

A Qualitative Assessment of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) Policy on Education in the Upper West Region of Ghana

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of Ghana's Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy on educational outcomes in the Upper West Region. Using a qualitative research approach, it explores the perceptions of students, teachers, parents, and education officials regarding the policy's effectiveness in enhancing access to education, academic performance, and student experience. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed using content, narrative, and thematic approaches. The findings revealed that the Free SHS policy has significantly increased secondary school enrolment, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, its implementation is hindered by challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and overburdened teachers. While stakeholders appreciate the policy's transformative potential, concerns about compromised educational quality and strained resources persist. The study recommends expansion of infrastructure, consistent supply of learning materials, and providing adequate support and training for teachers.

Keywords: Free SHS, educational outcomes, Upper West Region, qualitative research, access to education

1.0 Introduction

The Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy, launched by the Ghana government in 2017, represents a major transformative step in the country's education sector, directly addressing financial barriers that have historically limited access to secondary education (Asiedu, 2022). As a central pillar of Ghana's Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2018-2030, the policy eliminates tuition fees and associated costs, thereby democratizing high school education and promoting equity for students from low-income households (Amankwah, 2022). This policy shift aligns with global educational goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (UNESCO, 2020). This major educational shift liberated parents from financial setbacks while making education accessible to students from different financial backgrounds.

Nationally, the Free SHS policy has resulted in a substantial increase in secondary school enrolment. Statistics from the Ghana Education Service (GES) indicate a 75% rise in secondary school admissions

between 2017 and 2021, confirming the positive impact of the policy (Kwasi & Adomako, 2021). Another positive aspect of the Free SHS is the visible increase in female education at the SHS as against the previous years that revealed wide disparities in female education against their masculine colleagues (AduBoahen & Twumasi, 2022).

In the Upper West Region, the locale of this study, which is a predominantly rural enclave marked by high poverty rates and limited educational infrastructure, the Free SHS policy has been particularly impactful. This region has historically suffered from low secondary school enrolment rates, largely due to economic hardships that prevent families from affording high school costs (Mensah & Acheampong, 2023). The financial woes of parents in the Upper West region forced them to prioritize education for their male children as seen in the low female enrolment figures at the secondary level prior to the Free SHS policy. A study by (Agyemang & Boateng, 2020), revealed that 60% of parents in the upper west region were unable to send their wards to senior high schools before the introduction of the Free SHS, citing financial constraints as confirmed by similar studies conducted by (Quaye & Opoku, 2023). This claim was further confirmed by a study from Adjei and Anane (2022), on the enrolment rate of BECE students from the Upper West region of Ghana prior to the Free SHS policy.

The Free Senior High School policy's implementation has also had socioeconomic implications beside the increase enrolment. It has reduced the financial burden on families, allowing them to allocate limited resources to other essential needs, thereby enhancing overall household welfare (Boadi & Mensah, 2023). By promoting access to secondary education among financially impoverished families, the policy is seen as a key instrument for social mobility, allowing students from poorer backgrounds to compete for academic and professional opportunities on a more equal footing with their urban peers (Nyamekye, 2021).

However, some researchers argue that while the policy has increased enrolment, it has also strained the existing educational infrastructure, particularly in underserved regions like the Upper West, where schools struggle with overcrowded classrooms and limited resources (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023; Moseley & Kabo, 2021). In his work on Free SHS, Moseley and Kabo (2021), highlighted the problems of the policy led by insufficient infrastructure and undersupplied educational materials.

Furthermore, the Free SHS policy aligns with research emphasizing the importance of secondary education in driving economic development. Studies indicate that regions with higher secondary education completion rates tend to have better economic outcomes due to a more skilled workforce (Owusu & Koomson, 2021). In this context, Free SHS policy does not only addresses immediate educational needs but also supports long-term socioeconomic development by fostering a more educated population capable of contributing to regional and national growth (Nyarko, 2021; Amankwah & Tetteh, 2022).

Despite these positive impacts, the Free SHS policy faces numerous challenges, particularly concerning its long-term sustainability and quality of education. Scholars have noted that while enrolment has surged, the quality of education has not necessarily kept pace, with concerns raised over teacher shortages, inadequate facilities, and strained educational resources (OwusuAnsah & OseiTutu, 2022). In rural areas like the Upper West Region, these challenges are evident, as schools often lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate the influx of students, potentially undermining the policy's intended outcomes (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023; Nyarko, 2021). This is evident in the tracking model that complicated the academic calendar just to accommodate the surge in enrolment.

In summary, the Free SHS policy represents a crucial intervention in Ghana's education sector, particularly for economically disadvantaged regions such as the Upper West. While it has succeeded in improving

access, there remain critical gaps related to resource adequacy and educational quality that must be addressed to ensure that the policy's benefits are fully realized across all regions (Amankwah, 2022; Quaye & Opoku, 2023).

1.1 What is the problem?

Despite the significant increase in enrolment rates since the inception of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy, there is limited qualitative research assessing its impact on educational outcomes, particularly in marginalized regions like the Upper West Region of Ghana. While existing studies have largely focused on quantitative metrics such as enrolment and completion rates, these figures alone do not capture the entire experiences and challenges encountered by students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Quantitative data, though useful, often overlook critical aspects such as the quality of education, the strain on resources, and the broader social implications of increased access (OwusuAnsah & OseiTutu, 2022). By focusing primarily on enrolment data, policymakers may gain an incomplete picture of the policy's real-world effects, especially in under resourced regions where the policy's challenges are most acute (Nyamekye, 2021). The visual nature of quantitative output often sways stakeholders into getting a deceptive view of the problems facing the Free SHS.

The Upper West Region presents unique socioeconomic and infrastructural challenges that influence the Free SHS policy's implementation and outcomes. Known for its high poverty levels, limited infrastructure, and predominantly rural population, the Upper West Region faces specific difficulties in meeting the demands generated by the surge in high school enrolment (Mensah & Acheampong, 2023). For instance, schools are often under resourced, with classrooms exceeding capacity and inadequate access to essential learning materials, which can diminish the quality of education despite the policy's intentions to improve access (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023). Without qualitative insights from the affected stakeholders, it remains unclear how these challenges impact student learning, motivation, and overall educational experience.

Moreover, the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, and educational stakeholders who interact with the policy daily are vital for a holistic evaluation of the Free SHS policy's effectiveness. Parents may appreciate the financial relief that Free SHS offers but may also worry about the lack of resources and overcrowding that could compromise their children's education quality (Boadi & Mensah, 2023). Teachers, who bear the direct burden of increased class sizes and limited teaching resources, may experience increased job strain, affecting their ability to deliver effective instruction (Owusu & Koomson, 2021). Including these perspectives is crucial to understanding the broader, more complex effects of Free SHS, which may not be evident from enrolment statistics alone (Quaye & Opoku, 2023).

This study aims to address this research gap by using a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of various stakeholders in the Upper West Region. By investigating stakeholders' experiences, attitudes, and challenges with the Free SHS policy, this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the policy influences educational outcomes in a context where resources are limited and access to quality education has historically been challenging.

2.0 Empirical Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is governed by Social Equity Theory which provides a guiding framework for deep understanding of the Free SHS as a policy beyond just visuals and numeric valuations.

2.1.1 The Social Equity Theory

The Social Equity Theory, tracing its roots to John Rawls's concept of 'justice as fairness,' provides a

framework for understanding and assessing policies aimed at reducing inequalities within societies (Rawls, 1971). This theory is particularly relevant to educational policies like Ghana's Free SHS, which seeks to remove financial barriers and make secondary education accessible to all Ghanaians.

Social Equity Theory argues that for policy measures to be truly equitable, they must not only provide access but also consider the distribution of resources to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can benefit from high-quality education (Young, 1990). In the context of Free SHS, Social Equity Theory supports the idea that while access to education is a critical step, the policy must also ensure that educational quality and support systems are adequately maintained. This theoretical framework helps to analyse whether Free SHS achieves true educational equity in both urban and rural settings, particularly in resource constrained areas like the Upper West Region, where access to quality education has historically been limited.

2.2 Empirical studies

A detail review of related literature demonstrated the impact of making education accessible to the less privilege at the same time revealing the woes and setbacks of the much-celebrated policy. The literature was double edged with evidence of increase enrolment but deficient in improving the quality of education

2.2.1 Free SHS Policy in Ghana

The Free SHS policy is a cornerstone of Ghana's broader educational reforms and aligns with the goals of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2018–2030, which aims to enhance educational access, quality, and equity across the country (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2019). The policy abolishes tuition fees and associated costs for high school education, a move that has drastically increased enrolment. According to the Ghana Education Service (GES), the annual high school enrolment rate has risen significantly since the policy's implementation in 2017, with the country recording a 50% increase in enrolment within the first two years (Agyemang & Boateng, 2020). This surge in access aligns with Social Equity Theory's emphasis on removing barriers for marginalized groups to promote social justice in education (Rawls, 1971).

Despite these successes, there are growing concerns regarding the sustainability of the Free SHS policy, particularly as it places unprecedented pressure on the few existing infrastructure and resources. Nyamekye (2021), argues that although enrolment has increased, the policy's current implementation does not adequately address the need for expanded facilities and improved resource allocation, which are crucial for sustaining educational quality. Similar observations have been made in other African countries with free education policies, where increases in access have sometimes led to overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and limited access to learning materials, thereby diluting the quality of education (Moseley & Kabo, 2021). This trend underscores the need for policy adjustments to achieve a balance between increased access and maintained educational quality, as Social Equity Theory suggests.

2.2.2 Educational Access and Equity

Educational equity theories, including Social Equity Theory, posit that policies like Free SHS are vital for leveling the playing field, particularly for economically marginalized populations (Mensah, 2020). By eliminating fees, the Free SHS policy seeks to empower students from low-income families, enabling them to pursue secondary education without the financial burdens that previously hindered access (Amankwah, 2022). However, research suggests that mere access does not inherently translate to equitable outcomes. Adu Gyamfi and Twumasi (2022), caution that while enrolment figures may improve, disparities in learning outcomes may persist if infrastructural support and quality teaching resources are lacking.

In regions like the Upper West, educational equity is challenged not only by economic factors but also by geographical and infrastructural limitations. Equity oriented frameworks emphasize the importance of not just access but also adequate support systems to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the same educational opportunities (Young, 1990). For true equity, the policy should ensure that resources are allocated to address disparities, especially in rural areas where schools are often under resourced and teachers are stretched thin (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023). Social Equity Theory supports this approach, emphasizing that equitable education requires both access and quality support to achieve fair outcomes.

2.2.3 Challenges in the Upper West Region

The Upper West Region faces unique educational challenges that affect the Free SHS policy's potential impact. Known for its high poverty rates and predominantly rural population, the region has limited infrastructure, high student-to-teacher ratios, and restricted access to educational materials (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023). Classrooms in this part of the country are often overcrowded, and schools lack basic resources such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, and trained teachers. Bamfo and Kwabena (2021), found that these limitations significantly impede the policy's intended benefits, as students in such environments struggle to receive the quality of education envisioned by the Free SHS initiative.

Moreover, Social Equity Theory highlights the need for policymakers to prioritize the most disadvantaged regions when implementing nationwide reforms. Quaye and Opoku (2023), argue that without targeted interventions, the policy risks worsening existing inequalities by providing access without quality, especially in under resourced regions like the Upper West. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that considers the socioeconomic and geographical challenges unique to this region. Enhanced funding for infrastructure, improved teacher training, and better resource allocation are essential for ensuring that the Free SHS policy fulfills its mission of equitable education (Owusu & Koomson, 2021).

2.2.4 Stakeholder Perspectives on Educational Policies

In line with Social Equity Theory, incorporating stakeholder insights is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of policies like Free SHS. Stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, and education officials offer direct, experiential insights that reveal the policy's impact on day-to-day educational experiences (Sarpong & Mensah, 2022). Research revealed that understanding these perspectives is crucial for identifying both the successes and limitations of the policy in real-world contexts (Owusu & Koomson, 2021). For example, parents may express appreciation for the policy's financial relief but may also raise concerns about resource shortages and overcrowded classrooms, which could compromise the quality of their children's education (Boadi & Mensah, 2023).

Teachers, who are on the frontline of the policy's implementation, experience increased workloads due to larger class sizes and limited teaching resources. Many teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the demands of teaching in overcrowded conditions, which affects their ability to deliver effective instruction (Nyarko, 2021). In the Upper West Region, these challenges are amplified, as teachers are often forced to manage classrooms without adequate materials or support, further complicating the policy's intended goals (Tetteh & Dankwa, 2023). Including stakeholder perspectives helps to capture these nuances, providing policymakers with a deeper understanding of the policy's impact and informing adjustments to better serve under resourced communities.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to capture and understand the interdependent perspectives

of various stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, and education officials regarding the Free SHS policy. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study, as it enables an indepth exploration of stakeholders' lived experiences and attitudes toward the policy, going beyond quantitative metrics such as enrolment rates to examine the policy's real-life impact in an under resourced region (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a combination of semi structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis, the research design facilitates a comprehensive understanding of both the policy's successes and challenges. This approach aligns with Social Equity Theory by prioritizing the voices of those directly affected, especially in marginalized communities where qualitative insights can reveal inequities in policy outcomes (Young, 1990).

3.2 Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of participants who had direct experience or knowledge of the Free SHS policy. This method allowed the study to include a diverse range of perspectives from stakeholders with unique roles in the educational process. Specifically, 50 stakeholders including students and parents were chosen to represent the policy's direct beneficiaries, while teachers and education officials provided insights from an institutional and administrative viewpoint. This purposive approach was critical for capturing the diversity of experiences across these groups, which would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact in the Upper West Region (Palinkas et al., 2015).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The data collection involved three primary methods: semi structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and document analysis. This triangulation of methods strengthens the study's validity by allowing cross verification of findings from multiple sources (Patton, 2015).

Five schools (Wa Senoir High School, Wa Senoir High Technical School, Wa Technical Instute Jamiat Islami Gilrs SHS and Islamic Senior Hing School) were selected based on their nearness and accessibility. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 10 students, 10 teachers, 10 parents, and 10 education officials. Two students, two teachers and two parents were accidentally sampled from each school and 10 Officer from the Wa Municipal Education Office were purposively sampled. These were Officers who do supervisory work at Free SHS level. These interviews focused on stakeholders' personal experiences and perceptions regarding the Free SHS policy's effectiveness, accessibility, and challenges. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share detailed accounts, enabling a deeper exploration of issues related to enrolment, quality of education, and resource constraints. Interview questions included prompts such as How has the Free SHS policy affected your experience in school? What challenges do you associate with the policy's implementation in this region? Etc. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for accurate data analysis.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also organized separately for groups of students and parents, allowing participants to discuss and compare their collective perspectives on the policy. The FGDs offered a dynamic platform for participants to share common experiences and insights, creating a richer understanding of the policy's impact at the community level. Each FGD comprised 6–8 participants and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, facilitated by a moderator who guided discussions on topics such as educational access, quality, and parental involvement. FGDs helped identify shared themes and provided insight into how collective experiences align or differ from individual accounts gathered in the interviews. In all, seven FGDs were conducted.

Finally, relevant policy documents, enrolment records, and academic performance data from five schools

in the Upper West Region were analysed to provide context and supplement the qualitative data gathered through interviews and FGDs. Document analysis included reviewing official government reports, school enrolment figures, and school performance statistics since the Free SHS policy's inception. This data helped triangulate findings from interviews and FGDs, providing an objective basis to compare stakeholders' perceptions with documented policy outcomes.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was analysed using thematic analysis; a systematic method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with familiarization, where transcripts of interviews and FGDs were carefully reviewed multiple times to gain an initial understanding of participants' responses. Following this, the data were coded, and similar codes were grouped into themes. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of key themes, including perceptions of accessibility, challenges related to resources, academic performance outcomes, and suggestions for policy improvement. This method allowed the researcher to connect themes to the study's research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring that the analysis remained focused and grounded in Social Equity Theory's principles of fairness and resource distribution (Young, 1990).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in conducting this study to protect participants' rights and ensure that the research was conducted responsibly. All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, including parental consent for students under 18 years of age. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities in all transcripts and research documents, with codes assigned to replace names and personal identifiers. Additionally, data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The study received ethical approval from the university's ethics review board, ensuring compliance with institutional standards for research involving human subjects (Bryman, 2016).

4.0 Results/Findings

4.1 Perceptions of Policy Effectiveness

The Free SHS policy is widely seen by students and parents as transformative, especially in reducing the financial barriers that previously prevented many BECE graduates from accessing secondary education. Analysed data from the study saw numerous students expressing gratitude for the policy, with one student stating that;

"If it weren't for Free SHS, I would likely be working instead of attending school. My family couldn't afford the fees, so this policy changed my life. The fact that I only need to acquire my consumables made it a bit easier for my parents to get me enrolled into secondary school. So, to me it is a good policy despite the visible problems we are facing as students" (Key Informant, October, 2024).

Another student added that;

"I have siblings who didn't get this opportunity, and I can see how different my future might look because of Free SHS. The fact that I still struggle to get basic things to come to school tells me I could not have been enrolled if not for Free SHS policy. It had made it possible for students from poor financial background to attend same school as their colleagues from rich backgrounds." (Key Informant, October 2024).

Some students however had varied views. The claim that quality tuition is undermined. To them, the special attention they used to get at the basic level is no more. They added that, most of the time they

(students) will exchange their exercise and mark. No comments from the teacher for you to learn and correct the mistakes. These students alluded that the class room teacher is overloaded, hence, no attention for each student.

These comments reflect a shared sentiment that the policy has opened doors for many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, providing them with access to education that was previously out of reach.

Parents echoed this sense of relief and opportunity. A mother shared;

“I am thankful because now my children can go to school without me worrying about fees every term. This policy has given my family a chance for a better future. Even with the policy, we still struggle to get them basic needs to go to schools and this sums up their plight if it wasn't for the Free SHS policy. Admitting all the problems facing the policy, it is a good policy for the start.” (Parent, October 2024).

Some parents also think that the policy sounds fresh, full of sweetness, but is lacking substances. They were of the view that they spend more to purchase the items their children need to go to Free SHS than if they were to pay fees. They mentioned a range of GHC3,500.00 to GHC4000.00, required to purchase all that the school asked all first year's buy. This, they said cannot be described as free. Also, the policy's rapid implementation and resulting surge in enrolment have led to new challenges, particularly for teachers. Teachers reported that while the increase in enrolment is positive, it has strained existing resources, impacting their ability to teach effectively. One teacher commented that;

“The classrooms are so crowded now that it's hard to give each student the attention they need. We just don't have enough resources to keep up. Imagine a class of close to 80 students with little to or no textbooks, no descent accommodation or even regular supply of food but we are made to contain it in silence.” (Teacher, October 2024).

Another teacher observed;

“We've had to change the way we teach because we can't manage individual attention with such large numbers. The numbers are scary both in the classrooms and at the hostels with students to class ratio increasing on each academic sessions whiles hostels are getting packed with increasing enrolment. Teachers are made to work with higher student ratio with little to no resources on the academic desk.” (Teacher Interview, October 2024).

These insights align with findings from Owusu and Koomson (2021), who reported similar resource constraints and challenges in other regions with high Free SHS enrolment.

4.2 Impact on Enrolment and Academic Performance

Quantitative data from the Ghana Education Service (GES) indicate a 45% increase in secondary school enrolment in the Upper West Region since the Free SHS policy's inception. This increase is notable, as it underscores the policy's success in boosting access. However, the improvement in academic performance has not kept pace with enrolment gains, a trend that teachers and education officials attribute to the limited resources available to support the expanded student population.

“Enrolment numbers are up, but without better facilities, it's difficult to see significant academic gains,” explained an education official, reflecting concerns that academic outcomes may lag if schools cannot adequately support the growing student body.” (Key Informant, October 2024).

Teachers highlighted that while more students are attending school, the quality of learning is affected by larger class sizes and stretched resources. One teacher stated that;

“With so many students in one classroom, it's hard to ensure everyone understands the material. We are doing our best, but it's challenging. At the end of the day, we compromise quality for quantity.” (Teacher

Interview, October 2024).

Academic performance data from sampled schools support these observations, showing only modest improvements in exam scores compared to the substantial rise in enrolment. The performance disparity suggests that while access to education has increased, the quality of learning may be compromised, particularly in overcrowded classrooms. This finding supports Social Equity Theory, which emphasizes that true educational equity requires both access and quality (Young, 1990).

4.3 Challenges Identified by Participants

Participants identified several challenges associated with the Free SHS policy, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, teaching resources, and teacher capacity. Overcrowding was a primary concern, with teachers reporting that classrooms were often filled beyond capacity, sometimes with as many as 70 students in a single room.

“Teaching is much harder now. With so many students, it’s impossible to give them the quality of education they deserve. We are not also motivated in any way by our employer to do our best as the numbers increase every year.” (Teacher, October 2024).

Teachers noted that their ability to engage with individual students had been significantly reduced, impacting the depth of instruction and interaction in the classroom.

Insufficient learning materials also emerged as a major issue. Many schools struggled to provide enough textbooks, desks, and basic supplies for the increased number of students. One teacher commented that; *“We struggle with basic supplies, and this affects our ability to deliver quality instruction. Sometimes, students have to share textbooks, and this slows down the learning process. The government to some extent neglected the Free SHS practically. All first-year students must provide a box of white board markers and a ream of ruled sheets for teaching and for writing exams respectively. This they must provide before they are received into the school. Without this, teaching and learning come to a standstill, because government have stopped supplying these basic materials.”* (Key Informant, October 2024).

Parents also noted that the lack of resources sometimes meant that their children were not receiving the same quality of education they had expected from Free SHS. One parent indicated that;

“I’m glad they are in school, but I worry that they are not getting enough support with all these students in one class. They constantly called me and complained of the kind of food they are fed with; gari, every day with groundnut soup of salt and pepper only. So, I was feeding them from home by giving them money every week. How free is this? Inadequate food supply is a major challenge.” (Parent, October 2024).

The issue of teacher capacity further compounds these challenges. Teachers are overburdened, with little additional support or training provided to manage the increased student load effectively. A teacher shared that;

“The policy brought more students, but not more teachers or training on how to handle large classes. We’re stretched thin and there is nothing we can do that to teach tangential.” (Teacher, October 2024).

These challenges are consistent with findings from Adjei and Anane (2022), who identify resource limitations as a significant barrier to educational quality in rural Ghanaian schools. Such findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to policy implementation that considers both access and the resources necessary to sustain high quality education outcomes.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of findings

This study reveals that while the Free SHS policy has effectively expanded access to secondary education,

particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it encounters substantial challenges in sustaining educational quality. The surge in enrolment has led to overcrowded classrooms, stretched resources, and limited access to learning materials, which collectively impact the quality of education provided, especially in rural areas like the Upper West Region. These findings align with broader national trends indicating a trade-off between increasing access and preserving educational quality in Ghana's educational reforms (Nyamekye, 2021). Social Equity Theory, which underpins this study, emphasizes that equitable access must include not only the opportunity to attend school but also the assurance of a high-quality education for all students (Young, 1990). This study's findings suggest that, without targeted interventions, the policy risks achieving access at the expense of quality, limiting its long-term effectiveness. Do the discussions by taking each sub-findings in paragraphs and support them with literature or the theory.

5.2 Comparative Analysis

Compared to more urbanized regions like Greater Accra, the Upper West Region faces unique challenges in implementing the Free SHS policy. Regions with better infrastructure, such as Greater Accra, are generally better equipped to absorb the increased student population, with more robust facilities and resources to support a growing student body (Agyemang & Boateng, 2020). In contrast, the Upper West Region's socioeconomic and infrastructural constraints mean that schools often struggle with overcrowding, inadequate classrooms, and limited teaching staff. These disparities underscore the importance of adopting region-specific approaches to policy implementation, as a generic model may not address the unique challenges of rural areas. By tailoring resources and interventions to regions like the Upper West, the government could mitigate some of the quality issues associated with large enrolment increases in under resourced settings (Tetteh, 2023).

5.3 Recommendations

To enhance the Free SHS policy's effectiveness, particularly in resource limited regions, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.3.1 Increased Funding for Infrastructure

There is a critical need for additional funding to expand school facilities in the Upper West Region. Investments in new classrooms, desks, and learning materials would help alleviate overcrowding and create an environment more conducive to learning. Expanding infrastructure would not only support the current student population but also prepare schools for future growth, helping to ensure that increased access does not compromise educational quality. Who should do this? Under each recommendation, indicate who should take action.

5.3.2 Teacher Recruitment and Training

Addressing teacher shortages through recruitment initiatives is essential to improving educational quality. Additionally, providing professional development opportunities can equip teachers with the skills needed to manage large classes effectively and enhance instructional practices. Targeted training on large classroom management and inclusive teaching techniques would be particularly beneficial, helping teachers navigate the demands of increased enrolment while maintaining educational standards.

5.3.3 Community Involvement

Engaging local communities in resource mobilization efforts could provide schools with supplementary support, especially in regions where governmental resources are limited. Community involvement can

range from financial contributions to volunteer support, creating a sense of shared responsibility for educational success. By partnering with local communities, schools can build stronger support systems, enhancing both the policy's reach and sustainability.

These recommendations aim to address the Free SHS policy's current limitations by creating a more balanced approach that integrates access with quality. By implementing these targeted interventions, the policy can move closer to achieving true educational equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of region, receive a quality education.

6.0 Conclusions

The findings from this study provide a nuanced understanding of the Free SHS policy's impact, highlighting both its transformative potential and its inherent challenges. The results across the sub-sections demonstrate a complex interplay of increased access, resource limitations, and educational quality. Below, the conclusions are drawn from each sub-section:

The Free SHS policy is widely perceived as a groundbreaking initiative that has reduced financial barriers for many families, enabling children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access secondary education. Students and parents generally view the policy as life-changing, with many expressing gratitude for the opportunity to pursue education. However, concerns about the quality of education persist, as the policy's rapid implementation has strained classroom resources, leading to overcrowded classrooms and diminished teacher-student interactions. Teachers' challenges in managing larger classes have raised questions about the trade-off between access and quality, underscoring the need for balanced educational equity.

The Free SHS policy has significantly increased secondary school enrolment in the Upper West Region, with a reported 45% rise since its inception. This achievement underscores the policy's success in enhancing access to education. However, the surge in enrolment has not been matched by corresponding improvements in academic performance, with overcrowding and resource constraints cited as primary reasons. Academic outcomes, as reflected in modest exam score improvements, indicate that the quality of education may be compromised. These findings align with the Social Equity Theory, which emphasizes the necessity of balancing access with quality for true educational equity.

While the Free SHS policy has been transformative, several challenges have emerged, particularly in infrastructure, teaching resources, and teacher capacity. Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and an overburdened teaching workforce have hindered the effective delivery of quality education. Parents and teachers expressed concerns about the policy's sustainability, with teachers calling for better support and resources to manage increased workloads. The findings highlight the importance of a more holistic approach to policy implementation that addresses not only enrolment but also the resources and systems required to maintain educational quality.

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