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Equitable Access and Inclusiveness in Basic Education: Roadblocks to Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

For more than half a century, the recognition of education by the international community as a social transformative tool and a fundamental human right has found strong affirmations in conventions, statutes and resolutions. The inception of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), as a sequel to the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) for instance acknowledges education as an indispensable conduit for people to realize their capabilities while completing primary school cycle. However, while the international community is yet to realise the potential of education as a catalyst for development, greater inequalities in access to education in the face of heightening social, economic, political and cultural challenges exist for different social classes in different parts of developing countries, precisely Ghana. The paper sought to investigate the challenges to basic education access and inclusiveness in Ghana. The study was conducted in two (2) selected districts each in some six purposefully sampled regions against the backdrop of the 2015 Ghana Poverty Mapping Report. Relying on field gathered data, the study data analysis revealed that access to education in the study areas are chiefly poverty induced. It also found out that, the lack of a sustainable education policy and political will, coupled with incessant political interferences in education by governments over the years has been deleterious to education access in Ghana. The study concluded that merit-based poverty considerations, and the introduction of social policy interventions is crucial to increasing access to education. It is therefore pertinent for Government, Non-Governmental Organisations and Civil Society Organisations, Corporate bodies and other stakeholders alike to reignite their commitment to ensuring the extensive extension of assistance to the needy, while pushing for the implementation of pro-poor policies aimed at increasing access and equity/inclusiveness relative to basic education in Ghana.

KEYWORDS

Equity; access; inclusiveness; basic education; Sustainable Development Goals (SDG); Ghana

Introduction

Over the years, International bodies like the United Nations and its signatory member states have increasingly exhibited an unwavering resolve to pursue equity-based goals and committed themselves to ensuring the upliftment of the marginalized from the doldrums of life. To give firmer legs to casting its effort in steel, the declaration of education as a basic human right was passed in 1948 to communicate a clear message to the comity of nations that, in addition to recognizing education as critically important in the lives of individuals all over the world, it also sees it as a key ingredient in the socio-economic development of nations. The aftermath of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) saw the reopening and reignition of nations spirit towards a fuller commitment to progress and development under the banner of the Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs) carved around the objective of eradicating poverty, hunger, achieving universal basic education and promoting gender equality. A central plank of the MDGs constituted an emphasis on access to education as the springboard for all economies (Osei-Assibey, E. & Grey). It is for the reason of equipping the available national human resource with the required skills for socio-economic development (Afful-Broni & Sekyi, 2014) that countries enrol their citizens in school. Later, the eight (8) target Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) established, following the United Nation's Millennium Summit in the year 2000 was succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (which is projected to span from 2015–2030) in September 2015. The integrated 17 Sustainable Development Goals and its 169 targets amongst other things envisage a poverty, hunger, disease and want-

free world, a world with universal literacy, a world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels. To give prominence to the noble goal of promoting equity in education, the United Nations assigned goal 4 of the MDGs, aimed at ensuring inclusiveness and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. In the years gone by, government efforts towards increasing universal access to basic education programmes and strategies meant to propel the achievement of this vision have been initiated (Okujagu, 2013) in Ghana. They include the capitation grant, free school uniforms, free exercise books, free pupil feeding when they attend school (Osei-Fosu, 2011) and free pupil school sandals. Access to basic education is also associated with preparation for lifelong learning. This is usually provided through basic education fundamental 'knowledge and skills' for use in further contexts of education (Akyeampong, 2004). In this regard, it is important to note that, in a well-planned and succinct legal framework as enshrined in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, article 25 of the Constitution provides for a right to education and stipulates that:

- a. Basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all;
- b. Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education;
- c. Education shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education;
- d. Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular, by progressive introduction of free education;
- e. Functional literacy shall be encouraged or intensified as far as possible;
- f. The development of a system of schools with adequate facilities at all levels shall be actively pursued. Basic education is, therefore, one of many rights in education that the constitution aims to support and provide. Though much has been done to increase and equalize opportunities, in the face of government and leadership's unwavering investment and commitment to removing all hurdles to education access, equity and inclusiveness, there still exist challenges in clearing the roadblocks to achieving this goal (Enos & Francis, 2016).

Hordes of research conducted reiterates on the impact of increasing access to basic education on retention outcomes. Other researches have also been done on the impact of public social policy initiatives on increasing enrolment but little is done on how increasing access and equity or otherwise could impact on the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (4); "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" which is a central plank to the achievement of all other goals combined. This study was carried out on the premise that poverty militates against equity and access to education, and by extension constitutes a huge stumbling block on the way of humanity to achieving SDG 4 and its integrated goals. It concludes by looking at whether poverty has a deleterious impact on stifling equity and access with regards to basic education within the broader framework of SDG. It then makes recommendations targeted at helping to trim, shape and reshape policy direction regarding basic education access and equity factors.

Relevant-related literature

Ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all has always been etched on the agenda tablet of the United Nations Organizations. As integral as it has always been, post-MDG period, in sustaining the inroads made and bringing the unrealized ones into fruition, the United Nations in September 2015 rolled out another grandiose policy framework christened the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) intended to among other things ensure that by 2030:

- a. All girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
- b. All girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education
- c. Ensure equal access for all women and men
- d. Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- e. All youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. The acceptance of this by the UN member states makes it binding for all to put in place measures directed towards its attainment.

According to UNESCO (2005), children out of school in sub-Saharan Africa between 2007–2012, peaked an

estimated 30 million. This paints an ignoble harrowing picture about the sub-region relative to the future of its human resource base and its overall future as that leaves more than half of the total global children population excluded. Whether the fight to bridging the somewhat ever-widening gap with regards to access to education is anything feasible challenge to be overcome remains to be seen. By virtue of Ghana's membership to the United Nations, it behooves her as a signatory to the UN charters to institute measures to lay the foundation and framework to support the achievement of the aims and goals that lie therein.

The UNESCO in 2005 observed that many children do not go to school, simply because there is no school nearby, there are not enough classrooms, or their parents cannot afford to pay school fees. UNESCO further observed that about 30% of children who do not have access to education live in rural areas compared to 18% in urban settings. Access to education is not the only crisis, but poor quality is holding back learning even for those who make it to school. A study conducted by K. Akyeampong, Rolleston, Ampiah, and Lewin (2012) concludes that access to education suffers from both the supply and demand sides of provision of education. The study observed that from the supply side of provision which concentrated on inputs, infrastructure is weak, buildings and classrooms are inadequate or unavailable, learning materials are in short supply, and teacher qualification is low. From the demand side, access problems arise in communities where the opportunity costs of school attendance are high and where school quality is low. The government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service (GES) introduced social interventions to facilitate the attainment of two major dimensions of access to education: affordability and availability. The GES was tasked to make education both affordable and available to Ghanaians. The main interventions included the school feeding programme and the capitation grant. The school feeding programme was an intervention designed to provide pupils with a balanced meal in a day and targets basic schools with enrolment problems and high levels of poverty. The capitation grant was introduced to end to the charging of school fees. The capitation grant was the government's commitment to providing free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE).

Over the years in Ghana, the preeminent desire to achieve social and economic progress through increasing access to education has increased government's commitment in ensuring so much to be done. Apart from committing itself to the formulating the universal basic education policy in 1995, and set 2015 as the policy timeline for the achievement of the objectives, it also

introduced certain cluster of specific policies like the capitation grant, free pupil school feeding programme, free pupil school uniform programme, free pupil school sandals programme and a pupil teaching policy module under the National Youth Employment programme meant to train and supply teachers to fill in gaps in the classrooms, whiles bridging the teacher-student ratio, and the same time increasing access. The capitation grant called for the abolition of tuition fee payment at the basic level (Akyeampong, 2009) whiles the school feeding programme-guaranteed pupil per head free lunch at school (Iddrisu, 2018). The free school uniform and sandals helped provide pupils with clothing and footwears for school. Given the focus of this research paper – which attempts to investigate access to basic education challenges in poverty-endemic areas and its possible ramifications on the achievement of the global goal number 4, and the strenuous painstaking efforts exerted by governments over the years, the outstanding multi-million-dollar puzzle-like question still remaining unresolved is: Are the access roadblocks to basic education in the poverty prone rural areas subdued?

Theoretical framework

The principal theoretical underpinning of this study was based on the incremental model of policy formulation and the social justice theory. In consistency with the views of proponents of the incremental model, emphasis is duly placed on continuation of government policies and programmes with an expected attendant improvement in previous and/or existing policies and programmes. Incrementalists are of the strong notion that fashioning and devising antidotes to complexly interwoven problems usually imply practising incrementalism with an appreciable blend of flexibility and dexterity (Lindblom, 1979). Incrementalism as a set of theoretical bases is reservedly conservative. This is because, it considers existing policies and programmes as a base while placing attention on new policies or programmes and/or modifications of existing policies or programmes (Lindblom, 1959). Sustainable development Goal 4 happens to be a policy emanating from a previous policy; thus, the millennium development goals which also sought to address the issue of accessibility, equity and inclusiveness. From 1951, years before Ghana attained a self-determination status, there was a program of action: the accelerated development plan and the Education Act of 1961 which increased enrolment at the basic level. These provisions made primary and middle schools free and compulsory for all children. The policy continued undisrupted until in 1966 when cost sharing in the use of textbooks and stationery was introduced. And when the 1992 constitution

came into force, in response to the strong demands of the citizenry at that time, government introduced the free and compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE). Many citizens excoriated the model on grounds that it did not explain dramatic policy change. This however reiterated, the incremental decision-making is intended to affect more remedial impacts and directed towards assuaging social imperfections and challenges than enhancing the promotion of future social goals. Within the context of incremental model practices, decision-makers accept the legitimacy of previous policies and programmes.

On the other breadth, central to the ideologies of the Social Justice theory, and inextricably tied to its doctrines include the principle of equity, inclusiveness, equality and fairness to all social groupings irrespective of circumstances of birth, race, gender, etc. Social Justice literature is widespread with conceptual definitions and tenets of the theory (Bogotch, 2002; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gewirtz, 1998; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). Gewirtz (1998) provides a meaning of social justice centred on the ideas of disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes. Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) define social justice “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions”. However, Bogotch (2002) asserts that social justice is a social construction and that “there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices”. The definition of social justice for this study was informed by the work of Gewirtz (1998) as well as Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) who concentrate issues of social justice on the ultimate concern for situations of marginalization. Bogotch (2002) also puts forward a treatise that interlocks social justice

with education. In commensuration with the definitions of the scholars adduced, the definition of social justice for this study is steeped in daily realities of barriers to basic education access in Ghana. For the purposes of this study, social justice is conceptualized to mean fairness, inclusiveness, equity and the extension of a level playing field for all without discrimination or favour. This definition is pivoted on addressing and redressing issues of clearing inequity and marginalization related to basic education access, thus, inclusive schooling practices for all students. Sapon-Shevin (2003) minces no word in stating that, “Inclusion is about social justice. ... By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us”. The definition used for this study also builds on Sapon-Shevin’s groundwork linking inclusive schooling and social justice.

Research methodology

The study was done in selected public schools in two (2) selected districts each in six (6) purposefully sampled regions. The samplings were made with recourse to the incidence of poverty as reported by the 2015 Ghana poverty Mapping Report. Five (5) public basic schools were selected in each of the two (2) districts in the selected study areas. Overall, the study focused on six (6) regions: Ashanti Region, Brong-Ahafo, Northern, Upper-East, Upper-West and the Volta Region. Sekyere-Afram Plains North and Ejura-Sekyere Dumasi districts in the Ashanti region of Ghana recorded a poverty incidence level of 59.6% and 47.0%, respectively. In the Brong Ahafo Region, Kintampo South and Banda district had 78.3% and 78.0%. East Gonja district and the Bole district in the Northern Region had 84.2% and 79.4% according to the report. Builsa South and Bawku West in the upper-East region raked in 84.4% and 79.4%. Whereas Wa west and Wa east in the Upper-West region had 92.4% and 83.8%, respectively, in the Volta Region, the Adaklu district and the Kadjebi district scored 89.7% and 66.8% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2015). The

Table 1. Sample of respondents interviewed for the Study.

REGIONS	DISTRICTS	RESPONDENTS SELECTED					
		HEADS	PUPILS	TUTORS	PARENTS	DoEs	OP. LDS
Brong Ahafo	Kintampo South	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Banda	5	10	10	10	1	2
Ashanti	Sekyere Afram Plains North	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Ejura Sekyedumasi	5	10	10	10	1	2
Volta	Adaklu	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Kadjebi	5	10	10	10	1	2
Upper West	Wa-West	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Wa-East	5	10	10	10	1	2
Upper East	Builsa South	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Bawku West	5	10	10	10	1	2
Northern	East Gonja	5	10	10	10	1	2
	Bole	5	10	10	10	1	2
Total	12	60	120	120	120	12	24

Source: Research Team survey

Note: DoEs= Directors of Education **OP. LDS**= Opinion Leaders.

study assumed that access to education, as a sine qua non to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all as captured by the sustainable development Goal 4 is threatened by social, economic, cultural and political factors.

From the [Table 1](#) below, a graphical representation of the classification and number of respondents is captured. In all, a total of 456 respondents were interviewed. As part of the study design, relevant data were gathered from key informants. In each of the selected schools, two (2) teachers, one (1) headmaster and two (2) students were interviewed. Also, two (2) opinion leaders were randomly selected in each district. The district directors of education, in addition to ten (10) randomly selected parents in the various districts were also interviewed. To enhance an in-depth grasp of the subject matter under review, a focus group discussion (FGD) session was held for ten (10) randomly selected students and teachers. The large sample size used in the study was to ensure adequate across interest stakeholder representation. The huge number of respondents and number of regions sampled made data collection herculean as it required the need to invest time and resources into visiting and meeting respondents. Above all, the need to prevail upon them to yield to the request of establishing a rapport to ease responding to the research questions was another challenge because according to them, they have been respondents of a host of similar previous researches which they are yet to realise the fruits of the findings. A semi-structured interview guide was used to help achieve what the study sought to investigate. This was aided by the use of the case study approach. The interview process took the form of a conversation which was made possible by the prior establishment of a cordial relationship between the respondents and the research team. The interactive nature of the interview made it easy to probe respondents and make follow-ups to help fill gaps when the need arose.

Data management and analysis

The study made use of the inductive process of analysis in order to establish the research themes and place discussions within proper contexts. After a contemporaneous paper entry and electronic recording of responses, transcriptions of interviews were conducted and observations notes analysed with the help of an open coding system to aid systematic alignment and structuring in the coding of the data. After going through the transcribed data, themes labelling and naming ensued which led to the development and setting of the research boarders in line with the research questions within the precincts of the study purpose. Initial

codes developed comprised Health and disability challenges, Teacher lateness and Absenteeism, Environment and Household Influences on pupils and Migration. Others included Economic challenges/Child labour, Location/Distance, Teacher supply and qualification Factors, Distance to and location of schools and weak stakeholders' relationship. These feedbacks from the field interactions with the respondents as captured in discussions in the following responses exposed the afore listed as emblematic characteristic challenge of basic education access in Ghana.

Results and findings

From the analysis, the emerging highlights which corroborated the setbacks to access to basic education in Ghana focused on: Health and disability challenges, Teacher lateness and Absenteeism, Environment and Household Influences on pupils and Migration. Others include, Economic challenges/Child labour, Location/Distance, Teacher supply and qualification Factors, Distance to and location of schools and weak stakeholders' relationship. These feedbacks from the field interactions with the respondents are captured in discussions in the following responses:

Responses from headteachers

Interacting with headmasters of the various-selected public schools was somehow difficult because they considered some information too sensitive to share. They insisted the research team provided proof of clearance and approval secured from the education authorities to conduct the research in their institutions. This the research team willingly provided. In our probing dialogue with the headteachers, it became clear that there were grave challenges crippling education access in Ghana. A headteacher Issakura in Sekyere Kumawu indicated the following statements:

school infrastructure is a problem here. This is a school under tree. We have no classroom. it is risky for both teachers and pupils. Anytime there is a torrential rainfall or whirlwind it pulls the structures away. And we have to go to the bush, cut raffia, trees and come and put up another structure. It gets worst for us in the rainy season. The nature of the structure discourages parents from bringing their wards to school.

At Wenamda, the headteacher said:

We are handicapped in terms of basic infrastructures like classrooms, teacher's accommodation, computer laboratory, text books etc. You can see our school buildings. It doesn't befit the status of a structure for human learning and habitation. The cracked walls are

dangerous for pupils. Currently we have shut down our nursery class and transferred the class into a temporal thatch roofed rafters-supporting structure because it can cave in at any time. We have complained yet nothing is done.

Another headteacher at Nante school also said:

The erratic disbursement of the capitation grant is a problem. This was introduced to help increase access. Without the grant, school heads are unable to provide for certain things. We have no teacher's bungalow. The teachers live in the city centres. It takes them hours to reach here. This has hampered punctuality. Chronic lateness, truancy and absenteeism is now a commonplace.

At Kanka in the Banda district, the headteacher said:

poverty situation is a constraint to education. Parents here don't have money. They are unable to provide for their children. Children do not come to school because of this. This has pushed some girls into unhealthy boy-girl relationships.

Each headteacher interviewed had a one concern. Many had the conviction that, government is not doing enough to help raise the level of education, more especially in the deprived areas. Government as the mother regulator in charge of resources and its distribution is not ensuring its equitable distribution. And this according to most of the headteachers is taking a toll on education, and by extension the future of the whole country. In almost all the schools visited across the six regions in the selected districts, it was clear schools lacked infrastructures like school buildings, computer laboratory, library and also, teaching and learning materials were in acute shortage (Avotri, 2000 ; Care International, 2003 ; Fentiman, Hall, & Bundy, 1999) reaffirm the above findings in their respective researches. In their view, education in some districts and for some communities in Ghana is quite challenging especially for populations living in poor, rural areas. World Bank (2004) asserts that teacher absenteeism was more likely to be rife if poor working conditions, low morale, and high pupil-teacher ratio are on the rise. Bennell and Akyeampong (2006) typifies such situations as one that smacks of a malaise education system that is unable to manage teachers effectively, have weak teacher management structures, and are unable to provide incentives to motivate teachers to improve their attitudes to work.

Responses from students

At the initial stages of the research team's probing conversation with most of the pupils in the case study areas, it was obvious that they felt intimidated and shy. But after series of encounters which facilitated the building of a rapport, they felt at ease and later proved

very strong in the outpour of their views on what they think constitute obstacles to basic education access in their areas. When the selected few were interviewed, they had this to say:

We don't have good classrooms, no computer laboratory, desks, sufficient exercise books and textbooks to use, we don't have enough teachers because they refuse to come to the villages like this to teach.

This demonstrated the depths of the challenges pupil encounter on daily basis in accessing education. This view was consistent with almost all pupils interviewed. The issue of the infrastructure and teaching and learning materials availability, per the interactions had, stands as a grave one in the heart of the discourse of education access challenges.

Another pupil had this to say: "one of the challenges to access in this community is poverty. Our parents are poor. We don't get enough money to pay our school bills and buy books. My friends are unwilling to come to school because of money. Some come to school empty stomach. My school does not have the school feeding programme. This is a problem".

Another comment was:

"We ladies have problems with sanitary conditions. During menstruation some don't come to school because no sanitary pads to use. We use old clothing rags and papers. We cannot buy because parents don't have money". Fentiman, Hall, and Bundy (2001) support the claim that health status has implications for attendance with girls reporting more problems like painful menstruation, lack of sanitary facilities and this could result into absenteeism and drop-out of adolescent girls.

Another pupil also said that:

It is like almost every year, we have an issue of a teacher having an affair with a student and end up impregnating her. Some of these things affect access to education.

These were frustrations from pupils on some of the things they consider as impediments to education access in their areas and in Ghana in general. Their responses indicated that, the issue of access is an issue with wide-ranging themes not only restricted to infrastructure and teaching and learning materials but also by the degree to which children are provided with their personal care needs. This is confirmed in a seminal research work by (Academy for educational development & ERNWACA, 2002; Bennell, 2006; World Bank, 2004; Akyeampong, 2003; Hedges, 2002; Akyeampong & Asante, 2006; Casely-Hayford & Wilson, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2005; Care International, 2003; ActionAid, 2000).

In providing concrete evidence of the manifestation of the impact of the school feeding programme, and how it

could help increase basic education access (Abotsi, 2013; Essuman & Bosumtwi-Sam, 2013) as cited by Iddrisu (2018), “the assurance of a single meal a day has helped increase enrolment and attendance”. From the field interactions with the respondents as reflected in the foregoing discussions, it is obvious the extension of the school feeding programme would help relieve poor parents of some financial obligations while helping to increase access and improving equity.

Responses from teachers

Most teachers were unwilling to take part in the studies. However, upon sharing the focus of the studies with them several times in an interaction, they budgeted in to participate. From my field observations with respondents before, during and after classes hours in the case study areas, teachers appeared challenged, with respect to provisions in the absence of which has made basic education access a headache.

Teachers at Wechiau said that:

We don't have sufficient infrastructure like school buildings, computer laboratory, library, teacher's apartments and other basic things. We also don't have sufficient teachers in the schools. Teachers hardly accept postings into this part of the country because it's a village. There is no accommodation for teachers. Teachers rent accommodation at exorbitant prices then commute to school on foot daily.

This reinforces a research outcome by Avotri (2000) who confirms that, rural schools have the least number of qualified teachers and the highest pupil-teacher ratios, inadequate supply of teaching resources and basic facilities.

Another set of teachers also had this to say:

Most of the students financially challenged. The pupils as sources of labour would have to work to cater for themselves and their families while schooling. It is either they go to farm with their parents, work on people's farm or tend for cattle's on and off school days and even during school hours as part of efforts to provide employment and domestic support to their families.

During field visit to some farming communities within the case study areas, the use of pupils as money-making machines especially by parents was confirmed. We observed instances where parents either personally came to the schools or sent people to pick their wards from school for farm-related labour activities. In situations where teachers proved adamant, a serious conflict ensued between the teachers and parents and worst of it all, on rare occasions between the teachers and the entire community. In trying to find ways of amicably resolving some of these challenges, teachers proposed for the forging of

a strong bond between the local authorities and the schools.

A teacher elsewhere also recounted that:

Poverty is militating against access to education. Some of the children come to school without eating. There is no school feeding programme here., They come to school without learning materials. The school doesn't have materials to share for pupils. We don't have enough desks. That is why children are sitting in pairs on a mono desk

The deficit in school desk as observed on field proved to be serious. In some communities, pupils were seen sitting on bare grounds writing in their books. On the other hand, Fentiman et al. (2001) confirm poverty as a phenomenon that keeps communities disconnected.

Responses from parents

Parents as central stakeholders of education were also not left out. Their perspective on the challenges to basic education access was also sought for. In the end, it contributed to enriching the multi varying lenses of the discourse. In our interaction with the parents, one key theme that recurred incessantly was poverty. In an interaction with a single parent at Akanyakrom, she narrated that:

Life is difficult for us parents. I want to my children educated to the highest level, but for financial challenges. There are times my children don't go to school. I give them money when I have. I am unable to give if I don't have.

Another at Zebilla said that:

I am a farmer. I am unable to hire laborers for my farming activities. So, I take my children to the farm to work for me. If they don't help me I won't get money to take care of them.

Another at *Maluwe* said that: “Some teachers have capitalised on the poverty situation in this area to lure our daughters into relationships. They end the future of our daughters by impregnating them and even complicate the hardships for their families”.

In the views of (Blunch & Verner, 2000; Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997; Glewwe & Jacoby, 1995), poverty-induced child labour can have a huge tendency to cause an impediment to basic education access.

At Ponyetanga, a teacher remarked that:

Most of the schools don't have enough teachers, sufficient teaching and learning materials and parents too don't have money to provide them their needs. We wish we could but for the lack of job and hence a sustainable source of income.

At parent at *Kwala*” also said that:

Infrastructure is a problem. Our children have no classroom to sit in. They sit under trees. The only classroom block is weakening and it is now on the

verge of collapse. Whenever we ask them to go to school.

“The failure of teachers to accept postings into our district has deprived us of quality teachers. This has created a human resource gap. Most of the teachers in the districts are teachers without the required qualification and professionalism to teach. To some extent this affects access and quality of education in the district”. This was the worry of another parent at “*Vea Akugrebisi*” in the Bongo district.

A parent at Holomuni also said that:

“Some environmental factors and the illiteracy levels among the parent population here also affects access to basic education. Most parents, especially the uneducated ones have little or no appreciation for education so they do not see the need to educate their children. This has created an environmental limitation on access”- Hashim (2005) confirms this in a research conducted in the Northern Regions. According to him, the chances of children’s access to school is hinged on a myriad of complex-interlaced factors which may include parents’ level of education and the ability to afford costs of schooling. Yeboah (1997); Academy for educational development & ERNWACA (2002); Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang (2004) & Avotri (2000) assert that, access to education to some extent has some gender undertones relative to families and communities’ perceptions about roles of girls, opportunity cost of sending girls to school and other considerations fuelled by some prejudice and anachronistic beliefs and practices that favour the males, whiles maligning the females.

“Some schools are very discriminative against admitting physically challenged students. I have a son who is physically challenged. Fortunately for me, she has a sharper learning acumen. She is very good in school. There are a host of other physically challenged kids, including the visually, speech and audibly impaired who are not in school because of some of these discriminations and the lack of priority for special education needs (SEN)”. This was the narrative of other parents at Aragbida in Zebilla. According to Obeng (2007) many teachers are often unwilling to have children with disabilities in their class.

Responses from directors of education

The central position of the directors of education of the various study areas made it imperative for their inclusion. From the onset, some of them wanted to remain reticent in responding to the research questions for fear of victimization from their superiors. But upon series of discussions on the pertinence of the outcome helping to inject reforms into our education system, they obliged.

A director stressed in an interview that:

Lack of classrooms, school desks for pupils, teaching and learning materials for both teachers,

accommodation for teachers are major hurdles to basic education access in my area of supervision. The structures here are decrepit. It is shameful to see students learning under trees, sharing desks meant for one person. Others even come to school with stool chairs from their homes. There is actually pressure here on facilities and all these affect access, quality and equity.

Another director remarked that:

the number of teaching and learning materials, specifically, text books and others pale into insignificance, given the huge student population some of the schools have. At times, three students would have to share one text book during reading sessions. This hampers tuition.

“The high illiteracy rates amongst parents across the length and breadth of the surrounding communities is another constraint to basic education access issues. Some of the parents have the unfortunate mindset that, life is all about money and that education does not matter so the earlier they think their children start searching for money the better. Others also hold the notion that, why should they take their wards to school when others have completed university without jobs in the communities. All these are challenges to us here”, said another director. Hashim (2005) and Johnson and Kyle (2001) contend that education access to a larger extent is informed by household’s expectation.

“Other anti-feminine gendered beliefs and stereotypes”, according to another director:

restricts access. Some parents have the notion that the reserve of the girl child is the kitchen. By this they see no need in getting their wards to school out of the impression that the girl child would get married to a man in future

In the Volta region, Adaklu a director said that:

“because parents are not financially sound, it affects children’s access to school. The poverty level is unbearable. Pupils go to school without food. And quite unfortunately, the school feeding programme which is the lean-on option for the pupils does not cover all schools. With this difficulty, pupils either refuse going to school or parents do not take their wards to school”.

“The distances between communities and the schools is too far such that pupils are discouraged from going to school. In siting schools, I think certain community proximity factors ought to be considered. For whatever reasons partisan political considerations are allowed to take sway. Government hardly consults and involves we stakeholders in the decision to establish community schools. Government executes the projects just to fulfill a political promise. This overly politicization of education, does not help the growth of our education”.

“Actually, whiles there are good teachers, there are equally bad nuts disgracing the profession. Some of

them impregnate their students. This is too sad and unfortunate for us to bear”, says another director.

Responses from opinion leaders

Opinion leaders were also selected for interview. Relative to this research study, people considered as having authority within the study areas were considered as opinion leaders. They include: Traditional leaders like Chiefs, Religious leaders, local government representatives, community representatives, amongst other personalities and position occupiers as determined by the social structure of the study area. This explains their indispensable position in so far as this research work is concerned. The frustration on the faces of the interviewees was as clear as sunshine. Their responses indicated their worry about the access-related challenges that have plagued their vulnerable societies.

A traditional leader said that:

“We are plagued by a whole lot of challenges including, but not limited to the unhealthy sexual relationship between teachers and their students within the community. This has resulted into the truncation of the education of a host of teenage school girls in the district” A catholic parish priest lamented same elsewhere.

An assembly person representative at “*Drobonso*” indicated that:

“High illiteracy and poverty are a major problem for us. Most parents are not educated so don’t see the need to get their sons and daughters educated. And for those who know the value of education”. The sanaahene (treasurer) who stepped in for the absentee Chief, amongst other things chided “irresponsible parenting in the community as an obstruction to education access”.

“Most of the schools here have poor infrastructure. The school don’t have sufficient teaching and learning materials like the text books to facilitate learning. As such, students share books in groups and also desks are shared beyond their seating capacity. Teachers have no safe cupboards to keep the few available teaching and learning materials “says the traditional leader in a study area in the upper east region

On the issue of poverty, one opinion leader at “*Makango*” also recalled that;

there are times students go to school without money and food. And in this area, it is not all the schools who have the school feeding programme. Without feed, children are reluctant to go to school.

“The Location of the schools in this sparsely populated communities are not helping access. The schools are far away from the communities. One school serves a host of communities. And children have to walk for three miles to and from school. There are times they either don’t go

to school at all or they get to school late. The situation gets compounded when the footpaths gets flooded in the rainy season. The distance also discourages them from going to school”, confirmed an opinion leader in the Volta Region. This concern repeated itself during interviews with other respondents in the other districts. The issue of school feeding and its potency to increasing access finds strength in Iddrisu (2018) who reiterates how the school feeding programme helps in this regard. Distance and location in relations to access is extensively treated by (Ministry of Education, 2002; Hashim, 2005). In their view, education access tends to be more challenging in the hinterlands caught in the web of socio-economic quagmires like poverty, illiteracy, economic stagnation, health and other associated challenges.

A former member of Parliament revealed that:

Poor school-community relationship is another impediment to basic education access in Ghana. There is supposed to be a good relationship between the school and the community. This is germane to improving access. Whenever this is lacking, there easily develops a rift between stakeholders and communities could easily pull out the plug, prove uncooperative and more easily distance itself from the school.

Another Chief who reiterated that:

This is without prejudice and any attempt to denigrate the good works of other hardworking teachers. Some teachers behave unprofessionally and immorally. Some have impregnated our daughters and left them to their fate. And though we have School Management Committees (SMC), supposed to be composed of community and teacher representatives tasked with school decision-making within the communities, some heads of schools prove too autocratic, take decisions without consulting us and without recourse to due transparent processes and procedures.

The feedback given by the chief, which was in tandem with what had been shared by other stakeholders at other places indicated to us that, in as much as a healthy community-school relationship was fruitful for education access, it was still a big problem. As part of our efforts to dig into the issues, we initiated steps to get in touch with some members of the School Management Committee (SMC) and others serving as executives on the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) to get a fair, yet in-depth pictorial explanation of what exactly the problem is. We however observed in some areas where communities participated in decision-making process through School Management Committees and PTAs; participated in the school through material, financial help and community labour for constructing school buildings and facilities, and the overall teaching and learning process helped in improving access,

with some local authorities in other areas strongly entreating their communities to cooperate with school. With respect to the responses, as confirmed in a study by Academy for educational development & ERNWACA (2002) some respondents indicated that community participation increases access as the involvement of the chief, elders and parents with children in school in enrolment compel parents and other guardians alike to send their children to school. And when some of them were contacted for the study, it was revealed that, even though some were conscious of their roles, many of them did not know exactly what they were appointed to do. As a result, there is a disjoint in the activities of some members. One member contacted for the study, for instance, said that: *“if the headmaster does not call us, we have no business in the school’s affairs”*. This further goes to explain how a weak stakeholder relationship in most communities impedes access. The question therefore is, how can an effective school–community relationship strengthen and improve access? And what could be the reason for the laxity in effort and non-involvement of the community in school affairs. All these are research areas to be commissioned after this study.

Summary, conclusion and recommendations

The commitment of the community of nations to ensuring the promotion of access, equity and inclusiveness has been one profoundly pronounced for more than a century now. This is evidenced in international conventions and resolutions like the just-ended Millennium Development Goals and the 2015- incepted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among other things, one thing that has remained overarchingly common is the recognition of education by all as a sound tool for sound multi-pronged multi-sectoral social development. In addition to this, the admission of education as a fundamental human right and as a superstructure foundation for progress in all sectors of every country’s development is lucid. By this, it becomes obvious that central to the realization of all the 17-point sustainable development Goals (SDGs) is education. Sustainable Development Goal 4 encompasses a more ambitious and transformative drive to widening and broadening the frontiers of the global education agenda by creating an enabling atmosphere for all young people to complete a basic education cycle including quality pre-primary education; acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies for work, entrepreneurship and life; experiencing good quality teaching and inclusive classroom practices; and accessing educational opportunities in sync with equity, flexibility and adaptability. The targets set forth in the broad global goal would not only serve as a guide towards progress relative to education

outcomes but also facilitate sustainable social and economic development for countries and communities by aiding the poor in the area of education.

It is evident from the research findings and literature that, though efforts have been made over the years till now, and it is likely to continue unabated, harrowing challenges to education access still persists in varying context-specific dimensions – precisely more unfavourably pervasive in the rural areas than in the urban and peri-urban centres in developing countries – like Ghana. This research investigations identified key evidences from stakeholders on issues of impediments to access to basic education in Ghana and possible implications of the issues for policy and further research. From the discourses had, it is clear that poverty is at the root of the challenges to basic education access in Ghana. As observed, in almost all situations where poverty is rife, access is hugely challenged by such conditions. Improving access to basic education will not obviously require a straitjacket or single barrel approach but rather a gradual, cautious efficacy and efficiency results-orientated strategy involving stakeholders’ active participation.

We hope that this research will help provided the basis for more research-based policies to improve policy-related access factors for all children in Ghana, especially the most vulnerable and socio-economically deprived children in the society. In the quest for quality education, Ghana has implemented diverse curriculum innovations and policies targeting individual and national goals.

However, there leaves much to be desired as the result has been that the intended goals have not been achieved and access to basic education has continues remain a mirage and unendingly seem to elude Ghanaians. The study, therefore, came out with the following suggestions to help shape basic education access policy direction of the country. To better achieve the objective of the millennium development goal of increasing access to basic education, which is cardinal to the achievement of the entire global goals, the study, therefore, suggests the following:

- There should be much effort in public education to reconscientise parents, especially the illiterate ones to broaden their horizons on the imperativeness of not only education in general, but also on the need to get the girl-child educated. This effort should be a joint one between both State/Government and non-state/Governmental/civil society organizations.
- Government should also strictly enforce the facet of the law on compulsory basic education and hand down punitive sanctions to non-conforming/compliant parents who fail/refuse to get their wards in schools. In this regard, community leadership could

complement or augment the effort by enacting by laws that would compulsorily enjoin parents to send their children to school. Communities could incept household monitoring teams or task force, charged with the responsibility to exercising oversight responsibility on seeing to it that children of school going age in households within their assigned jurisdictions are in school during school hours.

- From the research in almost all the study areas, it became clear that, because of the unduly bias value some parents place on the boy child's education ahead of that of the girl child, access is a phenomenon that has assumed a gendered anti-feminine dimension. The study, therefore, recommends the opening of girl's schools to ensure proper grooming and mentoring of the girl child. It is believed that the successful mentoring of the girl child would obviously result into the production of many mentees.
- Considering the spate of lateness and absenteeism and its impact on equity, access and quality education, the research recommends amongst other things that teachers be placed on performance contract. This will motivate teachers to give out their best in order to achieve more. Some teachers are found to be regularly late and absent from school. And one reason for the despondency in performance could be ascribed to the fact that their salary is not dependent on their presence or output in the school or on any performance-based scheme. Placing teachers on performance contract will make teachers give out their best and to justify the salary they take.
- Facilities at the various schools need to be offered a facelift to suit the standard of a modern educational edifice fit and germane to support learning. More infrastructures are needed to cater for the growing number of children in basic schools. The provision of these facilities should not be designed to accommodate numbers, but also, should take into cognizance quality concerns. Since the enhanced level of infrastructure has the tendency to influence access, it would not be misplaced for authorities to increase their commitment to providing the needed infrastructure to help bridge the yawning access gap.
- The introduction of the capitation grant linked intended to provide opportunity and fee-free support for children from poor households to access basic education needs to be reformed. This research suggests to the government of Ghana to inject some appreciable dosage of efficiency and effectiveness in the scheme, more especially with

regards to fund disbursement. Among other things, timely disbursement of the fund to the respective schools should be ensured to help the remove the cost barrier to basic education access. This is significant for policy to addressing access to basic education challenges.

- From the research, one theme that became quite poignant and pervasive across the responses was one related to how the issue of access has become emblematic for mostly poor rural areas as well as for other densely populated urban poor areas. This could possibly imply that, areas with such characteristics are potentially challenged areas likely to experience a deficit in education, especially in the area of basic education access. Within the broader populations of such areas, there are likely a segment of them with the difficulty of sending their wards of school going age to school because of poverty-induced challenges. This research puts forward the recommendation that government should aid financially challenged households with pupils. A full or partial scholarship may be of immense help. In identifying the needy group, we suggest merit-based means-testing method or any other efficient needy identification schemes as a mode for tracking the poor. In our view, we contend that, for a meaningful basic education as a right to be extended to all classes of people, especially the socially marginalized, it must take into consideration the differing circumstances of all social classes, more especially households in areas under harsh conditions which requires special measures and attention to ameliorate their condition. For such population classes, they have limited options. Unlike the affluent who have the wherewithal to send their wards to high fee-paying private school.
- State and non-state actors should expend more strength and invest resources into expanding access and completion of basic education. And to make basic education appealing, whiles increasing access, stakeholders must emphasize on the following: quality teacher supply, institution of an effective school management system, timely supply of teaching and learning resources, regular attendance, checking teacher and student lateness/absenteeism, etc., which are all central to the proposition that basic education is fundamental to all populations regardless of the social circumstances and location.
- To help address the menace whereby poverty deprives children of food before attending school, the government of Ghana needs to increase its effort

in extending the School Feeding Programme to more deprived communities. In line with this, the research also suggests the identification of school feeding beneficiary intuitions be more inclined to pro-poor considerations.

- In the course of the research, we realised that, some school children were in school barefooted. Whiles others were unable, some were unwilling to attend school because they had no footwear. Because of this, we suggest government and other private hands and/organizations join hands in providing such schools with sandals to help increase access and equity. Government as a matter of urgency should stick to committing itself to implementing such a public social policy intervention.
- The Free School Uniform policy that allowed the distribution of school uniforms to pupils, must as a matter of urgency and necessity be intensified, more particularly in the rural areas. Relative to this, the distribution must be pro-poor based and even possible, a database of the needy-targeted population created to help ensure efficiency and effectiveness. From the interviews conducted, it was clear that whiles the previous distribution was limited in supply, the distribution was done out of discretion of the distribution agency and or personnel, without any assessment of the poverty situation of targeted beneficiaries. It was also clear that the legibility of prospective or potential beneficiaries of the benefits was not confirmed. And because this was the situation, the genuinely in-need students were eluded of the benefits. We hereby suggest that the vulnerable be targeted for social intervention programmes. On this score, studies be undertaken and a framework succinctly established and clarified in terms of the basis and a measuring standard requirement for prospective beneficiary.
- Moreover, it was again observed that, there was a dearth of focus on special education to meet the needs of the physically challenges with most of the human resources in the education sector bereft of the required skills to tutor students with disabilities. This deficiency per the observation and findings of this research had engendered discrimination against the physically impaired pupils. As a result, we recommend that, teachers be given training that meets the standards to provide for the academic needs of such pupils. We also recommend that national priority be given to a nationwide establishment of schools with full task of admitting and tutoring the impaired.
- Given the enormous wealth of benefits that belies good school–community relationship, we posit that the educational institutions strengthen and cement

the relationship between the not only the schools and the communities but also with other stakeholders. Community representatives on school management bodies should be educated on the pertinence of their roles. During our interaction with some of them, it appeared most of the community members selected to represent community interest did not even know their roles. Conversely, in areas where they were trained on many programmes to enhance their skills on school management failed to exercise their responsibility. As a result of this laxity in gatekeeper collaboration, we recommend the intermittent organization of refresher programmes for all stakeholders to rekindle their commitment to promoting basic education.

- In meeting the sanitation and health needs of the girl child, the research recommends for the inception of a public social policy programme that would guarantee the provision/supply of pubescent school pupil with sanitary pads. Given the unaffordability of sanitary pads especially to the poor, the research again recommends the enjoyment of subsidies sanitary pad purchase by school children. On the other hand, we also recommend for the distribution of menstrual cups to basic school pupils. Comparing the price of disposable sanitary pads to the menstrual cups, the latter is relatively economical as it could be rinsed and reused.
- To help alleviate poverty and socio-economically empower communities and parents to the level of being financially capable of meeting responsibilities, we entreat government and non-government entities to capitalize on the resource endowments of the study areas, most of which are agrarian based and provide employment for the denizens. With respect to this, we recommend that government reignites its commitment to creating and extending rural enterprise projects to some of these communities. The provision of low or free interest loan facilities as a startup capital to community's members is something we recommend government and other financial cooperate bodies assign due and necessary priority.

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Data Availability

The raw data (the administered questionnaires) and recorded interactions informing the findings and conclusion of this article are freely available. All other materials such as consent form are equally available upon request.

Disclosure

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Ethical Approval

The researchers respected the rights of the respondents and ensured that informed consent was completed before the administration of the questionnaires. Again, a written permission was obtained from the outfits involved in the study prior to the implementation of study methods.

Authors' contributions

The study was conceived, analysed and written by Vincent Ekow Arkorful. He also handled field data collection in Ghana, data management and analysis and participated in the critical review of the manuscript. Ibrahim Basiru participated in the study design. Sadia Lukman, Awuah Andrews Anastasia Hammond, Latif Amadu participated in the critical review of the paper and offered suggestion that helped shape and restructure the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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