

Prioritization of Secondary Education Over Basic Education in Ghana: The Gains and Losses

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Abstract

This study explores the critical role of Basic Education in Ghana, emphasizing its foundational importance for sustainable socio-economic development. Despite Basic Education being essential for lifelong learning, recent policies have disproportionately focused on Secondary Education, such as the Free Senior High School policy, raising concerns about resource allocation and inclusivity. The paper examines the implications of this prioritization through a review of literature, policy documents, and empirical evidence. Findings reveal significant disparities in resource allocation, infrastructural inadequacies, and challenges in teaching quality at the Basic Education level, undermining its potential to serve as a solid foundation and perpetuating socio-economic inequalities. The study argues that Ghana's long-term goals can only be achieved by strategically refocusing on Basic Education. Recommendations include equitable resource distribution, enhanced teacher training, and improved infrastructure. The paper advocates for a balanced approach that strengthens foundational education, ensuring an inclusive and effective educational framework. This research calls for Ghanaian policymakers to re-evaluate educational priorities to foster a resilient and equitable system, offering transformative benefits for individuals and the nation.

Keyword: Basic education, secondary education, educational equity, foundational skills, human capital theory, sustainable development

Introduction

The educational system in Ghana, like in many other countries, is structured into three main levels: Basic Education, Secondary Education, and Tertiary Education. Each of these levels plays a critical role in the holistic development of individuals and the socio-economic advancement of the nation as a whole (K12 Academics, n.d.). Basic Education, which encompasses primary and junior secondary levels, is broadly recognized as the foundation of the educational journey. It lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and equips individuals with essential skills such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking (UNICEF, 2019). Secondary Education, on the other hand, serves as the intermediary phase between Basic and Tertiary Education, preparing students for either higher education or the job market. Despite the acknowledged significance of both levels, recent trends in policy and resource allocation in Ghana indicate an increasing prioritization of Secondary Education over Basic Education, raising substantial questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of this approach (Ministry of Education, 2017; UNICEF, 2019). Basic Education plays an indispensable role in establishing the intellectual and economic base of a nation.

It is at this stage that foundational skills are imparted, shaping the future learning trajectories of students and their ability to thrive in subsequent educational phases. The quality and accessibility of Basic Education have a direct impact on the development of a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, which is critical for economic development and poverty reduction (UNICEF, 2019). The importance of Basic Education is further underscored by international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNICEF, 2019). Without a strong emphasis on Basic Education, Ghana risks failing to achieve such global educational and developmental aspirations (UNICEF, 2019).

In recent years, however, the Ghanaian government's policy emphasis has noticeably shifted towards expanding and enhancing Secondary Education. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the belief that a stronger Secondary Education system would yield a more qualified workforce and support national aspirations for industrialization and economic growth (Ministry of Education, 2017). The introduction of policies like the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) program in 2017 is a testament to this prioritization. This program aims to provide free access to Secondary Education for all eligible students, thereby increasing enrollment rates and reducing the financial burden on families (Ministry of Education, 2017). While this policy has indeed led to an increase in secondary school enrollments, it raises concerns regarding the inadvertent marginalization of Basic Education, which forms the critical foundation of the entire educational system (UNICEF, 2019).

The core argument of this paper is that prioritizing Basic Education over Secondary Education is essential for sustainable socio-economic development in Ghana. The focus on secondary-level policies, while beneficial in some respects, has led to a reallocation of resources and attention away from the foundational stage of education (UNICEF, 2019). Neglecting Basic Education has far-reaching consequences, including widening socio-economic disparities, lowering the quality of foundational skills, and undermining long-term development goals (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, this paper contends that resource allocation, policy formulation, and development strategies should place greater emphasis on Basic Education to secure a stronger educational base for future generations (UNICEF, 2019).

A key problem that emerges from the current trend is the widening disparity in quality and accessibility between Basic and Secondary Education. Despite the apparent gains in secondary enrollment due to the Free SHS program, the persistent issues in Basic Education remain largely unaddressed. Research indicates that many schools at the Basic level continue to grapple with inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers (UNICEF, 2019). These deficiencies in Basic Education adversely affect the progression of students to higher levels, resulting in a weak foundation that cannot effectively support secondary-level learning (UNICEF, 2019). As a result, a significant portion of students who benefit from free Secondary Education may enter this phase inadequately prepared, which could, in turn, diminish the intended gains of policies focused on Secondary Education (UNICEF, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to argue why Basic Education should be prioritized over Secondary Education in Ghana. By focusing on Basic Education, Ghana stands to reap several long-term benefits, including improved literacy and numeracy rates, better preparedness for higher education, and reduced social inequalities. An emphasis on Basic Education ensures that all children receive a fair start in their educational journey, creating a more equitable system that empowers individuals regardless of their socio-economic background (UNICEF, 2019). Countries that have successfully achieved sustained socio-

economic development, such as those across Europe, the USA, Brazil, Kenya, Singapore, and other parts of Asia, did so by building a robust Basic Education system that became the backbone of their human capital development strategies (K12 Academics, n.d.).

This paper adopts the stance that Basic Education forms the foundation of learning and should, therefore, be the primary focus of government investment and policy efforts. A strong Basic Education system serves as the bedrock for all subsequent levels of education and has a cascading effect on the quality of Secondary and Tertiary Education. Without adequate investment in this foundational stage, the benefits of increased secondary enrollment could be undermined by poor academic performance and low retention rates, as students struggle with the consequences of an inadequate primary-level education (UNICEF, 2019). In advocating for this shift in focus, it is acknowledged that Secondary Education remains a vital component of the education system. However, prioritizing one phase at the expense of another, particularly the foundational phase, is counterproductive and could jeopardize the nation's long-term educational and developmental objectives (UNICEF, 2019).

Guiding Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to examine the prioritization of secondary education over basic education in Ghana, with a specific focus on the resulting gains and losses. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of basic and secondary education, highlighting the implications of policy decisions and resource allocation on educational equity and quality. The following objectives are established to guide the paper's analysis and discussions, ensuring a structured exploration of the key issues related to Ghana's educational landscape:

1. to evaluate the impact of prioritizing secondary education on access and social mobility;
2. to examine the disparities in resource allocation between basic and secondary education;
3. to analyze the importance of early childhood education in building a strong foundation for academic success;
4. to identify and recommend strategies for achieving balance between basic and secondary education investments;
5. to assess the effectiveness of policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing educational equity in Ghana.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is built on Human Capital Theory and Educational Ladder Theory, both of which provide essential insights into the significance of strategic investments in education and the implications of prioritizing one level of education over another. These theories serve as a guide for understanding the potential gains and losses that arise from focusing on Secondary Education at the expense of Basic Education in Ghana.

Human Capital Theory, as developed by Becker (2009), emphasizes that education is a critical investment in human resources, enhancing individual productivity and fostering economic growth. According to this theory, education equips individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to participate effectively in the labour market, thereby contributing to overall economic advancement. Becker's work highlights the significant returns that come from investing in education, particularly in the foundational stages. Basic Education is identified as the first and most crucial phase in human capital development, as it equips individuals with essential skills such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. These competencies are not only fundamental for lifelong learning but also serve as a basis for higher-level education and

professional success. Becker (2009) argues that when a nation invests in Basic Education, it creates a well-prepared and adaptable workforce, capable of driving innovation and economic progress.

In the context of Ghana, Human Capital Theory underscores the strategic importance of prioritizing Basic Education to ensure that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, acquire the foundational skills necessary for further educational and professional advancement. However, the current policy focus on expanding access to Secondary Education, as seen through initiatives like the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) program, risks diverting attention and resources from Basic Education. While the Free SHS program has increased enrollment at the secondary level, it raises concerns about whether the foundational stage of education is being sufficiently strengthened to prepare students for this transition. According to Becker (2009), neglecting foundational education could weaken the human capital base, potentially hindering Ghana's long-term socio-economic development and diminishing the benefits derived from higher educational attainment.

Complementing Human Capital Theory is Bruner's (2009) Educational Ladder Theory, which emphasizes the sequential and interconnected nature of educational stages. Bruner argues that education should be structured so that each level builds upon the previous one, ensuring a smooth and effective progression for learners. This theory suggests that a robust Basic Education system is essential for students to be adequately prepared for the demands of Secondary Education and beyond. Bruner (2009) highlights that when the foundational stage of education is compromised, students are likely to struggle academically in subsequent phases, leading to increased dropout rates, poor academic performance, and reduced capacity to benefit from higher levels of education.

In Ghana, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, unqualified teachers, and insufficient teaching materials at the Basic Education level exacerbate these issues. The emphasis on Secondary Education, without addressing these foundational deficiencies, disrupts the educational ladder, creating systemic inefficiencies. Bruner's theory reveals that prioritizing Secondary Education over Basic Education can have detrimental effects, as a weak foundation undermines the overall quality of the educational system and affects students' readiness for higher learning. Integrating Human Capital Theory and Educational Ladder Theory provides a comprehensive perspective on the consequences of prioritizing Secondary Education over Basic Education. While Human Capital Theory stresses the economic necessity of investing in foundational education to develop a skilled and adaptable workforce, Educational Ladder Theory emphasizes the structural importance of a well-sequenced educational system. Together, these theories illuminate the interconnectedness of educational stages and the long-term impact of neglecting foundational education. The imbalance in resource allocation and policy emphasis, as highlighted by both theories, underscores the need for a strategic approach that strengthens Basic Education. By doing so, Ghana can ensure a coherent and sustainable educational progression, ultimately contributing to inclusive and long-term national development.

The theoretical framework of this study demonstrates that while expanding Secondary Education may offer immediate benefits in terms of access, it is critical to recognize the long-term losses associated with neglecting Basic Education. Strengthening the foundational stage of education not only ensures that students are well-prepared for higher learning but also secures the socio-economic future of the nation. Therefore, Ghana's educational policies must place greater emphasis on Basic Education, aligning with the principles of Human Capital and Educational Ladder Theories to achieve sustainable development. Figure 1 shows a flowchart illustrating the interconnected theories and concepts supporting the

prioritization of Basic Education for sustainable development, emphasizing the economic and structural benefits derived from a robust foundational education system.

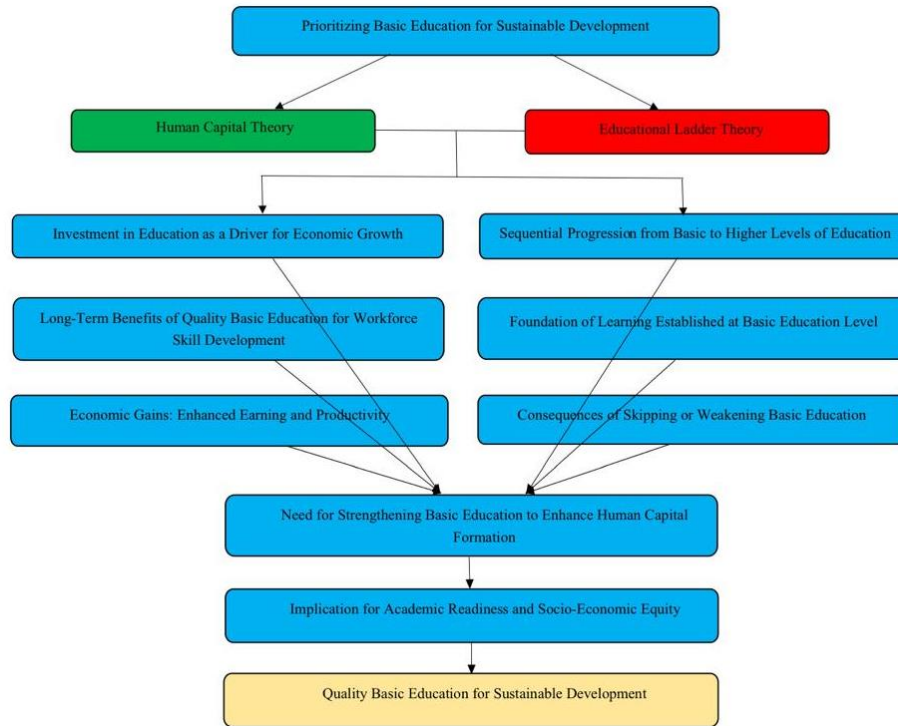


Figure 1: Prioritization of basic education for sustainable development

Methodology

The methodology is based on a thorough literature review, document analysis, and synthesis of empirical evidence, aimed at exploring the impacts of educational policies and laying the groundwork for evidence-based recommendations. A systematic approach to gathering and analysing academic and policy literature relevant to Ghana's education system is at the core of this methodology. The review focuses on credible and recent sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and publications from respected international organisations like UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, ensuring both academic rigour and practical relevance (Bryman, 2016). The process includes identifying key sources, conducting in-depth analysis, and organising the literature into thematic areas such as educational equity, resource allocation, and policy effectiveness (Bowen, 2009).

Document analysis complements the literature review by examining key educational policies, such as the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) initiative and the Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy. This analysis assesses the historical development of these reforms, scrutinizes their implementation strategies, and evaluates funding structures and resource distribution disparities. Government documents, policy briefs, and independent evaluations are reviewed systematically to understand both the intended and unintended consequences of these policies (Yin, 2018). This approach provides a comprehensive view of how policy decisions have shaped the educational landscape in Ghana and highlights areas where foundational education may have been compromised. The empirical evidence synthesis further enriches the analysis by drawing on existing literature and real-world examples that illustrate disparities in resource allocation, challenges in access to quality education, and issues related to

teacher qualifications and infrastructure. This synthesis helps to ground the study's findings in practical realities, offering insights into the broader socio-economic and regional impacts of education policies. Thematic coding and synthesis are used to analyze the collected data. This involves systematically identifying and coding key themes, such as "resource disparities," "impact on marginalized groups," and "policy implementation gaps" (Saldaña, 2015). The structured analysis of these themes allows for the identification of patterns and relationships between policy interventions and their outcomes, providing a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of their effects on educational equity and quality (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, a comparative analysis evaluates the outcomes of secondary education prioritization against the objectives of foundational policies like FCUBE and Free SHS. This comparison assesses indicators such as enrollment rates, education quality, and socio-economic mobility, highlighting gaps and aligning findings with recommendations for a more balanced and effective education system in Ghana (Creswell, 2013).

Overview of the Ghanaian Education System

The Ghanaian education system is structured to offer comprehensive and equitable learning opportunities, fostering the development of its citizens from early childhood education through to tertiary levels. This framework is designed to promote literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and a range of essential skills that are crucial for national socio-economic development. At its core, the system is mandated by the Constitution of Ghana, ensuring that basic education is accessible and free for all children from the ages of 4 to 15 (Ghana Education Service, 2019).

Basic education in Ghana forms the foundation of the educational journey and is divided into three key stages: kindergarten, primary, and junior high school. The kindergarten phase, which serves as the formal entry point into the education system, spans two years and focuses on developing cognitive, social, and emotional skills, which are critical for academic success in subsequent stages. The primary school level follows, encompassing six years of education aimed at providing students with a strong academic foundation in core subjects, including mathematics, science, and language arts. This stage is essential for laying the groundwork in problem-solving, analytical thinking, and effective communication skills. Completing the basic education cycle is the junior high school stage, which lasts for three years. Here, students are introduced to a more structured and advanced curriculum, preparing them for the challenges of secondary education and offering a pathway to future academic or vocational pursuits (Ghana Education Service, 2019; U.S. Embassy in Ghana, 2019).

Secondary education in Ghana is mainly represented by the senior high school (SHS) level, which spans three years. This phase is a critical preparatory stage, equipping students with specialized knowledge and skills that either prepare them for tertiary education or facilitate entry into the workforce. The SHS curriculum is comprehensive, covering a range of subjects that are grouped into academic and technical/vocational tracks, thereby offering diverse pathways to cater to the varying interests and strengths of students. The Free Senior High School (SHS) policy, introduced in recent years, has significantly increased enrollment and accessibility at this level, although it has also introduced challenges related to resource allocation and quality of education (Ghana Education Service, 2019).

Beyond secondary education, the Ghanaian education system encompasses various tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. These institutions are designed to provide advanced academic training, professional skills development, and research opportunities, contributing to the nation's pool of skilled professionals and innovators. The tertiary education landscape continues to

evolve, with an emphasis on aligning educational programs with the needs of the global and local labor markets (U.S. Embassy in Ghana, 2019).

Basic Education as a Fundamental Pillar for future academic excellence

Basic Education in Ghana serves as a critical pillar for the holistic development of children, providing essential skills that form the foundation for lifelong learning and socio-economic participation. The educational framework in Ghana emphasizes early childhood education, primary schooling, and junior high school, aiming to equip learners with cognitive, emotional, and social competencies necessary for their academic and personal growth. The foundational stages of education are particularly important, as they establish the groundwork for future learning and enable students to transition smoothly to higher educational levels (Ghana Education Service, 2019).

Cognitive, emotional, and social development is significantly influenced by early educational experiences. Bruner (2009) asserts that early education functions as a scaffolding mechanism for future learning, underscoring the long-term impact of high-quality early childhood programs. This view is consistent with Early Childhood Development (ECD) theories from scholars such as Piaget and Vygotsky, who emphasize the critical nature of early experiences in shaping cognitive frameworks and social competencies. These theories suggest that robust early education programs are vital for children to effectively engage in structured learning environments and achieve academic success. Research in developmental psychology further highlights that early childhood is a sensitive period for acquiring problem-solving, self-regulation, and social interaction skills, which have lasting effects on a child's academic trajectory (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Developing foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in the early stages of education is crucial for cognitive development. Swargiary (2024) argues that these skills are more than just academic prerequisites; they are integral to a child's overall learning capacity and influence future educational success across all subjects. In Ghana, however, the under-resourced nature of basic education often results in gaps in these critical areas. Students who do not master foundational literacy and numeracy are likely to encounter significant difficulties when they progress to secondary school, leading to high dropout rates and limited academic achievements. Rivera-Santana (2024) corroborates this by emphasizing that quality early education enhances school readiness and adaptability to structured learning, while Alfonso and DuPaul (2020) stress the importance of early intervention to address learning difficulties. Without adequate support in early childhood, disparities in learning outcomes are likely to persist, particularly affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those in rural areas (Ampiah, 2011; Anlimachie, 2015).

The role of early education extends to fostering socio-emotional skills and critical thinking. Sims (2020) highlights that children who experience high-quality early education demonstrate improved social skills, enhanced critical thinking abilities, and increased emotional resilience. However, disparities in Ghana's education system, especially in rural and marginalized areas, exacerbate learning inequalities. These inequalities limit students' ability to succeed in later stages of education and ultimately impact their socio-economic mobility. Educational Ladder Theory, articulated by Bruner (2009), reinforces the idea that each level of education builds upon the previous one, making a strong foundation essential. Conversely, gaps in foundational education result in academic challenges and diminished educational outcomes, which hinder students from capitalizing on secondary and tertiary educational opportunities (Becker, 2009; Darvas & Balwanz, 2013).

Inadequate investment in Basic Education, especially in rural areas, creates long-term educational disparities. Research by Sammons et al. (2004) demonstrates the significant impact of quality early education on children's cognitive achievements, affirming that early interventions are crucial for academic success. In Ghana, such disparities lead to unequal transitions between educational stages, adversely affecting retention and academic performance. Literacy and numeracy skills, foundational to lifelong learning, are central to an individual's ability to engage meaningfully in societal activities, as emphasized by UNESCO (2016). Human Capital Theory, articulated by Becker (2009), supports the argument that investing in foundational education yields long-term economic benefits by preparing a skilled workforce. Inadequate literacy and numeracy skills, particularly in underprivileged communities, hinder students' progress and limit their potential for contributing to national development (Swargiary, 2024).

Kartal, Balantekin, and Bilgin (2016) further emphasize the importance of starting literacy education at an appropriate age, showing that early interventions lead to stronger literacy outcomes. In Ghana, disparities between urban and rural schools – driven by inequitable resource distribution and variations in teacher quality exacerbate educational inequalities (Anlimachie, 2015; Gyimah, 2023). Phillips and Shonkoff (2000) argue that children who miss out on foundational skills face long-term academic struggles, while Fisher (2013) emphasizes the need for child-centered pedagogies. Experiential and play-based learning in early education fosters creativity, problem-solving skills, and curiosity, which are crucial for lifelong learning. Despite the benefits, Ghana faces challenges in implementing child-centered approaches, due to limited resources and inadequate training for educators.

The systemic neglect of Basic Education, especially for students from rural and low-income families, perpetuates socio-economic disparities. Shonkoff (2010) and Alfonso and DuPaul (2020) highlight the importance of early interventions in minimizing learning difficulties and promoting equity. In Ghana, the lack of adequate support for foundational education undermines efforts to improve learning outcomes and widens the educational attainment gap. Addressing these disparities is imperative to ensuring that all children have an equal opportunity to thrive academically and socially.

Secondary Education for Economic Growth and Innovation in Ghana

While the significance of Basic Education is well acknowledged, there remains a compelling case for prioritizing Secondary Education, especially within the context of a developing nation like Ghana. Proponents of prioritizing this level of education argue that it is crucial in preparing students for the job market, fostering innovation, and acting as a critical link between foundational and tertiary education. The strategic focus on Secondary Education by the Ghanaian government aligns with its vision of cultivating a skilled and knowledgeable workforce that can drive economic growth and social mobility. Thus, it is essential to explore these arguments to understand the rationale behind emphasizing Secondary Education over Basic Education.

One of the central arguments in favor of prioritizing Secondary Education is its crucial role in preparing students for the job market. In the contemporary economy, there is an increasing demand for skilled labor, and secondary schools are essential in equipping students with the necessary skills to transition into vocational roles or higher education. Adewolu Ogwo, (2024) emphasize that a robust high education system enhances employability by imparting specialized skills and knowledge in various sectors such as technology, healthcare, and business. This perspective aligns with the objectives of Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) policy, introduced in 2017 to expand access to Secondary Education and prepare a larger segment of the population for productive employment (Ghana Education Service, 2019). By

removing financial barriers, this policy creates equitable opportunities for students across socio-economic backgrounds to gain the qualifications needed for the labor market (David & Andrews, 2022).

The emphasis on Secondary Education stems from the understanding that Basic Education alone may not adequately meet the demands of the modern job market. Researchers such as Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2021) demonstrate that secondary education provides a more advanced curriculum encompassing technical skills, scientific knowledge, and critical thinking abilities. These competencies are increasingly essential in today's knowledge-based economy, where employers seek workers capable of adapting to new technologies and engaging in problem-solving. Thus, prioritizing Secondary Education represents a strategic investment in human capital that addresses the skills gap and improves the employability of young people (Becker, 2009). The economic benefits of this approach are well-established, as higher levels of education correlate with increased earnings and reduced poverty rates (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

In addition to preparing students for the job market, prioritizing Secondary Education is closely tied to the broader goal of fostering innovation and knowledge creation. Secondary schools serve as a bridge between Basic and tertiary education, offering students a foundation for specialized learning and research. Human Capital Theory posits that higher levels of education contribute to national development by fostering innovation and increasing productivity (Becker, 2009). Proponents of prioritizing Secondary Education argue that investing in this level is necessary to produce graduates who are ready for tertiary education and capable of contributing to technological advancement (Dolence & Norris, 1995; Gibbons, 1998). In Ghana, secondary schools offer subjects in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), which are essential for the nation's industrialization and digital transformation efforts. The Ghana Education Service (GES) has implemented a new standards-based curriculum to enhance STEM education at the secondary level. This curriculum aims to equip students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and technological skills necessary for the country's socio-economic development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NaCCA], 2019). Additionally, the Ministry of Education has introduced specialized STEM schools across various regions to provide focused education in these fields, further supporting Ghana's industrialization and digital transformation initiatives (Ministry of Education, n.d.). David and Andrews (2022) underscore that prioritizing Secondary Education creates a pipeline of skilled graduates who are better equipped to pursue tertiary education and engage in innovative projects. This strategic focus aligns with the government's broader vision of economic growth led by a knowledge-based workforce. The success of the Free SHS policy in increasing enrollment rates and broadening access to education signifies the government's commitment to producing graduates capable of driving national development through innovation (Duflo et al., 2021). Thus, the argument for prioritizing Secondary Education is not merely about increasing access but also about strategically positioning the education system to support long-term economic growth.

From the government's perspective, prioritizing Secondary Education is a strategic decision reflecting careful resource allocation. In a resource-constrained environment, policymakers often face difficult choices about where to invest limited funds to achieve the greatest impact. According to Adu-Gyamfi, Donkoh, and Addo (2016), the government's emphasis on Secondary Education stems from the belief that a well-educated and skilled workforce is indispensable for national development. By expanding access to Secondary Education, the government aims to create pathways for social mobility, reduce inequality, and boost national productivity.

The prioritization of Secondary Education in Ghana reflects global trends and aligns with international development objectives. Specifically, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels, with the aim of "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023). Ghana's commitment to achieving universal access to Secondary Education aligns with this global objective, as it seeks to provide each student with at least twelve years of education. The government's Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy is a significant step in this direction, reflecting an effort to meet international standards and provide equitable access to secondary education for all citizens (Ghana Education Service, 2020).

The prioritization of Secondary Education over Basic Education in Ghana has yielded substantial benefits, particularly with the implementation of the Free SHS Policy. Emphasizing secondary education has led to notable gains, including increased access, improved social mobility, and enhanced economic opportunities for students from marginalized communities. Research examining the effects of the Free SHS policy and similar initiatives underscores these successes and the transformative impact of prioritizing Secondary Education in Ghana. According to Banson (2022), the Ghanaian government's prioritization of Secondary Education aims to promote equity and quality within the education system. The policy's elimination of school fees has removed a significant financial barrier, enabling a broader range of students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families, to transition smoothly from Basic to Secondary Education.

Empirical evidence by Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2021) further supports the positive impact of free secondary education in Ghana. Their study indicates that removing financial barriers to Secondary Education significantly increases enrollment and completion rates, particularly for female students and those from rural areas, who have historically faced greater challenges in accessing secondary education. This underscores the role of free secondary education in advancing social equity and empowering marginalized communities through educational opportunities. Furthermore, the Free SHS policy has democratized education by bridging the urban-rural education gap. David and Andrews (2022) highlight that by eliminating tuition fees, the policy has facilitated access for students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue Secondary Education. This democratization of access is critical for achieving social equity, as it opens pathways to higher education and employment for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Shamo (2023) adds that the policy's emphasis on Secondary Education has significantly increased the number of students transitioning to secondary school, thereby enhancing their long-term employability and economic empowerment. Moreover, the focus on Secondary Education aligns with the broader objective of developing a competitive and educated workforce. Asumadu (2019) observes that the Free SHS policy has been instrumental in producing a more educated youth population in Ghana. By expanding access to Secondary Education, the government is investing in human capital development, equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to national growth. This strategic investment in education positions the country to improve its global competitiveness and stimulate economic development.

Challenges and Consequences of Neglecting Basic Education in Ghana

The basic education sector in Ghana faces persistent challenges that undermine its effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Despite ongoing reforms and investments, including initiatives such as the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program, significant obstacles continue to hinder the

delivery of quality education. These challenges ranging from inadequate resources and poor infrastructure to insufficient teacher training and an unsupportive learning environment are fundamental in understanding why Basic Education in Ghana struggles to fulfill its foundational role. Consequently, these issues have long-term implications, leading to high dropout rates, weak foundational skills, and widening socio-economic disparities.

One of the primary challenges faced by Basic Education in Ghana is the persistent issue of inadequate resources, particularly educational materials. Ampiah et al. (2004) report that public schools frequently face shortages of textbooks, learning aids, and essential teaching materials, which are critical for delivering quality education. Without adequate materials, teachers often resort to outdated and rote-based teaching methods, limiting students' ability to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Darvas and Balwanz (2013) further indicate that these resource shortages disproportionately affect schools in rural and underserved areas, exacerbating educational disparities between urban and rural students. This lack of resources not only affects students' ability to engage in active learning but also hinders teachers' efforts to implement effective teaching strategies.

In addition to resource inadequacy, poor infrastructure remains a significant barrier to quality education. In many parts of Ghana, especially rural and remote areas, schools lack basic amenities such as safe classrooms, functional sanitation facilities, and sufficient furniture. Takyi et al. (2021) observe that overcrowded classrooms and makeshift learning spaces are common, creating environments that are not conducive to effective teaching and learning. The absence of adequate infrastructure also affects student retention, as uncomfortable or unsafe learning conditions discourage students from attending school consistently (Ampiah et al., 2004). Furthermore, the lack of libraries, computer labs, and science facilities limits students' exposure to hands-on learning experiences, which are crucial for a well-rounded education.

Another critical challenge in Basic Education is the shortage of trained and qualified teachers. Despite efforts to improve teacher quality through initiatives like the Ghana Teacher Licensure Examination, many teachers still lack the necessary skills and professional development opportunities to deliver quality education effectively. Mensah et al. (2020) highlight that continuous professional development programs are often inadequate or poorly implemented, leaving teachers without the support they need to improve their instructional methods. This issue is particularly pronounced in rural schools, where the prevalence of undertrained teachers contributes to lower educational outcomes. Akyeampong (2009) underscores the importance of addressing this challenge by enhancing teacher training programs and introducing targeted incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers in underserved regions.

The learning environment also plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of Basic Education. Ampiah (2011) argues that an engaging and student-centered learning environment is essential for effective education delivery. However, in many public schools in Ghana, the absence of interactive spaces, insufficient access to digital tools, and inadequate recreational facilities limit students' ability to engage in experiential learning. Darvas and Balwanz (2013) emphasize that the quality of the learning environment is a key determinant of educational outcomes. Without improvements in infrastructure and facilities, efforts to enhance Basic Education will remain constrained, and students' overall development will be compromised.

The consequences of these challenges are far-reaching and detrimental to the long-term prospects of Ghana's educational system. As a result of inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, and underqualified teachers, students in the Basic Education sector struggle to acquire essential foundational skills such as

literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. This lack of foundational competencies often leads to high dropout rates, as students are unable to cope with the demands of higher-level education (Barakat et al., 2016). Furthermore, the persistent neglect of Basic Education exacerbates socio-economic disparities, particularly between urban and rural communities. Ampiah, (2011) highlights that rural schools in Ghana face significant challenges, including severe shortages in infrastructure and qualified teachers, which contribute to unequal educational opportunities and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. A recent report by the Ghana Education Service (GES) emphasizes that many rural schools lack essential facilities, such as classrooms, libraries, and sanitation, negatively impacting the learning environment and student outcomes. Additionally, the report indicates a disparity in the distribution of qualified teachers, with urban schools attracting more experienced educators, while rural schools are often left understaffed and rely on less qualified personnel. This imbalance restricts academic performance and limits future opportunities for students in rural areas (GES, 2023).

Similarly, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) reports that the infrastructural and staffing deficiencies in rural schools contribute to lower enrollment rates and higher dropout levels, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality. The GPE study calls for targeted interventions to address these disparities, including investments in rural school infrastructure and strategies to attract and retain qualified teachers in underserved regions (GPE, 2023). Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring equitable access to quality education for all Ghanaian children and breaking the cycle of poverty that affects many rural communities. These persistent challenges and the resulting consequences also pose a significant threat to Ghana's progress toward achieving key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2016). However, the consistent underfunding of Basic Education undermines this goal by compromising the quality of education and limiting access for marginalized groups. When the foundational stage of education is weak, it affects the entire educational system's effectiveness and limits the potential for inclusive growth. Moreover, neglecting Basic Education poses challenges to achieving SDG 1, which aims to eradicate poverty. A strong Basic Education system is essential for equipping children with the skills necessary to improve their socio-economic conditions and break the cycle of poverty (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). By failing to invest adequately in foundational education, Ghana risks perpetuating poverty and inequality, hindering its ability to achieve sustainable development.

Policy Recommendations

To address the ongoing challenges in Basic Education in Ghana, particularly in early childhood education, comprehensive and evidence-based reforms are essential. Evidence from both local and international contexts suggests that effective policy interventions can significantly enhance educational outcomes and contribute to sustainable development.

Prioritization of Basic Education

One key recommendation is to prioritize policies that channel more resources towards strengthening Basic Education. Investment in early childhood and primary education is essential for establishing a strong foundation that supports future learning and socio-economic mobility. Successful interventions in countries like Finland demonstrate that targeted investments in early childhood education, particularly in enhancing infrastructure, learning materials, and teacher quality, can yield significant developmental benefits (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). Ghana should adopt a similar approach by focusing on creating age-appropriate learning environments, improving the quality of teaching, and providing

sufficient learning resources to all schools. In addition to improving infrastructure, it is crucial to prioritize the recruitment and training of qualified early childhood educators. Nordic countries like Finland, Denmark, and Sweden emphasize the hiring of educators with specialized training in early childhood development and pedagogy (Sollerhed et al., 2021; Taguma et al., 2012). Ghana can adopt this strategy by setting qualification standards for early childhood educators and backing these standards with targeted incentives such as scholarships for specialized training programs. This approach would help bridge the gap in professional expertise and ensure that early childhood education is delivered by qualified professionals, ultimately improving learning outcomes.

Equitable Resource Allocation

Policymakers must also advocate for an equitable distribution of funding and resources across Basic and Secondary levels. Evidence from the OECD suggests that countries with equitable funding policies, like Finland and Sweden, allocate resources based on school needs, thereby promoting fairness and inclusivity in education (Taguma et al., 2012). In Ghana, an equitable funding model should be established to assess and allocate resources based on specific needs and challenges faced by different schools. This model would ensure that all schools, regardless of location, receive adequate supplies, learning tools, and essential infrastructure, thereby bridging the gap between rural and urban educational standards. Furthermore, evidence from early childhood education reforms in China underscores the importance of targeting economically disadvantaged areas to reduce inequalities (Chen & Yang, 2024). Channeling resources to underserved regions would ensure that children in rural communities have access to the same quality of education as their urban counterparts, reducing socio-economic disparities and promoting equity in educational opportunities.

Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Investing in the professional development of teachers at the Basic level is critical for improving instructional quality and student outcomes. Teacher training programs should focus on equipping educators with the skills necessary to implement student-centered learning methods and address the diverse needs of young learners. According to Akyeampong (2009), enhancing teacher training programs is essential to achieving the goals of educational reforms in Ghana. A comprehensive approach to capacity building should involve continuous professional development, mentorship, and access to updated teaching resources. Successful models in the United States, such as the Head Start Program, emphasize ongoing professional training and mentorship to ensure that educators stay updated on pedagogical advancements and curriculum standards (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017). Ghana could implement structured in-service training programs and create “Lead Educator” positions within schools to mentor and guide fellow teachers. This approach would strengthen teaching practices and enable educators to adapt to changing needs and advancements in early childhood education.

Integrated Policy Framework

Developing an integrated policy framework that aligns Basic and Secondary Education in a mutually supportive manner is crucial for ensuring the continuity and coherence of the education system. An integrated approach would facilitate smoother transitions between educational stages and promote long-term student success. A World Ready to Learn report by UNICEF emphasizes the need for cohesive policies that align early childhood education with later stages of learning to support holistic child development (Borisova et al., 2019). For example, successful early childhood education models in Nordic countries integrate comprehensive support systems for students transitioning from early childhood to primary education (Kascak & Koch, 2023). Implementing a similar framework in Ghana would involve

aligning curricular goals, enhancing collaboration between Basic and Secondary schools, and establishing monitoring mechanisms to track student progress and identify areas for improvement. Such an integrated policy framework would ensure that investments in Basic Education are effectively linked to secondary-level goals, maximizing the impact of educational reforms.

Enhancing the Learning Environment and Stakeholder Engagement

In addition to policy alignment, improving the physical learning environment is critical. Research from Nordic countries emphasize the importance of child-friendly, developmentally appropriate spaces that encourage physical movement, exploration, and play-based learning (Sollerhed et al., 2021). Ghana can draw lessons from these successful interventions by improving classroom designs, incorporating open play areas, and creating flexible spaces that allow for movement and active engagement. This would support children's physical development and foster a more engaging learning experience that stimulates curiosity and creativity.

Stakeholder engagement is another critical component for sustaining and enhancing the quality of early childhood education. The experiences of countries like China, which face challenges in rural education, highlight the importance of engaging parents and local communities to support children's learning (Chen & Yang, 2024). In Ghana, parents and community members should be encouraged to participate in school activities, provide feedback on initiatives, and collaborate with educators to maintain school facilities. This community engagement creates a sense of shared responsibility and ensures that educational reforms have a lasting impact.

Leveraging International Partnerships

The role of international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting early childhood education (ECE) in Ghana is crucial. UNICEF's report, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education*, emphasizes the importance of collaborative approaches involving NGOs in areas such as teacher training, resource allocation, and community outreach to improve ECE quality and access (Seidel et al., 2019). For Ghana, leveraging partnerships with NGOs can provide additional resources, specialized teacher training, and public awareness campaigns to highlight the significance of early childhood education. Expanding these collaborations is essential to strengthening the capacity of schools and contributing to a more inclusive and resilient educational system.

Conclusion

This paper advocates for the prioritization of Basic Education over Secondary Education in Ghana as a strategic approach to address foundational issues that directly impact the country's long-term socio-economic and educational outcomes. While Secondary Education is undeniably vital for preparing students for advanced studies and the labor market, it is Basic Education that fundamentally shapes the skills, capabilities, and cognitive foundation necessary for individuals to thrive. By focusing on foundational education, Ghana can ensure that citizens are equipped with essential literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills, which are critical for lifelong learning, productivity, and socio-economic empowerment.

The research presented here highlights specific challenges within the Basic Education sector challenges that threaten not only educational quality and equity but also the larger goals of sustainable national development. Critical issues such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and insufficiently trained teachers continue to impede the quality of Basic Education, disproportionately affecting students from low-income and rural backgrounds. These deficiencies create a cycle of educational disadvantage that

limits students' ability to progress, leading to high dropout rates and poor academic performance at subsequent levels. Addressing these foundational gaps is essential if Ghana is to establish a solid and equitable educational system capable of meeting the needs of all its citizens.

Neglecting Basic Education carries profound long-term consequences that extend beyond the classroom. Without a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy, students struggle with more advanced concepts in secondary education and beyond, resulting in lower academic achievement and reduced employability. This underperformance further reinforces socio-economic inequalities, as those who do not acquire foundational competencies face limited opportunities for upward mobility. Consequently, the emphasis on expanding access to Secondary Education without simultaneously addressing the needs of Basic Education risks exacerbating these disparities and undermining Ghana's socio-economic goals.

Furthermore, from an international development perspective, strengthening Basic Education aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Achieving this goal requires prioritizing foundational education to close gaps in literacy and numeracy that hinder students' overall learning progression. Moreover, strengthening Basic Education supports other SDGs, such as reducing poverty (SDG 1) and promoting gender equality (SDG 5), as education at the primary level is a key driver for social inclusion and poverty alleviation.

The research also demonstrates that a robust Basic Education system is crucial not just for individual success but for national resilience. Investing in Basic Education equips students with the skills needed to adapt to a rapidly changing global economy, where literacy, problem-solving, and digital skills are essential. Moreover, countries that prioritize early education tend to see higher returns on investment, as foundational skills are directly linked to increased productivity, economic growth, and social stability. For Ghana, prioritizing Basic Education represents an opportunity to build a workforce that is not only capable of meeting local demands but also competitive in the global market.

Prioritizing Basic Education is not merely a matter of policy preference but a foundational strategy for Ghana's sustainable development. Without significant improvements in Basic Education, efforts to expand Secondary Education will likely remain superficial, as many students will lack the necessary competencies to succeed at higher levels. A strong Basic Education system creates equitable opportunities, fosters social mobility, and empowers future generations to make meaningful contributions to national growth. As such, ensuring access to quality Basic Education is essential to achieving a resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking educational system that enables all citizens to reach their full potential and contribute to Ghana's socio-economic progress. By refocusing investments and policies toward strengthening the foundational stages of education, Ghana can create a more balanced and effective educational system that not only promotes individual achievement but also serves as a catalyst for sustainable national development. This prioritization will lay a strong foundation that supports educational advancement at all levels, ultimately enabling Ghana to build a more equitable and prosperous society.

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