

Salvaging Ghana's ailing education system: proposed structural reforms

Prince Hamid Armah | 5th September 2014

Few days past, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) released the provisional results of candidates who wrote the May/June 2014 (WASSCE) Examinations. Out of the 242,162 candidates who wrote the examination, a little over 28 percent (n=68,062) qualified for admission into tertiary institutions. These candidates obtained grade A1 to C6 in at least six subjects including English Language and mathematics (Core). By extrapolations, the remaining 72 percent of the candidates (n=174,100) who sat are either not qualified to gain admission into tertiary institutions or had their result cancelled and withheld. Since then, concerns and debates regarding the quality of the present education in Ghana have reinvigorated.

Many notable people, including the Minister of Education, Prof. Jane Nana Opoku-Agyeman and the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, have questioned whether it is the students who have failed or the failure emanates from the education system itself. In a recent forum organized by National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), Prof. Jane Nana Opoku Agyeman attributed the awful performance of students in the WASSCE to what she termed as overcrowded curriculum. According to the Minister, "students are compelled to learn too many subjects when the curriculum is overcrowded". Her concerns are consistent with similar ones Professor Howard Gardner of Harvard University expressed at the 1997 WEAC Convention in Milwaukee, USA: "the greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. If we try to cover everything, by the end of the day people will have learned very little and will have understood nothing".

Otumfuo Osei Tutu II in the recent GJA Awards night also questioned whether we are getting real value for the huge investment and effort in education, particularly when the nation sinks 18-27% of public expenditure (or 5-6% GDP) into the sector. His analogy could best be akin to Kwashiorkor infected education system where more resources are injected into the system with deficient results.

The stark reality

More disturbing is the worrying trends at basic education front where huge chunk of students who sit the BECE 'fail' each year. If we conceptualize 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, then can we say a student has failed BECE? Who has failed? Is it the students who have failed to attain the basic education, which is their right? Or is it the education system that has failed to provide adequate opportunities for them to attain this basic right?

Recent results from international comparative studies such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have further deepened the concerns regarding the quality of education in the basic schools. Since 2003, Ghana has been ranked among the

bottom group, although some improvements in scores have been recorded. TIMSS which is conducted every four years measures mathematics and science performance for 4th and 8th (JHS 2) grade levels with Ghana participating in the later grade level only. Aside these, 98% of basic school pupils can't read and write English, the 2014 National Education Assessment report has revealed. The National Education Assessment scores (NEA), which is conducted every two years, is used as a measure of quality at the basic level. Results for 2005, 2007 and 2011 in English and Mathematics have all indicated a deplorable performance at both P3 and P6. When many students fail an examination, we may blame the students, the teachers or both. We seldom question the system including examination which failed the students. If one synthesizes all these issues, the plausible conclusion is that all is not well with our education system. No mention has yet been made on the tertiary education front because the least said about it the better. Besides, I believe I have laid a solid foundation upon which monumental and structural reforms could be aggressively pursued to salvage the sinking educational standard.

Systemic Weakness

In general, whilst some education system (e.g., Scottish) at secondary school level emphasize breadth across a wide range of subjects, others systems (e.g., English, Welsh, Irish) have emphasized greater depth of education over a smaller range of subjects. Yet the Ghanaian system appears to emphasize both breadth and depth to the detriment of our students! Yes, the Minister is right, our curricular are too loaded and Kofi Mereku, Jophus AnamuahMensah, Ghartey-Ampiah (Professors in Education) and many others have raised similar concerns about these loaded curricular. Not only are students required to study broad array of subjects, but also the breadth of topics in each subject area are too deep and loaded with relatively limited instructional time.

Having taught the Ghanaian, English and Scottish curricular for some years coupled with my background in education policy analysis and research, I humbly make few proposals for the consideration of relevant authorities. These proposals are located within four broad thematic areas: education system and school management, teacher education and professional learning; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; educational qualification and accreditation.

I chose to publish these proposals in the media because the process of educational change should draw on the perception of people in the whole society, not just those of government officials, politicians and professionals.

In the light of scarcity of space and time, I'm unable to discuss each thematic area extensively but hope to do so when further opportunities are afforded.

The way forward

First of all, we need a comprehensive education system where after primary 6, the student can progress to six years Secondary education or high school from SS1 to SS6. By this arrangement BECE which has become a major impediment to access to secondary education could be cancelled. Expanding access to secondary education is not only a matter of building

new schools, or rehabilitating and expanding existing ones. Neither is it about providing free secondary education. It is conceptually about removing barriers to secondary education which BECE has been widely acknowledged. For if we build more new schools, and refurbish existing ones without a corresponding increased enrolment in these schools, of what sense is it?

From S1-S3, the students will write several internal exams for progression and placement. These exams may largely be not graded; pass or fail. Teachers would be expected to help students pass through remediation no matter how long it takes. A National Assessment Bank could be set up which contain various tests samples for such purpose. Various authors and educators could be encouraged to submit, voluntarily, questions to National Assessment Bank and the current National Assessment Unit of the GES could help in this direction as well. The internal exams may be moderated by a proposed examination body to be called the Ghana Examination and Qualification Authority.

The proposed Ghana Examination and Qualification Authority could perform, among others, the function of the current WAEC and provide accreditations for pre-tertiary schools who write their exams as well. This also means we would no longer be under the over 50 years WAEC treaty where examination does not reflect the needs of Ghanaian society. WAEC was established to inter alia, "award certificates, provided that the certificates did not represent lower standards of attainment than equivalent certificates of examining authorities in the United Kingdom". Yet certificates WAEC issue to secondary school graduates appears to be sub-standard as holders are required to take a foundation programme before entry to undergraduate degree courses at UK universities.

Between S4-S6, the students could write various examination including presenting coursework leading to entry to vocational education and training (i.e., NVTIs etc), further education (i.e., Nursing & Teacher Training Colleges, Polytechnics etc), higher education (i.e., Universities). Our appetite of grouping all post-secondary education in one homogenous entity should be abandoned as they have different roles to play in training the human resource needs of the country. The implication for this arrangement is that, we need to set up a National Credit & Qualification Framework (NCQF) that clearly specifies each qualification and its level, which would feed into the whole education system.

I recommend that the present National Technical and Vocational Education and Training Qualifications Framework (NTVETQF) be reviewed and integrated into the proposed NCQF. The NCQF could be developed by the said Ghana Examination and Qualification Authority in collaboration with the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET), Association for Ghana Industry (AGI), National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE), National Accreditation Board (NAB) and other relevant stakeholders. The Qualification Framework could help make the relationships between qualifications and credit transfers clearer and easier respectively. It can clarify entry and exit points and routes for progression within and across education and training sectors. Under such framework, a person may not hold a university degree but progressively obtain vocational training qualifications equivalent to a masters' level qualification at a university.

On the Teacher Education front, we are currently introducing the National Teaching Council which is a long-awaited policy direction from the Education Act of 2008(Act 778). We must make that council truly autonomous to regulate and set professional standards for teachers. I propose that, all teachers training institution must collaborate with the NTC on development of their teacher education programme so that they produce teachers who meet the NTC's professional standards. In fact, accreditation of the teacher education programmes must be the responsibility of the NTC. Relevant provisions of the Education Act of 2008 and the National Accreditation Board Act of 2007 (Act 744) should be amended accordingly.

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