

Systematic Review of Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic review of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy implemented in Ghana since 2017. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, this review synthesizes evidence from 34 peer-reviewed studies published between 1989 and 2023. The analysis is theoretically informed by the Education Production Function (EPF) and Social Justice Theory, particularly the Capability Approach. These frameworks enable a multidimensional understanding of how policy inputs translate into educational outcomes and how equitably those outcomes are distributed across diverse student populations. The findings reveal that while the FSHS policy has improved enrolment and access, particularly among low-income households, it has also created challenges such as overcrowding, teacher shortages, and disparities in educational quality. The study recommends policy adjustments to improve sustainability, equity, and system-wide efficiency in equity-driven educational reform in sub-Saharan Africa.

Key words: Free SHS, Ghana, access, equity, education policy, systematic review, educational efficiency.

1.0 Introduction

Access to quality secondary education remains a significant development priority for many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana, this imperative is enshrined in Article 25(1)(b) of the 1992 Constitution, which mandates the progressive introduction of free secondary education. Responding to this constitutional requirement and the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4—ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education—the Government of Ghana launched the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in 2017. The policy provides full tuition and related support services for all public SHS students, with the aim of improving access, reducing inequality, and enhancing

national human capital. Despite its ambitious goals, the implementation of the FSHS policy has generated substantial debate regarding its long-term sustainability, quality outcomes, and unintended consequences. While there is evidence of increased enrolment, concerns remain about overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and widening disparities between urban and rural schools. These tensions highlight the need for a systematic review of existing literature to assess the actual impact of the policy and inform future decision-making.

This review seeks to critically evaluate the effects of Ghana's FSHS policy across four key dimensions: access, equity, quality, and efficiency. By systematically analyzing empirical and theoretical contributions from 2017 to 2025, the study aims to identify prevailing trends, implementation challenges, and policy gaps. The overarching research question guiding this review is: What has been the impact of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy on access, equity, quality, and efficiency in secondary education since its inception? To address this question, we employed a structured PRISMA-based methodology to select, analyze, and synthesize relevant literature. The findings of this review will provide insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to understand the broader implications of fee-free secondary education reforms in Ghana and similar contexts.

2.0. Review of Related Literature

This section provides a critical overview of existing literature on free secondary education, focusing on global perspectives, Ghana's educational reform trajectory, and recent empirical studies on the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy. The review identifies key gaps that justify the need for this systematic analysis.

2.1. Global Perspectives on Fee-Free Secondary Education

Numerous studies highlight that while such policies increase enrolment and reduce financial burdens on households, they also introduce systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and overburdened teachers (Aluko & Adan, 2015; Kalunda & Otanga, 2015). Recent evidence from sub-Saharan Africa highlights that fee-free secondary education policies have substantially increased enrollment while posing challenges for educational quality and equity. In Kenya, the Free Secondary Education (FSE) policy led to higher student enrollment and improved gender parity, yet overcrowded classrooms and inadequate teacher resources negatively affected learning outcomes (Mwangi, 2021). Uganda's Universal Secondary Education (USE) initiative similarly increased participation, particularly for girls, and contributed to delayed marriages and enhanced economic opportunities, though infrastructure and teacher shortages remain critical challenges (Kazibwe, 2022). In Tanzania, the Fee-Free Basic Education (FFBE) policy increased access, but school supervision and educational quality were constrained by delayed fund disbursements and resource limitations (Mwila, 2023; Sanchawa, 2025). Rwanda's abolition of secondary school fees improved enrollment rates, though rural-urban disparities persist, indicating a need for targeted interventions (Ndayishimiye, 2024). Senegal's policy expansion in the 2020s increased enrollment, yet overcrowding and inadequate teaching materials continue to hinder learning (Diouf, 2021). Liberia's post-conflict free secondary education program enhanced access, but challenges in teacher quality and infrastructure remain (Jallah, 2020). Seychelles, by offering free secondary education up to age 18,

demonstrates that sustained investment and well-resourced systems can achieve both high enrollment and educational quality (Bettencourt, 2022).

2.2. Educational Policy and Reform in Ghana

Ghana has a long history of educational reform aimed at improving access, equity, and quality. The 1961 Free Universal Primary Education Act, the Dzobo reforms of 1974, and the FCUBE initiative launched in 1995 are key milestones that sought to democratize access to education (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016; Akyeampong, 2009). However, these reforms often struggled with implementation setbacks due to funding gaps, regional inequalities, and limited infrastructure (Donkoh et al., 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). The introduction of the FSHS policy in 2017 under the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government marked a significant expansion of these earlier efforts. Building on the 2015 Progressive Free SHS program, the FSHS removed nearly all cost barriers at the secondary level by covering tuition, boarding, meals, and learning materials. The policy aimed to enhance access, especially for students from disadvantaged regions, while also improving equity and national human capital development (MOE, 2017).

2.3. Empirical Studies on Ghana's Free SHS Policy

A growing body of empirical research has evaluated the implementation and outcomes of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana. These studies span various themes, including access, quality, equity, efficiency, and policy sustainability. Asante (2022) examined the effects of fee abolition on secondary school enrolment across sub-Saharan Africa and found that cost elimination policies significantly

boosted enrolment, especially among marginalized groups. In Ghana, enrolment into senior high schools increased by 11% in the 2017–2018 academic year following the launch of the FSHS policy (MOE, 2017). According to administrative data, nearly 470,000 students were enrolled in that academic year alone, breaking previous national records.

Asante, Nkansah, and Agbee (2024) conducted a comparative policy analysis of the Progressive Free SHS and the full FSHS policy, highlighting tensions between centralized implementation, school-level autonomy, and stakeholder engagement. Their work also underscores equity issues—particularly how elite urban schools may disproportionately benefit from the policy, despite efforts such as reserving 30% of places for public JHS graduates. Complementing this, Asante, Gajduschek, and Bartha (2024) explored the political economy dynamics behind the policy's emergence. Their study revealed that political commitment, electoral strategy, and ideology—more than technocratic planning—were instrumental in shaping the rollout and framing of the FSHS as a "sacred promise" to citizens.

Operational studies such as Mohammed and Kuyini (2021) provide insight into challenges encountered by schools. They note infrastructure deficits, strained teacher capacity, logistical delays, and the complexities introduced by the double-track system as key issues affecting quality. These findings are echoed by Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021), who observed that the double-track system, while expanding access, compromised contact hours, increased administrative burdens, and created uncertainty among both students and teachers.

Moreover, the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2007; World Bank, 2011) and MOE reports highlight persistent regional

disparities in educational access, especially between the northern and southern regions. While the FSHS policy aims to equalize opportunity, poverty and distance to school continue to deter rural families from full participation. Studies also point to significant opportunity costs for low-income households in sending children to distant boarding schools (Adongo et al., 2022; Fentiman et al., 1999). The policy's emphasis on full cost absorption—including tuition, meals, and exam fees—has reduced financial barriers significantly. However, the increased enrolment has not always been matched by corresponding expansion in infrastructure, leading to issues such as overcrowding, classroom conversions, and reduced instructional time. These constraints challenge the sustainability of the policy's intended gains in educational quality and equity (UNESCO, 2017; Daily Graphic, 2018).

2.0. Theoretical Framework

This systematic review is anchored in two complementary theoretical lenses: the Education Production Function (EPF) and Social Justice Theory which is the Capability Approach. The EPF framework conceptualizes education as a system in which specific inputs, such as financial investment, infrastructure, teacher quality, and policy interventions, generate outputs like student enrolment, learning achievement, and retention (Hanushek, 1986). In the context of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, this framework explains how removing direct cost barriers, providing free meals, and supplying teaching and learning materials have contributed to increased access to secondary education. However, it also underscores that without proportional investment in physical and human resources, increased enrolment may compromise educational quality. This is

evident in the policy's implementation challenges, such as the introduction of the double-track system, overcrowded classrooms, and heightened teacher workloads, which collectively impact learning conditions and overall effectiveness (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). The EPF therefore offers critical insights into the trade-offs between access, quality, and efficiency in the delivery of free secondary education in Ghana.

Complementing the EPF's economic perspective, this review employs Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and Nancy Fraser's Social Justice Theory (Fraser, 2008) to examine issues of equity, inclusion, and fairness in educational outcomes. These frameworks emphasize that providing access is insufficient if students, particularly those from rural, low-income, or marginalized communities, lack the real capabilities to benefit from education meaningfully. Fraser's tripartite model of redistribution, recognition, and representation is especially relevant. It assesses whether resources are allocated equitably, whether diverse cultural identities are acknowledged, and whether marginalized voices are included in decision-making processes. Together, these frameworks inform the review's analytical structure by examining access through the lens of financial barrier removal (EPF). They also examine equity through the Capability and Social Justice perspectives, quality through resource-demand dynamics (EPF), and efficiency through a combined evaluation of input-output relationships and fairness in outcomes.

3.0. Methodology

This study employed a systematic review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2015) to examine the impact of Ghana's

Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy on access, equity, quality, and efficiency. A review protocol was developed to enhance transparency and replicability, specifying inclusion and exclusion criteria, quality assessment procedures, and thematic synthesis strategies. An extensive literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and ResearchGate for studies published between 2017 and 2025, employing keywords such as “Free Senior High School,” “Ghana,” “access,” “equity,” “educational quality,” “policy

impact,” and “efficiency,” with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine results, alongside manual reference checks to identify additional relevant studies. Articles were selected based on a structured checklist: (1) explicit focus on the FSHS policy or comparable fee-free secondary education reforms, (2) empirical, theoretical, or policy-focused with clear methodological descriptions, (3) published in English in peer-reviewed journals and (4) relevance to one or more dimensions of access, equity, quality, or efficiency.

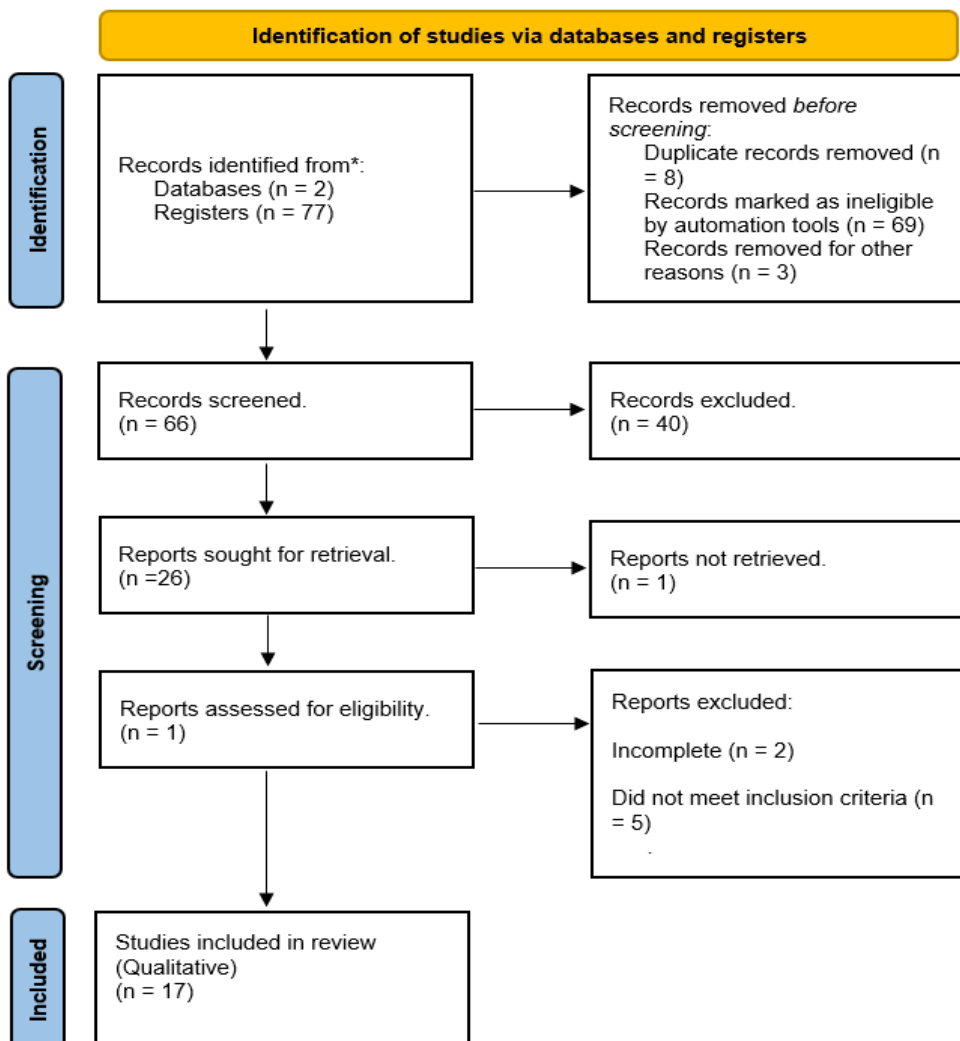
Table 1: Summary of Methodology

Component	Description / Criteria
Research Design	Systematic review guided by PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2015)
Review Protocol	Specifies inclusion/exclusion criteria, quality assessment, and thematic synthesis strategies
Literature Search	Databases: Google Scholar, ResearchGate; Timeframe: 2017–2025; Keywords: “Free Senior High School,” “Ghana,” “access,” “equity,” “educational quality,” “policy impact,” “efficiency”; Boolean operators (AND, OR) used; Manual reference checks also performed
Inclusion Criteria	1. Explicit focus on FSHS policy or comparable fee-free secondary education reforms 2. Empirical, theoretical, or policy-focused with clear methodology 3. Published in English in reputable journals 4. Relevance to access, equity, quality, or efficiency
Exclusion Criteria	1. Not focused on secondary education 2. Lacked relevance to key dimensions 3. Not relevant to the research question
Quality Assessment	Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) Qualitative Checklist; evaluates clarity of methodology, sample selection, rigor of data collection, validity of findings, and relevance to FSHS policy outcomes
Data Extraction	Coded for: authorship, publication year, study type, methodology, sample characteristics, policy focus, key qualitative findings
Study Selection Process	1. Initial screening of titles/abstracts by 2 independent reviewers 2. Full-text review by 3 additional reviewers 3. Consensus resolution among 5 reviewers

Excluded studies were those outside the scope of secondary education, those that lacked relevance to the research objectives. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria in terms of population, setting, or methodological rigor were also excluded. Quality assessment of the included studies was conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2024). The assessment

applied criteria adapted from established systematic review standards, evaluating clarity of methodology, sample selection, data collection procedures, and validity of findings. Data extraction involved coding each study for authorship, publication year, study type, methodology, sample characteristics, policy focus, and key qualitative findings (Tawfik et al., 2019).

Figure 1:. Reporting items for the systematic review (adapted the Preferred Reporting Items for systematic review



The study selection process involved three phases. First, initial screening of titles and abstracts was conducted by two independent reviewers. Second, a full-text review was performed by three additional reviewers to assess methodological rigor and relevance. Third, discrepancies were resolved through consensus among all five reviewers. Google Scholar and ResearchGate were included to capture grey literature and recent publications, thus improving the comprehensiveness of the search. The 2017–2025 timeframe was selected to capture studies following the introduction of the FSHS policy, ensuring that the review reflects current and relevant evidence.

4.0 Results

The results of this systematic review are

presented using the PRISMA flow diagram to illustrate the article selection process (see Figure 1). The diagram outlines the number of studies identified, screened, assessed for eligibility and included in the review.

Articles search

A total of 1,465 papers were initially identified across Google Scholar and ResearchGate using the specified keywords and Boolean operators. Google Scholar yielded more papers (889) than ResearchGate (576), reflecting its broader coverage of scholarly publications. After removing duplicates, irrelevant records, and studies not meeting inclusion criteria through manual screening and reference checks, 17 studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis.

Table 2: Articles search

Keyword/Phrase	Google Scholar	ResearchGate
“Free Senior High School” AND “Ghana” AND “access”	123	78
“Free Senior High School” AND “Ghana” AND “equity”	97	64
“Free Senior High School” AND “Ghana” AND “educational quality”	88	59
“Free Senior High School” AND “Ghana” AND “policy impact”	102	47
“Free Senior High School” OR “Ghana” OR “access” OR “equity”	158	134
“Free Senior High School” OR “Ghana” OR “policy impact” OR “educational quality”	141	99
“Ghana” AND “Free Senior High School” AND NOT “policy impact”	76	53
“Ghana” AND “educational quality” AND NOT “access”	65	42

Table 3: Summary of article search

Database	Date of Search	Papers Obtained
Google Scholar	28/09/25	889
ResearchGate	28/09/25	576

Quality Assurance

The included studies were assessed using a nine-question framework adapted from (Butler et al., 2016) , with each question reflecting a specific aspect of study quality relevant to the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana: Q1 – clear research objectives, Q2 – relevance to FSHS policy, Q3 – appropriateness of study design, Q4 – transparency in data collection, Q5 – validity and reliability of measures, Q6 – adequacy of sample size, Q7 – appropriateness of data analysis, Q8 –

discussion of limitations, and Q9 – contribution to understanding policy impacts (access, equity, quality, efficiency). Each study was scored 1 for positive and 0 for negative responses, and total scores classified studies as high (9), moderate (7-8), or low (<7) quality, with contribution scores reflecting each study's impact on the review's findings. Table 9 presents the scores, quality classifications, and contributions for the 17 studies included in this review. This is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Quality Assurance of Included Studies (Baima et al., 2020)

#	Citation (Author, Year)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Total	Quality Classification
1	Akuffo (2025)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	High
2	Casely-Hayford et al. (2025)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	8	Moderate
3	Dwomoh et al. (2022)	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	8	Moderate
4	Mohammed & Kuyini (2021)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	High
5	Dzikunu & Ansah (2023)	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	7	Moderate
6	Fuscini (2025)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	8	Moderate
7	Azagsiba et al. (2025)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	High
8	Asumadu (2019)	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	8	Moderate

Note: 1- yes; 0=No

Table 5a: Data Extraction

#	Citation (author, year)	Title	Type of Paper	Methodology (qual component)	Key Qualitative Findings (quality/ equity focus)	Theoretical Lens
1	Akuffo (2025)	In pursuit of equity in upper secondary education: the curious case of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy	Peer-reviewed article	Grounded-theory qualitative: interviews with policymakers; document analysis	Increased enrolment but "equity blind spots" remain; regional, school-level, and gendered exclusions; policy assumptions neglect prerequisites for quality expansion	Policy equity/ social justice
2	Casely-Hayford et al. (2025)	The intended and unintended effects of secondary school fee abolition: evidence from Ghana's Free SHS policy	Peer-reviewed article	Mixed methods with stakeholder interviews and qualitative policy analysis	Strong access gains; implementation pressures, resource shortages, uneven benefits across regions and schools—threatening quality	Policy evaluation; distributive equity
3	Dwomoh et al. (2022)	The impact of the Free SHS policy and double-track system on quality education outcomes: a quasi-experimental policy evaluation (Ghana)	Peer-reviewed policy evaluation (mixed methods)	Quasi-experimental quantitative analysis plus stakeholder interviews and qualitative evaluation	Overcrowding, reduced contact time under double-track, teacher shortages, uneven resource distribution—differential declines in quality across schools	Distributive equity; inputs outcomes

Table 5b: Data Extraction

4	Mohammed and Kuyini, (2021)	An evaluation of the Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana	Peer-reviewed article (policy evaluation)	~65 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders; documentary analysis (qualitative evaluation)	Fee removal welcomed; poor responsiveness in infrastructure delivery and delayed materials; equity and quality gaps persist between better-resourced and weaker schools	Policy evaluation; equity & responsiveness
5	Dzikunu and Ansah (2023)	Free Senior High School program implementation in Ghana: an assessment	Journal article	Multi-site exploratory case study: interviews, observations, checklists (38 respondents)	Access improved; quality hampered by overcrowded classrooms, delayed textbooks, inadequate labs/dorms, increased teacher workload	Implementation & equity lens
6	Fuscini (2025)	Free Senior High School devours basic education in Ghana	Peer-reviewed article	Qualitative policy critique with document analysis and interviews	Free SHS diverted resources from basic education; primary education quality deteriorated; system-wide quality concerns	Systems perspective; resource allocation & equity

Table 5c: Data Extraction

7	Azagsiba et al. (2025)	A qualitative assessment of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy on education in the Upper West Region of Ghana	Journal article	Interviews & focus-group discussions (students, teachers, parents, officials); thematic analysis	Increased enrolment among disadvantaged students; persistent quality deficits: overcrowding, limited materials, teacher overload, poor facilities	Social justice in education
8	Asumadu (2019)	Implementation of Free Senior High School Policy: The Case of SHS in Denkyembour District	Peer-reviewed article / institutional research	Case study interviews and observations (qualitative)	Early implementation challenges: space, teacher recruitment, stakeholder coordination; sustaining quality amid rapid enrolment increases	Implementation & distributive equity
9	Asante et al. (2022)	(De)centralisation in fee-free policymaking process: Comparative review of progressive free senior high and free senior high school policies in Ghana	Peer-reviewed article	Policy document analysis and stakeholder reflections	Governance tensions between centralization and decentralization; implications for equitable resource allocation	Governance / decentralization theory

Table 5d: Data Extraction

10	Chanimb e (2019)	Support mechanism in the implementation field: A stakeholder collaboration to mitigate the adverse effects of the free SHS policy in Ghanaian schools	Journal article	Interviews with school stakeholders (teachers, parents, administrators)	Stakeholder collaboration reduces implementation challenges; enhances equity in resource-constrained schools	Stakeholder collaboration / social capital lens
11	Chanimb e and Prah (2020)	Distribution mechanisms of Ghana's free senior high school policy: The equity dimensions and ameliorating measures	Peer-reviewed article	Policy analysis + qualitative administrator perspectives	Reveals inequitable distribution of school places and resources; suggests quota-based corrective measures	Equity in education / distributive justice lens
12	Wilson and Somhlaba (2017)	Ghanaian school-going adolescents' self-perceived barriers regarding access to quality education in the Northern Region	Education as Change	Qualitative interviews	Adolescents identify inadequate resources and socio-cultural challenges affecting quality	Quality & Equity
13	Takyi et al. (2019)	The effects of multi-track year-round education on the delivery of senior high school education in Ghana	Journal article	Interviews, document analysis	Multi-track system increased access but created strain on quality and teacher workload	Educational delivery / quality lens

Table 5e: Data Extraction

14	Alando (2025)	Contribution of Free Senior High School Policy to Students' Academic Performance and Progression in the Northern Region of Ghana: A Review	Review Article	Document and policy analysis with qualitative synthesis	FSSHS policy improved access and progression, but disparities in infrastructure and teacher deployment affect equity in learning outcomes.	Equity and Access Framework
15	Opoku (2024)	A Comprehensive Analysis of the Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy in Ghana Using Policy Triangle Framework	Policy Analysis	Document analysis + stakeholder perspectives (qualitative synthesis)	Identifies interplay between policy context, content, actors, and processes shaping implementation; equity gaps persist between urban and rural schools.	Walt & Gilson's Policy Triangle Framework
16	Yeyie (2024)	Perceptions of Social Studies Teachers on Teaching Rationale in New Juaben Senior High Schools, Ghana: A Qualitative Study	Empirical Research Article	Qualitative interviews with teachers	Teachers emphasize civic engagement and critical thinking but face curriculum overload and limited resources, affecting instructional quality.	Interpretivist Lens
17	Quansah et al. (2024)	Qualitative Insights into School Improvement Practices: Stakeholder Perceptions in Ghanaian Junior High Schools	Empirical Research Article	Qualitative case study with focus groups & interviews	Stakeholders (teachers, parents, administrators) stress collaborative practices and leadership involvement as crucial for improving school quality and equity.	Stakeholder Theory / School Improvement Framework

5.1. Access to Education

Qualitative evidence from Ghana demonstrates that free secondary education policies substantially improve access and enrollment, particularly among marginalized groups. In Ghana, the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy increased student enrollment, reducing financial barriers and boosting participation in districts where cost was a major obstacle (Azagsiba et al., 2025; Duah et al., 2023; Tseer et al., 2024).

"If it weren't for Free SHS, I would likely be working instead of attending school. My family couldn't afford the fees, so this policy changed my life. The fact that I only need to acquire my consumables made it a bit easier for my parents to get me enrolled into secondary school. So, to me it is a good policy despite the visible problems we are facing as students" (Key Informant, October, 2024). (Azagsiba et al., 2025)

However, this expansion has placed pressure on teaching and learning, with larger class sizes, increased teacher workload, and declines in performance in core subjects under double-track systems, illustrating the access–quality trade-off (Dwomoh et al., 2023; Tseer et al., 2024).

"The double-track system increased our workload significantly. I find myself teaching throughout both batches due to shortages in subject-specific teachers. Holidays feel like a luxury, especially for those of us with additional responsibilities." (FGD, statement from a female participant, KALISCO, 2023) (Tseer et al., 2024).

Rural areas in Ghana similarly recorded higher transitions from junior to senior high, though access remained constrained by distance and poor transport (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Akyeampong (2009) demonstrates that historical rural–urban disparities, rooted in earlier educational

reforms, continue to influence enrolment patterns and opportunities under FSHS, with students in remote areas facing structural disadvantages. Asante et al. (2024) underscore governance tensions, showing that the balance between centralized policymaking, which standardizes access, and decentralized decision-making, which allows context-specific adjustments, affects equitable allocation of resources across regions, often leaving disadvantaged schools under-resourced.

5.2. Educational Equity

Urban schools and well-resourced institutions continue to attract more competitive students, often benefiting disproportionately from the policy due to better infrastructure and academic performance records (Asante et al., 2024). In contrast, students in rural and underserved areas face structural barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching staff, and substandard facilities, which affect their ability to benefit equally from the policy (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021).

Research on Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy highlights persistent equity challenges despite expanded access. Chanimbe and Prah (2020) show that the distribution of school places and resources remains inequitable, recommending quota-based measures to improve fairness. Matey (2020) finds that while families benefit financially from fee-free education, hidden costs, overcrowding, and rural–urban disparities continue to limit equitable educational outcomes.

One of the headmasters said: *"I have seen on many occasions when parents and guardians whose wards were placed outside their home districts and region simply declined the offer of admission."* He added: *"The children of such parents end up not*

attaining secondary education” (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021).

Studies also highlight that although access increased for female students, challenges such as early pregnancy and household responsibilities continue to affect retention, particularly in rural communities (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

“My family influenced my delay in marriage because I was always advised to further my education and be a better person before getting married. – FGD 12-17 Unmarried, Sabare” (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

Multiple studies report that infrastructural deficits, overcrowded classrooms, and overburdened teachers undermine the quality of education (Azagsiba et al., 2025). Regional disparities remain pronounced, with rural and northern areas experiencing limited access to educational resources and uneven implementation of policy intentions (Akuffo, 2025; Casely-Hayford, 2025).

Governments make a farce out of education policy routines, unfortunately, there is no democratic solution to this... our policies are inherently problematic. We as policymakers can bridge the geographical and gender gap with good policies if we want to, but we pretend to have such conversations, and that is what we call policy talk, knowing that nobody is ready to do the difficult job of bridging the disparities (Policymaker, NGOs) (Akuffo, 2025)

Interviews with teachers and headteachers reveal concerns about the double-track system’s strain on resources, which can compromise learning outcomes and exacerbate inequities (Dzikunu & Ansah, 2023; Mensah, 2019).

“My school for instance has not been provided with adequate materials and logistics. We were only supplied some few materials and logistics”. (Head teacher 1) (Mensah, 2019).

“.....Nobody takes care of the students; sometimes you see them in town almost all the time. Availability of Teaching /Learning Materials is another challenge, but if they are put in place, I think it will be okay (HM3)”. (Dzikunu & Ansah, 2023)

Policy analyses indicate that although FSHS emphasizes equity in principle, political agendas and resource allocation challenges affect its practical realization, often privileging urban or well-resourced schools over marginalized communities (Akuffo, 2025; Fuseini, 2024). Studies also show that social location and context, such as rural and urban settings, influence experiences of inclusion, with distance learning initiatives highlighting inequities for students in remote areas (Opoku, 2025). Teacher wellbeing emerges as a critical factor in the success of FSHS, as overworked educators face challenges in maintaining quality while accommodating rising enrolment (Tseer, 2024).

"Before the Free SHS, our classrooms had about 45–50 students. Now, it's not uncommon to find over a hundred students in a class. It's challenging to provide individual attention and maintain an effective learning environment." (PI, statement from a male teacher, TAMASCO, 2023) (Tseer, 2024).

Adolescents in Northern Ghana face financial, infrastructural, and socio-cultural barriers to quality secondary education, with limited resources, overcrowded or poorly equipped schools, and gender disparities restricting equitable access and learning outcomes (Wilson & Somhlaba (2017).

“Yes, like you need some books but you do not get the money [from parents] to buy it, unless you save some of your money and buy. At times you find it difficult to save that kind of money so you just borrow from your [peers] (Sanni, 19-year-old male, Grade 12)” (Wilson & Somhlaba (2017).

5.3. Quality of Education

Multiple studies report that the double-track system—introduced in 2018 to manage overcrowding—led to reduced contact hours, inconsistent teaching schedules, and learning interruptions (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). The increase in class sizes, coupled with a shortage of trained teachers and inadequate teaching materials, has affected the quality of instruction in many schools. Empirical accounts describe the conversion of libraries, dining halls, and even laboratories into makeshift classrooms due to space limitations (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Similarly, research by Alando (2025) found a significant decline in quality education outcomes and academic performance due to the double-track system, with challenges including financial constraints and infrastructure deficits. Moreover, a study by (Opoku, 2024) highlighted that the system led to reduced contact hours between teachers and students, forcing educators to rush through lessons. Lastly, a study by (Takyi et al., 2019b) discussed the implications of multi-track year-round education on Ghana's educational system, noting its effects on instructional time and teacher-student interactions.

Studies examining the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy reveal that while enrollment has increased, particularly among economically disadvantaged students, infrastructural deficits, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient learning materials constrain the quality of education (Azagsiba et al., 2025; Mensah et al., 2019).

“The free SHS policy is good but it is affecting the quality of education as a result of poor students with poor grades getting admission under the policy. A student with aggregate 40 has been posted to my school to offer Science and I don't need a prophet to tell me that this student will not excel in science”. (Head teacher 4) (Mensah et al., 2019).

Wilson and Somhlaba (2017) emphasizes that socio-economic disparities and gendered expectations, such as early school dropouts among girls, further exacerbate inequitable access. Teacher-related factors, including agency, professional development, and engagement in school improvement practices, are central to educational effectiveness, with evidence showing that empowered and supported teachers enhance learning outcomes (Adams et al., 2025; Yeyie, 2024; Quansah et al., 2024).

“I will meet my teachers personally and each will set his targets for me. I will monitor the progress of the targets or the contract and give feedback to the teacher.....As SISOs, we must get involved in the setting of performance targets by teachers. I believe that will go a long way to improve students' performance. (SS-1) (Quansah et al., 2024)

Omari (2023) notes that while teachers recognize the benefits of integrating technology, lack of training and institutional support limits effective implementation.

“Students struggle to understand when you teach abstractly. If there are no teaching aids such as ICT tools, teaching becomes like a story to them [students]. When technologies such as computers and a projector are used to display videos, students gain a clear understanding of what is taught, and they may even assist you [teacher] in teaching”. (FT-Esi_ I) (Omari., 2023)

5.4. Efficiency and Sustainability

A comprehensive analysis of qualitative studies on Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy reveals significant concerns regarding its efficiency and long-term sustainability. The rapid expansion of enrolment has placed substantial strain on school infrastructure, with many institutions facing acute shortages of classrooms, dormitories, and laboratories ((Azagsiba et al., 2025; Addai & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2024).

The introduction of the double-track system, intended to manage overcrowding, has led to reduced contact hours, inconsistent teaching schedules, and learning interruptions (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Tseer, 2024). These operational challenges are compounded by escalating student-to-teacher ratios, which have increased to 30:1, thereby straining teaching quality and threatening the sustainability of access gains (Akuffo, 2025). Essuman (2018) emphasizes tensions between sustainability and access, warning that inadequate funding and planning could exacerbate disparities. Financially, the policy's reliance on finite oil revenue and unpredictable donor support raises sustainability concerns, as it is perceived as a costly and poorly planned initiative (Akuffo, 2025; Casely-Hayford, 2025).

The free SHS is helping parents who are not financially strong to send their wards to school. Previously, some students with better grades were unable to attend SHS because of financial constraint, but now, because of free SHS, they can enroll their wards. – SHS student (male), Eastern Region (Casely-Hayford, 2025).

The policy's implementation has also led to increased teacher workloads, delays in funding, and overburdened infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Opoku, 2025).

Empirical accounts describe the conversion of libraries, dining halls, and laboratories into makeshift classrooms due to space limitations, reflecting challenges in balancing access and quality (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Akuffo, 2024). Despite the policy's positive impact on enrolment rates, there is limited evidence to establish a direct link between FSHS and improved learning outcomes, highlighting the need for a more sustainable and efficient approach to education financing, resource allocation, and teacher support (Akuffo, 2025; Tseer, 2024; Addai & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2024; Casely-Hayford, 2025; Opoku, 2025).

“it is necessary to ensure an equitable distribution of resources based on the unique needs of learners and schools. Ghana's learners are from diverse backgrounds, which requires the provision of equal opportunities to all, and that all strive to care for each other both personally and professionally (p. 21)” (Addai & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2024).

6. Discussion

Four studies show that the FSHS policy increased secondary school access by removing tuition and related costs, leading to higher enrollment, especially among low-income and rural groups (Azagsiba et al., 2025; Duah et al., 2023; Tseer et al., 2024; Asante, 2022). Comparative evidence from sub-Saharan Africa indicates similar outcomes following fee abolition in Kenya, Uganda, and Malawi, where enrollment growth, gender parity, and household prioritization of education were observed (Aluko & Adan, 2015; Mwangi, 2021; World Bank, 2015; Kazibwe, 2022). However, 4 studies report unintended consequences, including increased class sizes, teacher workload, and reduced instructional time under the double-track system implemented to accommodate rising student numbers (Dwomoh et al., 2023; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021;

Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Tseer et al., 2024). Evidence indicates that these structural constraints compromise learning outcomes and are consistent with the input-output trade-offs described in the Education Production Function (EPF) framework (2 studies) (Kalunda & Otanga, 2015; Kattan & Burnett, 2004). Geographic disparities remain pronounced: students in northern and rural regions experience long travel distances, poor transport, and limited access to well-resourced schools. Governance tensions between centralized standardization and decentralized decision-making further exacerbate inequities (Akyeampong, 2009; Wilson, 2017; Asante et al., 2024; Akuffo, 2025).

Evidence indicates that increased access under FSHS does not equate to equitable outcomes. Urban schools benefit from better resources, while rural schools face overcrowding and poor facilities (Asante et al., 2024; Akuffo, 2025; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Gender barriers and teacher strain further limit rural girls' retention and equitable learning (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Kim, 2016; Wilson, 2017; Tseer, 2024; Mensah, 2019). These patterns align with cross-national evidence from Uganda and Tanzania, where enrollment increases under fee-free policies did not eliminate region- or gender-based disparities in learning outcomes (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013; Kattan & Burnett, 2004). Social Justice Theory, including Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1985) and Fraser's framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser et al., 2004), provides a lens to interpret these findings, emphasizing that access alone does not guarantee capability development or meaningful educational achievement (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Ahonsi et al., 2019; Akuffo, 2025).

A synthesis of studies indicates a decline in instructional quality concurrent with FSHS-

driven enrollment expansion. The double-track system has reduced teacher-student contact time, disrupted continuity, and repurposed learning spaces such as libraries and dining halls (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Alando, 2025; Takyi et al., 2019). Evidence consistently highlights teacher capacity, agency, and engagement in school improvement as critical mediators of quality outcomes (Quansah et al., 2024; Yeyie, 2024). Socio-economic disparities further limit student engagement, with learners from low-income households facing restricted access to essential resources (Wilson, 2017; Ahonsi et al., 2019). Comparative evidence from Kenya, Nigeria, and Liberia demonstrates that enrollment increases without proportional investment in infrastructure, pedagogical support, and teacher development can result in stagnant or declining learning outcomes despite higher enrollment (Kalunda & Otanga, 2015; Obasi, 2000; Jallah, 2020).

Lastly, short-term efficiency strategies, including the double-track system, have improved classroom utilization (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Tseer, 2024). However, long-term sustainability remains limited due to heavy dependence on petroleum revenues, donor contributions, and internally generated funds, exposing the policy to fiscal fluctuations (MOE, 2017; Casely-Hayford, 2025). Administrative inefficiencies, including delayed disbursements, weak monitoring, and limited school autonomy, further constrain effective implementation (UNESCO, 2017; Awal & Oduro, 2017). Reviewed studies recommend medium-term financing strategies, targeted student support, public-private partnerships, and digital resource management systems to enhance sustainability and efficiency (Addai & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2024; Asante,

Gajduschek, & Bartha, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy constitutes a landmark intervention in the nation's educational landscape, offering substantial opportunities to democratize access and promote social mobility. However, its long-term effectiveness cannot be measured solely by enrolment figures. It is contingent upon the integration of systemic reforms that address persistent infrastructural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural inequities. Sustainable impact requires that increases in student numbers be matched by proportional investments in school facilities, teaching personnel, and professional development. Context-sensitive support for learners in marginalized, rural, and northern regions is also essential. Embedding principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice is necessary to ensure that access translates into meaningful educational outcomes, enabling students not only to attend school but to fully engage, learn, and progress. Additionally, the financial sustainability of the FSHS policy depends on good governance, diversified funding mechanisms, and performance-based resource allocation to mitigate risks associated with reliance on volatile petroleum revenues and external donor support. Strategic coordination between central and local education authorities, coupled with data-driven monitoring and stakeholder participation, is critical to addressing regional disparities and improving policy responsiveness. When these elements are effectively implemented, the FSHS policy has the potential to evolve

beyond a politically driven initiative into a durable, high-quality, and equitable education system. It can serve as a model for secondary education reform across sub-Saharan Africa.

8. Recommendations

To ensure sustainability and maximize impact, the Ministry of Education should prioritize targeted investments in infrastructure and human resources, while local education authorities implement context-specific support for marginalized learners, including transportation, school feeding, and remedial programs. School leaders should engage in teacher performance management and professional development, and teachers' unions should advocate for manageable workloads and wellbeing initiatives to enhance instructional effectiveness. Policymakers must develop diversified, medium- to long-term funding strategies, reducing reliance on petroleum revenues and donor support, while NGOs, donors, and civil society can complement government efforts through capacity-building, infrastructure development, and programs targeting gender and socio-economic disparities. Ongoing research and evaluation are essential to monitor policy impacts, inform evidence-based adjustments, and ensure that access translates into meaningful educational outcomes. When these measures are effectively implemented, the FSHS policy has the potential to evolve into a durable, high-quality, and equitable education system, serving as a model for secondary education reform across sub-Saharan Africa.

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