



FACULTY OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF HEADTEACHERS AND TEACHERS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY IN GHANA

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

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Abstract

The study explores the perceptions and experiences of headteachers and teachers in the implementation of Free Senior High School (FSHS) in Ghana, which aims to increase access to secondary education by eliminating financial barriers. Using equity and distributive justice theory, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with purposively selected headteachers and teachers from three different schools. The data analysis revealed three major themes: evolving perceptions, opportunities, and challenges. The research showed that the policy has successfully enhanced enrollment and facilitated access to education, especially for underprivileged students. Nonetheless, the rapid enrollment growth has resulted in several challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, and resource limitations, which have negatively affected the quality of education. However, headteachers and teachers have displayed adaptability by utilizing innovative teaching strategies and working together with stakeholders to address these issues. The study offers recommendations for policy improvements, which include conducting a comprehensive policy review, increasing resource allocation, ensuring sustainable funding mechanisms, and providing ongoing support for teachers. The study's findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to policy implementation that balances access, equity, and quality. This study is an important contribution to the broader discourse on educational reforms in Ghana and beyond, highlighting the significant role of headteachers and teachers' experiences in informing evidence-based decision-making and driving sustainable change in the education system.

Keywords: free senior high school policy, access to education, equity, quality education, policy implementation, headteachers, teachers, Ghana

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about the experiences of headteachers and teachers in the implementation of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana. Education is increasingly acknowledged as one of the most powerful vehicles for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). As a developing country, Ghana has prioritized education reforms to enhance access, quality, and relevance which aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which creates possibilities for lifelong learning for everyone and guarantees equitable and inclusive education. Previously, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program, implemented in 1995 and significantly increasing primary school enrollment and completion rates, was a crucial turning point (Essuman, 2012). However, transition rates to secondary education have historically languished around 50%, compelling urgent action to align youth skills to 21st-century economic needs, labour market and societal needs, among others (Sackey et al., 2023).

One of the key challenges in accessing secondary school identified was the financial strain on parents, who often found it difficult to pay tuition fees and levies (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). In response, Ghana introduced a comprehensive FSHS policy in 2017. The primary objective of this program was to eradicate school fees, thereby encouraging the enrollment and retention of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018).

The FSHS policy eliminates school fees and prohibits headteachers from taking any form of fees from students. This policy aims to help the country achieve SDG 4, which ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). The policy is also aimed at reducing the rate of school dropout due to the inability of some students to pay their tuition fees. It also seeks to ensure quality education in the Senior High Schools (SHS) which will help increase human capital. Chapter XV, Section 5 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana states that secondary education, including technical and vocational education, will be provided to all through various channels. The government will mainly provide this education through gradual implementation of free education (Adarkwah, 2022).

Benefits under the FSHS policy include non-payment of tuition and entrance fees, provision of textbooks, access to libraries, science centres, ICT facilities, coverage of exam fees, utilities, boarding,

and meals (Dwomoh et al., 2022). Studies showing increased student enrollment in most regions indicate that the policy's primary goal was accomplished (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021).

Nevertheless, assessments also highlight equality issues given that 65% of the population lives in rural areas, which saw slower growth than the national average increase in population (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). This presents significant challenges for headteachers and teachers in rural schools who must provide quality education with limited resources. Additionally, analysis shows that poor technical evaluation and planning flaws prior to hurriedly executing a project has quality ramifications (Adarkwah, 2022). This can cause additional strain on headteachers and teachers, making it difficult to manage schools and deliver effective instruction.

Studies show that although enrolment rose significantly following the policy's implementation (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021), many public SHS found that this quick expansion also put a burden on their already-limited resources and facilities. Research revealed that when schools struggled to meet demand, shortages of textbooks, teachers, classrooms, and other learning resources emerged (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). This situation hindered headteachers' effective management and pressured teachers to deliver quality instruction in overcrowded classrooms with limited teaching and learning materials. In the middle of already limited resources, research participants also experienced delays in government funding disbursements (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Dwomoh et al., 2022) As headteachers and teachers struggled to meet the basic needs of their schools and students, the financial strain was further compounded.

While the policy's impacts have typically been analyzed quantitatively, few known studies (e.g., Brown, 2019; Johnson, 2021) explore the firsthand experiences and perspectives of headteachers and teachers - who shoulder immense responsibility for translating policy ambitions into tangible educational outcomes. Their insider insights around tribulations navigating rapid enrollment expansion against limited capacity can illuminate crucial bottlenecks and potential solutions. However, their voices have remained largely unheard while urgent calls emerge to balance quantity and quality aims. Understanding ground realities from diverse school contexts is pivotal for evidence-based policy and programming improvements. Hence, the proposed study will investigate the experiences of headteachers and teachers with implementing Ghana's extensive FSHS program since its nationwide roll-out.

1.2 Aim Of the Study

The aim of the study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of headteachers and teachers who have been leading the implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana since its nationwide rollout in 2017. The study will be conducted through the lens of equity and distributive justice theory. The study's main objective is to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities these key stakeholders encounter in achieving policy goals and delivering educational outcomes, especially in the context of increasing enrollment, concerns around educational quality, and inadequate infrastructure planning and funding. By employing equity and distributive justice theory, this study aims to explore the impact of the FSHS policy on the fair distribution of educational resources and opportunities. It also aims to understand how headteachers and teachers have tackled these issues to promote equal access to quality education. It also highlights the broader implications for educational equity and social justice in Ghana's secondary education system. The insights gained from this study will help in developing more informed, inclusive, and sustainable educational policies and practices that prioritize the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for all students.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are headteachers' and teachers' perceptions of the FSHS policy implementation in Ghana?
2. What challenges and opportunities have headteachers and teachers encountered about the implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana?

1.4. Significance of the study

This study is very useful and important because the insights from the headteachers and teachers about the implementation of free senior high school policy can be used by policymakers to reform the program to meet its aims and objectives effectively. The study allows headteachers and teachers to express their opinions, challenges, discoveries, and suggestions based on implementing front-line policies. The study's findings can influence teacher support, motivation, and training. The research findings may inform measures like providing senior high schools in Ghana with more competent, motivated instructors by providing them with training. Since there is no empirical research on the experiences of teachers and headteachers in the implementation of the free senior high school policy in Ghana, this research will go a long way to add up to research in that regard.

The research also addresses the aims of SDG4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2021). The study aligns with SDG 4.1, which guarantees all boys and girls access to a free, fair, high-quality education and meets the necessary learning objectives. This study also addresses the aims of SDG10, which seeks to reduce inequality within and among countries. SDG 10.1 aims to eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunities through qualitative insights into how factors like location, income, and disabilities interact to exacerbate inequality with policy expansions (United Nations, 2021).

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows to address the research questions: It consists of six chapters, with different parts under each chapter. Chapter One is the introduction and overview of the study. This chapter also captures the problematization and relevance of the study. The research questions follow the aim of the study. Chapter two of the study provides a background, which includes the history of educational reforms in Ghana, the current educational system, and the rationale for implementing the FSHS policy. Chapter three comprises two sections: the theoretical framework that guides the study and the literature review that draws a relationship between relevant and previous studies and the need for this study. Chapter four presents the methodology. This chapter explains how participants were selected using purposive sampling and the data collection method using semi-structured interviews. The chapter also includes data analysis and interpretation using thematic analysis. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical aspects are also discussed. The findings and results of the study are presented in chapter five, which highlights the perceptions, challenges and opportunities encountered by headteachers and teachers in the implementation of FSHS policy. Finally, Chapter Six constitutes the discussion, conclusion, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2.BACKGROUND

This section provides an overview of the educational landscape in Ghana, laying the foundation for understanding the context of the study. It starts with a brief history of educational reforms in Ghana, highlighting key changes and their impact on the education system. It then presents the current structure of Ghana's education system based on the 6-3-3-4 model. Finally, the section explains the rationale behind the implementation of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, which aims to remove financial barriers and increase access to senior high school education in line with global and regional education goals.

2.1 History of educational reforms in Ghana

Ghana has implemented significant reforms and policies over the past few decades to expand access, improve quality, and promote equity in education. According to Dei, (1999), In the early post-independence years, from 1957, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, prioritized rapid enrollment rate increases across primary, secondary, and vocational schooling. The education reform in 1974 established the current structure of junior and senior secondary school systems, which has persisted despite periodic curriculum adjustments (Baidoo-Anu & DeLuca, 2023; &Poku et al., 2013). In 1987 and 2007, reforms extended the school day and revised curricula to enhance quality and learning outcomes (Baidoo-Anu & DeLuca, 2023; Boadu, 2021). Other reforms have focused on making education practical and employment-oriented through initiatives like vocationalization, strengthening science and technology, and aligning curricula to national development needs (Boadu, 2021; Dei, 1999)

In addition to structural and curricular changes, some reforms have aimed to decentralize education management and decision-making. These decentralization reforms have delegated more powers to district and regional levels to promote localized control (Zuilkowski et al., 2018). Access and equity goals have also driven reforms like the 1992 constitutional amendment that made basic education tuition-free and compulsory, removing cost barriers to participation (Ansah & Osei-Owusu, 2018). Most recently, the flagship 2017 FSHS policy eliminated tuition fees for senior high schools across Ghana to boost enrollment and retention (Asante et al., 2022).

However, many education reforms have fallen short of their objectives due to challenges with execution, resource constraints, overloaded curricula, high costs, and disconnects from ground realities

(Baidoo-Anu; Dei, 1999; & DeLuca, 2023). Gaps persist between policy aims, implementation, and outcomes related to quality, advancement, and graduate unemployment. Frequent political party changes to education policy have also inhibited the stability and continuity of reforms over time (Poku et al., 2013)

2.2 Overview of Ghana's current educational system

Ghana's current educational system is structured in a 6-3-3-4 format, spanning basic, secondary, and higher education (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). The educational system in Ghana follows a 6-3-3-4 format, indicating the number of years spent at each level of education. The first stage is basic education, consisting of 6 years of primary school and 3 years of Junior High School (JHS), followed by 3 years of Senior High School (SHS) for secondary education. After completing SHS, students have the option to pursue a 4-year bachelor's degree program at a university or attend polytechnics and other tertiary institutions for vocational and technical training programs lasting 2 to 3 years.

The basic education level consists of two years of kindergarten, six years of primary school, and three years of junior high school (JHS). Kindergarten enrollment begins at age four, Primary school runs from age six to twelve, and JHS goes from age twelve to fifteen. This eleven-year basic cycle is free and compulsory (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). Ultimately, students take the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) for placement in senior high school (Sackey et al., 2023).

The secondary education level includes three years of senior high school (SHS) from ages 15-18. Students have choices between general academics, technical/vocational, and commercial tracks based on their interests and BECE performance (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). SHS culminates in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) (Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Higher education consists of 4 years of university education leading to a bachelor's degree or three years of polytechnic, college of education, or nursing training leading to a diploma or certificate (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020). Entry is based on WASSCE results.

2.3 Rational behind the implementation of free senior high school policy

The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) was introduced in 1995 to provide universal education in Ghana by 2005 and eliminate the payment of fees in school. The FCUBE policy

sought to raise the demand for education by doing away with school fees (Akyeampong, 2009). The government covers the cost of exercise books and offers free tuition, textbooks, and teaching and learning resources as part of the FCUBE program (Akyeampong, 2009). As part of the provision of the FCUBE program, some selected schools are provided with free lunch every day. This has helped increase enrollment in basic schools. The implementation of tuition-free FSHS nationwide in 2017 was a flagship reform aimed at rapidly boosting secondary education access and retention in Ghana (Asante et al., 2022). The policy intended to remove financial barriers that excluded academically qualified but socioeconomically disadvantaged students from progressing to SHS after basic education (Essuman, 2012). Although basic education is free and compulsory, continuation into fee-based SHS has remained low and inequitable (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). Costs for tuition, boarding, meals, and transport prevented many poorer families from enrolling their children, especially girls and rural residents, resulting in low transition rates of 45-60% (Sackey et al., 2023). The FSHS policy thus aimed to improve equity and inclusion by eliminating tuition-related expenses.

In addition to boosting enrollment, the FSHS initiative aimed to enhance the quality of secondary education and the relevance of learning to employment needs (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020). However, deficient infrastructure, large class sizes, inadequate teaching resources, and limited practical training opportunities constrained quality and outcomes (Dwomoh et al., 2022). The policy intended to spur investments and reforms to improve teacher capacities, classroom conditions, career readiness, and, ultimately, learning outcomes for SHS students (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). Together with promoting access and inclusion, enhancing quality was a key objective.

The implementation of Ghana's nationwide FSHS policy in 2017 has led to substantial increases in total student enrollments over a short span of years, indicating expanded access to secondary education. Total enrollment rose from 435,780 in 2016/17 to 580,422 in 2017/18, an increase of over 140,000 students or 33% (Takyi et al., 2019). By 2018/19, enrollment had surpassed 750,000, and by 2021/22, it exceeded 1.2 million SHS students nationwide following the abolition of fees (Kwegyiriba, 2021; Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2023). Studies estimate that over 1 million additional adolescents benefited from free SHS between 2017 and 2021 (Asante et al., 2022).

The surge in enrollments under the FSHS policy also increased participation among students from low-income households and underserved groups who previously faced financial barriers. Rural school enrollment rose by 48% in the first year of implementation, highlighting improved access in remote areas that are often disadvantaged (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Lower-income groups saw enrollment increases up to 75% higher than wealthier groups (Kwegyiriba, 2021). These trends indicate that the new policy has widened SHS access across demographics and geographies, aligning with the equity goals.

The background information explains the context, rationale, and objectives behind Ghana's FSHS policy. It also highlights its impact on increasing enrollment and access to secondary education. However, to comprehensively assess the challenges, outcomes, and implications of implementing the policy to ensure educational equity and quality, it is imperative to review the existing literature. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical framework of equity and distributive justice theory to evaluate the policy's alignment with fairness, resource allocation, and justice in education and will be followed by synthesizing relevant research studies analyzing various aspects of the FSHS policy, including its effects on educational quality, academic performance, funding and infrastructure, and issues of inequality.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by equity and distributive justice theory, which is a part of social justice theory (Miller, 1999). According to Adams et al. (2016) and Bell (2016), social justice theory is a multidisciplinary framework that investigates issues related to societal fairness, equity, and justice. It is aimed to promote fairness in treatment, provide equal opportunities, and improve the welfare of all individuals, especially those who are underprivileged due to economic or other social circumstances.

Equity and distributive justice theory is based on the idea of fairness and ensuring equal distribution of resources, goods, and services within a society. Miller (1999) and Rawls (1971) defined this theory and emphasized the importance of resolving social injustices to provide everyone with access to resources needed for a happy and meaningful life. According to Cohen (1987), there are four central dimensions of distributive justice: receipts (conditions, opportunities, roles, material or social goods), recipient units (entities, usually individuals to whom receipts are assigned), functional rules (how receiver units and their attributes relate to receipts), and standards (moral assessment used to assign receipts to recipient units).

In the context of education, equity and distributive justice theory ensures that educational resources and opportunities are fairly distributed, acknowledging the crucial role that education plays in promoting social mobility and reducing inequalities (Brighouse & Swift, 2014). The theory recognizes that the equitable distribution of resources is not only fair but also promotes social justice and reduces inequalities (Fraser, 1998).

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) Policy in Ghana is in line with the principles of equity and distributive justice theory. This policy aims to improve access to education, reduce financial barriers for disadvantaged students, and address inequalities in education by bridging the gap between students from rural and urban areas, as well as between low-income and high-income families. According to Akyeampong (2017), the policy's implementation has the potential to promote greater equity in the distribution of educational resources and opportunities.

Implementing the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy has presented its own set of challenges. With more students enrolling, classrooms are now overcrowded, facilities are inadequate, and there is a shortage of qualified teachers, as reported by Adu-Gyamfi et al. in 2019. This raises concerns about

the quality of education provided and whether the policy has unintentionally worsened inequalities in educational experiences and outcomes. It is important to emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation and voice in implementing and evaluating educational policies, as highlighted by equity and distributive justice theory. Thus, engaging with the perspectives and experiences of headteachers and teachers is crucial for understanding how the policy has been experienced on the ground.

The rationale for choosing equity and distributive justice theory is based on its ability to provide valuable insights into how headteachers and teachers perceive the impact of the FSHS policy on educational access, resources, and opportunities for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This theory is a strong foundation for evaluating policy success, identifying areas for improvement, and comprehending the complex relationship between educational policies, social inequalities, and the pursuit of a more equitable society.

By employing this framework, I can thoroughly examine the experiences and perspectives of headteachers and teachers and assess how the policy affects the equitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities. The theory addresses important issues such as fairness, social justice, deservingness, and stakeholder participation, providing a transparent way to evaluate the policy's effectiveness and identify any unintended consequences that may arise.

Equity and distributive justice theory places great emphasis on providing equal opportunities to all individuals and eliminating disparities among them. Within this theoretical framework, my goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between educational policies, social inequalities, and the pursuit of a more equitable society, ultimately contributing to the improvement of the FSHS policy in Ghana.

3. 2 Literature review

The literature review analyzes existing research on educational reforms in Ghana and other countries, specifically focusing on the nationwide implementation of free and funded education. The policy's impacts have been analyzed and structured around several key themes, including increased access and enrollment, quality of education and academic performance, funding and infrastructure deficits, inequality and uneven policy effects, and calls for policy modifications. Although the policy aimed to boost access and equity in secondary education, its rushed execution without adequate planning, resources, and consideration for systemic constraints led to significant shortcomings, as revealed by the literature.

3.2.1 The Realities of Educational Reform Implementation in Ghana

One of the several reforms that have been supported and put into practice over the past few decades in both developed and developing countries is the decentralization of education policies (Poku et al., 2013). Ghana's story of educational reforms is dynamic and demonstrates the country's determination to provide high-quality, easily accessible education. Over the past few decades, Ghana's education reform trajectory has been marked by frequent changes, a lack of clear direction, and inconsistent policies amongst governments despite the overarching objectives of increasing access, enhancing quality, and coordinating the education system with the needs of the country's development (Quainoo et al., 2020; Kung, 2016).

Additionally, through curriculum updates, vocationalization, and the promotion of science, ICT, and technical skills, succeeding governments have placed a strong emphasis on making education practical and employment-oriented (Dei, 1999; Boadu, 2021).

Nevertheless, reforms' impact has been questioned due to issues with proper implementation, resource limitations, crammed curricula, excessive expenses, and other disconnects from reality. (BaidooAnu; Dei, 1999; & DeLuca, 2023). These implementation problems directly affect teachers and headteachers, the primary facilitators of education at the school level. The resource constraints and overcrowded curricula would likely increase their workload and make it challenging to deliver quality education. At the same time, the high expenses could limit their access to essential teaching materials and professional development opportunities. To further understand the impact of these issues on teachers and headteachers, it would be valuable to explore their perspectives and experiences through interviews or surveys, which could inform policymakers and education authorities in addressing these challenges and providing the necessary support for successful reform implementation.

This trend also demonstrates the powerful influence of politics, as candidates and political parties promise to expand education in exchange for votes and introduce changes to win support (KNUST) et al., 2021; & Kung, 2016).

Furthermore, to translate policies into better quality and outcomes, reforms have placed a greater emphasis on structure, access, and evaluations than on the leadership development and implementers' capacities, such as head teachers (Zame et al., 2008). The failure to recognize the critical role of headteachers and teachers in successfully implementing educational reforms has resulted in a lack of understanding of the challenges they face in converting policy goals into practice. Therefore, it is essential to explore the perceptions and experiences of these key stakeholders to develop more effective and sustainable educational reforms that can bridge the gap between policy intentions and actual

outcomes. There are still differences in policy goals, implementation realities, and outcomes related to graduate unemployment, progression, and quality (Baidoo-Anu; DeLuca, 2023 & Poku et al., 2013).

3.2.2 Increased access and enrolment

Ghana's introduction of a free senior high school (SHS) policy has significantly increased enrolment in all secondary schools in the nation, according to the overwhelming body of available data (Asante et al., 2022; Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020 & Sackey et al., 2023). After school fees and related expenditures were eliminated, which had previously been a barrier for children from lower-income households, several studies reported considerable increases in overall enrollment numbers (Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2020). For instance, one study (Takyi et al., 2019) reported a 33.2% annual rise in enrollment, while another (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021a) indicated that enrollments increased from slightly over 300,000 students before the policy to over 600,000 two years after it was implemented.

Significant improvements were seen in the overall national statistics and the data specifically for underprivileged groups, confirming the effectiveness of FSHS in enhancing access and equity. Research findings indicate higher enrollment rates in remote schools among poor groups and females (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Adarkwah, 2022; Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020; Sackey et al., 2023). This is consistent with data from Japan, where free tuition made attendance at high school equal for all income levels (Hori & Shimizutani, 2018).

However, the rapid increase in enrollment facilitated by FSHS has exposed weaknesses in Ghana's educational infrastructure, such as classroom blocks, dormitories, and the system's capacity. (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Asante et al., 2022; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Similarly, other countries implementing fee-free policies have faced similar challenges. In Kenya, the policies of Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) resulted in a rapid increase in student enrollment, which put a strain on school resources and teaching quality (Mugo et al., 2015). Due to the overwhelming workload on teachers, Uganda's implementation of the Universal Secondary Education (USE) policy faced hurdles (Chapman et al., 2010).

Due to the increasing number of students, many educational institutions have been unable to keep up with the corresponding increase in teachers, classrooms, dormitories, and other facilities. As a result, issues such as large class sizes, traffic, teacher shortages, overcrowding, and stretched resources have become prevalent in many schools, albeit to varying degrees (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) Due to the rapid increase in student enrollment, less reputable and rural colleges faced

more difficulties and obstacles (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Although enrollment has increased due to Ghana's FSHS policy, more finance, human resources, and educational infrastructure expenditures are needed to maintain quality and fulfil the promise of improved access.

3.3.3 Quality education and academic performance

While Ghana's free SHS policy has been successful in quickly increasing access and enrollment, the majority of research shows that there are serious worries that the quality of education and academic achievement of students have decreased or are still insufficient (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Esuman, 2012 & Takyi et al., 2019). Following the abrupt influx of students under the policy, key quality indicators such as student-teacher ratios, the availability of textbooks and learning materials, teacher qualifications, and exam success rates in core courses have gotten worse (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Asante et al., 2022).

Teaching standards, curriculum delivery, learning outcomes, and individual attention for each student are all negatively impacted by several factors, including overcrowded classrooms, overstretched facilities, overworked teachers, a lack of contact hours, and deteriorating academic discipline (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Dwomoh et al., 2022 & Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b). Access to high-quality secondary education in Ghana has historically been unequal, with rural and underprivileged schools lacking basic facilities and suffering from worse quality deficiencies than elite urban schools (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021a). The same pattern can be observed in other situations as well. In the Philippines, the recent initiative to extend free education to secondary levels has caused problems including overworked personnel, facility shortages, and congestion, particularly in disadvantaged schools (Brillantes et al., 2020; Montemayor, 2018). Principals requested timely release of funds, more classrooms, and teachers to maintain instructional quality despite access gains (Nafilah & de Guzman, 2021).

Research highlights the need for enhanced government funding, teacher preparation initiatives, strong learning outcome monitoring systems, and focused assistance for underperforming schools in order to convert higher enrollment into significant gains in real academic quality and performance under the well-meaning free SHS policy (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Dwomoh et al., 2022; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b).

Although the free tuition policy removed financial barriers to secondary education access, implementation weaknesses related to insufficient resources, inputs, and capacity have surfaced, undermining the effectiveness of instruction and student learning.

3.3.4 Funding and Infrastructure Deficits

Due to Ghana's FSHS policy, enrollments have rapidly increased, making resource and facility shortages worse in secondary schools (Asante et al., 2022; Adarkwah, 2022 & Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). According to research, physical facilities, including dining halls, dormitories, and classrooms, are unable to accommodate the growing number of students enrolled, leading to extreme overcrowding and unfavourable learning environments (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adarkwah, 2022; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021 & Dwomoh et al., 2022). Urban day schools without essential facilities such as dining areas are highly vulnerable (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Greater shortfalls are experienced in relation to enrollment increase by more underprivileged rural schools and under resourced institutions (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021).

Furthermore, the increased demand has not been met by financial and supply provisions (Asante et al., 2022; Dwomoh et al., 2022; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b). Class sizes and teacher workloads have expanded due to the student population, although staff hiring is limited by disbursement delays (Asante et al., 2022; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Additionally, there is a school's lack of funding to quickly remedy deficiencies in instructional resources such as ICT infrastructure and texts (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). The late distribution of funding to schools under established programs exacerbate these disparities (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Adarkwah, 2022).

Researchers linked these financing delays to growing debt and missed chances to address overcrowding problems when they first surfaced following the introduction of policy (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021).

Although the fundamental problems are present in all of Ghana's secondary schools, there are differences in the degree and details along the axes of rural versus urban, boarding versus day school, and reputable versus non-reputable, leading to uneven experiences (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Similarly, abolishing public school fees in the United States had unintended consequences on poorer districts that relied more heavily on such revenue (Hyman, 2017). Principals at high-poverty schools face significant challenges in raising funds to make up for lost fees compared to their wealthy counterparts (Winton, 2018). This situation highlights the need for state funding policies that are more fair and just, in order to ensure equality and fairness for all (Hyman, 2017).

Nevertheless, under the well-meaning but inadequately funded FSHS policy, researchers repeatedly emphasize that expanding infrastructure and guaranteeing funding sustainability and timeliness are crucial to easing present pressures and preserving future educational quality, access, and equity (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Chanimbe & Prah, 2020 & Essuman, 2012).

3.3.5 Inequality and Uneven Policy Impact

One potential approach to use idle resources and expand enrollment is to investigate joint ventures between public and private organizations and recognized private education institutions (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b). Furthermore, many stakeholders are in favor of first allocating funds for the expansion and improvement of facilities in disadvantaged schools rather than limiting the potential of children based solely on their background. This is expected to improve equity by providing consistently high standards for all types of schools (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). Enhancements in supervision are also required for closely observing how money is being transferred and how teaching and learning resources are distributed (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adarkwah, 2022). Day students, however, were not provided with the one required complimentary lunch per day.

According to demographic trends, female enrollment rose disproportionately, contributing to the improvement of gender parity (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020). However, disparities in access to facilities and increased dropout risks were still reported by women in some situations (AbdulRahaman et al., 2020). Due to residual direct and indirect costs, households in remote areas and with lower incomes experienced lower uptake increases, preserving pre-existing socioeconomic gaps (Esuman, 2012; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b).

Although enrollments were increased by Ghana's strategy, underprivileged populations and regions still face unfair barriers to high-quality education. The achievement of the policy's equity objectives depends on targeted assistance to strengthen personnel and infrastructure capacities in neglected schools. Despite overall enrollment growth, fee-free policies in Kenya allowed access and quality disparities between prestigious and less-endowed institutions, as well as between rural and urban schools (Mugo et al., 2015). Headteachers struggled to manage finances and support teachers due to delayed fund disbursement and insufficient training (Njeri & Ngesu, 2014).

3.3.6 Calls for Policy Modification

Numerous stakeholders, including policy experts, headteachers, teachers, parents, and civil society organizations, have pushed for significant reforms and changes to the current FSHS policy based on early implementation challenges (Asante et al., 2022; Dwomoh et al., 2022). This is a recurring theme

that emerges across studies. It is believed that immediate changes are required to improve quality, sustainability, and equity due to the untargeted fee-free model's quick nationwide expansion without proper infrastructure, instructional materials, or planning (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Essuman, 2012). Proposals have been made to implement cost-sharing and means-testing policies that mandate that households with sufficient resources pay a share of costs, such as boarding fees. The government would experience less financial strain (Adarkwah, 2022; Asante et al., 2022 & Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b). Investigating public-private partnerships with accredited private schools is another strategy for utilizing underutilized infrastructure and capacity to handle increasing enrolments (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b).

Establishing uniformly high standards across all schools kinds, this is anticipated to increase equity (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020). Improvements in oversight are also needed in closely monitoring the distribution of teaching and learning materials and the flow of funds (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Adarkwah, 2022). The endorsement of pedagogical and curriculum reforms that prioritize modern skills, lower repetition rates, and increase opportunities for teacher development are other policy directions aimed at improving quality and learning results (Adarkwah, 2022; Asante et al., 2022). In order to stabilize quality reductions brought on by congested facilities and reduce instructional contact hours, it is finally stressed that critical infrastructure deficiencies must be addressed and the controversial double-track system must be abandoned (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b) Another lesson in policy formulation is to involve headteachers, parents, and communities as key stakeholders in resource mobilization, quality improvement, and policy formulation (Chapman et al., 2010; Mucai, 2013).

3.3.7. Contribution of the thesis

This review examined studies on the results and viewpoints of stakeholders regarding significant educational reforms in Ghana and other countries throughout the previous few decades, with a focus on the countrywide introduction of free and funded education to increase equity and access to education.

Numerous studies have confirmed that the elimination of tuition fees led to significant enrollment gains, particularly among female and underprivileged rural students (Sackey et al., 2023; Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020). But the speed exceeded the infrastructure and staffing levels that were already in place, aggravating problems including overcrowding, a lack of teachers, large class sizes, and declining exam scores that indicate declining quality (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020). The shortage of resources was made worse by delays in funding and distribution, which disproportionately affected rural and underprivileged schools (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Essuman, 2012).

Despite gravely acknowledged flaws, teacher and head teacher perspectives that directly experience the effects of the policy are not included in the conversation. Even though stakeholders strongly urge changes, their voices outlining experiences, coping mechanisms, and recommendations are conspicuously absent (Asante et al., 2022). By addressing this blind spot through human-centered, qualitative research, we may improve comprehension and provide practical, context-specific policy recommendations that maintain quality.

All things considered, Ghana's FSHS policy was successful in increasing access, but implementation flaws made infrastructural constraints and quality decreases worse, with varying effects on different kinds of schools. Prioritizing teacher voices and leadership abilities can spark grassroots initiatives that promote sustainability and equity, reviving the initiative's transformative vision that technical issues have jeopardized.

The gap in the research on Ghana's FSHS policy implementation is the lack of perspectives and experiences of frontline education stakeholders, particularly headteachers and teachers. Their perspectives would provide critical insights into implementation challenges, effects on teaching and learning quality, resource constraints, and other impacts at the school level. Further research examining the FSHS policy implementation through empirical data gathered from headteachers and teachers could help fill this gap and inform more effective policy execution.

Given the lack of research capturing school-level perspectives, this study's findings will offer a deeper on-the-ground understanding of how the rapid enrollment increases and policy aims have translated into school conditions, resources, teaching practices, and learning outcomes. The data gathered through engaging headteachers and teachers will illuminate successes, challenges, and impacts at the micro-implementation level.

In particular, the study can provide valuable recommendations from the ground up on how policy execution can be improved to better support teachers and headteachers in delivering quality education amidst rising student numbers. The research can inform more effective resource allocation and policy adjustments to strengthen future implementation by highlighting gaps between policy aims and realities. The empirical perspectives of headteachers and teachers will enable a more holistic evaluation of the free SHS policy's outcomes and fill a significant knowledge gap.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Research Design and Methodology

The study focuses on investigating the experiences of headteachers and teachers in Ghana with regard to the implementation of FSHS policy. To achieve this, a qualitative interview methodology was used. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an exploratory approach that aims to comprehend the meaning individuals or groups give to a social or human problem. Qualitative interviews involve in-depth conversations with participants to explore their experiences, perspectives, and understandings of a phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This methodology is consistent with the study's objective of gaining a contextualized and nuanced understanding of how headteachers and teachers perceive their experiences concerning the implementation of the FSHS policy.

Seidman (2019) argues that one major benefit of employing qualitative interviews as a methodology is its ability to examine participants' real-life experiences thoroughly. Through open-ended interviews, the researcher created a safe space for headteachers and teachers to share their perceptions and experiences on their own terms. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), this approach values the voices and perspectives of participants, recognizing their expertise in their own experiences.

To commence the study, the researcher developed an interview guide that outlined the main topics and questions to be explored during the interviews. The interview questions were designed to explore how participants experienced the FSHS policy, their perception of its impact on student's academic performance and access to education, and how they dealt with the challenges and opportunities they encountered. Purposive sampling was used to select headteachers and teachers with direct experience in implementing the FSHS policy.

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), collecting and analyzing data through qualitative interviews is time intensive. Conducting comprehensive interviews, transcribing, and analyzing data require significant time and resources. Additionally, the open-ended nature of qualitative interviews can generate a large amount of data that can be challenging to manage and interpret (Seidman, 2019). Creswell & Poth (2018) posit a potential risk of researcher bias and subjectivity impacting the data collection and analysis process. As a researcher, I needed to be constantly aware of my assumptions, values, and experiences and how they may shape my interactions with participants and my interpretations of their accounts. I continuously reflected on my actions to address this issue and solicited diverse perspectives through peer debriefing and member checking (Saldaña, 2021).

Qualitative interviews proved to be a valuable and relevant methodology for this study despite several

challenges. By focusing on the voices and experiences of teachers and headteachers and exploring the nuances and complexities of their experiences with the FSHS policy implementation, this approach was able to generate rich and meaningful ideas that can inform policy review and practice. The findings of this study can help us better understand how educational policies are put into practice and experienced in real-life situations. This can provide helpful insights for policymakers and practitioners who are working towards promoting educational equity and social justice in Ghana and other similar contexts.

4.2 Selection of Participants

All the participants in the study were teachers and headteachers in public senior high schools in Ghana. This is because the FSHS policy does not extend to private schools. Due to the nature of the study, purposive sampling was employed to select teachers and headteachers willing to participate in the study. To promote gender equality and eliminate any potential biases, both male and female headteachers and teachers were selected for the study. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), the concept underlying qualitative research is to deliberately choose venues, people, documents, or visual materials that would most effectively aid the researcher in comprehending the issue and the study topic. The headteachers and teachers selected to participate in the study were those who had been headteachers and teachers before and after the implementation of the free senior high policy in Ghana. This is because they stood a better chance to provide helpful information for this study. They were able to compare the differences in equity, access to education and quality education before and after the implementation of the policy.

Headteachers were included in the study because they are in charge of school administration; hence, they stood a better chance of providing the needed information. Teachers were also included because they have rich knowledge and experience of how classes are run. Based on their administrative and teaching experiences, they have a proper understanding and experience of FSHS policy. Only teachers and headteachers willing to participate in the study were selected.

All the participants were contacted through email, and consent forms were sent to all the participants in due time. Five headteachers and five teachers from five different schools were contacted to participate in the study. Eventually, three teachers and two headteachers from three different schools agreed to participate in the study.

Table 1 and table 2 provide an overview of the background information of the participants in the study

Table 1

Background of teachers

Name	Gender	Age	Number of years in the educational sector	Years in the current school	Subject taught
T1	Male	33	11	2	Chemistry
T2	Male	34	10	6	Mathematics
T3	Female	37	18	4	Mathematics

Table 2

Background of headteachers

Name	Gender	Age	Number of years in the educational sector	Number of years in current school
H1	Male	39	13	9
H2	Female	45	16	11

4.3 Data collection

Open-ended interview questions were used in the study because they allowed respondents to give additional responses and opinions and to explain their experiences in greater detail than was possible with closed-ended questions. This allowed for a more thorough and holistic view of the issues under consideration (Popping, 2015). The researcher conducted pilot interviews with his colleagues and the feedback helped improve the interview skills.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. With permission from the participants, all the zoom interviews were recorded. The interviews lasted between 30 to 35 minutes and were conducted within a period of three weeks. The recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim to represent exactly what the participants said in the interviews.

4.4 Data analysis

A critical phase in qualitative research is data analysis, in which researchers carefully review and analyze the collected data to identify patterns, themes, and meaningful insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study employed thematic analysis to analyze the data gathered through interviews with headteachers and teachers.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. After the interview, the data was transcribed. I went through the transcribed data severally to familiarize myself with the available data. I then identified relevant patterns and coded them accordingly. The data that was coded were then categorized and given assigned labels. Finally, relevant themes were generated. In all, three major themes emerged from the data. Under each of the three major themes, there are sub-themes.

4.5 Trustworthiness

According to Altheide & Johnson (1994), trustworthiness becomes a pragmatic question for the qualitative researcher who is evaluating the extent to which her or his data can be trusted to be worthy, relevant, or, at the very least, not allowing pure invention' (p. 489). In the study, I used several strategies to prioritize trustworthiness throughout the data analysis process. After collecting the data, I employed member checking by allowing the participants to review and provide feedback on the interpretations; I had conversations with impartial colleagues to identify potential biases. I used purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. I kept a thorough record of the research process, reflected on my biases and assumptions, and provided detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences.

4.6 Ethical statement

Ethical consideration was paramount throughout the study. According to Fujii (2012), social scientists have the potential to seriously harm research participants and collaborators, which is why research ethics are important. The study followed research ethics principles to protect participants' rights, privacy, and well-being (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before the start of the study, permission for approval was sought from the appropriate institutions. This allowed the researcher to get in touch with the participants in the study. A consent form was sent to all the participants. The word consent implies that the participant has given their free will to participate in the study and has not been forced, manipulated, or otherwise misled into doing so (Fujii, 2012). The participants were provided with all the needed information about the study, which included the purpose and the objectives of the study and also the procedures it will follow. The participants were made aware of their rights, which include voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study anytime they wish without any consequences. The informed consent form was sent to all participants through email, and they all signed and accepted to take part in the study. The word informed implies that the participant is aware of every aspect of the study, especially the aspects that directly affect them, including any potential dangers and rewards from taking part (Fujii, 2012).

Participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected. The data collected, including the interview recordings and transcripts, was kept safe and is only accessible to the researcher (Byman, 2016), and will be erased after the completion of the study. In most cases, researchers guarantee to preserve participants' privacy and identity by locking down computers, encrypting computer files, and erasing data once the study is over (Fujii, 2012).

To ensure anonymity in order to protect participants, pseudonyms were used in place of participants' names to safeguard their identities. Teacher 1,2,3,4 and headteacher 1 and 2 represented the participants in the study. To ensure that my findings appropriately reflected the participants' perspectives, I also employed member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to share my interpretations with the participants and solicit their feedback and clarification.

5. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

5.1 EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS

The first research question focus on the perceptions of headteachers and teachers in implementing the FSHS policy in Ghana. The implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana aims to provide equal access to secondary education, regardless of socioeconomic background. As the policy has been implemented, headteachers and teachers have expressed various perceptions and reactions towards it. This analysis focuses on the perceptions of these key stakeholders, focusing on four distinct sub-themes: initial skepticism and surprises, happiness and curiosity, gradual acceptance and appreciation, and recognition of the policy's success.

5.1.1 Initial Skepticism and Surprises

Headteachers and teachers initially reacted to the announcement of the FSHS policy with a combination of skepticism and surprise. Given the country's financial constraints and historical challenges faced by the education system, many expressed doubts about the policy's feasibility and sustainability.

"I was surprised because of the financial status of the country. So I thought it was just a political talk or something"(H 2)

This appears to describe a prevailing feeling of disbelief and uncertainty experienced when the policy was unveiled. The headteacher doubts the government's capability to fulfil its promises and worries that the policy may be more talk than action.

Similarly, another headteacher said, "I was wondering how the system will be like"(H1)

The statement highlights the feeling of both worry and interest that came with the policy's declaration. His words suggest that he understands the challenges associated with implementing a wide-ranging reform and desires to explore how it would unfold in practice. As a researcher, I find that headteachers' and teachers' initial skepticism and surprise serve as a powerful reminder of the significance of effective communication and engagement during policy implementation. The

announcement of the policy caught many educators off guard, highlighting the need for greater transparency and dialogue between policymakers and those on the frontlines of education.

It is important to view initial skepticism and surprise as a healthy and necessary part of policy discourse. Headteachers and teachers can contribute to improving the design and implementation of the FSHS policy by examining its assumptions and rationale. This will ensure that the policy meets the needs and realities of students, schools, and communities.

As (T1) notes, "I was happy, and I was wondering how the system will be like." His words express optimism about the policy's potential to transform education and expand access to secondary education.

The initial skepticism and surprise expressed by headteachers, and teachers highlight the importance of continuous dialogue, collaboration, and adaptation during policy implementation. By involving teachers and headteachers and other stakeholders as partners in the reform process, policymakers can establish trust, address concerns, and ensure that the policy reflects the realities of the classroom and community. Education reform is a complex process that is shaped by social, economic, and political factors, which can cause skepticism and surprise.

5.1.2 Happiness and Curiosity

Despite initial skepticism and surprises, many headteachers and teachers expressed happiness and curiosity about the FSHS policy implementation. For some, the policy represented a long-awaited opportunity to address the persistent inequities and barriers to access that had long plagued the education system,

"I was so excited because those from the rural communities can also access secondary education"(T1). This highlights the policy's potential to provide secondary education to previously excluded students due to financial constraints.

Similarly, a headteacher observed that the "majority of the students are always available in the school because they are not being sacked to go home for school fees"(H1). This highlights how the policy reduces financial burdens on families and promotes consistent school attendance for students.

As a researcher, I am impressed by the happiness and curiosity expressed by headteachers and teachers. This challenges the dominant narrative of education reform which often focuses on resistance

and opposition from educators. The willingness of many people to embrace the policy and explore its potential demonstrates a deep commitment to the transformative power of education and a readiness to adapt and innovate in the face of change. Furthermore, happiness and curiosity demonstrate an acknowledgement of the policy's potential to create new opportunities for teaching and learning and inspire new approaches to pedagogy and curriculum.

Headteachers and teachers have expressed happiness and curiosity, which emphasizes the significance of utilizing educators' inner drive and enthusiasm during policy implementation. Policymakers can achieve their goals by involving stakeholders, including headteachers and teachers, in policy development. By doing so, they can utilize their creativity, expertise, and enthusiasm and ensure that the policy is implemented to meet their needs and aspirations.

The headteachers' and teachers' expressions of happiness and curiosity emphasize the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to education reform. This approach should address access, quality, equity, and relevance. By creating the necessary infrastructure, resources, and support systems, policymakers can ensure the policy's success and realize its transformative potential. Headteachers' and teachers' happiness and curiosity remind us of their resilience and commitment to creating a just and equitable education system.

5.1.3 Gradual Acceptance and Appreciation

As the policy of offering FSHS was implemented and its impact became more visible, many headteachers and teachers noticed a gradual shift in their attitudes. They started with skepticism and uncertainty, but as time passed, they grew more accepting and appreciative of the benefits it brought. This shift was driven in part by a recognition of the tangible impact that the policy was having on students and communities, particularly in terms of increased access to education and reduced financial burdens on families.

"I am still very happy, though things are not going as normal. In general, people enjoy education for free, and then it's good. Most people are enjoying the policy, so it's very good."(T1)

Similarly, T2 observation that "My perception has changed positively. Initially, I thought they could not implement it, but they were able to put things together to implement it, and it's now running smoothly in the country". This highlights the increasing trust and positivity that came along with the execution of the policy. As a researcher, I find it powerful that educators have shown resilience and

adaptability in the face of change, as evidenced by the gradual acceptance and appreciation expressed by headteachers and teachers. Despite initial doubts and challenges, many embraced the policy and found ways to make it work.

The gradual acceptance and appreciation expressed by headteachers, and teachers highlights the importance of patience and perseverance in the policy implementation process. Education reform is a complex and long process that requires effort to build trust, change mindsets, and create conditions for success. The need for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and feedback in policy implementation is underscored by the gradual acceptance and appreciation expressed by headteachers and teachers.

5.1.4 Recognition of Policy's Success

As the FSHS policy unfolded, headteachers and teachers recognized its successes despite ongoing challenges.

This policy has been proven to increase access to education, reduce financial barriers, and improve outcomes for students, based on a growing body of evidence and experience.

As (H1) notes, "majority of the students are always available in the school because they are not being sacked to go home for school fees."

Similarly, T1's) description of the infrastructure developments in his school, "What my school have received is that, at first, it was a quota system. But now the population have increased, due to the nonpayment of fees by students and the open access to secondary school education, so we have new infrastructures, such as the science laboratory, built by the government, new dormitories, and then the school itself. We have received many infrastructures due to the population increase," highlights how the policy has a real impact on increasing access and enhancing the learning environment for students.

The recognition of a policy's success seems to be a powerful validation of the transformative potential of education reform. It highlights the critical role that government policies can play in addressing persistent inequities and barriers to access. The recognition of the policy's success by headteachers and teachers highlights the importance of evidence-based policymaking and evaluation in education reform.

The recognition of the policy's success by headteachers and teachers underscores the need for a sustained commitment to education reform, one that goes beyond short-term initiatives and political

cycles. By investing in the necessary infrastructure, resources, and support systems, and engaging educators as partners and co-creators in the reform process, policymakers can create the conditions for long-term success and sustainability.

The policy's success highlights the potential of education and the role of government in creating a fairer society. Education is essential for unleashing the potential of individuals and societies. It serves as the cornerstone for progress in every family, community, and nation. The Free FSHS) policy in Ghana is designed to increase access to education and enhance student outcomes. This policy can serve as a blueprint for other countries striving to advance educational equality and social justice.

The second research question also focuses on opportunities and challenges encountered by headteachers and teachers in the implementation of the FSHS policy. Through thematic analysis, Four and three themes were obtained under opportunities and challenges, respectively. The themes under opportunities are Increased access to education, Infrastructure development, Capacity building, and Improved educational outcomes. The themes under challenges are Inadequate infrastructure and facilities, Staffing and teaching resource constraints, Funding and financial limitations.

5.2 OPPORTUNITIES

While the policy has undoubtedly created significant opportunities for students, teachers, and communities, it has also presented a range of opportunities that have tested the resilience and adaptability of the education system. This analysis delves into the opportunities encountered by headteachers and teachers in the implementation of the policy, focusing on four key sub-themes: increased access to education, infrastructure development, capacity building, and improved educational outcomes.

Through the lens of these sub-themes, the researcher explored the ways in which the policy has opened up new possibilities for teaching and learning and has catalyzed positive changes in the educational landscape of Ghana. By examining the experiences and insights of headteachers and teachers, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of the policy and the factors that have enabled and constrained its success.

5.2.1 Increased Access to Education

The FSHS policy implementation has created a significant opportunity for headteachers and teachers to positively impact a larger number of students, particularly those who come from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds. The removal of financial barriers to secondary education has allowed headteachers and teachers to extend their reach and influence, enabling them to shape the lives of students who would have otherwise been excluded from accessing education.

The impact of increased access to education can be seen in the words of (T1) and (H1). (T1) expressed his satisfaction in being able to contribute to the education of students from his community, saying, "As a teacher, I was so excited because I can now play a part in providing secondary education to students from different communities, especially those from underprivileged communities." (H1) echoed this sentiment, noting that "With the majority of the students always available in the school because they are not being sent home for school fees, we as headteachers and teachers can focus on our core responsibilities of teaching and guiding these students.

Moreover, (T3) stressed the importance of policies in enabling headteachers and teachers to support students whose parents face financial challenges, stating, "The policy has given us the opportunity to help reduce the burdens on parents, especially the poor ones. As teachers, it was very disturbing to see students unable to continue their education after Junior High School due to financial constraints."

Similarly, (H2) highlighted the impact of the policy on the work of headteachers and teachers in providing education to students who would have been excluded due to financial constraints. "With most of the students ready to learn and excited about the opportunity to attend secondary school, we as headteachers and teachers can now focus on creating a conducive learning environment and delivering quality education to these students, knowing that their parents' financial situations are no longer a barrier."(H2)

Expanding educational access has given headteachers and teachers a valuable chance to have a lasting impact on their students' lives. By reaching and teaching a greater number of students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, headteachers and teachers can help promote social equity and inclusion through their work.

Improved access to education clearly underscores the important role of headteachers and teachers in implementing government policies successfully. By committing themselves to offering quality education and assistance to all students, regardless of their background or situation, headteachers and

teachers are crucial in achieving the potential advantages of the FSHS policy. This not only benefits the students and their families but also the broader society and economy."

5.2.2 Infrastructure Development

The FSHS policy in Ghana has brought about a significant opportunity for investment in infrastructure development. This is aimed at supporting the increased enrollment and improving the quality of education for students. The construction of new classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, and other facilities has been a great step towards reducing overcrowding and creating a more conducive learning environment for both students and teachers.

"The impact of the infrastructure development can be clearly seen in the words of (T1), who described the changes in his school: "What my school have received is that, at first, it was a quota system, which limits some students to gain admission into the secondary schools, but now the population have increased marginally due to the elimination of the quota system and financial burdens. We have new infrastructures, such as the science laboratory, which was built by the government, new dormitories, and classroom blocks. We have indeed received many infrastructures due to the population increase."

Similarly, (T2) acknowledged the provision of buses and vehicles to the schools, stating, "In fact, there are buildings, specifically, they have been able to provide a lot of infrastructure. The government has provided cars to the headmasters and busses to the schools."

Moreover, (T3) emphasized the need for additional infrastructure, such as "more tables and chairs or desks. We need classroom blocks. We need a dormitory and a well-furnished ICT laboratory." This emphasizes the constant need to develop infrastructure that can keep up with growing enrollment and provide students with the necessary resources for effective learning.

Infrastructure development is a crucial component of the FSHS policy. It is a necessary complement to increased access to education. Without adequate facilities and resources, the policy's goal of providing quality student education would be severely compromised. Investing in infrastructure also signifies the importance of the learning environment in shaping student outcomes and experiences. It highlights the need to create safe, healthy spaces conducive to academic and personal growth.

5.2.3 Capacity Building

Since the implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana, there have been notable opportunities create One of these is the investment in capacity building for teachers and headteachers. This investment

aims to help them cope with the new challenges and demands that come with an expanded education system.

To achieve this goal, the policy has provided numerous professional development opportunities such as training workshops, mentoring programs, and other support services for educators. These opportunities are designed to improve their skills and knowledge and ultimately enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

The participants spoke about how the policy helped them grow professionally. "In terms of my teaching and my skills and my methodology, nothing has changed, but rather, it has improved in one way or the other."(T3)

(T1) also highlighted the benefits of the training and motivation provided to teachers, saying, "As a teacher, in terms of content-wise, being able to have a lot of training through all this, we are. They have given us training concerning the FSHS, giving us a lot of motivation with respect to that. After all, they give us some little tokens as an intervention for the program."

Moreover, (H1) emphasized the importance of adapting teaching methods to the new realities of the expanded education system, noting, "This time when I go to class, because of the large number of students in a class, if you don't let them participate, you will see a lot of them doing their own things and then others who also want to sleep. So, this time, it's more like participating in class in terms of teaching and mostly group work."

Capacity building is a crucial element of the FSHS policy as it plays a vital role in its long-term success and sustainability. The policy acknowledges the significance of educators in shaping student outcomes and experiences; therefore, investing in the professional development of teachers and headteachers is necessary to support them in their work. Capacity building also emphasizes the importance of ongoing learning and growth for educators and the need to create a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in schools.

5.2.4 Improved Educational Outcomes

The fourth opportunity created by implementing the FSHS is for headteachers and teachers to contribute to improved educational outcomes. Although the policy aims to increase access to education, it has also provided teachers and headteachers with the chance to enhance their professional skills in order to make a meaningful impact on student learning.

Several participants highlighted the ways in which the policy has contributed to improved educational outcomes. For example, (T2) noted, "The policy has given me and my colleague teachers the

opportunity to improve our teaching strategies and methods. Because now that we have a lot of students in the classrooms, I have to adapt to and innovate and at certain times improvise to make sure that all my students receive quality education irrespective of their number in the classroom."

Similarly, (H2) emphasized the role headteachers play in managing the increased enrollment in schools to ensure that the policy is smoothly implemented: "As a headteacher, I have been challenged by the policy to develop new management and leadership skills to help oversee the increased enrollment. This is an opportunity for growth in my life."

Moreover, (T3) noted that " The implementation of the policy has given us, the teachers and the headteachers, a platform to come together and collaborate to share best teaching practices. We can work together and learn from one another to collectively find solutions to the challenge of increased student enrollment."

Finally, (T2) acknowledged that the policy has had an impact on the motivation and job satisfaction of teachers. " seeing the positive results of our efforts, like an improved academic performance of students and literacy rates, serves as a source of motivation for us"

The FSHS policy has given headteachers and teachers a chance to enhance their professional growth, acquire new skills, and make a substantial contribution to educational outcomes. However, to make the most of these opportunities, the government must continue investing in the professional development and support of headteachers and teachers. This will ensure that they have access to the necessary resources and training to effectively address the challenges and maximize the benefits of the policy..

After examining the effects of the FSHS policy on headteachers and teachers in Ghana, the policy has created numerous opportunities. The analysis focuses on four main areas: increased access to education, infrastructure development, capacity building, and improved educational outcomes. These themes highlight how the policy has not only transformed the education system for students but has also provided headteachers and teachers with new opportunities for professional development and contribution to the improvement of education in Ghana.

The analysis emphasizes the crucial role of headteachers and teachers in effectively implementing and sustaining the FSHS policy. By acknowledging and supporting their efforts, the government can create a conducive environment for them to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the policy and bring about positive change in the education system. Ultimately, this will lead to the long-term success and impact of the FSHS policy on students' lives and the overall development of Ghana.

5.3 CHALLENGES

The FSHS policy in Ghana is a significant initiative to promote social equity and increase access to education. However, like any major education reform, it presents a range of challenges that test the resilience and adaptability of the education system. This analysis examines the challenges headteachers and teachers face in implementing the policy, focusing on three key sub-themes: inadequate infrastructure and facilities, constraints in staffing and teaching resources, and limitations in funding and finances.

The researcher delved into the challenges that headteachers and teachers encounter in their daily practice to deliver quality education to a growing student population. By analyzing the experiences and perspectives of headteachers and teachers, the researcher seems to better understand the systemic and structural obstacles that have impeded the policy's complete implementation. This highlights the pressing need for focused interventions and support.

The interviews with various participants reveal their unwavering commitment and resilience in adapting to policy implementation challenges. Their personal accounts of the difficulties they encountered underscore the human aspect of education reform and the significance of considering the opinions and requirements of those at the forefront of providing services.

5.3.1 Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

The headteachers and teachers highlighted inadequate infrastructure and facilities as one of the most pressing challenges in implementing the FSHS policy. The removal of financial barriers has led to a sudden increase in student enrollment, which has put immense pressure on the existing school infrastructure. This has resulted in overcrowding and has strained the limited resources available.

"Lack of classrooms. We have many students in one classroom; we have about 80 to 90 students in a class, which is very bad." (H2). This high student-to-teacher ratio not only hinders the quality of education but also poses serious risks to students' and teachers' health and safety.

The shortage of furniture and dormitory space highlights the inadequacy of infrastructure beyond classrooms, as described by H2: " Even though we have a lot of students in the class, we lack furniture. Yes, in terms of the dormitories, we don't have enough space for the students."(H2)

Similarly, (T3) highlights the need for more desks, classrooms, dormitories, and well-equipped ICT laboratories to meet the demands of the growing student population.

The challenge of infrastructure is a critical issue that requires urgent attention and action. Overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities not only undermine the goals of the FSHS policy but also perpetuate inequalities within the education system. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are the primary beneficiaries of the policy, are disproportionately affected by the infrastructure deficit, as they are more likely to attend schools with limited resources and facilities.

5.3.2 Staffing and Teaching Resources Constraints

One major issue that headteachers and teachers have identified regarding the implementation of the free senior high school policy is the shortage of qualified staff and insufficient teaching resources. The increase in student enrolment has not been met with a corresponding increase in the number of teachers, leading to high student-teacher ratios and overworked educators.

(H2's) statement, "We do not have enough teachers, even though we have many students, we do not have enough teachers because of that work has become very difficult," underscores how the severity of the staffing crisis significantly impacts teacher workload and well-being. When teachers are forced to manage large class sizes without sufficient support, their ability to provide individualized attention, engage students, and deliver quality instruction is significantly reduced.

The challenge of staffing in the educational sector is made even more difficult by the lack of sufficient teaching resources and materials., "The teacher population is not adequate. With the introduction of elective ICT, we need more teaching and learning resources" (T2).

"The burette, pipette, and Bunsen burner in our science laboratory are insufficient"(T1)

Similarly, T3 highlights the need for textbooks and 21st-century gadgets to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

Staffing and resource shortages are a critical problem that affects the quality and fairness of education. Due to the lack of qualified teachers and insufficient teaching materials, a dual education system emerges, where students in well-funded schools have access to better academic opportunities and support, while those in under-funded schools struggle with overcrowded classrooms and limited resources.

5.3.3 Funding and Financial Limitations

As noted by headteachers and teachers in the study, the FSHS policy has faced significant funding and financial constraints. Although the policy has relieved families' financial burden of school fees, it has created a heavy strain on the government's budget and the financial resources of schools.

"Since they started this FSHS policy, the food that they serve in the school has reduced, because the money from the government is not forthcoming, so they have to manage whatever they have,"(H2) The above statement emphasizes the severe outcomes of insufficient funding on students' fundamental requirements and welfare. When educational institutions face a shortage of funds, they must make tough decisions between crucial services, like feeding programs, and other educational priorities.

The inconsistent and delayed release of government funds to schools exacerbates funding challenges. As (T2) points out, "the funds from the governments and resources from the government are not coming to the schools on time. So, the headteachers are finding it very difficult to run the schools." The unpredictability of funding creates constant uncertainty and stress, leaving school administrators to grapple with day-to-day operational challenges without adequate financial resources.

Moreover, (H1) notes, "And so, for instance, here a headmaster, then you should know how to squeeze yourself, in order to make proper use of the available funds. So, I don't think there are other funds to cater for other things like maybe building new classrooms that we know. There are not enough finances for the smooth running of the school." This highlights the immense pressure on school leaders to manage finances at the expense of infrastructure and resources.

Funding and financial challenges are a major issue that hinders the sustainability and efficacy of the FSHS school policy. The policy's triumph relies on the government's capability to provide appropriate and timely funding to schools, to ensure that they possess the resources required to impart quality education and cater to the needs of all students.

The implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana has led to several challenges faced by headteachers and teachers. These issues are interrelated and complex and have put a strain on the capacity and resilience of the education system. The challenges include overcrowded classrooms, lack of adequate facilities, shortage of qualified teachers, inadequacy of teaching resources, funding, and financial constraints. These issues are systemic and have deeply affected those in the front line of education.

The interviews with headteachers and teachers offer a compelling and insightful portrayal of the challenges they face daily in implementing an ambitious education policy in a resource-limited setting. Their accounts of difficulties and determination are evidence of their unwavering commitment to

providing their students with an education that is a basic human right and a critical factor in promoting social and economic progress.

Table 3 provides an overview of the study’s results

Table 3: Summary of findings

Research questions	Themes
1. What are headteachers’ and teachers’ perceptions of the FSHS policy implementation in Ghana?	<p>EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS</p> <p>Initial skepticism and surprise</p> <p>Happiness and curiosity</p> <p>Gradual acceptance and appreciation</p> <p>Recognition of policy’s success</p>
2. What challenges and opportunities have headteachers and teachers encountered about the implementation of the FSHS policy in Ghana?	<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Increased access to education</p> <p>Infrastructure development</p> <p>Capacity building</p> <p>Improved educational outcomes.</p> <p>CHALLENGES</p> <p>Inadequate infrastructure and facilities</p> <p>Staffing and teaching resource constraints</p> <p>Funding and financial limitations</p>

6. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Discussion

The study offers valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of headteachers and teachers concerning the implementation of Ghana's policy on FSHS. The results align with existing literature, highlighting the successes and challenges of implementing free education policies in different contexts. The study's findings regarding increased access to education, especially for students from underprivileged backgrounds, are in line with previous research by Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2018) and Akyeampong (2009), who found that implementing free education policies can enhance enrollment rates and educational opportunities for marginalized groups by eliminating financial barriers. The study confirms a surge in enrollment, especially among students from remote and underprivileged communities, after the implementation of the FSHS policy.

However, overcrowding, infrastructure deficits, and limited resources, which were challenges in the implementation process, are consistent with existing literature. Previous studies have identified similar issues with rapid enrollment expansion under free education policies, as highlighted by Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2020), Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021), and Mohammed and Kuyini (2021b). The current study confirms previous research highlighting issues with managing large class sizes, limited resources, and inadequate infrastructure, as reported by headteachers and teachers.

The study highlights how headteachers and teachers adapted and demonstrated resilience while facing challenges posed by the FSHS policy. The study found that adopting innovative teaching strategies such as group work, participatory methods, and student-centred learning can help cope with increased student numbers and resource constraints, adding to the existing body of knowledge. Although previous research has recognized the significance of teacher preparedness and support in executing educational reforms (Essuman, 2012), there has not been extensive exploration of teachers' and headteachers' specific strategies in implementing the FSHS policy.

The study's results, which are consistent with previous research, provide a mixed picture of how the FSHS policy affects the performances of headteachers and teachers in the quest to deliver and help improve quality education. While some participants reported gains in academic achievement and more chances to pursue further education, others expressed worries about the difficulties in preserving the quality of education in the face of rapidly increasing enrolment. These results are consistent with

research by Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) and Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2020), which have emphasized the possible trade-offs between quality and access in the framework of free education policy.

The participants' concerns about the FSHS policy's long-term planning and sustainability are in line with previous research. Research conducted in 2009 by Akyeampong and in 2020 by Adu-Gyamfi et al. has highlighted how crucial long-term financing sources and efficient resource management are to the sustainability of free education initiatives.

The present research contributes to this conversation by presenting the viewpoints of teachers and head teachers, who advocate for regular policy reviews, alternative financing sources, and the creation of strategic infrastructure to guarantee the program's long-term sustainability.

The issue of the politicization of the FSHS program, which participants brought up, is one unexpected finding of the research. Although political influences have been recognized as a significant influence in creating educational reforms in earlier research (Dei, 1999; Poku et al., 2013), the concerns regarding the politicization of the implementation of the FSHS policy have not been thoroughly explored. This finding expands our awareness of the difficulties in implementing free education policies and emphasizes the necessity of a more depoliticized strategy to guarantee their success. These findings emphasize the need to involve stakeholders in making the policy a success rather than leaving it in the hands of politicians to make political gains out of the policy, which will not yield any positive result in the end.

By centering on the voices and experiences of headteachers and teachers, the current study provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the implementation of FSHS policy compared to previous research. While previous studies have explored the policy's effects on access, quality, and resource management, this research delves deeper into headteachers and teachers' real-world experiences and strategies. The inclusion of varied school environments and the investigation of opportunities as well as challenges offer an integrated perspective on the policy's execution.

As a result, the study's conclusions generally support previous research on the application of free education policies, stressing both the achievements in expanding educational access and the difficulties pertaining to infrastructure, resources, and quality. The study adds to the body of knowledge by giving a deeper comprehension of the perspectives and experiences of head teachers and teachers, who are in the frontline of putting policies into practice. The discourse surrounding free education policy gains new dimensions due to the adaptability and resilience exhibited by headteachers and teachers, along with the concerns raised regarding sustainability and politicization.

The FSHS policy's revolutionary potential can be realized by addressing the stated problems, including thorough policy reviews, boosting resource allocation, ensuring sustainable funding, and encouraging collaboration among stakeholders. The findings of this study can help guide evidence-based policy decisions and add to the growing body of knowledge about educational reforms in developing nations, as Ghana works to ensure that all students receive an equitable and high-quality education.

With regards to the sustainability of the policy, sustainable implementation of the free SHS policy requires a balance between expanding access and ensuring that schools have the necessary infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, and human resources to deliver quality education (Essuman, 2012).

Challenges identified in the study, such as overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources, threaten the policy's sustainability (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). To ensure the policy's long-term sustainability, the government must prioritize investment in educational infrastructure, which includes constructing and rehabilitating classrooms, dormitories, and other facilities (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018).

The study emphasizes the important role of teachers and headteachers in the effective implementation and long-term sustainability of the FSHS policy (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020). Providing adequate support, resources, and professional development opportunities for teachers is important for maintaining quality education and ensuring the long-term success of the policy (Essuman, 2012). According to UNESCO (2017), to implement sustainable policies, it is essential to prioritize teacher welfare, motivation, and capacity building.

Furthermore, the study highlights that stakeholder involvement and collaboration are important to ensure the sustainability of the free SHS policy (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021b). Engaging stakeholders such as headteachers, teachers, parents, community leaders, and non-governmental organizations in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of policies can create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility (UNESCO, 2017). Sustainable implementation requires stakeholders' active involvement and support to overcome challenges and continuously improve (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020).

The study recommends conducting a comprehensive policy review, ensuring sustainable funding mechanisms, providing teacher support, and strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems for the long-term sustainability of the free SHS policy (Asante et al., 2022; Essuman, 2012). Implementing these recommendations into practice will help guarantee that the policy continually provides equal access to high-quality education and strengthens Ghana's educational system (UNESCO, 2017).

6.2 Revisiting the Equity and Distributive Justice Theory

Equity and distributive justice theory, as part of the social justice theory (Miller, 1999), provides a valuable framework for understanding and evaluating the impact of the FSHS policy on the fair distribution of educational resources and opportunities in Ghana. This study's findings can be supported theoretically and applied within this framework.

The study's findings regarding increased access to education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, align with the theory's emphasis on ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities (Brighthouse & Swift, 2014). The removal of financial barriers through the FSHS policy demonstrates a commitment to distributive justice, as it seeks to allocate resources and opportunities based on need and fairness (Cohen, 1987; Miller, 1999).

However, the challenges identified in the study, such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, and resource constraints, underscore the ongoing struggles to achieve true equity and distributive justice in Ghana's education system. These findings emphasize the importance of continuously addressing disparities and ensuring that resources are allocated based on the needs of different schools and student populations (Roemer, 1998).

The adaptability and resilience demonstrated by headteachers and teachers in overcoming the challenges posed by the FSHS policy can be understood through the principles of fairness and fair distribution. Their commitment to adopting innovative teaching strategies and collaborating with stakeholders reflects a dedication to ensuring that all students receive a quality education, aligning with the principles of fairness and equality of opportunity (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983; Rawls, 1971).

The study's recommendations, such as conducting a comprehensive policy review, ensuring sustainable funding mechanisms, and providing ongoing support for teachers, are based on the principles of equity and distributive justice. These recommendations aim to tackle the identified challenges and foster a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities within the education system.

The equity and distributive justice theory proved to be a useful framework for this study, as it provided a strong foundation for understanding and evaluating the FSHS policy's impact on educational equity in Ghana. The empirical findings can be theoretically affirmed and applied within the framework, highlighting the successes, challenges, and potential for promoting educational equity and social justice in the country.

6.3 Sustainability Statement

The study contributes to sustainable development goal 4, which ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). The study's findings have significant implications for the long-term sustainability of education policy.

Sustainability refers to the ability of a policy to maintain its positive outcomes and provide equitable access to quality education over a long period of time (UNESCO, 2017).

Ghana can guarantee that the FSHS policy continues to provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, by implementing the recommendations given in this study and focusing on long-term sustainability. This will contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015).

Most of the sustainability issues have been captured in the discussions.

6.4 Conclusion

The study explored the perceptions and experiences of headteachers and teachers regarding the implementation of Ghana's FSHS policy. Using a qualitative approach, the implementation of the policy was evaluated from the headteachers' and teachers' perspectives to find out their perspectives and identify challenges and opportunities they have encountered in the implementation of the policy. The background of the study addresses the historical context of educational reforms in Ghana, focusing on the FSHS policy implementation in 2017. The study's main aim is to increase access to education and remove financial barriers, especially for children in disadvantaged communities. The aim of the study was to determine headteachers' and teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the FSHS policy and identify the challenges and opportunities they have encountered in the implementation of the FSHS policy. Equity and distributive justice theory was employed as the theoretical framework for the study, which helped highlight the essence of equitable distribution of resources and opportunity allocation.

The findings of this study emphasize the significance of including key stakeholders, especially headteachers and teachers, in the policy-making process. Since they are the ones who put educational policies into action, their perspectives and experiences are essential for developing effective and long-lasting policies. Policymakers should provide more chances for headteachers and teachers to participate in policy conversations, express their viewpoints, and contribute to the decision-making process. By encouraging a collaborative approach to policy development, policymakers can ensure

that the policies are well-informed, practical, and responsive to real-world situations. This inclusive approach can result in better policy design, improved implementation, and ultimately, better student educational outcomes .

This framework offers a perspective on analyzing the perceptions and experiences of headteachers and teachers and evaluating the policy's impact on educational equity.

The study utilized a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected teachers and head teachers from three different school environments. The data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, which identified three major themes: evolving perceptions, opportunities and challenges. There were sub themes under each of the main themes.

The study's findings demonstrate the FSHS policy's significant impact on increasing secondary school access, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Eliminating financial obstacles has made it possible for students from remote and deprived communities to pursue their educational goals. This supports the policy's objective of ensuring equal access to education and contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of providing inclusive and quality education to all.

However, the study also highlights the challenges associated with the rapid expansion of enrollment under the FSHS policy. Major concerns have arisen due to infrastructure deficits, overcrowding, and resource constraints, leading to a decline in the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers and headteachers have expressed concerns with excessive class sizes, a shortage of instruction resources, and inadequate resources. These challenges emphasize the importance of a comprehensive plan for implementing policies that goes beyond improving access and addressing problems with resource allocation and quality.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the study emphasizes how adaptable and resilient headteachers and teachers were in adapting to the new realities generated by the free SHS program. Teachers have proven their dedication to facilitating successful teaching and learning by implementing innovative strategies like group projects, collaborative strategies, and student-centered methods. These efforts demonstrate how committed teachers are, even amid resource limitations, and how eager they are to change with the times and meet the needs of their students. The study also emphasizes the importance of stakeholder involvement and collaboration in the successful implementation of educational policies.

Headteachers and teachers have stressed the necessity of conducting an extensive policy review, allocating more resources, and including a wide range of stakeholders, such as parents, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. The collaborative strategy addresses implementation-related challenges and ensures the policy's long-term viability.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the participants' concerns about the sustainability and long-term planning of the FSHS program. It has been noted that sustainable funding methods, frequent policy reviews, and efficient management of enrolment growth and infrastructure expansion are all significant. These concerns emphasize the importance of implementing policies in a comprehensive and progressive manner that considers the initiative's long-term viability and effect. Another major concern is the politicization of the FSHS policy, with participants urging a more depoliticized approach to guarantee the policy's success. This finding emphasizes the need to place a priority on decision-making based on evidence and giving educational goals priority over political reasons. The findings highlight the achievements made in increasing educational access, challenges in guaranteeing quality and equity, and teachers' flexibility and resilience in the face of resource constraints. This study's findings further provide a basis for evidence-based policy and decision-making as Ghana moves forward in its attempt to offer equitable and high-quality education for everyone.

By prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of headteachers and teachers who are at the forefront of educational delivery, Ghana can achieve the transformative potential of the FSHS policy and ensure a brighter future for the youth.

6.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although this study offers insightful information about headteachers' and teachers' perspectives and experiences with the implementation of FSHS policy, its limitations must be acknowledged.

The first limitation of this study is the sample size. The study involved three teachers and two headteachers from three different schools. This sample size is very small and may not represent a large population of teachers and headteachers in Ghana. Future researchers and studies should consider expanding the sample size and the scope. They should include more teachers and headteachers from different schools and regions in Ghana to provide a comprehensive understanding of headteachers and teachers' understanding of the FSHS policy.

The study participants were chosen from three public senior high schools in the eastern region of Ghana, one of the country's 16 regions. It is important to note that due to the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of Ghana.

Another limitation of this study has to do with the limited range of stakeholders. Only headteachers and teachers' perceptions were explored in the study. Key stakeholders such as parents, students, policymakers, and educational authorities were excluded from the study. Many headteachers and teachers, as well as different stakeholders, should be included in future studies.

Another limitation of the study is the absence of quantitative data. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, quantitative data regarding the policy's effect on academic performance and enrollment rates are not available. Future studies should incorporate quantitative data to allow a more thorough evaluation of the policy's impact and success.

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