Emphasis added] (07/06/2023)

Another teacher, Napo, elaborated:

So, hitherto, the headmasters were actively involved in the selection process. So, a school like this, my school, **because it is a grade “B” school we don’t take in every kind of students**, but we have a cut-off point with the aggregate. I understand those days if you have something like 25 and above, you are not likely to get this place. But because of the policy, students with aggregate 42 are even in this school. [Emphasis added] (15/06/2023)

Before the adoption of the FSHSP, the practice was that because well-resourced schools were usually oversubscribed, the heads of Grade A and B schools had the privilege of selecting their students first. Usually, it was only after the places in these schools were filled with the better-qualified students that schools in categories C and D were considered. Consequently, the well-resourced schools used to take all the best students, leaving the schools in Category C and D with

weaker students. However, with the advent of the FSHSP, the government reemphasized the use of the Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS). With the CSSPS, heads lost control over the type of students placed in their schools, resulting in a more equitable distribution of students across the various schools. Teachers believed the CSSPS led to a fairer distribution of students.

Mass Promotion, No Repetition

According to Kyereko et al. (2022), grade repetition has been a constant feature of the Ghanaian education system. Students repeated classes for a myriad of reasons, including and especially poor academic performance (scoring poorly on examinations). Yet, poor performance sometimes resulted from students missing a significant portion of the term due to a lack of fees or being prevented from writing the end-of-year examination because they owed school fees. Some rural students also missed particular periods of the year, particularly during the planting and harvesting seasons (Hadley, 2013). Students who had to work to raise money for their fees could not always devote their energies to learning, and as a result, they often ended up repeating classes. Furthermore, some schools repeated academically weak students to ensure that only students capable of passing the final external exams were registered for the exams (Kyereko et al., 2022).

Schools and teachers often framed grade repetition as giving students a second chance to become academically ready for the next grade or class. The fear of repeating also made students take their studies seriously. However, as Lewin (2008) suggested, repeaters occupy spots that could have been allocated to incoming students, thereby increasing the government's spending on students. Grade repetition also increases the pressure on scarce school facilities (Kyereko et

al., 2022). Grade repeaters tend to drop out (Giano et al., 2022; Kyereko et al., 2022; Tafreschi & Thiemann, 2016).

With the inception of the FSHSP, schools were prohibited from repeating students. This was probably because each student could only benefit from the FSHSP for three years (Tamanja & Pajibo, 2019). All participants lamented the mass promotion that accompanied the policy. While this was ostensibly a cost-saving strategy by the government, participants contended that it made their work more difficult. This was because, in the first place, the government admitted many students with poor grades, and secondly, it prohibited schools from repeating them when they performed abysmally. Miss Dema (Mawunya SHS) stated that the policymakers insisted on "mass promotion," while Agnes (Elikplim SHS) said the policy came with "wholesale promotion." Yet, the government expected teachers to ensure these students successfully passed their final examinations. Regarding the effect of the no-repetition mandate, teachers indicated that it adversely affected quality, as students lacked motivation to learn for examinations. This was because end-of-term examinations have become merely informative rather than decisive in determining promotion. Koagbe asked: "Are we going in for quality, or are we going in for quantity? The person must just pass through free SHS. Now [that] you cannot even repeat a student." Thus, teachers argued that the government overemphasized access to the detriment of quality, a finding consistent with those of Dwomoh et al. (2022).

In my one-on-one interview with Vinyo from Edem SHS, he talked about the implications of the no-repetition mandate on the work of teachers:

According to the policy there is no room for repetition... So, for instance, in first semester of first year, maybe a student is in school. Second semester the person is no longer in school. But can you imagine you are not supposed to repeat that student? A

whole semester the student is not in school. You must manage to send that student to second year.

Kofi: Wow.

Vinyo: So, the policy gives no room for repetition. Either the person is performing or not, the person should go through the system.

Kofi: So how does that affect your work?

Vinyo: You know, definitely, that will affect your work. Because everything is in continuum. You introduced a lesson and then the following lesson is a buildup on the previous one. So, can you imagine you are teaching grammatical name and function, and the student has no idea on even how to identify a verb. Because the identification of a verb will enable that person to even basically to distinguish that this is a verb, and this is a finite verb. So, the presence of a finite verb will give a clue that this will be a clause. Basically, it will be a clause and not a phrase. You taught maybe noun in first year. The student was absent, you taught functions of a noun a student was absent. How will you teach a grammatical name like a noun phrase or a noun clause to such a student who cannot even identify a verb, who cannot even identify a subject of a sentence, an object, a complement, an adjunct of a sentence? We are building on (11/08/2023).

The teacher in the extract above highlighted the challenges faced when students advanced to the next class without mastering earlier concepts. Because he taught the English Language, he illustrated this with the concept of verbs and how mastery of verbs could facilitate the learning of phrases and clauses in the upper classes. Similarly, the assistant headmaster of Mawunya SHS indicated that the mass promotion led to his teachers having to engage in “personalized one-on-one tuition” for such students to prepare them for their final examinations. The mass promotion

made students not take their studies seriously (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). This was not farfetched because, in the past, the threat of repetition made students try hard to pass, and its removal thus demotivated some students. It also demoralized teachers, who knew that students were still promoted regardless of their performance. All teachers, though to different extents, shared this concern, with those at Edem SHS voicing the most complaints. This is because Edem SHS receives the least academically qualified students relative to Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS¹⁶.

No Corporal Punishment

Participants noted that the abolition of corporal punishment made their work more difficult. Although GES officials have consistently advised against corporal punishment, the practice has remained part of Ghana's basic and secondary education system. However, corporal punishment was associated with high drop-out rates (Abotsi et al., 2018). Therefore, in 2017, the Ghana Education Service Council, in the revised code of conduct for staff of the GES, insisted that "an employee shall not administer any act of corporal punishment or any act that inflicts physical pain on the children or causes physical harm to their pupils/students such as pushing, pulling, hitting and/or flogging" (Ghana Education Service Council, 2017, p. 17). To this end, following the introduction of the FSHSP, the GES intensified efforts to comply with the no corporal punishment mandate in primary and secondary schools (Yeboah, 2020).

Over the years, corporal punishment has been used to address indiscipline and a lack of seriousness among students at the senior high school level. Corporal punishment served as a tool of control, and its abolition, according to teachers, made their work more challenging. The main

¹⁶ The distribution of students to the various schools is discussed in the next chapter.

problem was that the enforcement of this law came at a time when the student population had doubled and, in some cases, tripled.

Thus, for teachers, the abolition of corporal punishment by the GES led to students becoming more powerful, overtly expressing a lack of respect for teachers, and indiscipline skyrocketing. This concern was present in all three schools. Edward, for example, argued that taking out corporal punishment was counterproductive:

The Free SHS has also brought along this policy of completely taking corporal punishment... out of the system. So, a teacher is not allowed to punish the child in certain ways to discipline the child you know and refocus the energy of the child. But we know the African child, the Ghanaian child, in the absence of cane and other forms of punishment, they have the free will to do whatever pleases them (19/07/2023).

In the extract above, this participant suggested that the absence of corporal punishment gave students the leeway to behave in an undisciplined and unserious manner. We must also look at the historical context of education in Ghana. The missionaries introduced and championed formal education in Ghana during precolonial and colonial times (Boadu, 2021; Graham, 1971; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). With the missionaries at the forefront of education, social control, character formation, and discipline were emphasized, and the teacher functioned as the primary agent responsible for transmitting these ideals (Grace, 2012). Corporal punishment was, therefore, justified by Biblical counsel that sparing the rod was tantamount to spoiling the child. The concept of a teacher as the disciplinarian stuck even after the missionaries left the country's shores. Corporal punishment was used as a corrective measure for any infraction, including coming to school late, making noise in class, refusing to submit class assignments, and engaging in inappropriate sexual relationships. In certain instances, parents have expressly requested that

educators administer corporal punishment to their children for transgressions that occurred within the home environment.

The cane, thus, represented a symbol of power for the teacher. So, in effect, taking corporal punishment (caning) out of the hands of Ghanaian teachers was, according to participants, disabling them and, at the same time, empowering the students over and against the teacher. Ransford noted that “the policy formulator [MoE/GES] makes the policy implementer[teacher] weaker in the eyes of the beneficiaries of the policy[students]” (27/07/2023), while the assistant headmaster of Elikplim SHS insisted that “the GES seems to be pampering or focusing on protection of students against teachers” (27/07/2023).

For the teachers, eliminating corporal punishment increased indiscipline among students (Ampofo, 2021; Quansah et al., 2023). According to participants, this made their work more difficult. The issue of indiscipline was compounded by the fact that students far outnumbered teachers, and most teachers lived off campus, leaving only a few to handle all the students.

Participants also expressed serious concerns about students' attitudes towards education. As suggested by a male teacher at Mawunya SHS, “Everything that is free, people don’t value it.” Cate of Elikplim SHS also noted, “They see it to be something free, so they don’t put a premium on it. They don’t care whether to study or not” (24/07/2023). Thus, teachers believed that students’ lackadaisical attitude towards schooling stemmed from the fact that they did not have to pay for their education. Tarius, from Edem SHS, provided an elaborative explanation:

Some of them feel that because they are not paying for what they get here, they don’t really value it. And so, truancy, especially when they get to the third year, is a challenge that we face every day. They don’t pay for registration. So, even after registration, they

really don't feel that they have registered for a paper... That sense of urgency to learn is not there because they have not paid (02/08/2023).

Tarius went on and explained that it was “very demotivating to see your students not coming to class” (02/08/2023). Prior to the policy, teacher demotivation was usually associated with low remuneration and poor working conditions (Akuoko et al., 2012; Salifu, 2014), rarely about students' indiscipline (Salifu, 2008), and not necessarily about students' attitude toward studies. With the advent of the policy, students' lackadaisical attitude towards schooling, in general, compounded teachers' demotivation. Vinyo (Edem SHS) also drew my attention to how demoralizing students' lackadaisical attitude could be for teachers:

It even dampens your spirit as a teacher... the headmaster has been saying that, even if it's one person, go there and teach. But errr (he hesitated) you cannot do it. You get to a class, and you are demotivated to even teach... (11/08/2023).

Apart from demotivating teachers, the main problem with the students' lackadaisical attitude was that it resulted in poor final examination results, and teachers were sometimes blamed for students' poor grades. As suggested by Timothy of Elikplim SHS, “There's a lot of inputs but the output is not what you expect to see. You won't be getting what you really expect from the students though you do a lot” because “you push them to the riverside, and they don't want to drink the water” (18/07/2023).

Regarding the reason for this attitude, Madam Ivy (Elikplim SHS) stated that because the government had eliminated the cost burden, some parents had forced some students to attend school against the students' wishes. Madam Ivy's account of a nursing mother, who was brought to her school less than a week after giving birth, is interestingly illustrative:

Some of the students, they are forced to come. It's not because they want to be here.

...We had a very terrible example. Somebody just delivered [a baby], the father brought this girl without even telling us that she just delivered ... It was the midwife who delivered the child for her who traced and then came and then informed us. And then when we called this girl, you see the breast... This girl was in pain here. That girl didn't want to come (19/07/2023).

This father might have done that to secure a bed and other scarce facilities, which were usually allocated to students on a first-come, first-served basis. Another plausible reason would be that the father wanted to 'dispose of' the young mother in school because teenage mothers and (sometimes) their families were often mocked, stigmatized, and looked upon with disdain in their communities (Gbogbo, 2020). It is also possible that the parents feared the policy could be canceled if there was a change in government. To ensure their daughter could take full advantage of the policy, they were determined to enroll her without delay.

Thus, teachers noted that though enrollment and completion rates increased significantly, students' class attendance, regularity, and punctuality decreased drastically. As a result, academic performance plummeted. While this finding was surprising given that President Akufo Addo insisted that the 2022 West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) results were the best of the last eight (8) years (Osei, 2022), it nevertheless corroborates the findings of Shamo (2023) that Senior High Schools students in the Effutu Municipality of the Central Region of Ghana performed poorly in the WASSCE due to their attitude. It also agrees with Dwomoh et al. (2023) that FSHSP did not result in the general improvement of academic performance. Even though teachers blamed students' attitude towards schooling on the "free" nature of the education, it can also be argued that students were beginning to question education

as THE means to social mobility. With many university graduates remaining unemployed, poor kids did not have hope of securing any proper employment with a secondary school leaver's certificate (see Ansell et al., 2020; Kendall & Silver, 2014). Furthermore, concerns regarding the attitude of students were more dominant in Edem SHS and Elikplim SHS than in Mawunya SHS. This could be attributed to the fact that in Mawunya SHS, many teachers reside on campus with the students, and the school is walled. Students can only enter or exit through the main gate, which the school's security officers guard. Mawunya SHS receives the top scorers in the BECE, and from my experience as a professional teacher in Ghana, I have found that the best-performing students tend to be more disciplined compared to low-performing students. These reasons explain why complaints regarding indiscipline and a lackadaisical attitude among students were fewer in Mawunya SHS. Indeed, some female teachers blamed the upsurge in indiscipline for the surge in teenage pregnancies.

Keeping Pregnant Girls in School

Notably, following the policy, the GES revised its approach to students who became pregnant. Though teenage pregnancy has been a problem all along, there was no official national policy regarding pregnant girls in schools, a situation that allowed headteachers to exercise discretionary powers by expelling pregnant girls (Agbemabiese-Grooms, 2011). Indeed, in the past, a girl who got pregnant during school would either pull out or be pushed out by teachers. The latter was usually the case.

In 2016, the GES introduced the re-entry education policy, albeit without significant policy guidelines (Baafi, 2020). However, less than a year after announcing FSHSP, the GES came out with the "Guidelines for the prevention of pregnancy among schoolgirls and facilitation of re-entry into school after childbirth." The aims of the guidelines are to standardize the

approaches for handling cases of pregnancy among schoolgirls and facilitating the return of girls to school post-childbirth.

1. Promote measures to prevent pregnancy among schoolgirls at the pretertiary level.
2. Increase support to in-school pregnant girls and young mothers.
3. Promote the re-entry of adolescent mothers to school after childbirth.
4. Strengthen the capacity of teachers in the management, accountability and support for pregnant schoolgirls and those who re-enter after childbirth.
5. Promote supportive environments for pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers by reducing stigma and discrimination towards them. (GES, 2018, p. 11)

This document forbade headteachers and teachers from expelling pregnant girls from school. It also mandated heads to readmit the girls after they have given birth. So, in all three schools, and for the first time, I saw many pregnant girls. Retaining pregnant girls in school, however, increased the workload on teachers, especially female teachers. As suggested by Ransford, a male teacher at Elikplim SHS,

We are doing what we call antenatal for the expectant mothers in the classroom, but nobody is paying you for providing those services. If a pregnant girl falls sick or something happens to the pregnant child, I am a male teacher, what I'm going to do with that female pregnant girl? (27/07/2023)

Aside from indicating that taking care of pregnant girls constituted unpaid labor, Ransford stated that, as a male teacher, he lacked the necessary skills to deal with pregnant girls. This duty is a very gendered form of labor, which again fell mainly on female teachers. Many male teachers

never wanted to be associated with pregnant students.¹⁷ Thus, the policy's mandate that pregnant girls should not be expelled from school disproportionately affected women who already did the lion's share of care work at schools (and beyond). For example, in all three schools, the housemistresses¹⁸ sometimes provided hot water for the expectant mothers to bathe, supervised their antenatal visits, and ensured that the expectant mothers took all their prescribed medications. When delivery was imminent, these female teachers liaised with the mothers of the pregnant girls to prepare for a safe delivery.

All these constituted invisible work (Rio Poncela et al., 2021), or invisible labor (Hamblin et al., 2020), which increased teachers' workload. Thus, with the advent of the FSHSP, even as teachers' official workload increased, there was a corresponding increase in teachers' invisible work, particularly for female teachers. In all schools, teachers, particularly females, took on greater responsibilities for supporting pregnant students; however, the workload at Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS was lighter compared to that at Edem SHS. This can be attributed to two reasons: first, Edem SHS lacks an affiliated government clinic, which is present at Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS. Second, Edem SHS has a smaller number of female teachers, leading them to face more responsibilities than their counterparts at Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS.

Pressure from the Government

Some participants highlighted the pressure that the government exerted on school heads and how this pressure trickled down to teachers. This pressure manifested in three different but

¹⁷ There are occasions where the pregnant girls refuse to disclose the names of those responsible for their pregnancies. Male teachers keep their distance from such girls to avoid being suspected of being the ones responsible for the pregnancies.

¹⁸ A female teacher in charge of a female dormitory at a boarding school. In ideal situations, the housemistress lives in a bungalow attached to the girls' dormitory. The male counterpart is called a housemaster.

related guises: (1) The ranking of secondary schools into a sort of league table based on the performance of schools in the WASSCE, published by the MoE/GES in the Ghana Senior High Schools Annual Digest; (2) the signing of performance agreements by the headteachers; and (3) the promotion or demotion of heads based on students' performance in the WASSCE.

During the FGD in Elikplim SHS, one teacher explained:

The heads of schools sign performance contract agreements, pledging to deliver desirable outcomes to the proponents of the policy. I mean results. This type of grade shall be churned out. It comes with conditions. Do it, or you are fired (28/07/2023).

While this teacher spoke, all the participants nodded, indicating their agreement with what he was saying. Some participants argued that the signing of performance agreement contracts and the implementation of ranking systems led their headteachers to put undue pressure on them to work hard and produce excellent results. The quote above becomes more insightful when we understand that a headteacher's promotion to a bigger school or demotion to a smaller school was contingent on students' results. While this is reminiscent of the Ordinance of 1887, where teachers' salaries were contingent on students' performance (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975), this aligns with neoliberal approaches to education, where teachers' efficiency is based on student test scores. It also mirrors broader techniques of accountability associated with the neo-liberalization of schools, where quality is reduced to quantitative measures to put pressure on schools and teachers through competitions and performance audits (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016). Thus, like it happened in the US with the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top policies (Weiner, 2012), headteachers, teachers, or schools in general, were held responsible for students' poor performance, thereby obfuscating the role of government's (in)actions in students' performance.

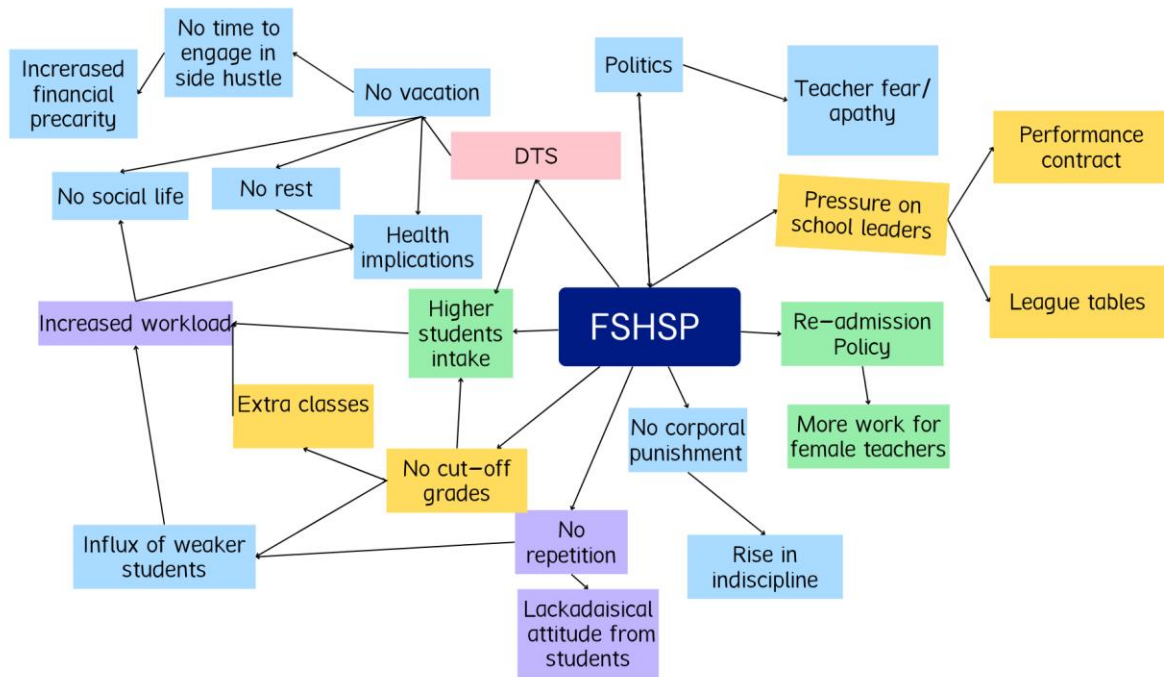
Edward, a mathematics teacher at Elikplim SHS, pointed to the problem of measuring a school or a teacher's efficacy by using students' results:

That is where some of us have serious challenges when it comes to teaching in Ghana, because the factors that measure your output do not depend only on you as a teacher. The students also come to play, and the quality and attitude of the students also matter greatly. Because they will carry your input to produce the output...So, this aspiration is putting so much pressure on the teacher (19/07/2023).

Edward's response typifies a conundrum: How do you send unqualified students to a school, forbid school authorities from repeating them in case of poor performance, and then expect teachers to churn out wonderful grades? Further, it also espouses the fact that students' performance is not only contingent on teachers but also depends on several factors, including school facilities and quality of students admitted. Figure 7 is a visual mind map of FSHSP, its accompanying directives, and how they impact teachers' lives and work.

Figure 7

A Mind Map Illustrating the FSHSP and its Impacts on Teachers



Part Two: Impact of FSHSP on Teacher's Lives

No Vacation: "Working all Year Round"

The absence of vacation, or personal days, was by far the most dominant complaint from the teachers interviewed. The conversations about the lack of vacations were closely related to the Double Track System (DTS) and its present form, the Multi Track Year-Round Education (MT-YRE). For a better understanding of this theme, it is important for me to explain the DTS and MT-YRE. Almost immediately after rolling out FSHSP, the Ghana government realized that it was inconceivable to accommodate all the students at the same time, considering the facilities available. Consequently, the MoE adopted the DST as a stopgap measure to maximize the limited facilities and teachers.

With the DST, students in a year batch were divided into gold and green tracks, enabling all students to use the same limited facilities, albeit at different times (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Takyi et al., 2019). The initial idea was to divide both teachers and students into two tracks. Thus, as a track stayed home, teachers assigned to that track also stayed home, only to return to teach after their track returned to school. This arrangement, the MoE argued, would provide teachers with extended vacation periods, alleviate school congestion, and decrease class sizes (Dwomoh et al., 2022). However, because the number of teachers available in most schools, particularly rural schools, could not be practically divided into two, most teachers taught both tracks, staying in school all year round as the different tracks alternated between vacation and classes.

Two years later, the MoE changed the DST to MT-YRE. The difference between the DST and MT-YRE was that, with the MT-YRE, at every point, two-year groups remained on campus, while a year group stayed home. In contrast, with the DST, half of the students (gold track) stayed in school, while the other half (green track) stayed home. For example, when I started my fieldwork, Forms One and Three were on campus while Form Two was on break. As I was leaving the field, the Form Twos returned to school, and the Form Ones left for vacation. Like with the DST, teachers teaching more than one grade level did not have any vacation. Teachers complained bitterly about not taking any breaks since the policy's inception. Take, for instance, the case of Linda of Elikplim SHS, who had not had a single break since the inception of FSHSP:

At first, as teachers, we come to school for a period of time and then you have a break...

But after the free SHS policy was implemented...some teachers like me, you are teaching in first year, you are teaching in second year, you are teaching in third year or ... maybe

you are teaching gold, and you are teaching green ... So, when one stream or one form is at home, the other is on campus. So, you have to continue teaching for the whole year...

(27/07/2023)

Benjamin also expressed the same opinion at the FGD:

If you listen to the earlier speakers, they are all speaking about workload, workload. So, after the workload, you need some rest, but the rest doesn't come because the only way you could get the rest is to get some vacations, and the vacation isn't there because you have to continue when the next batch appears (17/07/2023).

The accounts from these two teachers echo the sentiments of almost all the teachers I encountered during my time in the field. Linda, for instance, detailed the problem involved when a teacher taught two or more grade levels. Teachers who taught two or more grade levels had no holiday at all. Benjamin, on the other hand, highlighted the paradox of the situation. Thus, the increased workload was the main reason vacations were needed. Thus, to most participants, the government was overly committed to increasing access, to the disadvantage of teachers.

Thus, the teachers contended that the policy was more student-centred and even though teachers played an important part in the implementation, teachers were not thought about in formulating the policy. Even though this complaint ran across the three schools, I found the problem was profound in Elikplim SHS and worse in Edem SHS, relative to Mawunya SHS. This was probably because teachers usually refused posting to rural and peri-urban settings (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Because Mawunya SHS had more teachers, some departments adopted mechanisms to circumvent the system. The language department, for instance, adopted what they called the "horizontal allocation" of classes. This way, they made sure teachers were assigned to different

classes in only one-year group. Essentially, this meant that when a teacher's year group was on vacation, the teacher could also go on vacation. Berebe, a teacher in the language department, called this an "internal arrangement":

I will say, now, we have a kind of internal arrangement... You will be in only one track. So that if they are on vacation, you can also have your time to do other things (04/06/2023).

At the FDG in Mawunya SHS, Kelvin, a social studies teacher, raised a similar point:

Kelvin: In our department, we adjusted our allocations in a way that has given me... two months of holidays...

Kofi: Can you talk about that adjustment?

Kelvin: So, in allocating the classes... if you are lucky to have the number of teachers ...you can allocate classes maybe first year classes or a particular transitional group to a group of teachers. Then, the second group, you give them to another group of teachers. So, when their group is on break, you will also enjoy that break. When they are back, you take over. That is the only thing that you can do to have a break. Aside that, since the program started, some schools and some teachers that I know in other schools have never had any form of holiday (10/06/2023).

As illustrated in the excerpts above, some teachers devised creative ways to create vacations within the system. This confirms the claim that because "policies are part of the social environment, they can be ...rearticulated to suit local circumstances" (Taylor et al., 1997). It is important to state that this scenario was feasible only in Mawunya SHS, which, as I indicated earlier, was usually overstaffed. No teacher mentioned this in Elikplim SHS or Edem SHS.

Even in Mawunya SHS, this arrangement was only feasible in some core subjects. It was not feasible for any of the elective subject teachers. For example, Mawunya SHS had only one music teacher, and there was no way this teacher could take a break regardless of which track or batch of students was in school. So elective subject teachers, even though they had fewer students to teach, spent the whole year in school without any break, save for the Christmas break. Thus, the burden of DTS/ MT-YRE and its corollary, no vacation, fell disproportionately on the less-resourced schools and the teachers of elective subjects.

Additionally, teachers who held administrative positions, such as housemasters/housemistresses, Heads of Departments (HoDs), and guidance and counseling coordinators, had no break at all, regardless of which batch of students was in school. Interestingly, due to the small number of female teachers, almost all of them held administrative positions and thus could not take vacations. This finding reemphasizes that FSHSP disproportionately affected female teachers. It also echoes how policy effects are “unpredictable given the complex interrelationship of contextual factors ...and the variety of key players involved in the policy process (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 17).

Increased Workload: “Almost all the Time, you are Busy”

Most participants noted the impact of the increased workload on their social life. As suggested by one participant, “Almost all the time, you are busy.” Another participant noted that “social life reduced drastically because we end up spending so much time in school.” Because teachers spent almost the entire day in school, coupled with the fact that vacations became almost nonexistent after the policy rollout, participants indicated that the policy impacted their family commitments. During the FGD in Elikplim SHS, a teacher noted that he hardly saw his

children because he left the house very early in the morning and returned late. Meanwhile, Patrick, a male teacher at Elikplim SHS, referred to how the policy impacted his marriage:

For some of us, in actual fact, even our wives who are away are even separated from us.

“Yes!! because look at this. The whole year now, this academic year, I never had a day or a month to say I’m going to spend with my wife and children who are somewhere
(18/07/2023).

Patrick’s situation was indeed peculiar because his wife also taught at another boarding secondary school, meaning vacations were the only times this couple could be together. Without the vacations, it was difficult for the young couple to meet.

Doreen, a female teacher from Edem SHS, also spoke about the impact of the policy on wives and mothers in the performance of their duties:

Other professions like to marry teachers because, at least, we have some time to spend with the kids...But now, because of the free SHS, your children will see you very early in the morning, and you return sometimes after 5 p.m because there’s a lot to be done... They (the children) are home, and mummy is always at work. So, life outside has not been the same as the free SHS (08/08/2023).

Nora, Doreen’s colleague and a mother of a 4-year-old girl raised similar concerns:

You get home like 5:30 pm. What kind of food are you going to prepare to eat? So, when you find something for your child [to eat], after that, you wash down. At times, I don’t even wash down, I just sleep ... Yesterday we ate around 9 PM... (pointing to her little daughter). She was dozing off [as] I was feeding her (11/08/2023).

In Ghana, there is a serious emphasis on marriage, particularly for women, and many women view marriage as an important step into womanhood (Nartey, 2021). Consequently, many

educated women choose professions they feel are attractive to would-be husbands—teaching ranks high in that regard, compared to nursing, the other female-dominated occupation. Female teachers are often considered ideal wives, given the presumption that they would have additional time for household, productive labor. So, with the advent of the FSHSP, this time was taken away from these teachers, and this in no small way affected their family lives, making it difficult to balance personal, professional, and family life. I, therefore, contend that the FSHSP will lead to the further depletion of the female teacher population at the secondary level, given the sociocultural expectations of wives and mothers as the primary caretakers of children.

Economic Impact

Crucially, one theme that emerged was the idea that FSHSP took teachers away from other income-generating opportunities. As mentioned previously, teachers in Ghana, and indeed most parts of Africa, are woefully underpaid. Teachers thus engage in secondary employment to supplement their income (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). These activities include, but are not limited to, farming, rearing livestock, private tutoring, operating provision shops, driving taxis, operating internet cafes, and engaging in commercial farming. However, with the advent of the FSHSP, many teachers became preoccupied with teaching and had no time for other things.

Benjamin, a social studies teacher at Elikplim SHS, explained during the FGD:

This extra work [brought by FSHSP] has also taken part of our time that we could do other engagements to support ourselves. So, some of us, **we have to shed** some of the economic activities we engage in order to make time for classes and meet the demands of the free SHS ... I feel that, personally, it's affecting me economically. [Emphasis Added]

When I asked him to elaborate, he continued:

... I do engage in taxi driving as part time work to support the teaching profession. So, what this means is that, once I can't make enough time to do the taxi driving work, ...I'm going to depend on the salary solely to meet the family's needs and demands (17/07/2023).

Ivy, the senior housemistress of Elikplim SHS, juxtaposed the period before and after the policy, while shedding light on her inability to engage in secondary employment during the FSHSP era:

Then, [because] the workload was less, I baked. So, I was able to make money aside the normal what they pay us. But here now, you wake up in the morning, you have to come to class, from class, you have to mark your work, you have to do other things. So [there is] no time. If you force to do [any] extra thing, you will break down (19/07/2023).

While Benjamin highlighted time constraints as the reason he no longer engaged in his secondary employment, Ivy indicated that by the time she finished with all her official duties, she was left with no energy to do anything extra. Others also cited the economic impact of a lack of vacations. For example, Patrick, the only music teacher at Elikplim SHS, narrated how he used to travel to Togo during vacations to work as a choirmaster. According to him, the money made from this job during the vacation periods “cushioned” him. However, since the policy came, he missed out on that opportunity.

Perhaps because FSHSP took teachers away from income-making opportunities, some teachers engaged in businesses on the school premises, despite the GES Code of Conduct for teachers stating that “no staff shall trade or transact any financial business on the school premises during school hours” (Ghana Education Service Council, 2017, p. 14). In Mawunya SHS, for instance, I observed many female teachers engaging in brisk business in the school canteen, selling food items to the students during break time. Some male teachers' wives also sold in the

school canteen. In Elikplim SHS, a male teacher sold stationery from his car's booth, while a housemaster's wife operated a provision shop in front of their bungalow. Even though some teachers or their spouses engaged in on-campus businesses before the policy, it was not widespread.

The surge in on-campus teacher businesses could be attributed to two reasons: one, the increase in enrollment increased the student customer base; two, the absence of fees might also have contributed to the increased purchasing power of the students. Either way, some teachers made a good amount of extra money selling to the students. However, in Edem SHS, though most people who sold in the school canteen were related in one way or another to a teacher in the school, no teacher personally engaged in selling on campus. This might be because most of the teachers in Edem SHS did not reside in on-campus accommodations and, in some cases, did not even reside in the township of the school. Thus, even as FSHSP made some teachers lose their income-making opportunities, it created avenues for others to make extra income. This affirms the stance of Young and Diem (2018) that policies create winners and losers.

Impact on Teachers' Health

Many teachers made reference to the impact of the increased workload on their health. Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Words such as "stress" and "pressure" appeared severally in their stories. For example, Timothy explained during the FGD in School B:

We are always on campus very early in the morning and we leave quite late, and this is putting a lot of pressure and stress on us. If you have a class for all the year groups, there is no break for you throughout the entire academic year. So, you work tirelessly

throughout the whole year without a break, which is even telling on our health as teachers (18/07/2023).

Another teacher at Elikplim SHS, Koagbe, elaborated:

There is so much stress on us. To the extent that mental stability is a challenge, health-wise, it is impacting on our health so much that you may have symptoms, and you think it is malaria. They do all typhoid and malaria tests, and they are all negative (28/07/2023).

Meanwhile, the assistant headteacher of Edem SHS also raised similar concerns. This was our interaction:

Assist head Edem SHS: Let me add that some of my staffs are breaking down gradually.

Kofi: Breaking down. Can you explain?

Assist head Edem SHS: In terms of health.

Kofi: wow!

Assist head Edem SHS: Yes. As we are speaking, the physics teacher which should be taking our final year students is down with stroke (02/08/2023).

Thus, many teachers drew attention to their declining health situation, often blaming it on the increased workload. Many teachers felt they overexerted themselves, and this impacted negatively on their health. This finding corroborates earlier research results by Akutey et al. (2024) that the FSHSP exacerbated teacher burnout. This burnout has implications not only for teachers' well-being but also for teacher retention. On a macro level, this finding espouses the claims in the mainstream literature regarding the relationship between workload and stress or burnout (Jomuad et al., 2021; Zydziunaite et al., 2020).

Teachers' Fear: Culture of Silence

“Heads were demoted under this policy. Teachers were dismissed under this policy”

(Koagbe, Elikplim SHS, 28/07/2023)

Another prevalent theme in the interviews with teachers was the fear associated with talking about the policy. This might explain why all the heads firmly but politely declined my request for an interview, even though I had ethical clearance from my institution and had been granted access at both the national and regional levels of GES. In one instance, the HoD of the social sciences department at Mawunya SHS told me he had only a few years to go on pension and would not like to be targeted after granting an interview. Most teachers declined my request for an interview, stating, “I don’t want any problems.”

Even after Stephen of Mawunya SHS agreed to grant me an interview, and despite my repeated assurance of confidentiality, this was part of our interaction at the beginning of the session:

Kofi: Can you tell me a little about yourself?

Stephen: Well, if that little will include omitting my name, that’s fine.

Further, during a one-on-one interview with Koagbe (Elikplim SHS), he stated,

We are at a negative reception of this policy. We are gagged. You can’t talk. Don’t say this. They throw it at us like a piece of bone to the dogs, and we have to pick it up and keep quiet. We are terrified as we speak (28/07/2023).

Nora of Edem SHS, one of the few female teachers who agreed to speak with me, also shared teachers’ fears regarding talking about this policy:

We have been pushed into a corner that even if you see something, you can't say it.

Because somebody is watching you. By the time you say a word, you are taken on. So, you have to stay in your small corner (11/08/2023).

As discussed earlier, the FSHSP was adopted to fulfill a campaign promise (Addo, 2019). The perception that the policy was political caused fear among teachers because any criticism of the policy would be misconstrued as opposition to the ruling regime. Even the minutest infractions were interpreted as attempts to make the government unpopular, and headteachers cited for violations were viewed as saboteurs. This, perhaps, accounted for the reason some teachers declined or ignored my request for them to participate in my study. The excerpts above become more insightful when we consider the fact that, after the advent of the policy, GES demoted, sacked, or transferred many headteachers for many reasons, including charging unapproved fees ("Free SHS saga," 2017), granting access to journalists to report on their schools ("Another headmaster sacked," 2019) and for admitting students without consent from the superiors ("GES sacks Aggrey," 2019).

There were also many anecdotal reports of teachers being posted to very remote areas as punishment for criticizing some aspects of the FSHSP. It is essential to understand that this fear, while widespread, was particularly pronounced at Mawunya SHS. This observation is not unfounded, as in Ghana, outright dismissal of teachers is rare, except for gross incompetence or professional misconduct and engaging in certain criminal activities, particularly those involving sexual misconduct with students (minors). Typically, the main form of punishment for teachers is being reassigned to rural locations. Consequently, teachers at the urban-based Mawunya SHS were cautious about safeguarding themselves against the consequences of being posted to rural areas.

Concerns About Students' Welfare

Many participants, before, during, or after the interview, expressed a profound concern about the welfare of the students, particularly in relation to their feeding and housing. Initially, I did not consider this to have an impact on teachers. However, observing the countenances of teachers as they discussed issues affecting students made me realize how emotionally challenging students' problems could be for teachers. Thus, as much as it affected the students, it also affected teachers, at least emotionally. For example, on our way to the office where I interviewed Tagbedze, a teacher of English Language and the guidance and counseling coordinator of Mawunya SHS, he noted:

I know you are interested in how this policy affects teachers, not students. But as a father, the main thing I think about daily is what these kids eat. If you see what they eat, hmm. Anytime I am on duty, I try to avoid the dining hall. It worries me because I am a father (Fieldnote, 03/06/2023).

Tagbedze went on to describe the feeding situation as “embarrassing” and spoke about his fear that one day, students would revolt. Also, Edward of Elikplim SHS stated, “When you go to the dining hall, and you look at the quality of the meals that the students are served. It’s so pathetic” (19/07/2023). This sentiment was present in all three schools. For example, Daniel of Elikplim SHS stated that students had had corn porridge “without sugar for more than three semesters” (27/07/2023). During the FGD in Elikplim SHS, Linda noted that students had “breakfast with no protein” (27/07/2023). Sister Dema of Mawunya SHS noted that there were times when students took the same breakfast for weeks because that was the only food in the store.

In the past, students paid feeding fees, with which the heads of the various institutions sourced food items to feed the students. However, with the FSHSP, the Ghana Government

contracted the National Buffer Stock Company to source and supply food to the schools (“Free SHS: Government engages,” 2017), while the government sent money to the schools for recurrent expenses. The reports of schools threatening to shut down because of food shortages (Aziamor-Mensah & Adobea-Owusu, 2022; Nkegbe, 2024) were usually caused by the delay of food supply from the National Buffer Stock Company and the government’s erratic release of funds to the schools (Kojo, 2022).

While the finding regarding students’ feeding situation starkly contrasts the findings of PIAC (2020), it is corroborated by a Joy News investigative documentary, *Empty Plate; The Free SHS Promise*. This comprehensive countrywide documentary found that “numerous campuses face alarming food shortages, substandard meals, and even weevil-infested supplies from the Free SHS secretariat” (Nartey, 2024, para. 4).

However, consistent with the findings of Dwomoh et al. (2023), teachers quickly added that the feeding of students during the first two years of the policy was impressive. In the view of these teachers, feeding challenges started after 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on Ghana’s economy might be blamed for the change in the feeding situation at the schools.

Some participants also expressed concern about how the students were crowded in the dormitories and classrooms and pointed out how this led to the spread of communicable diseases. Kelvin, a social studies teacher at Mawunya SHS, recalled when the boys’ dormitories were infested with bed bugs, and students had to bear the brunt of the dangerous insects. Cate, a housemistress at Elikplim SHS, also expressed deep concern about students sleeping on mattresses on the bare floor.

I gathered from these interactions that, although these situations primarily affected students, they also had an emotional and psychological impact on teachers, as teachers were often the de facto parents on campuses. As parents on campuses, teachers, first and foremost, were worried about the welfare and well-being of their students. Thus, when students ate unwholesome meals and lived in overcrowded dormitories, it took an emotional and psychological toll on teachers. As suggested by Solomon, “As a teacher, you cannot take yourself out of the system... whatever affects the students affects you” (05/06/2023).

Consequently, some teachers sometimes supported students with their meager salaries. Edward of Elikplim SHS shed light on some of the monetary sacrifices he made:

You find situations where the student is hungry, but because of the quality [of the food], the child is not prepared to go to the dining hall. The child is not even having the money to go and eat at the canteen. So, the child ends up in the classroom on empty stomach... and sometimes, they fall back on us teachers. As you sit under the tree, you find students coming around saying, “I’m hungry”...So you have to dole out some monies ... to support them because they [we] are social beings (19/07/2023).

Edward’s comment suggests an attitude of care or concern among teachers. This concern was not only limited to giving out money to students: Gertrude, a home economics instructor at Edem SHS, mentioned that she consistently provided sanitary pads to some females who were menstruating, using her own funds. Further, some teachers had students staying with them. Some of these students were admitted as day students but could not afford to rent a place in town, and some were admitted to the boarding house but could not afford the items listed in the school’s prospectus.

Summary

This chapter examined the impact of FSHSP on teachers' work. It also explored the impact of the policy on teachers' daily lives. The policy changed schools in general and has impacted how teachers worked and lived their lives. The increase in student enrollment invariably resulted in a high student-to-teacher ratio, translating into more work for teachers in all three schools utilized for this study. Although teachers were pleased that FSHSP led to the early reporting of students to school, they were unhappy with the increased teacher workload and resource scarcity, including a lack of essential teaching and learning materials, as well as infrastructural inadequacies. Yet, the pains of infrastructural challenges and resource scarcity were most felt at Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, which had contended with those challenges even before the FSHSP.

Teachers also bemoaned the removal of cut-off points for admission, the mass promotion of students, and the ban on corporal punishment, which, together with the fact that students did not pay school fees, made students develop a lackadaisical attitude toward schooling. Teachers from all three schools reported students' lackadaisical attitude towards schooling, but complaints were fewer at Mawunya SHS than at Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS. This is due to Mawunya SHS receiving the highest performers from the gateway examination, highlighting flaws in the distribution of qualified students.¹⁹

While the policy affected all teachers, I found that it disproportionately impacted female teachers, who, in addition to the increased workload, had to contend with the bulk of care work imposed by the FSHSP. To this end, female teachers in Edem SHS suffered the most compared to Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS because they had the least number of female teachers. Also,

¹⁹ I elaborate on this in the next chapter.

the school did not have on-campus accommodation for most of them. Additionally, the school did not have a clinic on its premises.

Even as the increase in student population resulted in more work, teachers in all three schools noted that there was no corresponding commensurate increase in teachers' remuneration. This situation led to teacher apathy. Regarding the impact of the policy on teachers' lives, teachers decried the lack of vacations, poor working conditions, and harassment from government officials, leading to teacher fear. Though some teachers in urban-based Mawunya SHS took advantage of the large student population to engage in on-campus businesses, they also noted that FSHSP restricted their social life and took them away from other income-making activities they previously engaged in. Yet, even though teachers still expressed a deep concern for their students, it was evident that the FSHSP exacerbated the already declining prestige and liveability of the teaching profession. While teachers working under extremely difficult conditions—lacking the needed resources for effective teaching and overworking yet being underpaid—did not start with the FSHSP, the teachers made sense of the worsening of their circumstances as a direct consequence of the operationalization of the FSHSP as a political tool.

Chapter Eight: FSHSP and Equity in Ghanaian Secondary Education

On the 31st of August 2017, in preparation for the launch of the FSHSP, President Akufo Addo and his vice unveiled the FSHSP logo. The words “Access,” “Equity,” and “Quality” were inscribed on the logo. At the launch, the minister in charge of tertiary education explained that the themes of access, equity, and quality are the principles that drive the policy (“Akufo Addo unveils”, 2017; MoE, 2017). The MoE website describes “Access,” “Equity,” and “Quality” as the “Pillars of the Policy.” Though access, equality, and quality have long been topics of discussion in the Ghanaian education terrain and have appeared in several policy documents, the term "equity" gained real traction with the introduction of the FSHSP, becoming associated with the policy. Little is known, however, about how those tasked with implementing these lofty goals understand their charge.

This chapter explores the concept of equity in relation to FSHSP from the perspective of teachers. It discusses teachers’ understanding of equity and their understanding of the FSHSP’s implications for equity in Ghanaian secondary education. Teachers' perspectives on the FSHSP’s implications for equity matter because teachers are the most important school-based variable for practicalizing and actualizing education policy intentions, and their views regarding equity directly influence how they enact equity within schools. Teachers also spend the most time with students and are best placed to identify inequities during the FSHSP period compared to the pre-FSHSP era.

Figure 8

The Free Senior High School Policy Logo



Teachers' Understanding of Equity

A common theme in my teacher interviews was the association of equity with giving, sharing, or distributing resources and opportunities. As Winfred of Mawunya SHS suggested, equity meant the “fair distribution of national cake” (05/06/2023). Another teacher from Mawunya SHS, Tagbedze, explained equity as “giving people their right to their benefit without impediment” (03/06/2023). In Elikplim SHS, Cate explained equity as “providing something...” while Timothy noted that equity entailed “making sure that everybody gets...” (24/07/2023). Meanwhile, in Edem SHS, the assistant headteacher in charge of academics insisted that equity had to do with “giving equal opportunity to all beneficiaries” (27/07/2023).

In conceptualizing equity as giving, sharing, distributing, or providing, most of the teachers I spoke with equated equity with equality. According to these teachers, equity could only happen if the giving, sharing, distributing, or providing was done equally. They explained that equity meant providing everyone with equal access to resources and opportunities. The following excerpts from interviewees are illustrative of teachers' equation of equity with equality.

1. “Equity, in my view, is simply providing resources for students and teachers to... providing equal resources to students and teachers to enhance academic work (Caleb, Mawunya SHS,04/06/2023).
2. “Err, when we talk about equity, to the best of my understanding, we are talking about equal accessibility.” (Solomon, Mawunya SHS,05/06/2023).
3. “...My understanding of equity is ... giving equal opportunity to everyone to partake in a particular...(Mawuli, Edem SHS, 03/08/2023).

Interestingly, the teachers’ responses linked equity to equal opportunities and, thus, a fair society. In other words, some participants understood equity to be fairness. However, their responses suggested that they perceived fairness as a product of equal treatment. Ransford at Elikplim SHS explained that equity meant “the fair distribution of whatever you have with everybody irrespective of the person’s gender or religion, sex or whatever.” However, he continued to state that equity meant giving “equal opportunities to everybody” (27/07/2023). Another teacher, Timothy, added that equity is the “equal sharing of resources where everybody gets a fair share of commodities or items” (18/07/2023). Edward of Elikplim SHS also added that:

I am looking at equity as fairness, equality, in terms of distribution of resources or whatever that is being shared among a group of people... So that’s fair play, making sure that everybody has access to equal measure as per what is needed (19/07/2023).

Other teachers explained that sharing things equally meant fair treatment of people. For example, Daniel of Elikplim SHS noted that equity entailed “sharing something equally or fairly or treating everybody fairly” (27/07/2023). Nora, a teacher in Edem SHS, also stated, “... I am

looking at equity as fairness, you know, fairness, equality in terms of distribution of resources or whatever that is being shared among a group of people” (11/08/2023).

It is important to note that this understanding of the term equity is not peculiar to teachers. It mirrors the general understanding that government officials attached to the term equity. Document analysis revealed that government officials often associated equity with equal treatment for everyone. For example, regarding school fees, no special treatment was mentioned for any group of persons, whether rich or poor, thereby creating the impression that all parents struggled to afford the fees. The then minister of information, Kodjo Oppong Nkrumah, stated that FSHSP “is a heritage that every Ghanaian child must enjoy ... It is not necessarily based on whether your parents are rich or poor” (“Free SHS heritage,” 2019). Like Kodjo Oppong Nkrumah, many other Government officials often alluded to equality and fairness in the same vein using all-encompassing words and phrases like “everybody,” “every citizen,” “all Ghanaians,” and “every Ghanaian child.” The extract below was contained on the Free SHS Website:

Equity: This is a fundamental driver in any social intervention program. Poverty, gender, deprivation, etc. should no longer be barriers to education. The government is eager to ensure a fair and just society where there are equal opportunities for all, irrespective of family circumstances.

Against the backdrop that one of the pillars of the FSHSP is equity (MoE, 2017; Partey, 2017), the quote above, taken together with the pronouncements of government officials such as the information minister, highlights the fact that even though there is widespread use of the term equity in many conversations concerning education policies, there is little or no clarification on the meaning of the term, resulting in a situation where many people see equity and equality as

synonymous (Unterhalter, 2009; Cruz & Stake, 2012). Thus, many teachers considered the term "equity" in relation to "equality," as they defined equity as equal access for everyone, regardless of background. Even those who viewed equity in terms of fairness still alluded to some forms of equality in defining it. Most teachers understood equity in relation to a sort of equality or fairness that is reflected in access to education or making quality education available to all. One plausible explanation for this might be the position of the word equity on the logo—positioned between access and quality, equity was understood as interfacing the two terms. Thus, these teachers' understanding of equity resembles the situation in Mali, where equity was “understood as a kind of fairness wherein all beneficiaries, without any distinction whatsoever, have access to the same advantages” (Bregman, 2008, p. 32). The general EFA discourse, which heavily emphasizes equality and has been "mainstream" discourse in education since the early 1990s, may have also influenced or shaped their understanding of equity. This discourse of creating equal opportunity for all drives most policies aimed at expanding access.

Nevertheless, a few other participants noted that even though equity had to do with fairness, it did *not* mean equality. In my interview with Sister Dema of Mawunya SHS, I asked, “How do you understand equity?” She started her answer by pointing out that “sometimes we confuse equality and equity.” She continued that equity meant “there should be fairness in whatever we want to do, whatever we are doing, whatever we are sharing, there should be fairness” (03/06/2023). Another teacher at Mawunya SHS, Jeremiah, stated that equity involved “every member of a group getting a fair share of what he deserves or what is available, not necessarily equal but getting what the person deserves by virtue of membership or belongingness” (05/06/2023). Linda of Elikplim SHS expressed the same view when I asked her to explain the term equity:

Equity is just like fair. Being fair or fairness or impartial way of handling, treating or sharing of students or sharing our resources and maybe opportunities that are available to all of them regardless of their gender... impartially sharing of our resources and opportunities that are available to them based on their unique needs (27/07/2023).

When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by “unique needs,” she continued:

When we say uniqueness, we have students from different areas of the nation, from different backgrounds, schools..., and socio-economic backgrounds. ...So all these things make them unique. We have students with different learning capabilities. Some with special needs...we can't put all of them in one pot. Everybody has a uniqueness.... someone having learning difficulties ...So, you don't have to say, ok, all of them are students... We have even genders- male, female... (27/07/2023).

This idea of uniqueness expressed by Linda came up with other teachers, too. At Edem SHS, Doreen told me that “equity is just about creating a level playing field for everybody” (08/08/2023), regardless of their socio-economic background. To her, taking equity seriously would require the creation of a platform that enables the poor and the middle class to reach the same level as the rich.

Surprisingly enough, though teachers differed in their understanding of equity, almost all of them raised concerns regarding the policy targets. They argued that to achieve equity, the policy should be more targeted at those who needed it most. Ivy of Edem SHS stated that it should not be wholesale, while Koagbe in Elikplim SHS insisted that the government needed to “discriminate the policy... those who can pay must be made to pay. Those who are poor must be made not to pay”. He argued that the government was carrying “a burden it doesn't deserve to carry” by paying for the rich. He elaborated:

Let's assume I'm a Minister of State, I have all the luxury in the world, and I can pay fees for my ward, why should my child benefit from the free SHS policy? (28/07/2023)

Edward (Elikplim SHS) also observed:

Even in the Bible, I know the Bible talks about God administering his spiritual gifts of grace according to the faith of the people that he has ministered to. So, equitability should also take into account affordability on the part of parents and guardians. Those who can afford it should be made to support the system. Should be made to pay. You know, there should be some cost-sharing aspect to free education (19/07/2023).

Articulated above was the desire of these teachers for the policy to be exclusively a pro-poor intervention. They argued that making the same allocation for all students was not necessarily the best approach but that there should be differentiation for individuals or groups of individuals with proven needs. Interestingly, however, although these responses seem to suggest an understanding of equity in the sense of different treatment of different groups, this position by teachers was informed by their desire to see the rich pay “to support the system” and to relieve the government of “a burden it doesn't deserve to carry.” It was more or less motivated by the desire of these teachers to have the rich forfeit a benefit they seemed to be enjoying unfairly.

The idea of “those who really need it” often emerged in teachers' interviews. Caleb told me that “not everybody needs the free education,” and there was the need to identify “the people that really need help—the people that cannot be in school if it is not free” (04/06/2023).

However, this presented a conundrum. As suggested by Caleb, “How can the policymakers identify the needy or those who have not or the targeted class that needs this policy?”

(04/06/2023). To this end, Dr. Ante Partey, a professor at the University of Cape Coast, suggested means testing and collating background information about students at the basic level

(Partey, 2017). Significantly, most teachers who argued about taking out the well-to-do students argued that the money accrued from cost-sharing could be channeled into improving the policy.

Some teachers also argued that treating all students as equals amounted to discrimination. Sister Dema told me that the policy was more geared towards equality because the “government is paying the same amount for everybody without considering who has the ability to pay.” Sister Dema reiterated this during FGD in Mawunya SHS:

My understanding of equity is when you are fair. It is when you are giving people what they need... to be competitive in the school. In this regard, I will say there is no equity when we are talking about the students because some people will just need only the fees and they will be okay. Some may need more than fees (03/06/2023).

She then talked about how some students, despite the FSHSP, “dropped out” because they could not afford the basic things needed to stay in school. She also recounted how some girls dropped out because of a lack of access to menstrual products—a sentiment expressed by two female teachers in Edem SHS as well. Gabi told me, “Girls have their own issues, so the equity is lacking a bit.” When I asked her to elaborate, she added, “as females you know, we have hormonal changes, and these are adolescent girls too” (09/08/2023). I supposed she did not feel comfortable mentioning the term menstruation, so I did not push her any further. Meanwhile, in the same school, Akos made the same point, but in a more forthright way: “Most of these girls are adolescents, and they are menstruating, so they need their feminine pads” (10/08/2023). Embedded in the stories of these teachers is the belief that, to achieve equity, you would need more than school fees removed. For instance, in the menstruation examples, you would need the provision of supplies, which is a different set of interventions than the current policy provides for.

Some teachers also suggested that the policy should target students pursuing vocational and technical courses. Koagbe, for instance, said, “those students going for the pure grammar, science, business studies ... should pay fees. And those going into vocational, technical, and artisanal education should have it free” (28/07/2023). On the other hand, some participants also proposed that the policy should be based on merit, targeting only those who achieved a specific threshold grade in the BECE. In the case of the teachers advocating for focusing solely on vocational/technical courses, these teachers were concerned particularly with how the country could attain the maximum benefit from the policy, while the teachers calling for a threshold grade were interested in escaping the problems wrought by the elimination of cutoff grades.²⁰

Equity During the pre-FSHSP Era

Surprisingly, some of the teachers I spoke with in Elikplim SHS claimed that, prior to the introduction of the FSHSP, secondary education was equitable. In the words of Ransford at Elikplim SHS, secondary education “was equitably distributed [because] people had the right and the freedom to go to any school of their choice” (27/07/2023). Daniel, a colleague of Ransford, contended that secondary education was equitable in the days preceding the FSHSP because “there was no barrier preventing anybody from accessing secondary education... the system was open to any citizen that qualifies to enter the secondary school” (27/07/2023). It is evident that Ransford, for instance, was looking at equity as freedom of choice, while Daniel talked about education as a “right” that “any citizen” could enjoy by virtue of being a Ghanaian.

Yet, as if to contradict his earlier response, Daniel added, “if your parents are unable to afford your fees, then it means that you will not be able to access secondary education because of the fees that are involved” (27/07/2023). To say that there was no barrier and that fees prevented

²⁰ This was discussed in the previous chapter.

some students from enrolling suggested that Daniel looked at “barrier” as a physical impediment to accessing secondary education. It also elides the issue of cost preventing many people from accessing secondary education (Lewin, 2008). Ignoring or being oblivious to cost acting as a barrier to secondary education was again present in the response of some other teachers. Take, for example, my conversation with Ivy:

Kofi: Before the introduction of the policy, was secondary education equitable?

Ivy: I think so.

Kofi: Can you explain?

Ivy: Yes. I think so. I am saying so because ... anybody who really wanted to go was given the chance... it was fair. It was not like you cannot go. Hardly was it that somebody qualified and then the person could not go. To me it was fair. Nobody was denied secondary education if they really wanted to go. I can use my house as an example (19/07/2023).

The last statement in the quote above is significant in understanding this teacher’s stance that “nobody was denied secondary education if they really wanted to go.” Ivy continued by recounting how her father gave them (the children) the option of pursuing secondary education or embarking on an apprenticeship. Ivy’s story elided the fact that many poor households did not have the luxury of choice that her father, by his middle-class status, offered Ivy and her siblings. Like the other two teachers, Ivy did not consider cost a barrier to secondary education, probably because she had not experienced it as a student. This could be adduced to the fact that many teachers in Ghana come from socio-economically advantaged households (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002). Relatedly, Benjamin (Elikplim SHS) argued that secondary education was equitable during the pre-FSHSP period. To him, even though cost constituted a challenge to

accessing secondary education, passing the gateway examination, BECE, was the main hurdle a student had to clear:

To a large extent, all those who qualified... all those who passed BECE exams, no matter what, parents, NGOs, churches, other people in community, there is one way or the other, the system will help you to go to school...So it was equitable. The door was opened to everybody. (17/07/2023)

Benjamin noted that when parents could not afford to send their kids to school, other community members, NGOs, and sometimes religious bodies stepped in to help such students enroll.

However, his last statement that, “The door was opened to everybody,” I contend, did not mean anybody could walk in.

It is important to note that only four teachers (all in Elikplim SHS) glorified the period before the FSHSP. Nevertheless, it really surprised me, given earlier stories of having to chase students out for fees. It is possible that they were NDC sympathizers. Ghana has a history of profound political partisanship, where the people's political leanings usually affect their views regarding national issues. Given the highly political nature of the policy, I cannot discount the impact of political affiliation on the responses from respondents. For example, I later learned that Benjamin was a constituency executive for the NDC.

Nevertheless, most of the teachers I interviewed noted that access to secondary education was not equitable (or equal) during the pre-FSHSP period. The main reason they attributed to this was cost. Stephen, an economics teacher in Mawunya SHS, called the hitherto system a “cash and carry” system. This was our conversation:

Kofi: In your opinion, in the period before free senior high school policy, was secondary education in Ghana equitable?

Stephen: Not exactly, because anytime a system, an economic system of sort and distribution system, is based on cash and carry you can hardly say it's equitable. Since the old system was based on cash and carry, how could it be equitable? It would only mean it served those who could afford it.

Kofi: Can you explain the cash and carry?

Stephen: Oh yes! ...if you can pay the fees and all other cost, then you are able to enter and complete successfully. If you are not, you are out. In other words...it benefits the rich and disadvantages the poor (05/06/2023).

Strong links were made between the ability to pay school fees and secondary school attendance. For example, when I asked the assistant headteacher of Elikplim SHS whether secondary education was equitable in the pre-FSHSP era, he replied, "no." He continued and told me that secondary education was for only those who could afford it. He recounted his middle school experience: After noting that his 1987-year batch of students was very good, he sadly added that all except three could not proceed to the secondary level. He told me of the best student of their batch, who, despite being admitted by three of the best schools, could not enroll because of cost. Mawuli of Edem SHS also argued that before the advent of the FSHSP, "if your parents are not well to do, you may be brilliant, but sometimes you may not have access to secondary education because of the school fees" (03/08/2023). This view, that the previous system denied brilliant but poor students the chance to pursue secondary education, was the most dominant view expressed by teachers across the three schools. Naomi put it succinctly:

Then, it was for those who were able to pay the fees... if you have the money, then you can go to school. If you don't have, it means you will be in the house. Even if you are brilliant, you will still be in the house (06/06/2023).

This view mirrors the reason President Nana Akufo Addo and his functionaries ascribed to adopting the policy. As suggested by the president at the launch of the policy, education would no longer be the preserve of the affluent in the country.

Teachers' Perception About Equity During FSHSP Era

In most cases, teachers mainly looked at equity in terms of socio-economic status (rich versus poor), placement of students, boys versus girls, rurality versus urbanity, allocation of resources to the various schools and quality across the different schools. Thus, in talking about equity, teachers referred to the past where several students, especially the poor, girls, and rural folks could not progress after the primary level due to poverty. Teachers also felt that, during the period preceding FSHSP, the elite schools remained the preserve of the rich. Teachers juxtaposed the period before and after the adoption of the FSHSP, noting that cost was the most critical factor responsible for the inequities in education. Thus, FSHSP increased access for those who otherwise would not have reached the secondary level. In this regard, it increased equity. All teachers believed eliminating cost had made secondary school education more equitable, at least to a considerable extent.

Equity by Socio-Economic Status

As already discussed, most participants pointed to cost as the most significant impediment to achieving equity in secondary education. Therefore, according to some teachers, eliminating school fees ultimately resulted in improving equity or the provision of equal opportunity for all students. Many teachers suggested that because financial limitations were eliminated, access improved drastically, particularly for the economically disadvantaged, thereby improving equity between access for the poor and the rich. In my interview with Solomon, he explained the relationship between eliminating school fees and equity:

Kofi: So, in your view, has free SHS made secondary schooling more equitable?

Solomon: Yes. Yes

Kofi: Can you explain?

Solomon: Yes... fees is a major hurdle to education. So, once the fees are taken care of, once fees have been removed ... it has open up the gate for people who are poor, people who are rich, ... (05/06/2023).

Napo of Mawunya SHS also shared,

I will say the free SHS, actually, is bringing a lot of equity though it is not complete.

Those days that they were paying fees, you will have to be from a home that can afford that amount to even pay your admission fee to start with. But now, there is nothing like admission fee so whether you are from the richest family or you are from the poorest family or you are from the middle class, you all have that level to come into the system.

So as far as equity is concerned, it is very high (15/06/2023).

Articulated here was the theme of admission fees preventing students from taking their place at the secondary level of education. Caleb noted that in the era predating FSHSP, secondary education was meant for students from “a home that can afford” (04/06/2023). However, he noted that FSHSP leveled the playing field for the poor, middle, and upper classes. During the FDG at Mawunya SHS, Solomon reiterated this:

When we talk about equity, I don't think anybody seated here among us will debate that.

The system of the free fee paying, as a matter of fact, has opened the door to many students who, may, under normal circumstances, not have the chance to benefit from secondary school education (05/06/2023).

Yet, while they identified that the policy helped bridge the gap between the poor and the rich regarding access, they also contended that cost was still a barrier because parents still had to pay a lot to enroll their wards. For example, Sister Dema bemoaned the cost involved in buying items on the prospectus²¹:

Now, when you look at the prospectus of various schools, the items that you are to provide when you are reporting as a first year, when you calculate all those monies, to me, it's even better they pay the fees (03/06/2023).

Like Sister Dema, Patrick of Elikplim SHS indicated that, despite the FSHSP, “the poor are still suffering.” When I asked him to expatiate, he stated:

When they are coming to the school... the accoutrements that they will buy before coming to the school actually is very huge. So... this free is never free because the kind of money that it's involved is so huge that the poor will still suffer... So those from the poor background, at times, the semester ends before you see them reporting (18/07/2023).

This situation, which I call “the burden of the prospectus,” was mentioned in all three schools. In Edem SHS, Doreen recalled students admitted to the boarding house opting to be day students because they could not afford the things on the prospectus. This finding is consistent with Akuffo's (2024) conclusion that the poor are still greatly disadvantaged despite the FSHSP. Furthermore, a 2023 study by an education think tank, African Education Watch, found that, despite the FSHSP, parents still bore 77% of the cost associated with secondary education, with the government taking on only 23% of the cost. The education think tank thus stated that the 77% of cost burden “still remains very significant, with the potential of denying poor children access to secondary education” (p. 25). Africa Education Watch (2023) further found that, in the

²¹ In Ghana, a prospectus generally refers to a document detailing all the items a student must bring to the school. Some headteachers insist that the items on the prospectus be bought from the school store.

2022/23 academic year, financial constraints resulted in 15% of admitted students not reporting to school.

The burden of the prospectus is further compounded by the fact that many headteachers insisted that the items on the prospectus be purchased in their schools, and worst of all, the prices of the various items were double or triple the price in the open market. While many people across the country attributed this to the greed of the headteachers, Kelvin, a social studies teacher in Mawunya SHS, blamed this on the lack of a codified policy document. During the FDG, he stated, “every headmaster, every administrator, every management decides on what to do, when to do it, how to admit students, what to ask them to buy. But we need a binding policy working document” (28/06/2023). To this end, the Africa Education Watch advised the GES to come up with a harmonized prospectus to prevent extortion by some heads of the various secondary institutions (Asante, 2023).

In addition, considering the government’s failure to supply all the required textbooks to all pupils, several teachers contended that economically disadvantaged children could not afford the essential textbooks, while their well-off peers obtained all the textbooks. They argued that this made secondary education inequitable despite the government’s introduction of the FSHSP. This corroborates Ransford’s earlier submission that “the poor are still suffering” and also confirms Asante’s (2022) proposition that high poverty rates can nullify government cost-elimination efforts, because as the rate of poverty increases, the enrollment rate decreases both in the presence and absence of cost elimination (p. 575). Additionally, he points out that the high poverty rate makes it difficult to fund the ancillary schooling expenses.

Placement of Students – Quality of Students

In 2005, the GES implemented the Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS)²² to enhance the transparency and equity in posting of students to secondary schools. Since then, the CSSPS has been used to place graduates of the basic school to the secondary level. The CSSPS also aimed to reduce human errors (and corruption) associated with the manual selection and placement system (Owusu & Nettey, 2022). Before writing the BECE, students choose six secondary schools in descending order (from the most preferred to the least preferred). A student is permitted to choose one category A school, two category B Schools, three category C schools, and one category D (day) school (Ajayi & Sidibe, 2020; Ghana Education Service, 2022). A student's admission into a secondary school is contingent on their performance in the BECE. The placement of students relies on the candidates' aggregate from the four core subjects (English, mathematics, integrated science, and social studies) and their two highest grades from their elective subjects. There are three modes of placement: (a) automatic placement, (b) self-placement, and (c) manual placement. In automatic placement, the CSSPS places students by merit into their selected schools and their preferred residential status (Owusu & Nettey, 2022). The high performers are placed in their first-choice schools, which are usually the well-resourced category A schools. Despite this arrangement, the government, for the sake of ensuring equity, reserved 30% of vacancies in category A schools for students from public basic schools, particularly from rural areas (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). Because of the 30% allocation for students from public schools to have access to category A schools, students from rural schools, with not very good grades are able to be placed in the category A schools, and because Category A schools are usually oversubscribed, there is always spillover, and some very good

²² The CSSPS predated the FSHSP. Yet teachers spoke as if they started to feel the impact of CSSPS after the FSHSP.

students are placed in category B or C schools. If a student's preferred choice (in category A) is oversubscribed by students with better grades, that student is sent to his second-choice school (in category B). In the event that the second-choice school is also over-subscribed, the third choice is then considered (Ghana Education Service, 2022).

However, some students end up not being placed by the CSSPS and such students have to resort to self-placement. Self-placement refers to the procedure where students who were not assigned schools by the CSSPS may access the CSSPS system and choose schools that still have available spots following the automatic placement process (Ghana Education Service, 2022; Owusu & Nettey, 2022). More often than not, the category A and B schools are over-subscribed and so do not declare vacancies unlike the category C schools, which are usually filled by self-placement students.

Before the FSHSP, enrollment in elite schools was mainly reserved for the best-performing students (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). As such, it mirrored an urban/rural divide because basic school students in the cities were more likely than rural students to pass the BECE and to do so with high scores. Thus, enrollment into the elite secondary schools was strongly skewed in favor of students from richer households and students residing in the cities.

Many teachers pointed out that with the advent of the FSHSP, there was some level of equity in the qualifications of students posted to the various schools. They contended that the computerized system of posting students was non-discriminatory and thus made it possible for every student, regardless of performance in the BECE, to be sent to any school the placement system deemed appropriate. As discussed in the previous chapter, hitherto, the category A and B schools were the preserve of affluent and high-performing students.

All participants in Mawunya SHS regarded the CSSPS as an equitable way of distributing students to the various schools. Consistent with the findings of Kwegyiriba (2021), Kelvin of Mawunya SHS told me that admission was “no longer in the hands of the headteachers, while his colleague, Tagbedze, insisted that headteachers no longer had “control” over who attended which schools and suggested that the past system was rife with corruption when he told me that previously “whom you know and how much you can pay” influenced admission decisions. He thus concluded that the CSSPS was “evenly distributing good students to all schools” (03/06/2023). Sister Dema of Mawunya SHS corroborated this:

Due to this computer placement and then the free SHS, once you passed the BECE, you are free to go to any secondary school in the country... Once you choose the school and you have passed, you will be placed in that school (03/06/2023).

Nevertheless, in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, two divergent views were expressed. Firstly, like the teachers in Mawunya SHS, some believed that FSHSP led to a more equitable distribution of students in terms of students’ qualifications. Dela of Elikplim SHS insisted that because the CSSPS placed students haphazardly, someone with “a good IQ” could equally be sent to Elikplim SHS. This same view was expressed by the assistant headteacher of Edem SHS, albeit with some reservation, when I asked him whether the FSHSP had made secondary education more equitable:

The computerized system made it such that **there is the tendency to get good students in every school**. Let’s put it that way even though it is dependent on the choice of the students. **It isn’t like those days where the first-class schools picked their favorites and leave the rest for the others to struggle for**. In this case, because of the

computerized placement, there is a little amount of fairness. I will say that this is a plus to the system (18/08/2023). [Emphasis added]

The assistant head of Edem SHS raised an important point that students' choices still played an important role in the school students were posted to. Edem SHS, based in a rural community and having a huge infrastructural deficit, was not the first choice of many top-performing students. Then, students who could not make it to their first and second-choice schools usually ended up in the lower-ranked schools. Nevertheless, teachers in Schools B and C admitted that the quality of students posted to their schools generally improved. Mawuli told me that when the FSHSP started, Edem SHS was able to qualify for the National Science and Mathematics Quiz²³ “for the first time.” Mawuli continued,

When the free SHS came, we were able to...we admitted some brilliant ... some good students. So, they were able to help us to also compete with some of those schools that were categorized as A or B schools, and we were able to even defeat some at the regional level which moved us to Accra- State [level]... I may say since then, we have been participating in this science and math quiz, which previously... we didn't even know that there was something like that those days (03/08/2023).

After the interview, Mawuli shared with me the pride he felt when their students also progressed in this prestigious competition. He told me that the previous system made it look like only the teachers in the “big schools” were working.

²³ The National Science and Maths Quiz is an annual national level quiz competition for senior high schools in Ghana that focuses on the science and mathematics curriculum. The National Science & Maths Quiz aims to encourage students to pursue mathematics and science.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana_National_Science_and_Maths_Quiz

On the contrary, some of the teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS still believed that, in terms of students posted, their schools still received mainly poor students. They, therefore, contended that there was no equity in terms of the quality of students posted to the various schools. Benjamin, a social studies teacher at Elikplim SHS, told me that since the beginning of the policy, no student with distinction grade was posted to Elikplim SHS. He elaborated:

So, when you look at the students over here, is the same children from the vicinity. Then the few ones that come from Accra and the cities are kids that ... were apparently not placed by the placement system, and they had to do self-placement... It has not addressed the issue of inequity at all. I've mentioned first that the grades of students that come to this school remains the same, so it means is the people's choice that is still working (17/07/2023).

The above quote meant that, despite the FSHSP, schools in the lower categories were not attractive to high-performing students. He indicated that when students lost out on the schools of their choice, the lower-category schools were considered.

On my first day at Edem SHS, after I told the headmaster that my mission was to research the FSHSP, he asked nonchalantly, "What is it about FSHSP that you are interested in?" I told him I was interested in how teachers experienced the policy and how the policy impacted equity. Upon hearing the word 'equity,' he smirked, leaned over his desk, and asked me, "How can there be equity when the schools are in categories? He did not seem to be expecting an answer from me. So, I smiled and remained quiet. He continued:

The problem we have here are the big schools. The big schools are only interested in the good students, leaving us with the bad students. The worst part is that the government wants us to perform magic on these students (Fieldnote, 01/08/2023).

Vinyo corroborated his superiors' view. He told me the best student sent to Edem SHS in the 2022/23 admission cycle had an aggregate of 19. He proceeded to juxtapose this with some of the students posted to the elite schools:

You go to Adisadel College, you cannot tell me that you will find a student with aggregate 19... You cannot get to Mfantsipim²⁴ and see a student with aggregate 56... But when you are counting students with aggregate 6, you can count about 100 of them. Where is the equity when you come to Edem SHS, and you will not see any student with a single-digit aggregate? ...[The equity] is on paper, but in reality, the endowed schools are still enjoying their monopoly...(11/08/2023).

Thus, the school placement system led to the less-resourced schools receiving higher concentrations of lower-qualified students, thereby intensifying the gap between the various schools. To compound the already disadvantaged position of these schools, some of the good students who were posted to Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS eventually changed their placement since, in the words of Doreen (Mawunya SHS), "they know the way to the free SHS secretariat... and so they will go ... and pay... for the child to be taken from Edem SHS to Presec."²⁵ Doreen's comment was perhaps indicative of the myriad allegations of bribery and corruption against the placement system. For example, in 2023, an investigative documentary indicted the Free SHS secretariat in a corruption scandal where parents paid huge sums of money to have their wards placed in the category A schools (Aziamor-Mensah & Adobea-Owusu, 2023).

²⁴ Adisadel College and Mfantsipim School are two elite and prestigious schools in the central region of Ghana. Mfantsipim School, for instance, is the oldest secondary school in Ghana.

²⁵ Another elite school in Greater Accra Region.

Those who were unable to change their schools at ‘the top’ reported to school, but eventually transferred to well-established, well-endowed schools because of the lack of adequate facilities in the less-endowed schools. A teacher raised this point during an FGD in School B:

A student came, I think he had aggregate 9 or so. When he came, he was supposed to come and do science. He reported, then he saw his name as the first person on the list of science students and the next person that followed him, the aggregate was around 22. ... At the end of the first term, he never came back. The comment he made was that he cannot compete or there is nobody in the class to compete with him or to challenge him, so he moved to another school (28/08/2023).

According to the teachers, even though, in principle, students were supposed to remain in the schools that the CSSPS placed them, in practice, some students were able to transfer to other schools after spending a term or two in their initial schools. Often, these transfers are from the lower ranked schools to the higher ranked schools such as categories A and B schools and often involved students from well-to-do homes. Anecdotal reports indicated that some headteachers of the well-resourced schools charged parents huge sums of money to facilitate these transfers to their schools. Yet, when a high-achieving student transfers from a lower-performing school to a higher-performing school, the lower-performing school experiences a negative impact as it continues to be populated with students who struggle academically.

Impact on Girls’ Education

According to all the teachers interviewed, FSHSP played an important role in increasing enrollment for girls. When I asked teachers whether FSHSP improved equity, many teachers referred to the improved enrollment of girls relative to the boys’ population as an indication of equity for girls. In this regard, it was obvious they were thinking about parity. Teachers in

Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS that, in the pre-FSHSP years, their girls' enrollment was poor. In Mawunya SHS, however, though they had a good number of girls during the pre-FSHSP era, the number was less when compared to boys' enrollment because many girls dropped out at the end of the basic education (Agbemabiese-Grooms, 2011).

Nevertheless, in all three schools, teachers insisted that after the policy, the population of girls surpassed that of the boys. In my interview with Koagbe (Elikplim SHS), he told me it would soon get to a time when the GES would establish a unit to encourage boys' education to catch up with the rate at which girls took advantage of the FSHSP. The situation in Ghana after the FSHSP is akin to what Rolleston and Iyer (2019) call the "reverse gender gap" in access (p. 231). This finding is significant because prior to 2017, Iddrisu et al. (2017) noted the existence of "pro-male bias" among parents (p. 1174).

Lewin (2008) notes the significance of increasing the enrollment of girls in the quest to achieve gender equity. To Lewin (2008), gender equity at the secondary level is contingent on offering more places to girls than boys. However, the teachers I spoke to were mainly thinking in terms of gender parity or increased girls' enrollment, and not necessarily equity.

Teachers ascribed two reasons to the increase in girls' enrollment. The first reason they noted was the elimination of cost. For example, Caleb stated:

Most families... if they don't have enough money, will like to sacrifice the little they have on the male child and leave the female child at home. But once the cost of education is taken off, then, they don't lose so much in sending the female child to school. So, I believe that when the program started, the enrollment for the girl-child increased because most parents didn't have to keep their female child at home to help them in economic activities to look after the male child (04/06/2023).

During the FDG in Mawunya SHS, Solomon also raised similar points:

Normally in the situation where a parent has even twins one boy one girl. In our rural areas, where the parents cannot send both of them to school at the same time, then they must sacrifice the education of the girl. Then the boy must go at the expense of the girl but... without fee paying, the boy has the chance to come as well as the girl. So, I will say [there is] equity. Yes, because now both genders have the chance to attend secondary school (28/06/2023).

These quotes highlight the Ghanaian families' preference for boys' education (Seshie, 2019). However, a cursory look will reveal that both teachers referenced resource scarcity, which indicates that denying girls education is not necessarily a cultural issue but is a function of poverty. In fact, girls born to upper-class and middle-class parents tend to attend school to the highest level possible. This, however, does not discount the fact that historical and colonial marginalizations (Darkwah, 2010) and some cultural practices (Seshie, 2019) tend to affect girls' educational efforts.

Caleb's response highlights that girls were not only denied education but, sometimes, were compelled to work as domestic servants to help fund the education of their brothers. This sheds light on the opportunity cost of educating girls. Second, against the backdrop that girls usually lagged behind boys in the BECE performance (Ampiah, 2011), the BECE had served as a blockade to the enrollment of girls. Therefore, eliminating cut-off points for admission into secondary schools helped increase the enrollment of girls. Aside from the increased enrollment for girls, the policy has also helped increase girls' completion rate.

Generally, the policy improved the completion rate among boys and girls by eliminating costs and the mass promotion of students—however, the insistence of MoE on the need to keep

pregnant girls in school led to a situation where pregnant girls no longer dropped out of school. In talking about pregnant girls and the policy, the teachers were thinking about equity in relation to retention. Consequently, according to Cate (Elikplim SHS), “the free SHS has made it flexible that even if you are pregnant as a student, you need not drop out... nobody will sack you” (24/07/2023). Talking about the law against expelling pregnant girls from school, Nora of Edem SHS told me: “...we heard that, even if the pregnant girl wants to give birth on the headmaster’s table, the headmaster or mistress should make way for the child to give birth” (11/08/2023). Nora’s account, though exaggerated, highlights the strictness of the law against expelling pregnant girls.

Teachers felt this law could be counterproductive because, in their view, the law emboldened girls to engage in sex. Nevertheless, they believed the law against expelling pregnant girls from school reduced the dropout rates among girls, thereby resulting in a much-improved completion rate for girls. As suggested by Ransford of Elikplim SHS:

One thing I think is also embedded in the policy is the issue of female children who became pregnant in the course of their studies. They are allowed to sit in the classrooms with their pregnancy till they complete. So, the girls who might have withdrawn because of becoming pregnant or expecting a baby are now in the system. They can now complete (24/07/2023).

In all three schools of my studies, I saw at least three visibly pregnant girls. These girls attended classes with their colleagues and took part in all activities their physical conditions allowed. The hope of completion made many parents comfortable that, even in case of pregnancy, their daughters would still end up with at least a school leavers’ certificate. Ivy brought this up:

You know this idea about if you send the girl to school, your girl will get pregnant. Now parents do not care because even if the child is pregnant, the child will be in school. So even if I send my girl to school, and she happens to be pregnant, my money will not go to waste (19/07/2023).

Ivy's account highlights the fear of pregnancy as one of the reasons Ghanaian parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school. There is always a feeling about the inevitability of pregnancy when it comes to adolescent girls because as the age of schooling increases, the period they become sexually active intersects with their schooling period. Therefore, since the policy assured parents of completion even in the face of pregnancy, parents' fear of pregnancy truncating their daughters' education became allayed. Stenzel et al. (2024) write:

Free SHS can remove not only economic barriers but also intervene in socio-cultural obstacles by changing the perceived costs of sending the girl child to school, hence creating an equal demand. It is consequently expected that girls' enrollment rates will increase following the introduction of Free SHS because the policy removes economic barriers and socio-cultural obstacles to education. (p. 6)

While these findings mirror the situation in Uganda after the adoption of USE (Asankha & Takashi, 2011), they also corroborate the findings of Duflo et al. (2021) and Stenzel et al. (2024). However, it contrasts with the findings of Asante (2022) that the elimination of the costs of secondary school education in SSA has a more beneficial effect on male enrollment than female enrollment.

Equity and Geographical Location

Another issue that teachers raised regarding equity had to do with the chance the policy offered rural folks to access the best secondary schools in the country. Teachers contended that

before FSHSP, children in rural areas did not have the same educational opportunities as their city counterparts. Against the backdrop that most of the primary schools in rural Ghana lacked adequate resources and even teachers, most of the students from the rural areas were not getting very good grades and, therefore, were not getting admitted into the grade A and B schools. However, with the FSHSP, many rural folks got accepted into the elite schools. Mawuli, a teacher at Edem SHS who hailed from the village where Edem SHS was located, told me, “Now, I can also tell you that I have people from this village town who are in Mfantshipim” (03/08/2023). Cate from Elikplim SHS attributed the increased access to elite schools for rural folks to the CSSPS.

Right now, with the introduction of the free SHS policy, the computer doesn’t know anyone’s status, so it posts anyone or everyone based on performance, and so, the poor woman in the village’s daughter can also have access to a grade ‘A’ school (24/07/2023). She argued that the CSSPS eliminated the corruption associated with school placement when headteachers were in charge, as suggested in the statement, “the computer doesn’t know anyone’s status” (24/07/2023). Furthermore, Caleb, a mathematics teacher at Mawunya SHS, referred to the 30% of places the MoE reserved for students from public schools and students from remote areas as indicative of equity:

Another issue is that they have a percentage. I think 30% of students from public schools and very remote areas are considered in Category A schools. So, let’s say Adisadel, for example, if they are going to take one thousand students, three hundred, that is 30% will be reserved for students who chose that particular school, but are coming from public school or very remote areas. So that Category A schools can also have students coming

from less endowed communities or schools, So I think it has helped enhanced equity (04/06/2023).

It is important to point out that almost all category A and B schools operate the boarding house system. For this reason, students from rural areas were able to enroll in these schools without many problems. Allocating 30% of slots in the elite schools in the country to graduates from public schools made equity sense because private school graduates usually performed better than students from public schools. Chanimbe and Prah (2020) argue that this 30% concession for students from the public schools “defeats meritocracy” and that the government should instead concentrate on improving the state of the public basic schools (p. 441). Nevertheless, we should not forget the fact that meritocracy tends to hamper equity efforts (Cruz & Stake, 2012).

Equity and Children with Special Needs

Teachers also pointed to increased access for students with special needs as an equity indicator. Three teachers, one from Elikplim SHS and the others from Edem SHS, drew my attention to this issue. No teacher in Mawunya SHS made mention of children with special needs. The assistant headteacher of Edem SHS explained how in-service training (inset) embedded in the FSHSP helped teachers revise concepts such as inclusive education and social inclusion. He added that such training did not only make education inclusive but also created “rooms for the physically handicapped.” As Cate, a teacher in Elikplim SHS, described:

The inclusion of the special people, I mean the specially educated- or those who need special attention... the visually impaired, the physically challenged, all, are to be included in the quality education. No one should be left behind, and so I may say, that is the equity, and this policy is tackling them. It is making inclusion for both the socially able people and the specially-abled people (24/07/2023).

Mawuli (Mawunya SHS) explained that the implementation of the policy had led to the enrollment of children with special needs. Significantly, he stressed that having students with special needs was never the case in the period preceding the FSHSP:

As we are talking, we have people that are, excuse me to say, physically challenged, but we are all in the same environment. Just that we try to provide some facilities for them to go to class... [it is] because of the free SHS that we started to see some of these things... Prior to the free SHS, we were not having those cripples ... I think equal opportunity has been given to everybody to enroll (03/08/2023).

This stance was corroborated by Cate when she explained:

When you come to the specially-abled people too, they are also now seeing themselves as one of us. **Those days, you should take them to special schools, specially created schools.** But right **now**, because of the social inclusion that we have in our syllabus and of course, PLC is championing social inclusion, which is GESI... gender, equity, social, inclusion (24/08/2023). [emphasis is mine]

In discussing equity and efficiency issues in secondary education transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Bregman (2008), stated: “Very often, but not always, increased access also implies increasing equity” (p. 5). Thus, increasing access represents the first step towards equity. Bregman (2008) further noted that besides the geographical dimension of equity enhancement, equity by gender is an important aim in educational policy at the secondary level. Teachers noted that by improving access significantly, the FSHSP improved equity between the rich and the poor, between boys and girls, and between urban and rural areas. Teachers also noted the role of FSHSP in making access equitable to the elite schools and making education more equitable for children with special needs.

Equity in Relation to Quality of Schools

Lewin (2008) is of the view that “equity will be compromised if variation across schools is not reduced” (p. 137), and all my participants agreed with this assertion. When I asked my participants whether the FSHSP has helped bridge the gap between the various categories of schools, most teachers interviewed answered “yes and no,” and the others, mainly teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, answered “No.”

Some teachers in Mawunya SHS noted that the CSSPS made the distribution of students to the various schools equitable, thereby bridging the gap between the various schools. Teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS acknowledged that the policy helped them increase their enrollment, an area where the less endowed schools had problems before the FSHSP. They argued that by helping them populate their schools, the policy bridged the gap in terms of enrollment. Yet, they were quick to add that, in terms of the quality of students, they still received the least qualified students, because high-achieving urban students would never attend Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS. This is because of the placement system. During the FGD at Elikplim SHS, Koagbe spoke about the inherent problems with the placement system:

Many students have been placed in category “C” schools by self placement. That means even the computer system has not even recognized them to place them... Students who have not been placed earlier who want to do self placement will not easily have placement by self into category “A” schools (28/07/2023).

As this teacher was talking, all the teachers nodded, indicating their agreement with what he was saying. One participant interrupted: “The moment placement is done, no category “A” schools are looking for self-placement” (28/07/2023). This espouses the fact that it is only after category A and B schools have been filled that the lower categories get their students.

Furthermore, Ransford, who had been in Elikplim SHS for more than a decade, told me, “I don’t think there is any gap bridged in terms of the quality of students that are posted to schools.” Yet, he continued to acknowledge the impact of the policy on the school enrollment:

But in terms of numbers, population wise, I think my school is also improving in terms of the population. The number of students we take in now has increased because of the free SHS policy. Unlike the previous time, we used to struggle even to get people to enroll.

The numbers were not encouraging. But now, with the introduction of the FSHSP, we get quite a number of students to enroll in my school. So, the policy in terms of enrollment, has helped (27/07/2023).

Vinyo in Edem SHS echoed Ransford’s proposition. He told me that, before the policy was adopted, Edem SHS usually sent teachers to “comb round” basic schools in the nearby villages and “beg for students” (11/08/2023). He noted that the situation changed only after the FSHSP. Meanwhile, during the FGD in Mawunya SHS, Kelvin corroborated the sentiment of his colleagues in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS. He told the group:

The policy has actually helped some of the low-ranked schools and those in the villages in the sense that those days, people hardly picked schools in these deprived areas, but now, with this implementation, when you go to those village schools, they also have some numbers that they can equally boast of (28/06/2023).

Closely related to the argument regarding increasing the enrollment of the less endowed schools is the fact that the fairness of the CSSPS made it possible for children of rich parents to enroll in lower-category schools. Cate (Elikplim SHS) told me:

With the introduction of this policy, you could see that parents who have the money and their children are not doing well, are also found in the grade “B” grade “C” schools. A

typical example is my school.... [I]n Ghana, when they mention a place called East Legon, we all know that the rich men that are there. Students from East Legon are learning in my school here (24/07/2023).

Thus, the composition of the student population, in terms of social class, changed, and this helped improve the conditions in these schools. These rich parents were capable and willing to contribute to improving the conditions of the schools in which their wards were enrolled. According to these teachers, the parents' efforts in improving facilities in the schools helped bridge the gap between their school and some category A schools. Koagbe's response is illustrative:

Previously, the class of parents who would come to meetings in the school were different. Today, you may see a business tycoon whose child is in this school, who previously would have been in that A class in the city. But the child is here, so they come here. And they also contribute because they would want their children to be comfortable, they end up influencing decisions in the school to suit their children. So, in terms of class, this school has also benefited (28/07/2023).

This quote highlights the importance of the Parent Teacher Association in running schools in Ghana. In Mawunya SHS, for instance, the PTA was building a 12-unit classroom block, and more than 20 teachers lived in accommodations provided by the PTA. The PTA also constructed a water treatment plant, providing water for staff and students at a reduced rate. In Elikplim SHS, the PTA was building two bungalows to host more female teachers, considering the increased girls' population in the school. In Edem SHS, the PTA provided more than half of the school's infrastructure (information from the senior housemistress). The assistant headmaster of Edem SHS told me: "PTA is also doing very well. Extremely well. Without PTA we don't know where

we would have been” (02/08/2023). Thus, in the face of the government’s inability to meet the infrastructural needs of schools, parents helped through the payment of PTA dues. Yet, the extent to which a school’s PTA could go was contingent on the socio-economic status of the parents whose wards were in a particular school at a particular moment.

Other teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS noted inequity in the deployment of teachers. They noted that rural schools got the shorter end of the stick when it came to teacher population and teacher quality. During an FGD, Benjamin argued:

If you look at staff strength of this well-endowed, the grade “A” grade “B” schools, compared to the grade “C” there is a vast difference between them. They (grade A & B schools) are having the staff to cover all the subjects, and the number of staff that are posted to those grade “A” and “B” schools are far more than what they normally send to the lower schools like grade “C” (28/07/2023).

At the same FGD, Koagbe explained that because the less endowed schools were understaffed, they had no option but to accept unqualified teachers posted to their schools. He further contended that the well-endowed schools usually rejected unqualified teachers, something the less endowed schools were not capable of.

Almost all teachers admitted that in terms of infrastructure, there was still a gulf between the elite schools and the other schools. Visitors to these three schools would immediately notice this upon entering the campus. For example, while Mawunya SHS (located in a city) boasts a two-story administration block, Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS (located in peri-urban and rural settings, respectively) had to convert old classrooms into headteacher offices. Also, while I interviewed the assistant headteacher of Mawunya SHS in his well-furnished office, the

interview for the assistant headteacher of Edem SHS took place in the school's dilapidated computer lab to enable us to have an environment devoid of student noise.

Participants ascribed this gulf in infrastructure to the government's over-concentration on the elite schools. As Doreen of Edem SHS suggested, "the category A schools are having more in terms of infrastructure than the other categories of schools" (08/08/2023). John of Elikplim SHS expressed the same sentiment:

When we come to infrastructure, these same grade A schools have the best of infrastructure, and they still keep giving them more and the lesser endowed schools who are already struggling keep struggling. So, at that point, too, there is no equity (19/07/2023).

Though infrastructure problems in Ghanaian secondary schools predated the inception of the FSHSP, the FSHSP exacerbated the situation, particularly for the less endowed rural schools. In response, the government commenced various projects in the various schools to contain the surge in enrollment. However, rather than resourcing the less endowed schools to bring them up to the level of the elite schools, the government concentrated their projects in the cities, ostensibly giving the well-endowed schools more and giving the less endowed schools less. For example, the assistant headteacher of Edem SHS told me the FSHSP was rather widening the already existing gap between the various schools:

There was ... this decision to build classrooms nationwide. Some schools had six-unit classroom blocks, some schools had twelve-unit classroom blocks, some had eighteen-unit classroom blocks. When you want to look at it carefully, the well-endowed schools had more blocks. And if you look at the structure, the design and you look at what the less endowed schools have, many of them (less endowed schools) had the single story

six-unit classroom blocks. ... Classroom facility-wise, [this] seemed to have increased the gap the more. We expected that the less endowed schools will receive more so that the hue and cry that they didn't have classrooms could have been solved (02/08/2023).

He, then bemoaned the fact that all the Science Resource Centres²⁶ were located in the cities.

Using his school as an example, he continued:

This school, for example, is the only school doing elective ICT but when an ICT Resource Center was to be built, it was sent to a school [in the neighbouring city²⁷] where they don't do elective ICT. Do we call that bridging of gap in the same district? So, when I say...the gap rather seems to be widening, those are the areas I'm speaking from (02/08/2023).

Preferential Treatment of Urban Centre Schools

Teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS complained about the preferential treatment schools in the cities received from the government when it came to the distribution of food items to the schools. They indicated having to contend with a shortage of food supplies during some periods of the academic year. Significantly, Mawunya SHS had no complaints about the shortage of food, though some teachers in Mawunya SHS complained about the “quantity and quality” of the food served to students. Solomon, the HoD for the language department in Mawunya SHS, highlighted the discrimination at play in the distribution of food:

We understand that some schools are considered first when it comes to sharing of food items so along the line the lower schools or schools in the less endowed areas, they end

²⁶ These are centres that have science laboratories which are well equipped with adequate modern science equipment to facilitate the learning of science. These centres are usually established in the elite schools for use by all the surrounding schools.

²⁷ Name of the city withheld for the sake of anonymity.

up closing down because they don't have food. So, with issue of food allocation some schools are considered first before others (05/06/2023).

Although Solomon did not give any reason for the preferential treatment of certain schools when it came to the distribution of food to the various schools, one explanation for this was that the government was careful to avoid complaints from schools/students from the cities and as such, made sure these schools were provided with all the food they needed to keep them from raising concerns. During the FGD in Elikplim SHS, John provided a particularly insightful explanation for the preferential treatment category A schools received. He told the group, "Whiles the grade "C" and the rest are struggling to get food, you will see the grade "A" being supplied so they are always quiet while the rest are still struggling." (19/07/2023). The reason for this is not particularly surprising. Category A schools are in the urban areas, and so are the major news outlets. The government is afraid of the press making news of the feeding situation in those schools

Amid the nationwide food shortage at the various senior high schools, the headteachers at Schools B and C resorted to farming to supplement the feeding of their students. In Elikplim SHS, I watched the Agricultural Science department harvest eggplants, okra and pepper for the school kitchen. The HoD of the agricultural science department told me they sold surplus to generate funds for the school. Doreen in Edem SHS told me her school was able to navigate the food shortage situation because their headmaster had "been proactive." She pointed out:

Because we live in a rural area, school farms are there. We plant maize, we plant pepper and those things. So, it feeds them when we are in times of crisis. If not, you would have come here, and the complaint would have been that there is a shortage of food for our students (08/08/2023).

What this meant was that Edem SHS and Elikplim SHS, by virtue of the vast arable land at their disposal, produced extra food to supplement what the government provided and generate extra income for the running of their schools. This remained a viable option in Edem SHS and Elikplim SHS, but this was impossible, in fact needless, for urban-based Mawunya SHS.

How the Schools Responded

Policies typically require individuals to use discretion and make decisions based on specific contextual factors. While policies establish general guidelines, they do not provide explicit instructions for every situation. Ball (1994) notes that "Policies do not normally tell you what to do. They create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do is narrowed or changed" (p. 19). Often, education policies originate from governments, but teachers usually implement the policies within the school environment, and this implementation involves constant understanding, interpretation, and translation into action.

Schools and teachers are expected to be familiar with and able to implement multiple (and sometimes contradictory) policies that are planned for them by others while they are held accountable for this task. However, individual policies and policy makers do not normally take account of the complexity of policy enactment environments. (Braun et al., 2010, p. 547-548)

Conducting Extra Tuition

Teachers complied with the many directives of the FSHSP. However, compliance meant different things to the different schools. For example, by lowering the cut-off score, the government sought to achieve equity for all. Yet, by organizing intervention classes targeted at certain students, teachers sought to address the equity gap regarding outcomes. Three types of extra tutoring were used in the three schools. The first type was the general or whole school extra

classes. In all three Schools, this entailed starting classes an hour or two earlier than the GES-approved time and closing an hour or two later. In Mawunya SHS, classes were supposed to begin at 7:30 am, but the school organized “intervention classes,” which started at 6:30 am. Classes ended at 4:30 pm rather than 3:30 pm. Teachers in Elikplim SHS also organized what they called “extra attention.” Patrick of Elikplim SHS told me:

It [extra attention] was organized through levies... parents levied themselves that instead of the teachers to close at 2:50, they should add an extra 2 hours, and for this extra 2 hours, we will give you this token to support you so that you can stay... (18/08/2023).

This teacher spoke about the fact that students paid for this extra tutoring. He quickly added that the parents “levied themselves” to absolve teachers from any blame. Cate reiterated that parents demanded the classes when she stated, “it is a consensual agreement between parents and teachers to do what we call extra attention” (24/07/2023). Also, after talking about the extra attention, the assistant headteacher of Elikplim SHS emphasized, “Just for the sake of clarity, the extra attention was requested by the parents... especially those who have plans or vision for their children” (27/07/2023). Teachers found it necessary to state that extra tutoring originated from parents because the government outlawed the practice in 2009 (Bonsuuri, 2011) and also because of the no-fee stipulation that accompanied the FSHSP. Regarding what happens during these sessions, Cate (Elikplim SHS) stated:

We give more time to students that we see are not doing well in the class in relation to some of the academic subjects that they feel that they are not good at. We give more of the period that we call the extended attention to that, and we critically sit with them and help them and when they get to Form Three, we do what we call morning classes with them (24/07/2023).

Cate's input indicates that though the classes were organized wholesale, these tutorials were primarily organized to help students who lagged. Some teachers in Mawunya SHS corroborated this. For example, while Winfred called it "remedial classes," Sister Dema elaborated,

during that time, it's not like a normal classroom teaching that goes on but rather it's a kind of teaching to assist the weak ones and not relegating the intelligent ones, so you have to put all of them together, and then you teach them (03/06/2023).

Sister Dema spoke about how the intervention helped weaker students while being cognizant of the higher-achieving students. In Edem SHS, however, Vinyo told me that the intervention helped him and his colleagues make up for lost time for activities such as sports and games, culture festivals, and emergency meetings. He thus concluded, "in order to have contact with the kids, we try to organize evening classes and sometimes [during] weekends in order to cover up those lost periods" (11/08/2023). This, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is more work for the teachers.

The second form of extra tutorial happened when teachers organized classes for individual students or for groups of students who paid. These classes were organized predominantly over the weekends or sometimes during prep time. Though the government forbade teachers from doing this (Bonsuuri, 2011), the practice was still pervasive. Most teachers who engaged in private tutoring claimed the parents contracted them to help their wards. Some teachers in Mawunya SHS called it "galamsey,"²⁸ while teachers in Edem SHS called it "extra intervention." While many teachers claimed they did this to help students, it cannot be denied that most teachers engaged in private tutoring to pad their income, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is woefully inadequate. Consequently, extra classes in these schools, as in most

²⁸ Galamsey is originally a local Ghanaian parlance, meaning the unlawful practice of small-scale gold mining. Referring to private tutoring as galamsey is a testament to its illegality.

Ghanaian secondary schools, served a dual purpose: not only do they provide extra instruction for the students, but also allow the teachers to supplement their income, as private tutoring is viewed as a buffer amid the low salary that the government pays.

The fact that parents remained at the forefront of the demand for these classes confirms the claim of Bray and Kwo (2013, p. 11) that tutoring presents an avenue to “pacify” and “retain” teachers in the profession, given low teacher salaries. Even though private tutoring has been found to improve students’ academic performance and engender a positive attitude towards education (Cayubit et al., 2014), this practice can potentially increase the cost of schooling and thus hamper equity efforts, given that poor parents cannot always enroll their wards in such classes, particularly the one-on-one sessions which tend to be extremely costly. It also highlights how a hidden form of privatization has crept into public education, thereby blurring the boundary between what public education and private education means (Bray & Kwo, 2013). As suggested by Ball and Youdell (2008), this pseudo-privatization has the potential to impact not only educational access but also how students differently experience education and ultimately impact students’ educational performance.

Improvisation and the Multi-Purpose Usage of Infrastructure

Amid infrastructural inadequacies, many schools had to improvise by using the same buildings for multiple purposes. In Mawunya SHS, for example, they used the dining hall as classrooms, an assembly hall, and an entertainment hall. Mawunya SHS also converted the school canteen into a classroom. Elikplim SHS had assembly sessions under trees. Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS used parts of the uncompleted buildings for lessons. While these efforts allowed classes to go on, there was no doubt the students had different educational experiences in the different schools and even within the same school.

Turning to the Parent-Teacher Association

Also, given the resource scarcity, the three schools turned to the PTA for assistance. At the policy's inception, the government was silent on the issue of PTA dues. This silence was a significant oversight because PTA dues have been a constant feature of schools in Ghana. Remaining silent by excluding it from the policy discussions and directives created ambiguity and gave some school authorities the leeway to charge discretionary fees in the guise of PTA fees.

Consequently, in January 2019, GES suspended PTA levies, citing the financial strain the dues placed on parents. According to the Director-General of GES, Prof. Kwesi Opoku Amankwa, the suspension was necessary because PTA levies undermined the government's efforts to remove cost as a barrier to secondary education ("GES suspends PTA dues," 2019). However, in June 2019, the Chairman of the GES Council, Michael Nsowah, stated that school authorities should not meddle in collecting PTA levies, but parents should devise innovative ways of collecting such dues ("GES urges parents," 2019). This suggested that PTA dues were not banned, but school authorities were banned from taking money from students or harassing students who have not paid. With this law, the schools, in collaboration with PTA executives, devised surreptitious ways of collecting the PTA dues from the students/parents to put the fiscal responsibility for schools on parents. For example, in all three schools, teachers still collected PTA dues from the students but refrained from issuing receipts in the name of students. As suggested by Tagbedze, "It is the parents' name that is on the receipt, not the students'" (03/06/2023).

In Mawunya SHS, teachers, authorized by the PTA executives, still collected PTA dues from students, but receipts were issued in the parents' name. The same situation applied in the

other two schools, albeit the amount parents pay differed. In Elikplim SHS, for example, during the end-of-term exams, a teacher went around “reminding” (not harassing) students owing PTA dues to inform their parents about their commitments to the school. However, regardless of how they were collected, PTA dues defeated the policy’s purpose since parents still paid. Charging PTA dues, therefore, brought back the element of cost to the students. The current situation bears resemblance to the situation that prevailed in the 1980s after Ghana, compelled by the IMF and the World Bank, adopted the SAP and the government as part of austerity measures, pushed the cost of social services such as education and health onto parents, in the form of user fees (Adjei et al., 2014, Kraus, 1991) with the aim of reducing capital spending. It is also reminiscent of the days preceding the adoption of the FSHSP.

Consequently, though education is, in principle, free, many families were still compelled to cover significant costs regarding transportation, books, living expenses, and sanitary supplies. For example, according to African Education Watch (2023), despite the FSHSP, parents continued to spend an average of GHC 6,477 for each student every year. These extra costs range from transportation costs,²⁹ the cost involved in buying the items on the prospectus, money for personal effects, books,³⁰ and food.³¹ All of these extra costs were borne by parents, indicating that universalization of education in a context of insufficient government support meant that public free education was never really free, mirroring a broader trend in sub-Saharan Africa, where declarations of fee-free policies do not necessarily guarantee that that cost associated with

²⁹ Because of the frequency of breaks occasioned by the double track system, students travelled up to six trips in an academic year. This was particularly more costly for students who were placed in schools in towns far from their hometown, especially rural folks.

³⁰ You may recall teachers indicated that government could not provide sufficient textbooks for all the students, especially elective subjects.

³¹ In the face of inadequate food supply, parents had to give their wards more money to supplement the food served in the dining hall.

schooling is completely eliminated (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003; Samonova et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2014). Writing of the Sierra Leone context, Samonova et al. (2021, p. 2) suggest that “the declaration of a policy does not automatically mean that the government has acquired the capacity to fully implement the policy.” Their proposition aptly captures the situation of Ghana and her adoption of the FSHSP—with no recourse to whether it is feasible or not. This further highlights the inherent problems associated with the attempts by governments to achieve political goals (winning elections or appeasing its supporter base) through the adoption of educational policies (Gunu, 2019; Hacsı, 2009; Sifuna, 2004).

Sourcing External Funding

For these reasons, school authorities turned to external sources for help. The main source was their former students. This was present in the three schools. However, the impact was most visible in Mawunya SHS, given that it was the most vibrant school in the area for more than five decades and almost all the very good students in the locality attended it. Consequently, it had the most vibrant alumni network. Alumni helped refurbish the staff common room, built a new dormitory for the school, and restocked the science laboratory.

In Elikplim SHS, at the time of my study, a former student was singlehandedly building a canteen for the school. Another former student was helping with a water project for the school, while a group of old students residing in the UK and US had instituted an award scheme to motivate the students. In Edem SHS, even though Akos told me the school did not have a vibrant old students association, the assistant headteacher told me former students often helped the school. He put it this way:

The only thing that will help us do better is the external resources. As we are speaking, we are badly in need of an administration block so that we can leave the classrooms for

the students to occupy. We need furniture, we need bungalows, we need dormitories. We need an ICT lab. The old students are doing their best. As we are speaking, some are still organizing themselves. The 93 batch is organizing themselves to come and do the little they can again. The natives, they are also contributing their quota. So, we are looking up to other nongovernmental organizations as well as the state. We will be most grateful.

The district assembly gave us the block in which we sit now (10/08/2023).

The assistant headmaster's reference to support from external sources highlights the role of social capital and social networks in helping schools navigate the challenges that confront their schools. These social capital cum networks, as Bart-Plange (2019) would argue, is greater for the elite schools relative to the other schools and has been one of the main factors responsible for maintaining and widening the gap between the elite schools and the less endowed schools.

Prioritizing Final Year Students

A school's performance is measured by its performance in the final exams, and considering the accountability imposed on the various schools by the GES' Performance Contracts, all the schools prioritized the final year students over the junior classes. This was done by organizing special extra classes for the final-year students, teaching final-year students on weekends, and sometimes organizing vacation classes for final-year students. In Edem SHS, the assistant headteacher recounted a time when, because they did not have enough teachers, they "sacrificed" the first years "because the third years will soon be writing exams" (02/08/2023). Teachers in Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS also spoke about using past questions to prepare students for the final examinations. There arose an overemphasis on preparing students to pass examinations.

This situation predated the FSHSP and is a function of a system that relies on, and measures teachers' output through results from high-stakes examinations, even in the face of insufficient resources to support every grade equally. Nevertheless, the situation was exacerbated with the advent of the FSHSP and the responsabilizing of schools and their (head)teachers for the outcomes of external examinations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed teachers' perceptions of the FSHSP in relation to equity. The dominant theme that emerged from my participants across all three schools was that, despite the gains in enhancing access for groups that could not access secondary education, "the poor are still suffering." Ransford explained that equity is "the fair distribution of whatever you have with everybody irrespective of the person's gender or religion, sex or whatever" (27/07/2023). He, however, added:

No matter what you do, the rich will always have an advantage over the poor. So, the equity in terms of the rich having access to quality education and the poor not having access to quality education was there and is still there (27/07/2023).

The feeling that the policy improved equity was dominant in all three schools, as teachers noted that the policy has helped improve access for the poor, girls and rural students. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the policy, according to participants in all three schools, was the improvement in the number of girls enrolled in the various schools. In all three schools, female students outnumbered their male counterparts, a trend particularly pronounced in Mawunya SHS. All teachers agreed that this starkly contrasted what prevailed in the pre-FSHSP era.

The policy's role in improving the completion of girls was resounding in all schools. Teachers across schools attributed the improved completion rate of female students to the government's

absorption of the fees and the decision not to expel pregnant girls from school, even as supplies and other factors that might promote girls' retention were absent. Teachers noted that FSHSP also increased the chances for students from rural areas and students with less-than-ideal grades to access elite schools. Furthermore, teachers in Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS pointed out that the policy improved access for students with disabilities, thus making secondary education more inclusive. No teacher in Mawunya SHS discussed FSHSP in relation to students with disability.

That notwithstanding, teachers expressed great concern over the wholesale, non-targeted nature of the policy. As suggested by a teacher, the policy should focus on “the people that really need the help—the people that cannot be in school if it is not free” (04/06/2023). Thus, teachers in all three schools bemoaned that the government ignored the heterogeneity among students and schools and thus offered all students the same help regardless of their individual circumstances. Additionally, teachers at Elikplim and Edem SHS noted that, apart from the improved enrollment rate, their schools still received a lesser quality of students, teachers, and facilities. While teachers at Mawunya SHS argued that the policy was closing the gap between well-endowed and less-endowed schools, teachers at Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS contended that the policy had not closed the gap between well-endowed and less-endowed schools.

It was further brought to the fore that teachers in all three schools engaged in private tutoring, still charged students some discretionary fees, and over-concentrated on preparing final-year students for examination at the expense of the junior classes. Though some of the actions teachers engaged in were counter to the directives from the government, I noticed that those actions were geared towards making the policy succeed in their context. With the FSHSP, the government has, to a great extent, responded to the demand side of constraints to accessing secondary education. However, my interaction with the teachers, particularly those in the rural

schools, revealed the government needed to concentrate more on the supply side by providing adequate infrastructure for all the schools, especially the rural schools, in order to ensure equitable education. In sum, though the FSHSP increased educational opportunities for girls, low-income people, and rural people, it failed to fulfill Nana Akufo Addo's government's promise to equalize educational opportunities. This is because the inequalities and inequities in Ghana's education system, like those in any part of the world, are context-specific and, therefore, require context-specific solutions.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

A toad does not jump around in the daytime for nothing. If a toad jumps around in the daytime, it is either chasing something or something is chasing it (An African proverb)

I draw on a proverb from my ancestors, "A toad does not jump around in the daytime for nothing," to illustrate how I conceptualize the FSHSP. This proverb implies that there is always a reason behind every action. In Africa, toads are mainly nocturnal; thus, spotting a toad moving during the day is unusual, suggesting that there is a motive behind this unusual behavior. Our ancestors elaborated on the proverb by providing two plausible reasons for a toad's daytime activity: "If a toad jumps around in the daytime, it is either chasing something or is being chased." This analogy applies when we consider Ghana's FSHSP. Policies are not developed randomly. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the NPP government, through the FSHSP, sought and attained political power. However, I also maintain that the government adopted the FSHSP to tackle real educational issues.

The content of a political party's manifesto serves as a standard for evaluating its administration. In representative democracies, pre-election promises can be considered social contracts between the political class and voters, who have the power to reward or punish politicians based on their fulfillment of electoral campaign promises. In this way, regular elections act as an accountability mechanism that encourages elected officials to remain faithful to their pre-election promises (Artés et al., 2022). Consequently, governments around the world focus on meeting the initiatives and policies outlined in their manifestos. Thus, it can be argued that Nana Akufo Addo and his government prioritized the needs of their support base and implemented the FSHSP mainly to redeem their pre-election campaign pledge.

Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that Nana Akufo Addo and the NPP government had to make major educational decisions based on the urgent demands of the time concerning secondary education. There is no doubt that the gains made by universalizing primary education had created a massive bottleneck, requiring commensurate investment at the secondary level to consolidate the gains. Nana Akufo Addo, thus, implemented the FSHSP to decrease the number of out-of-school adolescents in Ghana. In terms of access, the FSHSP is significantly enhancing not only access to secondary education but also minimizing gender and geographical inequalities that characterized the educational system during both colonial times and the period following independence in Ghana. Consequently, despite the political origins of the policy, I also view the FSHSP as a policy developed by the NPP government to eliminate the situation where cost acted as a barrier to secondary education, which had suffered from historical and contemporary neglect, despite massive investment in the primary education sector. As Mohammed and Kuyini (2021) state, “The net effect of increased primary enrollment was increased demand for secondary education” (p. 9). Therefore, although the FSHSP originated from political campaign grounds, there was a genuine demand for the democratization of secondary education to address the bottleneck caused by both historical and ongoing neglect of the sector. Given that financial constraints have functioned as the single most important blockade to accessing secondary education, the FSHSP, with its no-fee mandate, represents a vital step in making secondary education accessible to many basic school graduates, many of whom without FSHSP, secondary education would have been financially out of reach. It is, therefore, unsurprising that one teacher described the policy as a “messiah to save both the rich and the poor” in Ghana.

Furthermore, mass education has been emphasized as a sign of good governance and a benchmark for global competitiveness. As Winton (2012) states, “education policies are

embedded in international and national influences both inside and outside the field of education. These influences include ideologies, policy trends, organizations, and practices at the international level” (p. 7). Concerning national influences, Article 25(1)(b) of Ghana’s 1992 Constitution declares that “secondary education in its various forms, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and, by the progressive introduction of free education...” (Republic of Ghana, 1992). The FSHSP also aligns with two global education policy initiatives—EFA and SDG 4. While reference to these global and national mandates regarding the democratization of secondary education establishes authoritative foundations for the FSHSP, it also depoliticizes the policy, rejecting the notion that it was created solely to fulfill electoral promises. This aligns with Vidovich’s (2004) assertion that global, national, and local exigencies influence policy formulation.

Thus, while recognizing that public education is inherently political and a platform for perpetual political campaigning, this dissertation emphasizes how various factors, including personal, local, national, and global dynamics conglomerate to influence education policy decisions. I noted that FSHSP featured prominently in political debates in the run-up to the 2016 and 2020 elections, highlighting the extent to which politics has infiltrated educational matters in Ghana, or rather, education matters have infiltrated politics as the two major political parties in Ghana, the NDC and the NPP capitalized on discussions about the FSHSP to engage in non-stop political campaigns. I further noted that this is not peculiar to Ghana. It highlights a trend where politicians leverage education policies to garner support for their various parties while using discussions about education policies to stoke resentment for their political opponents. In conceptualizing the FSHSP as an avenue for a non-stop political campaign, I posit that the NPP

utilized discussions regarding FSHSP to consolidate their grip on political power while the NDC operationalized the various discourses to instigate a regime change. This stance is given further credence because the NDC focused mainly on highlighting the negatives of the policy while the NPP focused solely on the positives. Yet, even though the FSHSP engendered massive political debates and considerably addressed gender and spatial disparities originating from colonial education, these gains were accompanied by challenges, and teachers felt the brunt of these challenges.

The Lizard does not Eat Pepper for the Frog to Sweat (A Ghanaian Proverb)

The Ghanaian proverb, “the lizard does not eat pepper for the frog to sweat,” highlights the belief of the traditional Ghanaian that everyone is responsible for their actions and should bear the consequences of those actions. Whenever people are placed in situations where they are required to take responsibility for the actions of others, the usual response is, “The lizard **cannot** eat pepper for the frog to sweat.”

The relationship between the Government of Ghana (GoG) and teachers concerning the FSHSP showcases a classic case of the lizard (government) eating pepper and the frog (teachers) sweating. Writing of the reasons policies fail, Hudson et al. (2019) suggest that politicians are more likely to receive recognition for enacting policies rather than successfully preventing implementation bottlenecks. They add that this situation is prevalent because politicians are attracted to “short-term results,” such as winning an election or satisfying the needs of their support base, without fully considering the feasibility of implementation. More so, politicians consider issues pertaining to implementation as “someone else’s problem” (p. 4). Hudson and his colleagues were right!

In the case of Ghana's FSHSP, that "someone else" was the secondary school teacher. As one of my teacher participants unequivocally remarked, "While the policymakers want to look good by giving freebies to the parents, the teacher is detrimented. We are at a negative reception of this policy." Thus, teachers and, by extension, students paid the price for the (in)actions of the government. While teachers were generally happy that the policy improved equity by increasing access for people experiencing poverty, girls, and rural folks, they bemoaned the fact that the policy was implemented without properly consulting teachers. The GoG adopted a top-down approach to policy making, concentrating the power to determine the shape of the policy at the top to the neglect and marginalization of teachers.

I have demonstrated how teachers spatialize the policy process, with the government sitting at the top, wielding unlimited power over the policy formulation process, and teachers sitting at the bottom, playing a subservient role and ready to implement whatever policies the government formulates. Overall, teachers conceptualized policy formulation and policy implementation as two distinct processes divorced from each other, with teachers having no control over the former and only confined to the latter.

Although the marginalization of teachers in the policy arena predated the FSHSP and is neither peculiar to Ghana nor FSHSP-specific, the situation was compounded by the fact that the FSHSP was a campaign promise that the government pushed through using bureaucratic powers, thereby making political actors dominate the policy formulation stage (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Teachers also blamed policy borrowing for marginalizing teachers from the policy formulation (Hogan et al., 2022; Phillips & Ochs, 2003). They contended that because this kind of policy succeeded in other countries, the GoG "copied and pasted the policy" without consulting teachers to ascertain its feasibility in the Ghanaian context. Nevertheless, teachers

believed involving them in formulating the policy would have prevented the challenges that bedeviled its implementation.

Among its unintended consequences, the policy resulted in increased workload, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of vacations, adversely affecting teachers' health, social life and denying them the opportunity to engage in secondary employment to make extra income. While the policy affected all teachers, I found that it disproportionately impacted female teachers and teachers in less-resourced schools, who, in addition to the increased workload, had to contend with the bulk of care work and resource scarcity, respectively. Efforts to promote equity in access to education thus resulted in deepening inequities among teachers along the lines of gender and rurality.

The government ignored the heterogeneity among students and schools and offered all students and all schools the same help regardless of their circumstances. Thus, to teachers, though enrollment increased in all schools, and historically marginalized populations such as the poor, girls, and rural folks got the chance for secondary education, there remained visible gaps between the various schools in terms of resources and the quality of students posted to the schools, due to the problems inherent in the computerized school selection and placement system. As one of my teacher participants remarked, "the poor are still suffering." To this extent, despite increasing access, the FSHSP has not adequately addressed the gap between students from rich households and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The FSHSP has also not helped to reduce the gaps between the various schools. Indeed, during the FGD in Elikplim SHS, teachers agreed that in terms of resource allocation, the FSHSP is rather widening the gap between the various categories of secondary schools in Ghana, or at the very least, maintaining the gap.

The allure of the historically prestigious schools still prevails, and these schools continue to attract the best students and teachers, which is detrimental to achieving equity. Despite the “equitable access policy” ensuring that 30% of the slots in the elite schools are reserved for considerably less qualified students from public basic schools, the composition of elite schools remained mainly groups of advantaged students. In contrast, a much higher concentration of disadvantaged students from rural areas has had to make do with lower-category schools. The 30% of slots allocated to students from public basic schools resulted in the spillover of fairly qualified students into lower-category schools. Nevertheless, the main problem with the placement system was that it led to the further stratification of the secondary education system, with the best-qualified students placed in the higher category schools, while lower category schools disproportionately serve students who are struggling academically or from low-income families. Ensuring equity will require adequate resourcing of all schools and fair distribution of students to all schools. This will require providing more support to the lower category schools to bring them level with their elite counterparts.

Regarding students and equity, even though government officials constantly invoked the term equity in political discourse, in most cases, equality rather than equity was centered due to the blanket approach that the government adopted. Thus, although the policy increased access drastically, it has exacerbated the already existing inequities within secondary education in Ghana because it ignored pre-existing disparities between and within schools. While this brings to the fore the need to take context seriously since no two schools are the same (Braun et al., 2011), it also underscores the truism in Wang’s (2013) postulation that equal distribution of opportunities and resources does not necessarily increase equity since “different groups deserve to be treated differently based on the conviction that the different groups have different starting

points" (p. 48). Thus, despite the FSHSP, educational inequities still operated along social class, geographical location, and school characteristics. It is, therefore, clear that while the fact that the FSHSP was not targeted made it look very egalitarian, it made the education system inequitable. Furthermore, the Ghanaian context, where schools are unequal in quality, compromised efforts towards equitable educational experiences for all students, despite the massive surge in enrollment. Therefore, I argue that real equity cannot be attained in a situation where schools and students are wildly unequal yet receive equal treatment from the state.

Reflections on the Main Findings

This research has focused on Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy, a policy from the GoG to ensure that graduates of basic schools can transition to secondary schools without paying fees. I traced the origin of the policy and situated it within the broader global developments to universalize access to education. I drew attention to the efforts to democratize primary education in Ghana and explored how democratizing primary education precipitated the need for commensurate efforts to universalize secondary education (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2020). I further highlighted how universalizing secondary education became crucial given the fact that secondary education has been an elite enterprise in Africa (Fredriksen & Fossberg, 2014; Ngware et al., 2007; Zubairi & Rose, 2019) because the missionaries, colonial governments, and even post-independent governments did not pay much attention to secondary education, with the first few available secondary schools focusing mainly on educating a privileged few, primarily wealthy males (McWilliam & Kwamenah, 1972; Sharra & Silver, 2023). For this reason, Clignet and Foster (1964) referred to African secondary schools as "elite reservoirs" (p. 350).

By paying attention to the FSHSP across scale and in multiple policy arenas, my main findings intersect and reinforce each other. Indeed, emerging from a political manifesto and

campaign pledge, the FSHSP was conceived not necessarily as a solution to an educational policy but as a well-thought-out plan to garner support from as many voters as possible. Mohammed (2020, p. 13) put it succinctly when he noted that the president set off with “a solution looking for a problem.” Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) suggest that policymakers make up problems to provoke a response through actions. Policies are not necessarily responses to societal problems; policymakers create “problems” through discourse (Bacchi, 2000). This highlights the importance of discourse and how discourses are manipulated for specific purposes. This was the case with pronouncements about FSHSP by political figures of the NPP and NDC, as each tried to outdo the other by highlighting the accomplishments and slippages of the FSHSP by referencing evidence. In most cases, the evidence adduced was self-serving and functioned mainly to advance the political and symbolic interests of their respective parties. I, therefore, contend that paying particular attention to the discourses of politicians can help illuminate the subtleties and nuances that are employed in the politicization of education policies. Aside from this, this underscores Hacsí’s (2009) advice that we should be skeptical when politicians mobilize and advance “evidence” in support of or against certain education policies.

The connection between the political birth of the policy and policy borrowing and their association with the exclusion of teachers from the policy formulation process is particularly noteworthy. According to Hudson et al. (2019), politicians tend to focus solely on “short-term results,” which makes them push through policies “as quickly as possible rather than getting involved in the messy, protracted, and frustrating details of how things might work out in practice” (p. 4). Hudson et al.’s (2019) proposition holds when considering the fact that the NPP and Nana Akufo Addo implemented the FSHSP to, first and foremost, fulfill their election campaign promises, and did not want to get engrossed in policy debates, which could delay the

implementation and therefore indicate to the public that the promise of free education was merely a ruse to win elections. Indeed, given that Nana Akufo Addo and the NPP made the FSHSP the plank of their campaign for the 2012 and 2016 general elections, reneging on its implementation or any delay would have amounted to political suicide on the part of Nana Akufo Addo and the NPP government.

I am not, however, indicating that this is the first time the government has alienated teachers from the policy formulation process. Many scholars before me have noted and decried the politicization of education policies in Ghana, with many asserting that politicization, together with the bureaucratization of the policy formulation process, has worked to keep teachers off the policy arena (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016; Amarh, 2017; Donkoh et al., 2019; Donkoh et al., 2023; Gunu, 2019; Nudzor, 2014; Seshie, 2019). However, as I have repeated several times in this dissertation, this policy was the first major education policy explicitly tied to election results. For example, the IMANI Centre for Policy and Education described FSHSP as “one of the most popular political manifesto promises in the history of Ghana’s elections” (Cudjoe, 2018), mainly because of the way the policy engendered heated political debate in the Ghanaian news media. I, therefore, agree with Mohammed (2020) that Nana Akufo Addo and his government, rather than setting the agenda by first identifying the problem, “started with a solution looking for a problem to solve” (p. 13). This, in no small way, contributed to the marginalization of teachers in the FSHSP formulation process.

The issue of policy borrowing and diffusion (Hogan et al., 2022; Phillips & Ochs, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002) also presented another explanation for excluding teachers and other stakeholders from the policy formulation process. As the teacher participants interviewed for this dissertation have generously pointed out, the Government of Ghana tended to “copy” education

policies from other countries and “paste” them onto the Ghanaian scene as “lessons learned from abroad” (Steiner-Khamisi, 2002, p. 72), with the assumption that these were “best practices” around the world (Ramirez et al., 2016).

Yet, it would be a mistake to blame the marginalization of teachers only on partisan politics and policy borrowing. As I indicated earlier and as my teacher participants have pointed out, the marginalization of teachers in policy formulation did not begin with the FSHSP. Indeed, it can be traced back to the colonial era, when missionaries and colonial authorities established the framework for the type of education to emphasize, and these decisions were typically made outside the shores of Ghana (then known as the Gold Coast). Thus, education policies were at the discretion of these colonial authorities and were geared toward the colonial project or proselytization in terms of missionary education (McWilliam & Kwamenah, 1972). Education policies were predetermined outside the jurisdiction of the colonies, making it impossible for the locals to play an active role in the formulation of education policy. Consequently, teachers were excluded from policy formulation and restricted to policy implementation. Even in matters of curriculum, teachers had no say and were confined to teaching a curriculum that was more attuned to the educational needs and aspirations of the colonial authorities (McWilliam & Kwamenah, 1972).

This pattern continued even during the immediate post-independence era. Though Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, attempted to Africanize the curriculum and education, the process was greatly limited to political actors and the intelligentsia who, ironically, were products of the colonial education project. As such, the Ghanaian education policy arena was dominated by bureaucrats and political elites, with not much input from major stakeholders in the education sector, especially teachers. These patterns were replicated throughout post-

independent Ghana and were exacerbated by the influx of transnational policies championed by International Non-Governmental Organizations in the educational sector (see Tota, 2014; Morley, 2019b). Consequently, governments, particularly in SSA, apart from considering the political gains to be accrued from adopting populist education policies, push through global policy packages such as the UPE and USE merely for the sake of aligning with perceived best practices and global education packages without analyzing situations to ascertain their feasibility and applicability (Sifuna, 2004).

According to Patton et al. (2013), "even a widely accepted policy [like the FSHSP] may run into trouble while being implemented" (p. 288). In the case of Ghana's FSHSP, the implementation was constrained by school-specific factors, including and especially resource scarcity. Lack of resources is a significant blight on the Ghanaian education system, and on the FSHSP, in particular. Yet, as we have seen in the three case study schools, not all institutions bear the pain equally. Thus, the education system continues to deal with issues regarding quality, equity, and inclusion, resulting in institutional stratification, as historically prestigious schools still boast an immense advantage over other institutions. Despite a substantial increase in enrollment for rural schools, urban-based schools, particularly schools along the coast, continue to receive the best students and churn out the most high-scoring students in the exit exams. Massive gaps remain between the various schools not only in terms of infrastructure and teaching and learning materials, but also in terms of the types of students.

Many educational systems in sub-Saharan Africa have roots in the colonial era, and Ghana is no exception. Therefore, it would be almost impossible to understand the Ghanaian educational system without examining the factors that shape it. Throughout this dissertation, I worked to contextualize the current dynamics in the education sector—centralization of

education policymaking, the role of teacher unions, or the devaluation of the teaching profession in historical precedent in relation to FSHSP. I also attended to the impact of FSHSP in relation to the historical and contemporary marginalizations inherent in Ghanaian education. This way, I attended to connections, continuities, and discontinuities between contemporary schooling and the colonial and postcolonial. Secondary education has seen the most dramatic boost with the introduction of the FSHSP. Although, to be brutally honest, when we talk about equity and equality of opportunity, it does not look much different from the colonial system. At least, not yet. Indeed, I found that Mawunya SHS, established before Ghana's independence, does not face the many problems that confront Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS in my study. Aside from that, Mawunya SHS, like most schools established in the colonial era, still benefits immensely from its historical advantages, particularly from its alumni organizations and, in the view of teachers from Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS, preferential treatment from the government through the selective distribution of resources and qualified students to schools. While these issues are not new, they have become exacerbated by the introduction of the FSHSP.

Policies produce disparate and disproportionate effects. The adverse effects of the policy are not evenly distributed, as the policy disproportionately impacted female teachers and teachers in rural areas, resulting in cumulative disadvantage for female teachers in rural schools. While complaints about resource scarcity ran through all the schools utilized for this study, the impact was more severe in the Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS because they lacked a vibrant alumni organization. While the alumni groups have occasionally helped schools with infrastructure and other necessary logistics, they are also complicit in maintaining and widening the gap between the historical elite schools and the recently established schools. For example, in Mawunya SHS, a particular year batch of old students donated 200 desks to the school to address the shortage of

furniture. Other alumni groups of the same school also donated desktop computers, laboratory equipment, and library books. In Elikplim SHS, an alumnus, in the spirit of giving back to the school, single-handedly funded the construction of an ultra-modern canteen for the school. Also, anecdotal reports suggest that it was certain influential alumni of Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS that lobbied for clinics for their alma mater. This level of support was, however, not available in Edem SHS. My point here is that the higher category schools (like Mawunya SHS) have a bigger pool of successful alumni to fall on and this can amplify and reinforce existing disparities. The same is true for the activities of PTA groups. Apart from PTA levies placing undue pressure on students and parents in low-income communities, it also maintains and perpetuates the gaps between urban-based schools (like Mawunya SHS) and schools in low-income areas like Elikplim SHS and Edem SHS. This is not counterintuitive. Schools in the cities have the capacity to raise more money from PTA levies and donations, unlike schools in the small towns and villages.

In all three schools, the female student population outnumbers boys. This situation starkly contrasts the colonial education system, which restricted educational access primarily to males. This situation is also at odds with the period preceding the FSHSP. In this regard, the FSHSP has made substantial strides in improving access to education for female students, effectively reversing some of the exclusions rooted in colonial history. However, despite the population of boys being lower than girls, the school prefects of all three schools utilized in this project were all boys. It is also crucial to note that the population of female teachers in each of these schools is remarkably low relative to their male counterparts. It is also telling that in all three schools, the headteachers, including the assistants, were all males. While this can be attributed to the fact that female teachers are predominantly in kindergarten and primary school

settings (Seshie, 2019), it is also reminiscent of the colonial and early postcolonial eras, where leadership positions were mainly the preserve of males. It is also reflective of the age-old practice in Ghanaian education where the “school prefect” position is reserved for males and girls confined to the “girls’ prefect” position.

With more female students arose more responsibilities for the female teachers who had to contend with mothering or caring for the students, especially those who became pregnant during their studies. To make matters worse, this extra work did not attract any financial reward. One teacher shared, “We are doing what we call antenatal for the expectant mothers in the classroom, but nobody is paying you for providing those services.” Despite the gendered nature of the effect of the FSHSP on female teachers, some schools, especially those in rural areas, suffered the most. For example, due to the lack of a clinic on the premise of Edem SHS, the burden of caring for pregnant adolescents was more when compared to that of teachers in Mawunya SHS and Elikplim SHS, where their care duties are buffered by the presence of qualified nurses. This situation might dissuade female teachers from accepting posting to the secondary level, a sector where they are woefully underrepresented. Given mainstream discourse that female teachers serve as role models for female students (Morley, 2019a), the depletion of the female teacher population can have serious implications for the education of girls. The complaint regarding teachers doing “antenatal work” without pay offers an eerie similarity to the concerns of other teachers, particularly those in rural schools, having to put in extra hours of work to help prepare weaker students and students with disabilities who have been posted to their schools for their exams. Thus, equity efforts in schools resulted in unpaid work for teachers, particularly female teachers, who, apart from schoolwork, had to contend with a greater share of domestic labor due to traditional gender roles in African society.

Also, as policies produce “winners and losers” (Young & Diem, 2018, p. 82), some teachers, particularly those in urban areas, took advantage of the influx of a large student population and operated on-campus businesses with the students as the main customers. Other teachers also engaged in private tutoring. My participants believed private tutoring presented an avenue for ensuring equity through remedial classes for lagging students. Thus, supplementary, private tutoring was necessary to make the FSHSP ‘work,’ an instance of policy appropriation (Levinson et al., 2020). Yet, there was no doubt that teachers engaging in private tutoring sought to pad their income aside from improving the educational outcomes of their students. However, as I have already pointed out, this could have profound equity implications as it indicates subtle privatization of education and leads to the exclusion of the poor. To this extent, I posit that some teachers were complicit in making secondary education inequitable through private tutoring. This confirms that policy actors, here, teachers, can “make, remake, and unmake policy through their practices” (Koyama, 2017, p. 66). It is, therefore, vital to assess how efforts to ensure equity through private tutoring can give birth to further inequities among students, particularly the poor.

Some changes associated with the FSHSP such as (1) the ranking of secondary schools into a sort of league table based on the performance of schools in the WASSCE, published by the MoE/GES in the Ghana Senior High Schools Annual Digest; (2) the signing of performance agreements by the headteachers; and (3) the promotion or demotion of heads based on students’ performance in the WASSCE are directly linked with the neo-liberalization of schools. Here, quality and schools’ performance are reduced to quantitative measures to put pressure on schools and teachers through competitions and performance audits for schools/teachers (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016).

While there is the temptation to associate these heightened demands for accountability and competition solely with the politicization of the FSHSP and the neo-liberalization of education, accountability measures in education in Ghana also find roots in the colonial era. With the signing of the Education Ordinance of 1887, the colonial Government introduced a payment-by-result system, wherein teachers' salaries were contingent on the results of their students (McWilliam & Kwamenah-Poh, 1976). This ordinance, among other things, encouraged rote learning, strained the relationship between teachers and their superiors, and led to the scapegoating of teachers (McWilliam & Kwamenah-Poh, 1976). Though this system was eventually abandoned, the tendency to associate students' performance in examinations with teachers' quality and scapegoating teachers whenever students perform badly persisted.

As illustrated in the findings chapters, the signing of performance contract agreements between headteachers and the government is eerily reminiscent of the payment-by-result era. As gleaned from the teachers in my study, a headteacher's promotion and demotion were based on the performance of their schools. Indeed, promotion manifested in transfer from a lower category school to a higher category school. The consequence of this was that headteachers placed undue pressure on teachers in their schools, and more emphasis was placed on students' pass rates, as evidenced by the focus on learning past questions. These forms of accountability and control emanating from the government seem coercive, leading teachers to adopt a stance of passive compliance, which can be seen as a form of resistance.

Moreover, accountability initiatives take away teachers' autonomy in their teaching practices. While teachers attributed the measures of accountability championed by the NPP government to the political origin of the policy, this is not a new phenomenon in Ghana's education arena, as I demonstrated. This scenario, I contend, increased precarity within the

teaching profession, making teachers work in an atmosphere of fear and panic. This situation and the feeling of alienation in the policy formulation process can contribute in no small way to the high turnover rate among teachers at Ghana's secondary education level. As qualified teachers leave, the government might have to resort to unqualified teachers to fill the void, and this can hamper educational quality, especially in rural communities.

Given that the schools differ in resources because the country operates, in my opinion, a stratified secondary education system, subjecting all schools to the same benchmark is unfair and obscures the government's role in providing infrastructure and other resources to ensure students perform well. It is crucial to move beyond accountability measures that merely seek to prove quality and focus on improving quality (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016). Even when accountability measures are geared toward improving quality, the focus should be on ensuring "intelligent accountability," wherein learning standards are measured only qualitatively and made available to only the schools involved (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016, p. 265).

Implications for Theory and Practice

The implications of these findings are varied. These results build on the existing body of evidence of the politicization of education in Ghana. While previous studies such as Gunu (2019) and Seshie (2019) have bemoaned politicizing education policies for political gains, this study highlighted the subtleties of politicizing education. The use of CDA revealed how the politicization of education policies manifests in seemingly mundane discursive practices. Budding democracies like Ghana and many African countries, with regular high-stakes elections, could face serious challenges to their education systems when education policies are formulated primarily to shore up voter support and not necessarily to solve educational problems. This situation becomes even more complicated when one political party only sees the prospects of the

policy while the other focuses on seeing only the challenges, as was the case of NPP and NDC officials.

My findings also suggest that the leveraging of education in the domain of formal politics is directly related to the exclusion of teachers from the policy formulation process. This does not, however, discount the influence of policy diffusion and policy borrowing on the disengagement of teachers and their unions from playing an active role in the policy process. Consultation with teachers at the initial stages of the policy process could have prevented some of the challenges that bedeviled the policy implementation, and this underscores the relevance of “local knowledge” (Smit, 2005, p. 294), or what my participants called “on-the-ground experience” in the policy process. To this extent, I posit that teachers are the best placed to speak about educational issues, and when they speak, governments should pay attention because *“if a fish comes out of the water to say the crocodile is ill, no one can doubt it”* (An Akan proverb). Therefore, there is a need to abandon the top-down approach to policy formulation and adopt a bottom-up approach, which could engender appropriate situation analysis to determine feasibility and help bridge the policy-practice gap. Also, while policy borrowing is not necessarily a bad thing, it is essential for governments, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, to refrain from politicizing education policies and resist the temptation to adopt them merely to align with perceived best practices and global education packages.

Political parties should avoid the temptation of including education policies in their manifestos. This looks quite a remote possibility at the time of writing this dissertation, given that the NDC has already included a “No-Academic-Fee policy” for newly admitted first-year students in all public tertiary institutions in their 2024 election manifesto (National Democratic Congress, 2024). This move is astonishing, given that the NDC had explicitly highlighted

Ghana's financial unpreparedness to democratize secondary education, arguing that the NPP government needed to adopt a piecemeal approach to universalizing secondary education. As Samonova et al. (2021) assert, merely declaring policies into existence does not indicate readiness for implementation. There is, therefore, the need for policymakers to ascertain the feasibility of policies before rolling them out. Policies should only be executed after determining their feasibility through thorough situational analysis. This research, therefore, underscores the importance of piloting policies on smaller scales before full implementation. Policymakers must be guided by the Ghanaian proverb, *“Never measure the depth of a river with both feet.”*

The findings further reiterate the salience and mediating role of context in policy implementation (Braun et al., 2011; Harris & Jones, 2018). I found that how teachers experienced the policy was mediated by contextual factors, especially infrastructural inadequacies. Policies can be outcomes of political power, but implementation relies on structures and resources (existing or new) to produce the expected outcomes. Prominent among these resources are teachers and physical infrastructure, and the inadequacy of these resources could hamper implementation. These findings corroborate previous studies that the policy led to a massive increase in student enrollment (Kerr, 2020; Kwegyiriba, 2021), and this has impacted how teachers worked and lived their lives. It reiterates that policy effects are often disproportionate. Schools must be adequately and equitably resourced to mitigate the policy impacts, particularly on teachers in the less resourced schools. The government must be intentional about ensuring equity. These efforts must not be limited to mere rhetoric. Conscious efforts should be made to raise the less resourced schools to the level of the well-endowed schools.

Yet, in this climate, schools and teachers resorted to practices that align with the subtle privatization of education, thereby clearly undermining equity. Unlike previous studies on the FSHSP and equity (Akuffo, 2024; Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Kwegyiriba, 2021), my analysis sheds light on the role teachers played in making schools inequitable, as some schools/teachers were complicit in perpetuating educational inequity by charging (un)approved fees, organizing vacation classes and private tutoring. Consistent with Akuffo (2024), my findings also demonstrate that despite the FSHSP, “the poor are still suffering,” mainly because of the huge amount of money involved in procuring items on the prospectus. Therefore, the government must ensure that schools/headteachers refrain from using the prospectus as a backdoor to charge admission fees. There are signs of the government's commitment to this, as GES has introduced a national harmonized prospectus (Kale-Dery, 2023).

The lack of a codified policy document also deserves attention, because it led to a situation where headteachers and teachers depended on situational explanations and directives from government officials as and when necessary. This created a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity among headteachers and teachers, resulting in a lack of uniformity in implementing the FSHSP. The lack of clear directives has also been blamed for the dismissal of some headteachers (“Free SHS saga,” 2017). Research has shown that, even in the face of well-articulated policy rules, teachers have a penchant for identifying loopholes or bending the rules and doing what they deem workable in their schools (Duarte & Brewer, 2022; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016; Watkins, 2022). The absence of a policy document resulted in a situation where, as a participant puts it, “every headmaster, every administrator, every management decides on what to do.” There is hope that the situation will change given that the MoE in July 2024 presented “The Free Senior High School Bill, 2024” to the country’s Cabinet for debate (Kale-

Dery & Ablordeppey, 2024). I hope that debating the policy at the parliamentary level would give it the necessary legal backing and help the government develop a policy document to streamline implementation.

Finally, given that teachers bemoaned the wholesale/blanket approach the government adopted in rolling out the policy, there is a need for the government to adopt a targeted approach. This will, however, require identifying those who “really” need the policy through need assessment to ensure that it benefits those in need and functions as a pro-poor social intervention. It is only by doing that we can reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots. Free education should also extend beyond tuition to focus on other basic needs, without which the poor would still be left behind. I am not the first to suggest this. Indeed, earlier scholars (Akuffo, 2024; Partey, 2021) and other prominent public officials, such as a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Professor Ernest Aryeetey, advocated targeting students with “genuine financial needs” (Boakye, 2022), which is consistent with the view espoused by Africa Education Watch (2023) and the IMF (Agyei, 2023). Suffice it to say that the IMF’s call for a targeted approach has nothing to do with ensuring equity. The IMF has always favored African governments imposing austerity on their citizens through forced cuts in public spending. Nevertheless, a targeted approach for student populations and school financing, rather than an across-the-board approach, makes sense in the face of limited resources and Ghana’s precarious economic situation, which appears to have been exacerbated by the global financial crisis occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, an efficient model to ensure successful implementation will also require that the government focus, first and foremost, on minimizing the resource gulf between schools in rural areas and schools in urban centers. Subsequent governments may need to allocate more resources to the less-resourced schools. Doing this will

ensure that students' educational experiences are not markedly different. Aside from this, efforts should be made to incentivize teachers in rural areas.

Given the participants' observations that even if the teacher unions were consulted, the unions did not consult teachers, it is high time the government moved away from representative democracy to direct democracy or deliberative democracy when making decisions regarding education policies and their implementation. While this looks quite difficult due to the number of teachers involved, it is plausible, given the advancement in technology and the fact that almost all teachers I interviewed had at least one smartphone. The teachers can be put into various WhatsApp groups, where decisions can be made, and votes can be cast on important education issues.

Various teacher unions might have to decentralize their decision-making process to ensure that teachers do not feel marginalized. They can do this by seeking teachers' views before meeting the government and promptly reporting back to teachers on issues tabled before them by the government. Social media platforms can also be used for internal communication among and between members and their leadership. This can potentially reduce the communication gap and the uncertainty among teachers regarding the union's involvement in policy formulation. Furthermore, as much as teacher unions seek the welfare of the teachers, they should not prioritize economic service to their members over and above educational issues. Improvement of education is not only contingent on better working conditions for teachers. Thus, teacher unions should move beyond their historical rationale to the current education demands, including policy formulation. Teacher unions also need to unite and have a strong voice so politicians can take them seriously.

The findings also speak to the importance of analyzing the impact of increased access on the quality of education. Many of my participants highlighted that the government's over-concentration on enrollment figures harmed the quality of education. This is not surprising because increasing the number of students while maintaining the same infrastructure made teachers' work difficult and led to a decline in the quality of instruction students received. One participant asked, "Are we going in for quality or we are going in for quantity?" (27/07/2023) There is, therefore, the need to focus on quantity, but not at the expense of quality. As one participant advised:

We have achieved the numbers in school. Yes. Let us move a step further to look at the quality in terms of the provision of good quality textbooks, good quality materials for the students to learn, you know, then good quality food (19/07/2023).

Besides providing the necessary materials to make the schools run smoothly, there is also the need for the government to pay close attention to developing basic schools in the country, particularly those in rural areas, so they can churn out good students to benefit from the FSHSP. This is important given that all the teachers complained about the quality of students sent to their schools with the advent of the FSHSP. Yet, the teachers' account regarding the quality of students they received was nuanced. While the teachers in category A and B schools reported a general decline in the quality of students posted to their schools, category C schools reported an upsurge in the quality of students posted to their schools. Nevertheless, there was a consensus that category A schools received the best-qualified students.

This dissertation has reaffirmed the position of teachers as major policy actors in education. Education policies do not become real in government chambers, nor are they implemented in parliament houses. Education policies are implemented in schools and by

teachers. Teachers' effectiveness invariably depends on the policies they interact with within their schools and the facilities in their schools. Since teachers are, by default, charged with implementing education policies, they should have a significant say regarding education policies, which almost always affect them. I contend that their involvement in policy decisions represents the first and perhaps the most important way of ensuring their welfare and well-being. This study thus speaks to the need to give teachers the recognition and respect they deserve. This respect and recognition should be reflected in improving their working conditions. Teachers should be remunerated fairly for their work. One participant described the FSHSP as “the heartbeat of the sitting president,” highlighting that the FSHSP was the very essence of the political existence of the current NPP government. Considering the role teachers are playing in the era of this FSHSP, I contend that “the heartbeat of the sitting president” is in the hands of the teachers. Thus, how the government treats teachers will determine how teachers treat the FSHSP.

The FSHSP significantly altered the way teachers worked and lived their lives. Though teachers expressed delight with the relief that the FSHSP offers parents and the fact that the FSHSP ensured early reporting to schools by students, these sentiments pale in comparison to their apprehension towards the increased workload, lack of vacations, overcrowded classrooms, inability to engage in secondary employment, and the seemingly increased precarity that became associated with the teaching profession.

This situation has profound implications for the attraction and retention of teachers at the secondary school level of education in Ghana. As I have demonstrated, many teachers have complained bitterly about burnout and dissatisfaction with some of the problems occasioned by the FSHSP. The FSHSP made teachers more prone to burnout due to the deplorable working conditions, lack of adequate resources, and incommensurate compensation. The culmination of

these factors invariably took a toll on their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. While there is no denying that concerns regarding overworked yet underpaid teachers preceded the FSHSP, the situation was exacerbated by the rollout of the FSHSP. However, though teachers' interview responses have demonstrated that the prevalence of burnout cuts across the board, I posit that the situation is worse for the less-resourced schools, which lack enough cultural and social capital and must contend with an acute lack of adequate resources. For instance, while Mawunya SHS, a category B school based in the city, also encounters the same constraints regarding resource scarcity, the adverse effects wrought by the inadequacy are mitigated by an active alumni organization and the socioeconomic affluence of the parents of its students, which is evident in a dynamic and engaged Parent-Teacher Association.

Consequently, there is the possibility of a higher burnout rate among teachers of less-resourced schools. This situation can lead to problems of high attrition and turnover rate, as many teachers are likely to quit the profession and transition to alternate career paths outside the teaching profession. Others might consider switching to the basic level. Within the teaching profession in Ghana, secondary school teachers need at least a university degree, while at primary and junior secondary school levels, one requires a minimum qualification in a diploma in basic education. This means, in principle, teachers working in secondary schools are qualified to teach at primary and junior secondary levels. Thus, besides quitting the job altogether, some teachers, especially females and those in rural areas, might consider transferring to the basic level to avoid all the encumbrances associated with the FSHSP. This suggestion is plausible because, in the Ghana Education Service, teachers' salaries depend on their ranks and the number of years they have taught, not the level at which they teach.

Others, too, might consider upgrading to qualify for a teaching position at the college of education or the university. As Wang (2025) suggests, “turnover can be viewed as both passive resistance to external control and a constructive decision by teachers to pursue self-actualization in response to their dissatisfaction with this control” (p. 1). Teacher turnover has adverse implications for students’ learning and performance because it disrupts the stability and consistency of educational environments. Furthermore, the departure of experienced teachers can impact the quality of instruction and discipline on the various campuses. A high turnover rate can potentially negatively impact the teachers' productivity and morale. Even those who cannot leave the profession but have turnover intention are likely to be demotivated and will not give their best in the profession.

Limitations of the Study

When I sent my request to the GES headquarters for permission to interview teachers, one guy at the reception asked, “Why the Volta Region and not the Ashanti Region?” I told him I had a deep connection to the region since I hailed from the region, lived, schooled, and taught there for over a decade. I also added that I was very fluent in the Ewe language. He did not seem convinced, so he proceeded, “We all know this is an NPP policy. Do you expect teachers in the Volta Region to be objective when discussing this policy?” I smiled and responded, “Do you also expect teachers in the Ashanti Region to be objective?” We all laughed. A woman in the office pointed out that teachers and all public servants were supposed to be non-partisan. We all agreed with her that teachers were, in principle, supposed to be non-partisan. Yet, we spent the next five or so minutes deliberating on the difficulty of being objective.

Herein lies the first limitation of my studies. Ghana, the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to gain its independence, is highly partisan, and political party affiliations are strongly

correlated with geographical location. For example, the NPP gets the majority of its votes from the Ashanti and Eastern Regions, while the NDC gets the majority of its votes from the Volta and Northern Regions (Ofori, 2015). The findings reported in this dissertation represent the views of teachers living and working in the Volta Region, a region that “has strongly preferred the NDC to other parties” (Morrison & Woo Hong, 2006, p. 635). Consequently, participants' accounts of their experiences may, at worst, represent a skewed account or, at best, not represent the national perception of the FSHSP, its implication for teachers' work, and the possibility of equity in Ghanaian secondary education. The GES, in principle, assigns teachers to schools “where their services are most needed” and does not consider a teachers' hometown when posting them to schools. Yet, teachers' preferred region is sometimes considered when posting.

Secondly, the voices of the headteachers of the three schools are conspicuously missing in the findings, as all three headteachers firmly but politely declined my request for an interview. They, however, allowed me to interview the assistant headteacher in their stead. Though I believed the voice of the headteachers would have added a unique perspective to the findings, all three assistants were very cooperative and provided me with valuable information and insight regarding the policy. Aside from this, the assistant headteachers were more in tune with the day-to-day running of the schools as the headteachers focused more on administrative responsibilities.

Directions for Future Research

My dissertation findings highlight the need for more research on the FSHSP. Future research should focus on expanding our understanding of the gendered implications of the policy on teachers and students. Investigations into teachers' experiences should address the number of out-of-classroom tasks teachers have to perform with the advent of the FSHSP. Regarding the

students, education researchers need to move beyond the increase in girls' enrollment to ascertain the educational experience of girls vis-à-vis boys. Such a study can also examine the courses these female students opt for relative to their male counterparts. This exploration is important, given that the educational marginalization of girls is not limited to access issues, but also manifests in programs of study (Graham, 1971). Future researchers can also build on the findings of this research by expanding the scope to include other regions in the country. I believe this will offer a broader perspective on teacher experiences with the advent of the FSHSP.

Final Thoughts

My dissertation is the first study of which I am aware that investigated the politicization of the FSHSP using Critical Discourse Analysis. It is also the first empirical study of the FSHSP that detailed how the politicization of the policy shaped teachers' work and daily lives. Taken together, this study departs from and builds on previous studies by focusing on the politicization of the FSHSP and its implications for teachers' work and equity from the perspective of teachers. I argue that the government focused on the political gains of the policy and prioritized higher enrollment figures over and against the welfare and well-being of teachers and the attainment of equity. Focusing on three distinct schools, this study provides a view of how the policy looks in different contexts and demonstrates that contextual factors not only mediate but also moderate policy effects (Braun et al., 2011).

More educational opportunities for students often result in more work for teachers but does not necessarily translate into fewer inequalities or inequities for students. Consequently, it is not enough to declare and implement free secondary education. We must also understand the mechanisms, other than fees, that militate against students enrolling, completing, and having equitable secondary education experience. We must investigate how inequities are perpetuated,

maintained, or exacerbated. We must not assume that the massification of secondary education automatically eliminates all forms of inequity associated with secondary education. Those of us in educational policy research should remember that, though “the truth can be wildly inconvenient,” we should remain faithful to and be led by the data. “Our duty is not to please politicians...” or schools/teachers complicit in perpetuating inequities (Lugg & Murphy, 2014, p. 1197). We must remind ourselves that policies can achieve the opposite of what they intend. As such, it is imperative to pay particular attention to the mechanisms that reproduce, maintain, exacerbate, or normalize the inequities and inequalities that exist not only among students, but also within and between different schools. This study also reiterates the fact that networks of individuals and organizations are invaluable in the process of policy formulation and implementation, and teachers are indispensable in this network when it comes to education policy formulation and implementation.

Epilogue

In all the schools I visited, I spoke with many teachers and made many new friends. I was reminded of how overwhelming the teaching profession can be for teachers as they deal with the vagaries of policies that governments formulate without considering teachers’ welfare and well-being. I heard these teachers grumble. I listened to their grievances, frustrations, and anger. I heard them complain about the government, the lack of teaching/learning materials, the lackadaisical attitude of students, and their low salaries. I watched their covert resistance even as they complied with government directives.

Yet, in all my conversations with these teachers, not once did I find a single person who was not concerned about the academic success or welfare of the students under their care. Indeed, most of their complaints were that the conditions wrought by the FSHSP hindered their

ability to deliver optimal education to students. I honor these teachers, my colleagues, with this dissertation and hope I have represented their lived experiences as truthfully as possible.

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