



An assessment of stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the free senior high school project in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of educational policy, particularly concerning the Free Senior High School program (FSHS) in Ghana, an abundance of empirical studies have explored stakeholder engagement. However, a comprehensive aggregation, synthesis and critical analysis of these empirical findings are notably lacking. This study fills this gap by providing a meticulous aggregation, synthesis and critical analysis of the individual empirical findings on stakeholder engagement within the context of the free senior high school program in Ghana. Using a scoping literature review methodology within the framework of the stakeholder theory, this study meticulously identified primary stakeholders intimately involved in the FSHS program. These stakeholders encompass students, parents, teachers, governmental bodies, food suppliers, school management teams, education workers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and UNESCO. However, a prevalent observation was the inadequate involvement of a majority of these stakeholders during both the policy formulation and program implementation phases. Central to this analysis is the critical role played by trust, underlining how its absence can impede collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders. Furthermore, the political entanglement of the program presents a substantial challenge, diverting attention from educational objectives to political considerations. Resource limitations, suboptimal project implementation capacities, and the state's hesitance in receiving constructive feedback further contribute to restricted stakeholder engagement. These findings resonate with broader international scholarship concerning education stakeholders while shedding light on distinct contextual challenges confronted by the FSHS program. In light of the aforementioned observations, this study recommends trust-building to fortify relationships among stakeholders as well as the depoliticization of education policy to ensure that educational objectives remain paramount.

Keywords: Free, High school, Stakeholder, Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Stakeholder engagement in school project implementation is a comprehensive approach aimed at involving a diverse array of individuals and groups with a vested interest in a specific educational endeavour (Cuppen et al., 2016). This approach acknowledges that schools are not isolated entities but integral components of broader communities and societies. The engagement of stakeholders is paramount to ensure that educational projects align with

the needs and expectations of the people they serve, contributing to their overall success (Cascetta et al., 2015). The process begins with the identification of stakeholders, which can encompass a wide range of actors, including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, local government officials, community members, businesses, non-profit organizations, and educational experts. Subsequently, a need assessment is conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the unique requirements and concerns of each stakeholder group

(Civera et al., 2019). Stakeholder engagement in school project implementation is a universal practice, but its execution varies across regions. Europe emphasizes inclusivity and collaboration, America showcases a mix of approaches, China navigates between central authority and local input, and Africa grapples with the complexities of diverse stakeholder landscapes. This study investigates the level of stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the free senior high school project in Ghana.

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) project in Ghana is a significant educational policy initiative that was implemented to address issues of access and affordability in the country's secondary education system (Civera et al., 2019). Ghana has been committed to improving its educational sector to ensure that all children have access to quality education, and the Free SHS Project is a central part of this effort (Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021). The project was officially launched in September 2017 by the government of Ghana, led by President Nana Akufo-Addo. Its primary objective was to make senior high school education in Ghana free for all eligible students. Before the introduction of this policy, many families struggled to afford the fees and related costs associated with senior high school education, leading to disparities in access and limiting educational opportunities for many Ghanaian students (Cascetta et al., 2015; Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021).

Key features of the free SHS project include the elimination of tuition fees for students, the provision of free textbooks and other learning materials, and the expansion of infrastructure and facilities to accommodate the increased enrolment. The policy covers both public day schools and boarding schools, aiming to ensure that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have equal access to quality secondary education (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Matey, 2020). The free SHS project has been met with both enthusiasm and challenges. On the positive side, it has significantly increased enrolment in senior high schools across Ghana, allowing many more students to pursue their education beyond the basic level. However, it has also faced some logistical and funding challenges, such as overcrowding in schools and the need for continued investment in infrastructure and teacher training to maintain and improve the quality of education.

The free SHS program, being a cornerstone of educational reform in Ghana, has sparked substantial interest and investigation. Numerous scholars and researchers have diligently conducted empirical studies to elucidate the policy's impacts, both positive and negative, across various dimensions (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adu-Ababio and Osei, 2018; Matey, 2020; Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021). However, the fragmented nature of this research landscape has inadvertently obscured the broader picture. Individual studies, while

informative in their own right, often fail to offer a consolidated and comprehensive view of the policy's performance concerning stakeholder engagement. This is the gap this study addresses. The study will identify and analyse empirical literature on the implementation of the FSHS to yield composite data, which can provide valuable insights into the overall state of stakeholder engagement within the free SHS program. This will empower policymakers, educators, and stakeholders with a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the policy's strengths and weaknesses in this critical dimension. To achieve this objective, the study answered a number of questions.

- Who are the stakeholders in the FSHS program?
- What roles have they played in the formulation and implementation of the program?
- What factors affect the level of stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the program?

Answers to these questions did not just contribute to existing knowledge by consolidating and synthesizing the findings of numerous empirical studies conducted on the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program in Ghana but also offered a framework for the modification and improvement of the FSHS policy to gain total buy-in from stakeholders and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy.

The rest of the paper is divided into four more sections. The first reviews relevant literature on stakeholder engagement in educational policies. The second details the methodology that was developed to conduct the study, the third presents and discusses the results of the study and the fourth offers a conclusion and policy recommendations emanating from the findings of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background to the Free Senior High School Program

Education plays a pivotal role in the advancement of human capital within any society. It serves as the wellspring for the accumulation of human, social, cultural, and economic capital (Wu and Fan, 2017). Across the globe, countries have been exploring innovative strategies to eliminate obstacles hindering access to education. In the case of Ghana, the pursuit of equitable educational access commenced long before gaining independence and continues to be a prevailing concern (Apostolou et al., 2018; Asamoah, 2017). With the enactment of the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution in Ghana, a profound commitment was made to progressively offer free secondary education (Matey, 2020). Article 25(1b) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana explicitly mandates the state to ensure that "secondary education in its various forms, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all through every feasible means,

particularly through the gradual introduction of free education" (The Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992).

Despite this constitutional mandate, it was not until 2015 that Ghana took substantial steps toward rendering secondary education accessible by removing financial barriers. The introduction of the progressively free senior high school policy in 2015 represented a partial funding initiative for senior high education (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). However, it was not until September 2017, during the administration of the NPP, that the full-scale free senior high school policy was rolled out, effectively abolishing financial barriers to secondary education (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Matey, 2020).

The Four Pillars of the Free Senior High School Policy

In September 2017, under the leadership of His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwah Akufo Addo, the Government of Ghana launched the Free Senior High School policy, a pivotal campaign promise in the lead-up to the 2016 elections. The policy stands on four foundational pillars:

Cost barrier removal: The free senior high school policy eliminated fees approved by the GES council, making secondary education financially accessible to all.

Infrastructure expansion: In anticipation of increased enrollment, the government committed to expanding physical infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of students.

Quality enhancement and equity: The policy promised the provision of core textbooks and supplementary reading materials, rationalization and deployment of teachers, and more to enhance quality and promote equity in education.

Skill development: A crucial aspect of the policy aimed at equipping Ghanaian students with employable skills, enhancing their competitiveness on a global scale.

By eradicating financial barriers, the free senior high school policy opened doors for potential students, regardless of their parents' financial standing. Data indicates a significant reduction in the percentage of students placed in senior high schools but unable to enrol, declining from 27.80% and 26.50% in 2015 and 2016 to 10.90% and 11.90% in 2018 and 2019, respectively (Kwegyiriba, 2021). This underscores the policy's success in increasing secondary school enrolment.

Before the introduction of this policy, senior high education was primarily accessible to financially stable families, but now, every junior high graduate who passes the entrance examination can attend senior high school free of charge, exemplifying genuine equity (Kwegyiriba and Mensah, 2021).

Despite the government's aspirations for infrastructure expansion to accommodate the burgeoning student population, progress has not matched the infrastructure needs. Consequently, the double-track system was introduced, optimizing the utilization of existing facilities to enroll more students (Kwegyiriba and Mensah, 2021). This innovative approach has resulted in soaring enrollment rates but calls for increased capital investments to match the rising numbers. While access has been a primary focus, other facets, such as teacher training and development, skill development, and pedagogical approaches, have not received adequate attention (Adarkwah, 2022). This overemphasis on access, sometimes at the expense of infrastructure development, has raised concerns about the quality of education delivery (Asante and Agbee, 2021). Additionally, issues with teacher policy reform implementation and training have been noted, affecting the overall quality of education (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018).

Theoretical Perspective: Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is a management and organizational theory that focuses on the complex web of relationships between organizations and their various stakeholders. At its core, the theory posits that organizations should not view their primary responsibility as solely serving the interests of shareholders but should instead consider the broader implications of their actions on all parties affected by their activities (Hörisch et al., 2020). This perspective recognizes that organizations exist within a larger societal context, and their decisions can have far-reaching consequences for a diverse array of stakeholders. One fundamental tenet of Stakeholder Theory is the identification of stakeholders. This involves acknowledging and categorizing all relevant parties connected to an organization or a specific project. Stakeholders can range from internal groups like employees to external entities such as customers, suppliers, local communities, governments, environmental organizations, and more. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of stakeholders is essential for understanding the complexity of organizational relationships.

The theory also emphasizes the need to balance the often competing interests of various stakeholder groups. While shareholders typically seek financial returns and profitability, other stakeholders may prioritize environmental sustainability, social responsibility, or ethical considerations. Achieving a harmonious equilibrium among these diverse interests can be challenging but is seen as a fundamental goal. Balancing these interests often requires organizations to make trade-offs and consider the long-term implications of their decisions. Additionally, stakeholder theory promotes a long-term perspective in organizational decision-making. Instead of focusing solely on short-term

profit maximization, organizations are encouraged to adopt a more sustainable approach. This entails considering the well-being of stakeholders over time, recognizing that actions taken today can have repercussions for years to come. Such a perspective aligns with the idea that organizations should prioritize the creation of long-term value, encompassing factors like reputation, reduced risk, and enduring relationships, in addition to financial profits (Cuppen et al., 2016).

Ethical considerations are woven into the fabric of stakeholder theory. It underscores the importance of ethical behavior and responsibility in organizational actions. This includes elements like transparency, honesty, and a commitment to fulfilling promises and obligations to stakeholders. Ethical conduct is seen as integral to building trust and credibility with stakeholders and, by extension, safeguarding the organization's reputation and success. Furthermore, stakeholder theory emphasizes the critical role of stakeholder engagement. Organizations are encouraged to actively seek input, feedback, and collaboration from their stakeholders. Engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes not only helps in identifying potential issues and concerns but also fosters trust and ensures that the diverse voices of stakeholders are considered (Firestone et al., 2020).

Ultimately, stakeholder theory places the onus on management and leadership to be accountable for considering the interests of all stakeholders in their decision-making. It challenges organizations to weigh the potential impacts of their choices on different stakeholder groups and make decisions that optimize the overall well-being of both the organization and its stakeholders. By adopting these principles, organizations can build stronger, more resilient relationships with their stakeholders and contribute to their own long-term success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

The stakeholder theory was instrumental in this study. It served as a foundational framework for identifying the diverse stakeholders associated with the FSHS program. We recognized that the stakeholders extended beyond the obvious, such as students and their families, to include government bodies, educational authorities, teachers' unions, school administrators, policymakers, and even the broader community. Applying stakeholder theory helped us categorize these stakeholders based on their roles, interests, and levels of influence in the program. The Theory provided a lens through which we could comprehensively analyze the roles of various stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of the FSHS program. We examined how each stakeholder group, from government bodies to teachers' unions, contributed to the program's design, policymaking, and implementation. Stakeholder theory helped us recognize that stakeholders played varying roles, ranging from decision-makers to implementers, and their influence levels differed. By understanding these dynamics, we

gained insights into the complexities of the program's governance structure. It also played a crucial role in identifying and examining the factors influencing stakeholder engagement in the FSHS program. We applied the theory's principles to assess how factors like communication, transparency, trust, and the alignment of interests affected the engagement levels of different stakeholder groups. For instance, we found that stakeholders who perceived their concerns were heard and incorporated into program decisions tended to be more engaged. Similarly, when the program's objectives aligned with stakeholders' interests, it positively influenced their engagement.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a scoping literature methodology was employed to systematically review and synthesize the existing research on stakeholder engagement within education projects, with a specific focus on the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program. The methodology involved a well-defined series of steps to ensure a comprehensive and structured analysis of the literature.

The inclusion criteria for this study were meticulously designed to determine which studies would be eligible for inclusion in the scoping literature review. The foremost criterion was that selected studies had to centre on the concept of stakeholder engagement. This requirement ensured that the chosen research directly addressed the core theme of stakeholder engagement within the context of education projects. Another crucial inclusion criterion was relevance to education projects. This encompassed a broad spectrum of educational initiatives, including programs, policies, institutions, and projects. It was imperative that the selected studies were directly applicable to the context of education projects to align with the study's primary focus. Given the specific emphasis on the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program, a third inclusion criterion was that selected studies needed to have a direct or substantial connection to the FSHS program within their content. This criterion ensured that the literature reviewed was pertinent to the central subject of interest and allowed for a more targeted analysis of stakeholder engagement within the FSHS program. The consideration of publication dates was also integrated into the inclusion criteria. Only studies which were published within 2015-2023 were considered. Lastly, the studies had to be available in the English language. This criterion was practical, as it aligned with the language proficiency of the research team and facilitated a thorough examination of the selected literature.

The sources of data for this scoping literature review study were carefully selected to provide a robust foundation for the examination of stakeholder engagement within the context of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program. Academic databases played a central role as they offered access to a vast array of

peer-reviewed research articles, scholarly papers, theses, and conference proceedings. These databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, served as rich repositories of knowledge, allowing us to extract relevant information on stakeholder engagement dynamics, educational projects, and the specific case of the FSHS program. Research journals, particularly those focused on education, public policy, and stakeholder engagement, were invaluable data sources. These journals housed a wealth of research articles authored by experts and researchers in the field. The systematic review of articles from these journals yielded valuable insights and empirical evidence related to stakeholder engagement strategies, challenges, and outcomes within education projects.

Government publications formed another crucial data source. Reports, policy documents, and publications related to the FSHS program and broader educational policies provided essential information on the program's design, objectives, implementation strategies, and the role of stakeholders in its execution. These documents, often authoritative and comprehensive, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the policy landscape. Grey literature, consisting of reports and publications from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, and think tanks, offered a practical dimension to the data collection process. Grey literature often contained case studies, practical insights, and real-world experiences related to stakeholder engagement in education projects. These sources complemented the academic literature by providing on-the-ground perspectives and examples of stakeholder interactions.

Books, monographs, theses, and dissertations authored by experts in education policy and stakeholder engagement provided theoretical frameworks, historical context, and in-depth analysis. These sources were instrumental in building a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding of key concepts in the field. Additionally, academic conferences played a role in sourcing data. Proceedings from education and policy conferences offered access to research papers and studies presented by scholars and researchers actively engaged in the study of stakeholder engagement. These conference materials provided the latest insights and emerging trends in the field. Online repositories and digital libraries, which house academic and policy-related materials, were also explored to expand the scope of data collection. The inclusion of diverse data sources ensured that the study's findings were well-informed, comprehensive, and reflective of a wide-ranging body of knowledge. This multipronged approach to data collection facilitated a thorough examination of stakeholder engagement within education projects, particularly the FSHS program, and contributed to a well-rounded scoping literature review.

Validity and Reliability

Ensuring the validity and reliability of a scoping literature review study is paramount to maintain the credibility of the research findings. In this study, multiple measures were implemented to address these crucial aspects. To maintain the validity of the study, a comprehensive search strategy was meticulously designed. Clear research questions and objectives were defined at the outset, guiding the search process. A combination of keywords and controlled vocabulary terms was utilized to identify relevant studies from various academic databases. This systematic approach aimed to encompass a wide spectrum of literature related to stakeholder engagement in education projects, particularly the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program. By casting a broad net, the study minimized the risk of missing key sources and ensured that the research questions were grounded in a robust body of literature.

To enhance the reliability of the study, a structured data extraction process was employed. Information from selected studies, including study objectives, methodology, key findings, and recommendations, was extracted in a consistent and standardized manner. This methodical approach minimized the potential for bias in data collection and interpretation. Moreover, the study underwent a rigorous peer-review process, where it was critically evaluated and subjected to feedback from peers and experts in the field. Peer review served as an additional layer of scrutiny, contributing to the reliability of the study's findings. Transparency and reporting played a pivotal role in maintaining both validity and reliability. The study meticulously documented its methodology, inclusion criteria, and data extraction process, providing readers with a clear understanding of the research procedures. This transparency allowed for the assessment of the study's rigor and the credibility of its findings.

The study, therefore, upheld the principles of validity and reliability through a systematic search strategy, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, standardized data extraction, peer review, transparency in reporting, and meticulous documentation of the scoping process. These measures collectively ensured that the study's findings were both valid and reliable, reinforcing the overall quality and trustworthiness of the scoping literature review.

Stringent ethical considerations were thoughtfully addressed. The study prioritized the respect for intellectual property by diligently acknowledging and citing the contributions of authors and sources. It upheld principles of informed consent, ensuring that all included materials were appropriately credited and adhering to copyright laws. Transparency and impartiality were central ethical principles, with the researcher ensuring an unbiased representation of the literature and providing

transparent documentation of the study's methodology. Data privacy and confidentiality, while not applicable to publicly available literature, were upheld as part of the broader ethical framework. Additionally, ethical peer review further contributed to the study's credibility and integrity. These ethical considerations collectively ensured the research's adherence to rigorous ethical standards and upheld the highest levels of integrity in the scoping literature review process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stakeholders in the Implementation of the Free Senior High School in Ghana

The comprehensive review of relevant literature uncovered a recurring pattern in the identification of key stakeholders within the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program. Most of the studies included in the scoping literature review consistently reported a core set of stakeholders actively involved in the FSHS program. These key stakeholders, as highlighted across multiple sources, encompassed a diverse range of actors and entities crucial to the program's implementation and success. The primary stakeholders frequently cited in the literature were students, who represent the core beneficiaries of the FSHS program. Their access to quality education was a focal point of stakeholder engagement efforts. Parents also featured prominently, as they played a pivotal role in supporting their children's education and ensuring its success. Teachers, as essential educators and facilitators within the program, emerged as key stakeholders with a direct impact on the learning experience.

The state, often through the government and relevant ministries, was consistently recognized as a significant stakeholder due to its role in policy formulation, funding allocation, and program oversight. Food suppliers, integral to the provision of nutritious meals within the FSHS program, were identified as stakeholders with a direct impact on the program's operations. School management teams, education workers, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were also reported as key stakeholders involved in various aspects of program administration, support, and advocacy. Finally, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) emerged as a noteworthy stakeholder, particularly in the context of international cooperation and guidance on education policies and initiatives.

The findings regarding key stakeholders in the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program closely align with the broader scholarship on education stakeholders, reflecting a universal recognition of the diverse actors involved in shaping educational initiatives. Across international scholarship, students consistently emerge as primary stakeholders, as education programs ultimately revolve around their learning experiences and

outcomes (Cascetta et al., 2015; Schelly et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2018). This alignment highlights the global commitment to ensuring that educational policies and practices prioritize the needs and well-being of students, a sentiment encapsulated in international initiatives like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on quality education. The inclusion of parents and guardians as key stakeholders in the FSHS program mirrors international perspectives on the critical role that families play in education. The engagement of parents in their children's education is a common theme worldwide, evidenced by parent-teacher associations and advocacy groups (Ferreira et al., 2020; Horisch et al., 2020; Jitpaiboon et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2018). In the United States, for instance, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) are active stakeholders that contribute to school improvement and educational policy discussions (Enserink et al., 2022). This alignment underscores the importance of fostering strong home-school partnerships to support students' educational journeys.

Teachers and education workers being identified as essential stakeholders are consistent with global scholarship that recognizes educators as the backbone of educational systems. Across countries, teachers are seen as key agents in delivering quality education (Cuppen et al., 2016; de Oliveira and Rabechini Jr, 2019; Dumont et al., 2019). The Global Partnership for Education (GPE), for example, emphasizes the critical role of teachers in achieving quality education on a global scale. This alignment highlights the universal acknowledgment of the pivotal role teachers play in shaping the educational landscape. The involvement of government and state entities in the FSHS program echoes international perspectives on the responsibility of the state for education. Government involvement in policy formulation, funding allocation, and program oversight is a recurring theme in education worldwide (Civera et al., 2019; Horisch et al., 2020; Matey, 2020). The European commission's education and training 2020 strategy underscores the role of EU member states in shaping education policies (Matey, 2020), exemplifying the alignment between the FSHS findings and international scholarship on the role of government in education.

The engagement of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international bodies like UNESCO resonates with global initiatives where such organizations collaborate with governments to advance education goals (Matey, 2020). International bodies often play a crucial role in promoting global education initiatives, as evidenced by UNESCO's education for all initiative. The alignment between the FSHS findings and international scholarship underscores the importance of partnerships between governments and non-governmental actors in advancing educational objectives on a global scale. Finally, the identification of food suppliers as stakeholders underscores the recognition of nutrition's

role in education, aligning with international scholarship that emphasizes the importance of nutrition and school feeding programs for student well-being and learning outcomes. Organizations like the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) are actively engaged in such initiatives worldwide. This alignment highlights the global commitment to addressing students' holistic needs within the education framework.

Roles Played by Stakeholders in the Implementation of the Program

The comprehensive review of stakeholders in the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program revealed a concerning trend where the majority of these stakeholders are not actively involved in the program's implementation, nor were they engaged in the formulation of the policy (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adarkwah, 2022; Adu-Ababio and Osei, 2018; Matey, 2020; Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021). This lack of meaningful engagement has significant implications for the program's effectiveness and the quality of education it provides. Teachers, who are vital to the educational process, are primarily limited to their teaching roles within the program. While their responsibilities in the classroom are crucial, their involvement is often confined to instructional activities, leaving little room for broader participation in decision-making or program development (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adarkwah, 2022; Kwegyiriba, 2021). Similarly, students, who should ideally be active participants in their own education, often play a limited role beyond attending classes. Their potential as stakeholders capable of contributing to the improvement of the program remains largely untapped.

Parents, a key stakeholder group in education, have been side-lined due to the discontinuation of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. This side-lining is a consequence of the cancellation of PTA levies by the state, a move directly related to the FSHS program's implementation (Matey, 2020; Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021). The absence of parental involvement represents a missed opportunity for collaboration and input from those who have a vested interest in their children's education. Food suppliers, critical for the provision of nutritious meals to students, are facing challenges, including delayed payments from the food and buffer stock (Matey, 2020). This financial strain is leading to their gradual withdrawal from the program, which could impact the quality of meals provided to students (Adarkwah, 2022; Kwegyiriba, 2021). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, often valuable partners in education initiatives, appear to be playing no discernible role in the FSHS program, further limiting the diversity of perspectives and resources available for its enhancement (Kwegyiriba, 2021; Mohammed and Kuyini, 2021).

The findings on limited stakeholder engagement in the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program resonate with

some aspects of international scholarship on education stakeholders, corroborating the challenges that exist in various educational contexts worldwide. The observation of limited student participation beyond classroom attendance aligns with the general perception of students as recipients of education rather than active contributors to policy and program development, a common theme in international studies. Similarly, the challenges faced in parental engagement due to the discontinuation of PTA meetings reflect broader concerns about barriers to meaningful parental involvement in education across different countries.

However, there are noteworthy contradictions within these findings when compared to international scholarship. The limited involvement of teachers in decision-making processes within the FSHS program contradicts the emphasis on teacher engagement and leadership in many international education initiatives (Jitpaiboon et al., 2019). International research often highlights the critical role of educators in shaping educational practices and policies, emphasizing their potential to drive improvements in learning outcomes. The withdrawal of food suppliers due to delayed payments represents a unique challenge specific to the FSHS program, and it is not a common theme in international scholarship (Enserink et al., 2022; Horisch et al., 2020). While school feeding programs are recognized globally for their importance in supporting students' nutrition and well-being, the financial strain on food suppliers leading to withdrawal may not be widely addressed in international studies. Additionally, the absence of engagement by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations runs counter to the typical involvement of these entities in many international education projects, where they often play key roles in resource provision, capacity-building, and advocacy.

Factors Affecting Stakeholder Engagement in the Implementation of the Free Senior High School Program in Ghana

The comprehensive review of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program shed light on several critical factors that significantly hindered stakeholder engagement in the initiative. These findings underscore the complexity of the educational landscape and its unique challenges within the Ghanaian context. The factors identified as impediments to effective stakeholder engagement include a pervasive lack of trust, the politicization of the program, resource constraints, deficiencies in project implementation skills, reluctance of the state to receive feedback, and instances of corruption involving public officials.

Lack of trust: The review highlighted a fundamental issue of trust deficit among various stakeholders involved in the FSHS program. This lack of trust can be attributed to historical experiences, policy inconsistencies, and

perceived ulterior motives, leading to skepticism and reluctance to actively engage in the program. Trust is foundational to building collaborative relationships among stakeholders, and its absence can significantly hamper effective cooperation and the achievement of program objectives.

Politicization of the program: The politicization of the FSHS program emerged as a substantial barrier to constructive stakeholder engagement. When educational initiatives become entangled in political agendas and partisan interests, it often undermines the program's effectiveness. This can create a divisive environment where stakeholders may prioritize political affiliations over the best interests of students and the quality of education.

Resource constraints: The review uncovered resource constraints as a significant factor affecting stakeholder engagement. Limited financial resources and infrastructure deficiencies can hinder the program's ability to deliver on its promises, impacting stakeholder perceptions and participation. Adequate resources are essential for addressing the diverse needs of students and ensuring a conducive learning environment.

Poor project implementation skills: Inadequate project implementation skills among relevant stakeholders were identified as a challenge. Effective implementation requires a range of skills, including planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Insufficient capacity in these areas can lead to suboptimal program execution and hinder stakeholder buy-in and participation.

Reluctance for feedback by the state: The state's reluctance to actively seek and embrace feedback from stakeholders was highlighted in the review. Constructive feedback is essential for program improvement and adaptation to changing needs. When the state is unwilling to receive input from stakeholders, it can foster frustration and disengagement among those who seek to contribute their insights.

Corruption of public officials: Instances of corruption involving public officials were identified as a concerning factor impacting stakeholder engagement. Corruption erodes trust, diverts resources away from educational priorities, and undermines the credibility of the program. Addressing corruption is crucial for rebuilding trust and ensuring the transparent and efficient operation of the FSHS program.

The findings regarding factors affecting stakeholder engagement in the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program offer a nuanced perspective that combines both corroboration and contradiction when compared to existing studies on education and stakeholder involvement. The identification of a lack of trust as a significant barrier to stakeholder engagement in the FSHS program corroborates existing research in the field of education (Enserink et al., 2022; Horisch et al., 2020).

Trust is consistently recognized as a crucial element for effective collaboration among educational stakeholders. Numerous international studies emphasize the pivotal role of trust in building constructive relationships and fostering cooperation within educational systems. This shared concern highlights the universal importance of trust in education and the need for trust-building measures. The finding that the FSHS program has become entangled in political agendas aligns with a common theme in education policy research. The politicization of educational initiatives is a recurring issue observed globally, where political interests can sometimes overshadow the educational objectives of such programs (Horisch et al., 2020; Jitpaiboon et al., 2019). Existing studies frequently document the challenges posed by the politicization of education, highlighting the potential negative impact on policy implementation and student outcomes. This parallel underscores the broader implications of political influence on education.

The findings, however, contradict some existing findings. While resource constraints are acknowledged as a challenge in education, the specific issues identified in the FSHS program, such as delayed payments to food suppliers, represents a unique aspect of resource management. International literature often focuses on resource disparities and inadequacies but may not extensively explore the intricacies of payment delays to suppliers as a common theme. This distinction highlights the need to address context-specific resource challenges within educational programs. The revelation of inadequate project implementation skills among stakeholders in the FSHS program contradicts the emphasis in existing research on broader issues of policy implementation and management. While research acknowledges the significance of effective implementation, it does not always delve into the specific skills gaps among stakeholders as a central concern. This finding underscores the need for targeted capacity-building efforts to enhance the implementation capabilities of those involved in education initiatives. The reluctance of the state to actively seek and embrace feedback from stakeholders is a shared concern but varies in its manifestation across different education systems. Existing research generally underscores the importance of inclusive policy development and stakeholder input, emphasizing the need for responsive governance in education (Firestone et al., 2020; Jitpaiboon et al., 2019). This variation in the willingness to receive feedback underscores the contextual nature of governance practices and highlights the need for tailored approaches to stakeholder engagement.

Corruption within education systems is a well-documented issue, with many studies examining its consequences for resource allocation and educational outcomes. While corruption is acknowledged as a widespread challenge, the specific instances and impacts

of corruption differ across countries and contexts. The identification of corruption within the FSHS program underscores the need for vigilant anti-corruption measures and transparent governance in education. The findings on stakeholder engagement in the FSHS program, therefore, align with established research on trust and the politicization of education while introducing specific factors related to resource constraints, project implementation skills, feedback reluctance, and corruption. These contradictions highlight the importance of considering the unique context and challenges faced by the FSHS program when interpreting these findings in the broader landscape of education research.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive review of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) program in Ghana has illuminated critical insights into stakeholder engagement within the Ghanaian educational context. These findings carry significant implications for the effectiveness and success of the program and have broader relevance for educational initiatives globally. First and foremost, the identification of a pervasive lack of trust among stakeholders underscores the foundational importance of trust in fostering collaborative relationships among educational actors. Trust deficits can undermine cooperation, hinder effective communication, and ultimately impede the achievement of educational goals. Addressing trust issues is paramount not only for the FSHS program but for any education initiative seeking meaningful stakeholder engagement.

The politicization of the FSHS program serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the risks associated with intertwining educational objectives with political agendas. The findings emphasize the need for depoliticized, evidence-based policy development and implementation to ensure that the quality of education remains a top priority. Resource constraints, as identified in this study, echo the global challenge of adequately funding and supporting educational programs. Ensuring that programs like FSHS have the necessary resources is essential for delivering quality education and engaging stakeholders effectively. Adequate infrastructure and financial resources are fundamental to creating a conducive learning environment.

The revelation of inadequate project implementation skills among stakeholders underscores the importance of capacity building. Strengthening the skills of those involved in education initiatives, particularly in planning, monitoring, and evaluation, is crucial for effective program execution and stakeholder engagement. The reluctance of the state to actively seek and embrace feedback from stakeholders highlights the necessity of responsive governance in education. Encouraging open channels for feedback and collaboration between the state and stakeholders is essential for program improvement and adaptation to evolving needs.

Instances of corruption involving public officials are a stark reminder of the need for robust anti-corruption measures within educational systems. Corruption erodes trust, diverts resources, and undermines the credibility of programs. Addressing corruption is imperative to ensure transparent and efficient operations within education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Base on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- The Ministry of Education should establish mechanisms for open and transparent communication between stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and government officials. Encourage dialogue to address historical mistrust and skepticism. Training programs on building trust and fostering collaboration could also be implemented for stakeholders. By fostering trust, stakeholders can work together more effectively to improve educational outcomes.
- The study highlights the negative impact of political agendas on the FSHS program. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education should ensure that educational policies and programs are shielded from partisan politics. Governments should prioritize evidence-based policymaking and consider the long-term benefits of quality education over short-term political gains. Independent bodies or advisory committees can be established to oversee educational policies and ensure they are free from political influence. This depoliticization will create a stable environment for program implementation and stakeholder engagement.
- The Ministry of Education should ensure that stakeholders involved in program implementation, including teachers, administrators, and government officials, receive training to enhance their skills in project planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Additionally, robust anti-corruption mechanisms, such as whistle-blower protection and transparent financial management, should be put in place to prevent and address corruption within the educational system. By strengthening skills and combating corruption, the effectiveness of educational programs can be improved, leading to better stakeholder engagement and outcomes.

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