

58 Years of British Colonial Education System in Ghana: Structural Challenges and the Way Forward (I)

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Ghana's education system has undergone many transitions dating back the colonial and post-independence eras of our history. To save time and space, I consider the major changes that have occurred since the late 1980's with emphasis on the pre-tertiary level of education (see Akyeampong, K. (2010). 50 years of educational progress and challenge in Ghana).

Following the 1987 National Educational Reform Program (NERP), a new structure and content of education for Ghana became operational with initial focus on the implementation of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) programme. The policy decision on the new structure was based on the then Provisional National Defence Council Government's White Paper entitled The New Structure and Content of Education. Under the new structure, the 6-3-3-4 system was adopted. The new system which sought to increase access, improve community participation and ultimately enhance the quality of education comprised 6 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary education, 3 years of senior secondary education and a minimum of 4 years of tertiary education. This culminated in the reduction of the age at which many pupils write the University level qualifying examination from 23 to 18 years. The six years of primary-school and three years of junior secondary-school education constitute the basic education level which is supposed to be compulsory and free for every Ghanaian child of school-going age. However, after nearly two decades of its implementation, it became clear that the reform had failed to achieve quality targets, thrown many young people out of school and exposed the education sector to public ridicule and opprobrium.

The New Patriotic Party Government after assuming office in 2001 reinvigorated earlier efforts to expand access in education, improve education quality and streamline education management and in particular meet the UN's Education for All (EFA) agenda relative to the Dakar Framework of 2000. Although improvements were evident in several areas, particularly in the rapid expansion of infrastructure at all levels; increased gross enrollment and teacher-pupil ratios; the

introduction of the School Feeding Programme; Capitation Grant; and free Metro Bus ride for children in basic school, the fundamental structure of Ghana's education system remained largely unchanged. Little structural reforms were however observed at the pre-tertiary level where basic education was redefined to include 2 years of kindergarten, whilst the senior secondary school was renamed and extended to four years, following Anamuah-Mensah's committee work. Teacher training colleges were also upgraded into diploma awarding institutions.

In 2009, the National Democratic Congress Government which took power in the 2008 general elections, returned the SHS duration to its original three years, although a stake holders' forum on the SHS duration ended inconclusively. Nevertheless, these changes appear cosmetic as it has largely failed to address many critical issues, particularly, of access, retention and success at the basic and secondary schools and lifelong learning generally.

For many years, attempts have been made to understand the underlying causes of this phenomenon. Findings have been very common, revolving around lack of infrastructure and teaching and learning materials, inadequate instructional time, overcrowded curriculum, teacher pedagogical content knowledge and lack of in-service training opportunities, among others. In recent times however, official reports have identified a particular concern regarding the obsolete and immutable structure of the education system. I remain convinced, therefore, that a better and more effective way to educate our people than the current school model is needed in order to reverse the downward trend in the quality of education.

In this article and the subsequent ones to follow, I highlight some of the structural weaknesses of Ghana's education model and offer a vision for structural reform, capable of delivering quality lifelong learning to all citizens.

I start by arguing that the current education system in Ghana has been characterized by three key features as suggested by international evidences. First, the system is fragmented along academic disciplines and levels, with overcrowded curriculum. With no systematic attempt to harmonize all the different subject-oriented curriculum strands, the Government's approach is to merely reduce the number of subjects, particularly, at the primary schools. Whilst this is laudable in terms of realigning the thematic areas of students' experiences and outcomes, the absence of a composite National Curriculum framework has largely occasioned a lack of clarity and focus about the key principles and concepts underpinning the education system in Ghana.

This raises important questions about what the underlying values, purposes and principles of the Ghanaian education system are and how these fit into a broader National Development framework. The Anamuah-Mensah's committee recommendations have been overly cherry-picked and largely misapplied in this regard. To address this fundamental problem, there is the need to develop a National Curriculum Framework (3-19 years) that brings under one roof early years, primary education and secondary schooling and post-compulsory education, tied up to a National Credit and Qualification Framework (NCQF). Details of these are discussed in the subsequent article.

Second, there is lack of access or unequal access to education and lifelong learning at all levels of the system. Vast disparities exist between rural and urban provision and large numbers of people, in particular, adults, out-of-school youth and children of pre-school age, have little or no access to education and lifelong learning. The Government has since 2009 generally missed its own targets in respect of improving equitable access to and participation in quality education at all levels and would not likely meet those set for 2015 as well, in spite of narrowly defining its policy objectives and key indicators. More disturbing is the worrying trend at the basic education front where a huge chunk (over 40%) of students who sit the BECE 'fail' each year. The mass failure of BECE which obstruct access to secondary education has been largely occasioned by the application of the widely criticized Stanine Systems employed by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC). Given the current conceptualization of basic education as the minimum formal education to which every Ghanaian child is entitled, as of right, to equip him/her to function effectively in the society, it is questionable to categorize and label any student as 'Fail'. Is it the students who have failed to attain the basic education, which is their right? The answer rests in the fact that the education system has rather failed to provide adequate opportunities for them to attain this basic right. In other words, the problem lies with the exam, not the pupils.

A particularly concern in this respect, and in the broader context of post-compulsory education provision is the huge section of young peoples of 16-20 years old or more Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Although, accurate data on this segment of the population remain largely sparse, it is conservatively estimated that the NEET proportion in Ghana is roughly 40% of its population. To meet the challenges of the 21st century and fully-fledged middle income society, access to education must embrace the concept of Lifelong Learning, defined as the overall learning activities undertaken by the Ghanaian population from age 16 onward. By

Lifelong Learning, I also mean the whole range of learning: formal and informal learning, work place learning and the skills, attitudes and behaviour that people acquire in the day-to-day experiences. Such definition seems broadly consistent with academic conceptualization of the learning society.

Third, there is a weak and incoherent administrative control within the education system, particularly at the district levels, although both the Education Act and the Local Governments Act mandate the district assemblies to provide and manage schools under their jurisdictions. The government policy of decentralizing education management as captured in its education strategic plan (2010-2020) is inadequate and incoherent particularly the proposed coordinating role of the Ghana Education Service. The organizational structure itself appears clumsy and unclear, which potentially could affect the implementation process. I remain convinced that the Ghana Education Service should be completely scrapped and staff redeployed to the Ministry of Education and the Local Education Authorities within the district Assemblies. Alternatively, their role should be redefined to allow the local authorities autonomy to manage schools as enshrined in the local governments act (Act 462). In other words, a complete devolution of education planning, provision, management and delivery is suggested instead.

In conclusion, these three major factors, *inter alia*, have had profound effects on Ghana in relation to nation building and socio economic development. It has resulted in the deterioration, distortion or neglect of the human potential of our country, with devastating consequences for social and economic development. The latter is evident in the lack of skilled and trained labour and the adverse effects of this on productivity and the international competitiveness of the economy. For instance the high stake-examinations such as BECE and WASSCE have destroyed the culture of learning for understanding and promoted rote memorization within large sections of our school population, leading to production of students who lack critical thinking and problem solving skills as evident by several international reports. The challenge that we face as we work towards a full middle income society is to create an education and lifelong system that will ensure that the human resources and potential in our society are developed to the full. It is a challenge which we can only meet collectively and in a partnership with all sectors of the Ghanaian society.

The policy proposals I have advanced or intend to advance further are wide- ranging in their scope and profound in their implications, presenting a vast and complex challenge for structural

reforms of the Ghanaian education system. In my next articles, I attempt to expatiate each of these challenges identified, its implications on our national development agenda and suggest pragmatic policy solutions to address them. But I must admit that it will take more than these articles to achieve the ultimate goal of reforms and that much stronger advocacy strategies would need to be adopted.

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