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Matey, Juabin

Divass Services

8 November 2020

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/104496/>
MPRA Paper No. 104496, posted 04 Dec 2020 03:10 UTC

ORIGINAL ARTICLE | ISSN (O): 2582–631X DOI:10.47857/irjms.2020.v01si02.038

The Effect of Free Senior High School Policy on the Lives of Parents and Wards in Ghana

Juabin Matey

Divass Services, Bolgatanga-Ghana

ABSTRACT

The free senior high school policy is one of best social and economic intervention policies that openly affect both parents and students of senior high schools. Parents and guardians especially, have been left off the hook of their economic and financial burden. This study therefore looks at the effect of introducing the free senior high school policy on the economic and social lives of parents and students respectively. Data were obtained from three hundred and thirty six (336) participants. A correlational cross-sectional descriptive design was used. Questionnaires were administered onto parents of wards in three senior high schools in the North East and Upper East Regions of Ghana. The study finds the introduction of the free senior high school policy as a relief to the financial burden of parents, especially guardians from rural and peri-rural settlements. Not just that, a few other public members who are fortunate, can now keep body and soul together through employment creation. Challengingly enough, there was a lack of adequate stakeholder consultation, hence saddled with implementation shortfalls. Delay in the disbursement of funds for feeding and learning materials presented yet another problem. It is important that governments find sustainable sources of funding the educational system and also ensure the double-track system is regularised into a single-track by expanding academic facilities and employing additional skilled and unskilled labour.

KEY WORDS: *Free Senior High School Education, Operationalisation, Policy, Parents*

JEL: I22, I24, I25, I26, I28, I31, I38

INTRODUCTION

It is quite normal not to find educational issues provoking as much passion as proposals to increase tuition and academic facility user fees in our educational institutions. Reasons for this mismatch are clear; it is not uncommon to find a clear statement of the repercussions of free tuition or high tuition fees (Alchian, 1977) (1). Likewise, it has not been that easy to identify what commentators perceive to be the consequence of alternative funding for education. In what seems to be a sharp support to the argument for the free cost of education, the United Nation's advocacy for an all access to education has gained patronage. Among the Sustainable Development Goals, number four addresses the issue of ensuring everyone "completes free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education" Mensah, 2019) (2).

Toeing this line, and as an improvement of what the National Democratic Congress Party started as a progressively free, the New Patriotic Party in Ghana, as one of its campaign promises and a flagship programme, allowed that the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) be implemented in its recognised status. This policy implementation was not without challenges. It ignited public debate on the sustainability and operationalisation of the system. Through the double-track, the shift system allows for students to go to school in batches, thus, while one batch is on holidays, the other is engaged in learning at school. This makes it possible to find students at home while their colleagues are in school. According to Botchway (2019) (3), this system is seen through its ability to improve school curricular and attendance, but appears to fail in delivery. Although there are many who have lauded the introduction of the double-track system which has given the graduants of the Junior high school the opportunity to have their way freely into the SHS, the question that rings in the minds of the concerned Ghanaian is; does the system have the quality needed to turn out well baked students as future leaders?

The antagonists of this policy however argued that it was a political gimmick and could not stand the test of real time. The argument that a poor individual cannot pay for education is deceptive. And indeed, the question of who a poor person is became contentious. Is the person a college calibre student? Failure to comprehend a college calibre student is a reflection of ignorance of two economic facts (1). One is the availability of human wealth that abounds our societies but untapped or unnoticed. The second economic fact is the

difference between the current earnings of the wealthy and the enhanced value of the poor from college training through the FSHSP.

Social and economic analysts on the other side contend that education has the power of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty on the African continent (Nsiah, 2019) (4). Education, according to this school of thought, melts illiteracy and ignorance. It stimulates innovation, bringing about inventions making the individual famous and globally popular (4). Most Ghanaian families barely survive economic conditions with their children seen dropping out of school for their inability to pay school fees thereby hitting the snag. With the implementation of the FSHSP, the economic woes of parents are seen to reduce considerably. This policy is in perfect agreement with the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of which Ghana is a signatory (Okrah, 2017) (5). These provisions allow for the disposable incomes of parents to indirectly appreciate. All these benefits notwithstanding, the operationalisation of the programme needs much to be desired. Planning at the outset was poorly done without giving enough time for the programme to find its proper footing. Planning a project, executing and implementing it need more time for viability. The FSHSP was trivialised and downplayed as it lacked proper and adequate planning time.

The synergists have however praised this policy for being good but described it as one on the verge of collapse due to poor planning. Not only this, sustainability of the programme is yet another consideration that has to be remembered. In his article on financial benefits of FSHSP to parents and the economy, (5) pointed out that, benefits of the policy are enormous as it enables farmers to gain through government purchase of their farm produce, thereby giving them ready market. (5) again revealed that businessmen and women who rely on equity and debt financing for their enterprises will be saved the hassle. This, (5) explains; by not paying wards school fees, the monies could be used to invest in assets which can go a long way to creating employment opportunities in the economy.

(3) identified a number of problems associated with the operationalisation of the FSHSP through the double-track system. Apart from the swelling figures of teenage pregnancies in our SHSs, the double-track, (3) lamented, could encourage truancy among students. (3) emphasised; it breeds fake holiday students as students who are scheduled to be on vacation may not be genuinely identified from the lazy ones in the batch supposed to be in school. This is detrimental to the taxpayer as he or she continues to pay for services not appropriately

received. The system has the potential for fewer contact hours with tutors. Parents are seen literally spending more than they previously spent on their wards education through attendance of extra classes by wards during holidays to prevent them from indulging in unfruitful activities and other social vices. Similarly, the double-track system creates unfairness as some schools are seen running a full time (normal school schedules as before in the single-track system) while others go double-track, limiting contact hours with tutors.

Talking on Adom FM, Dr. Daniel Yielpiere, a senior research fellow at the University of Education, Winneba, bemoaned the longevity of the stay at home by students as it escalates social vices in our societies. Dr. Daniel Yielpiere added that; the stay at home by students during a break of one of the tracks will make *“the devil find a job for idle hands”*. *“The objectives of the double-track system are to create room to accommodate an increase in enrollment, reduce class size, increase contact hours and increase the number of holidays”* (Adomonline.com) (6).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Educational Reforms

Various definitions have been suggested intended to mean education. Agu-Gyamfi and Addo (2016) (7, 8) refer to education as the act of imparting skills, knowledge, customs and values from one individual or generation to the other. Being the panacea for social and economic development, education is globally considered as a basic human right. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1984 (Article 26) enjoins every individual of able body and mind and willing, to be given free right to education at basic and subsequent stages where applicable (UNESCO, 2005) (9). (8) defines reforms as enacted attempts to correct an anomaly in an organizational setup. Educational reforms or policies according to (Psacharopoulos, 1989) (10), are decisions by policy makers tailored at bringing changes to the educational system that affect policy output. According to (God, 2005) (11), change is constant in our educational system, especially the learning standards, funding and cost bearing (2).

Empirically, (2) finds that although the FSHSP is plausible by way of increased enrolment numbers, it lacked adequate stakeholder consultation. He adds that the introduction of the FSHSP lacked adequate funding and logistics among others. Similarly, (8) identified reduction in economic burden on parents and guardians by way of absorbing tuition and feeding fees, recruitment of teachers to ease the unemployment menace as positive aspects of the system. Reechoing the position of (2) on the negatives of the policy, (8) also found overcrowding and pressure on existing infrastructure increasing maintenance cost. By way of purchasing farm produce from farmers to feed school children, it gives farmers ready market and eliminates the activities of middlemen thereby empowering our local farmers economically (5). Elaborating on how the FSHSP negatively impacted the society through the double-track system, Ayamga (2019) (12) captured the ranking member of education committee in Ghana’s Parliament, Peter Norsy-Kotoe as saying; “*within a spate of one year (2018-2019), over 1,433 girls at Senior High Schools across the country were impregnated and dropped out of school*”.

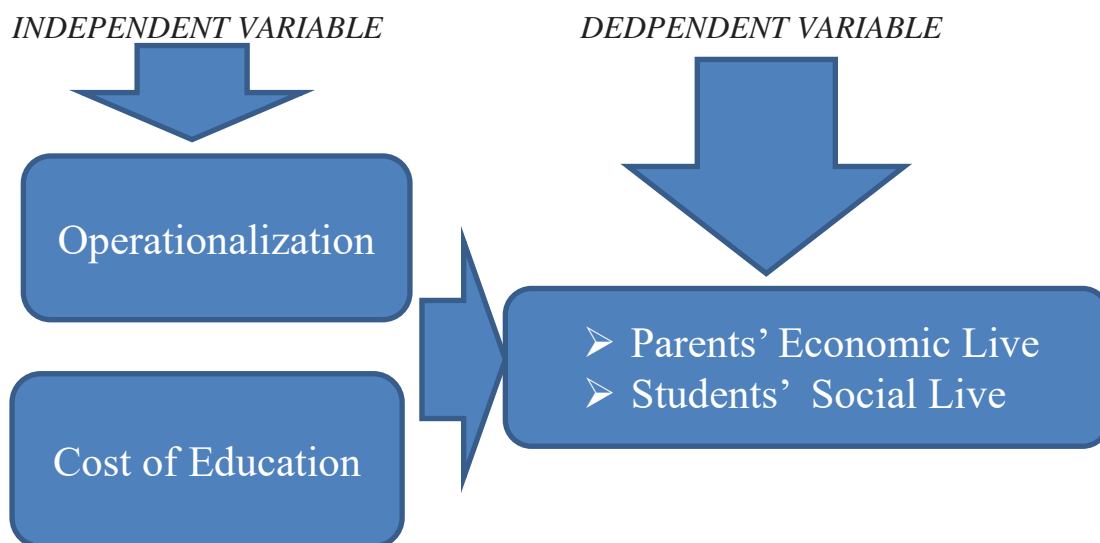


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Source: Researcher’s Own Construct (2020)

METHODOLOGY

Data were obtained using a cross sectional correlational research. This is a fixed non-experimental descriptive survey where the researcher measures the two variables of interest with little or no attempt to control extraneous variables and then assesses the relationship between them. Unlike the experimental descriptive survey, correlational descriptive survey only looks at beliefs, opinions and attitudes of participants without manipulating the independent variables in the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2001) (13, 14). Besides, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) (15) emphasise that a survey strategy allows for collected data to be quantitatively analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. I basically assessed the effect of free senior high school policy on parents and students in the North East and Upper East Regions of Ghana.

The study population comprised the parents of students from Bunkpurugu, Nakpanduri and Garu-Tempene senior high schools. A total of Three Hundred and Thirty Six (336) participants were purposively selected to respond to questions contained in the questionnaire. These participants were the real rural settlers amongst the population and had challenges financially and economically. This was made possible through consultation with tutors to identify lifeline students. Aside administration of questionnaires, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) was also organised with these participants on two occasions to solicit opinions.

STUDY VARIABLES

Outcome Variable

The economic lives of parents and social lifestyles of students were sub-categories of the dependent variable; Lifestyle. To effectively analyse data, the dependent variable (Lifestyle) assumed categorical values (Yes = 1, (when given a value of 4 and 5 for a given statement) and No = 0 (when given a score of 3, 2 and 1 for each provided statement). Each subset was assumed good (when rated a score of 4 or 5) and lifestyle not good (when rated a score of 3, 2 or 1). Responses that fell within 1, 2, & 3 were lumped as “No”=0, while scores 4 and 5 also grouped as “Yes”=1. The object of this categorisation was to obtain results for a “No” and “YES” responses.

Predictor Variable

The operationalisation of the FSHSP and the free cost of education were lumped as the independent variables.

Model Specification

Given the fact that the study had more than one independent variable, multiple-regression model was adopted. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) (16), a multiple-regression model is used when a group of independent variables together predict a given dependent variable. A multiple-regression model is used to measure the effect of two or more independent variables on a single dependent variable which may have sub-categories. The following equation was used;

$$LIFESTYLE = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (OPERA) + \beta_2 (COSTEDU) + \varepsilon \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where:

LIFESTYLE = is the dependent variable of the study measured in terms of parents economic conditions and social behavioural change in students

FSHSP = Free Senior High School Policy and represents the independent variable annexed by cost of education (COSTEDU) and operationalisation of the policy (OPERA)

β_0 = Regression Coefficient Constant

β_1 = Slope of the regression equation with regards to operationalisation of FSHSP

β_2 = Slope of regression equation with regards to cost of education

ε = Margin of error

Reliability and Validity Tests

Reliability test measures the extent to which the study instrument produces the same results having undergone repeated trials (16). Cronbach (1951) (17) alpha reliability and internal consistency method was used to test for the instrument. This gauges the accuracy with which the data collection instrument (questionnaire) measures the variables under consideration. According to (16), a coefficient alpha value of 0.70 or greater is accepted. Similarly, validity measures how representative data analysis reflects the phenomenon in the study. It ensures that the research instrument actually measures exactly what it was intended for (16).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is aimed at narrating findings, trying to interpret or evaluate and provide a link to the discussion section. The results are narrated in accordance with research objectives. Inferential statistics were used to impugn meaning into analysed data. The inferential statistical analysis helped to establish the link between the independent variable (cost of education and operationalisation of the policy in the form of the double-track system) and the dependent variable (economic conditions and social lifestyle of parents and wards respectively).

Test Results for Reliability

Table 1: Dependent and independent variable reliability statistics

Statement	Coefficient-Alpha	Sub-values
Free Senior High School Policy	0.794	6
Economic conditions of Parents	0.812	5
Social Lifestyle of Students	0.774	6

Source: Cronbach's Alpha Test Run

Reliability test for individual variables requires that a threshold mark of 70% (0.70) for acceptance be achieved.

Categorization of Respondents

The study determined the categories of respondents to participate in providing responses to questions raised in the questionnaires and their location for easier survey. Table 2 gives details of the respondent population and location.

Table 2: Selection of respondents

Location / School	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Bunkpurugu Senior High Sch	126	38
Nakpanduri Senior High Sch	105	31
Garu-Tempane Senior High Sch	105	31
Total	336	100

Data Source: Field Survey (2020)

A total of Three Hundred and Thirty Six (336) participants provided responses to the questionnaires. Out of this number, 38 percent came from parents whose children attend Bunkpurugu Senior High School whilst 31 percent each of responses came from parents of students from Nakpanduri Senior High School and Garu-Tempane Senior High School respectively.

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Table 3: Economic conditions of Parents

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	311	92.6
No	25	7.4
Total	336	100

Data Source: Field Survey (2020)

A question on whether the introduction of the FSHSP is helpful to parents recorded an overwhelming positive response of 92.6 percent. Only 7.4 percent was sceptical about the policy relevance. In fact, respondents who made up this category were neutral, but as a rule under the methodology, a neutral response is regarded as a “NO”, since it corresponded with a score of 3 which falls under a “NO” category. Those who responded positively explained that parents and guardians of wards have been relieved of their financial and economic burden and could now invest what is regarded as surplus or appreciated income into other

viable ventures. These findings are in sharp agreement with those by (8) who identified reduction in economic burden on parents and guardians by way of absorbing tuition, feeding fees and recruitment of teachers to ease the unemployment menace. In a focus group discussion, respondents told the researcher how the difficulty of putting food on the table for families has been overcome. A section of the participants explained how petty misunderstandings between couples over economic sustenance have considerably reduced. In the case of (4), he similarly found that some Ghanaian families barely survive the harsh economic conditions with their children even dropping out of school due to parents' inability to pay school fees, but for the implementation of the FSHSP, the economic woes of parents are now a thing of the past.

Table 4: Social Lifestyle of Students

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	91	27
No	245	73
Total	336	100

Data Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 4 presents a different response trend which is quite on the opposite of what was witnessed in Table 3. In answering questions on whether the introduction of the FSHSP (eg through the double-track system especially) impacted positively on the social lives of school children, the researcher obtained the results in Table 4. It was established that whilst 73 percent of participants responded in the negative, 27 percent rather preferred to stay on the fence, (implying a “NEUTRAL” response) or gave a “YES response. Indeed, those who lamented on how the double-track system negatively affected their wards explained that, during holidays their wards are in most instances seen engaging in a number of social vices such as internet scamming, “Soccer Betting” on the internet etc (a form of lottery). Another group (156/245[63.7%]) of those who claim the introduction of the FSHSP through the double-track system brought untold social evil, expressed their disgust about the ascendancy of teenage pregnancies in various SHSs. This response, the researcher noted, was in line with that captured in an article by (12), where a ranking member on the education committee in Ghana’s Parliament, Peter Norsy-Kotoe, bemoaned the increase in teenage pregnancies in our SHSs. The statement added that within the 2018 / 2019 academic year alone, 1,433 students across our senior high schools nationwide were impregnated and had to drop out of school (12).

Again, it came up at the group discussion sessions with some parents that despite the benefits that the double-track system brings such as increase enrolment numbers, it breeds unfairness, laziness and truancy. This was observed to be in consonance with the position of (3) who identified problems associated with the operationalisation of the FSHSP through the double-track system to include encouragement of truancy among students and laziness among others.

Multiple-regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to test the effect of free senior high school policy (annexed by operationalisation and cost of education) on the economic and social lifestyle of parents and students respectively. Microsoft Excel was used to turn out the regression results. Table 5 gives details of the Regression Model Summary.

Table 5: Regression Model Summary of Operationalisation of the FSHSP

	Regression Statistics
Model (R)	0.652
R-Square	0.425
Adjusted R-Square	0.420
Std. Error	0.114

Predictors: (Constant), Independent Variable = Operationalisation of the FSHSP

Source: Researcher's own construct (2020)

The relationship between the study variables was done by using the regression coefficient. It was established that positive relationship exists between studied variables, reflective in the approximate R-value (0.652) [Table 5]. The R-Square value (0.43) or about 43 percent explains the variability in the power of the independent variable (Operationalisation of FSHSP [annexed by double-track system]) to influence the outcome variable (social Lifestyle of students. What it tells the readership is that, 57 percent of the students' social lifestyle is influenced by other latent factors not captured in this study.

Table 6: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	24.23	1	51.77	28.73	0.000 (a)
Residual	9.67	335	0.411		
Total	33.90	336			

Source: Researcher's own construct (2020)

It is evidenced from Table 6 that with a significance value of 0.000 (a), less than 1 percent level, the data could be relied upon to make a conclusion. The p -value = 0.000 < 0.05, $R=0.652$, $R^2 = 0.425$. This is a suggestion that the nature of the operationalisation of the FSHSP (double-track system) significantly predicts the social lifestyle of students in our SHSs across the nation (see Table 6). By extension therefore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the FSHSP annexed by operationalisation and social lifestyle of students and accepted based on the results of the regression analysis. The R^2 (0.425) value indicates that approximately 43 percent of variations in social lifestyle of students is accounted for by the linear combination of the independent variable (the nature of the operationalisation of the FSHSP annexed by the double-track system).

Table 7: Regression Model Summary of Cost of the FSHSP

	Regression Statistics
Model (R)	0.978
R-Square	0.956
Adjusted R-Square	0.954
Std. Error	0.122

Predictors: (Constant), Independent Variable = Cost of funding education

Source: Researcher's own construct (2020)

Per results in Table 7, the coefficient of determination indicated by $R^2 = 0.956$ suggests that about 96 percent of the economic conditions of parents of wards in our senior high schools, especially in the rural settlements is explained by the free school fees that is occasioned by the FSHSP. By extension therefore, parents of wards have other factors not explained by study variables that make them comfortable economically. These factors are outside the current model reflected in the error term. It must be stressed that, the correlation coefficient given at about 0.980 signifies that there is a strong positive correlation between the effect of the FSHSP and the economic conditions of parents.

Table 8: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	162.0	1	70.77	5.021	0.009
Residual	7.11	335	14.07		
Total	169.11	336			

Source: Researcher's own construct (2020)

The independent variable was Cost of funding free senior high education (COSTEDU). The dependent variable was Life-style of parents. The result of the model of economic condition of parents was $F(1, 335) = 5.02$, $p = 0.009 < 0.05$, $R\text{-value} = 0.978$, $R^2 = 0.956$, which gives a suggestion that government policy measures undertaken (COSTEDU) predicts economic lives of parents through lessening the economic and financial burden of parents significantly.

CONCLUSION

If for nothing at all, the introduction of the FSHSP has been very beneficial to parents and guardians through reduction in their financial burden. It is one of economic policies in the past decade in Ghana that strategically targeted poverty alleviation. The operationalisation (double-track system) of the FSHSP is quite helpful due to the infrastructural deficit at our senior high schools. Aside that, the policy lacked adequate stakeholder consultation as it was saddled with hasty implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sustainable sources of funding the FSHSP such as the Heritage Fund and an established Fund purposely for activities of the FSHSP are recommended to the government. This is critical in the face of the financial and economic burden that the policy takes off parents' budgets. Operationalisation of the policy should be given a second look regarding the double-track so as to curb the menace of teenage pregnancies and other social vices engaged in by students during holidays which were already forces to reckon with in the system prior to the implementation of FSHSP.

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