

The Education-Outcomes Gap for Youth in Ghana: Addressing Raised Expectations

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Abstract

The current challenge for many African Governments including Ghana is to enable youth to progress through a modern system of education in the midst of traditional rural community life and de-agrarianisation, high levels of poverty, urban migration, unequal quality in school provision and weakening parental and social structures (Burgess, 2005). Academic and policy researchers have begun to unearth the tremendous risk for often weak states unable to meet the expectations of this generation of Africans (Argenti, 2002).

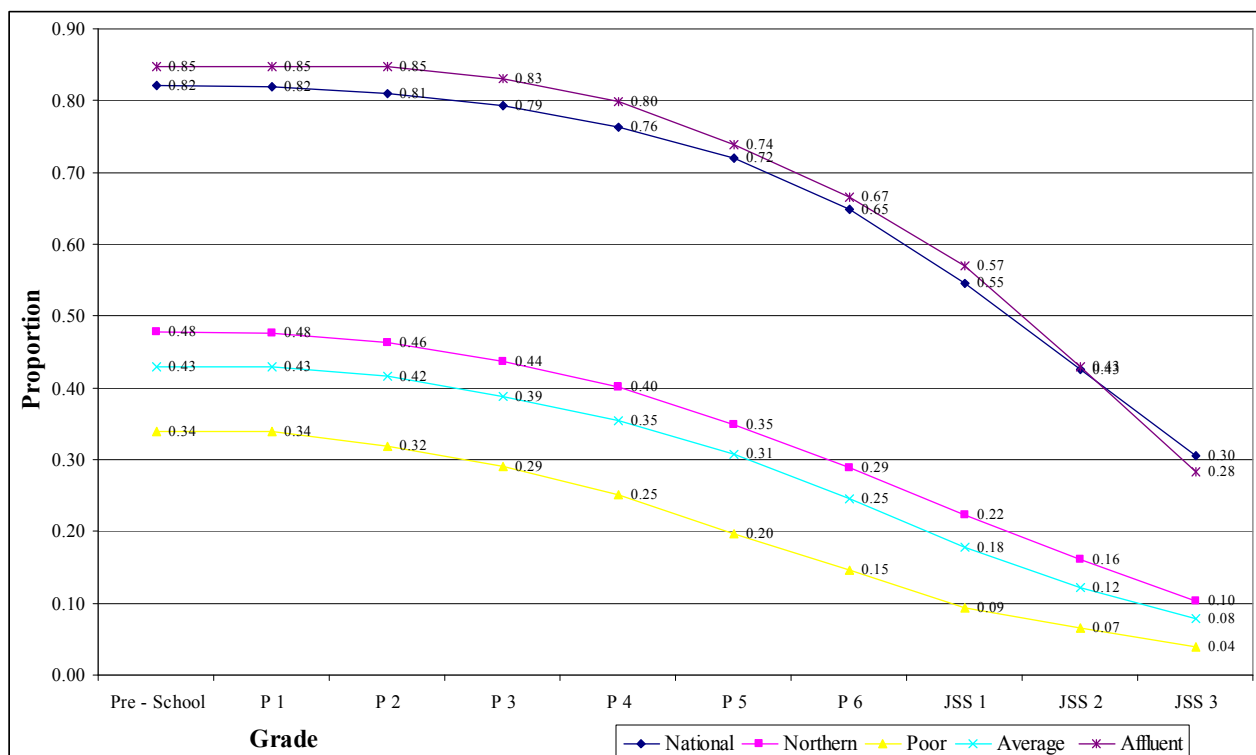
Governments often fail to focus on the needs of youth, listen to their voices, and understand the barriers that the social and economic context poses for young people out of school. As a result the particular challenges that youth face in using education as a means of developing their talents and capabilities can be neglected. This brief considers the policy implications of the findings from recent research carried out in two contrasting poverty zones in Northern and Southern Ghana (Arnot et al, 2009 a and b; Casely-Hayford et al. 2009, 2010).

Poverty, Education and Ghanaian Youth

The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS)(I: 2003; II: 2006) and subsequent implementation programs highlight the need to make basic education available to Ghana's youth. Further, Ghana's high fertility rates and its low resource base have resulted in significant pressure on the delivery of basic social services, especially to children. The prevalence of poverty varies by population group, and rural and urban regional divides. The Ghana Standards Survey (2008) indicated that 39.5% of Ghanaians are 'poor' and 25% are 'extremely poor'. Deprived communities experience a vicious cycle of ill-health, poor nutrition, low employment rates and inadequate social amenities and infrastructure.

Over 50% of the Ghanaian population is below the age of 18, up to 60% is between 12 to 24 years of age (GSS, 2008). Over 160,000 Ghanaian youth complete Junior High School each year but only 40% go on to Senior High School (SHS) and only a small percentage enter the formal vocational training sector. Wumbee (2008), using the Core Welfare Indicator Survey (GSS, 2003), found that less than 6% of children from poor rural households in the North complete the free compulsory basic education system of nine years and far fewer are likely to complete secondary school. Figure 1 demonstrates the connection between wealth, educational progression and attainment in Ghana's Northern region.

Figure 1: Educational Attainment Profile of Children from Northern Ghana by Socio-Economic Grouping



Source: Core Welfare Indicator Questionnaire (CWIQ) 2003, Ghana Statistical Service. From household assets index constructed by principal components analysis: lowest 40% represent the poor, the top 20% represent the affluent and the middle 40%, the average.

This five-year study of Youth, Gender and Citizenship explores how young people and their parents in poverty zones in the rural North and urban Southern settings assessed how schooling could help them transition out of poverty. It used a voice-centred household based approach in order to uncover how impoverished youth and their families viewed schooling and how schooling could make a positive difference to their lives.

The Research Design

The study contrasted the experiences of Ga youth in the La community, a predominantly urban environment in Southern Ghana, with Dagomba youth living in a Northern farming community where only two generations of youth had experienced a full cycle of formal schooling. A survey of 600 households and an intergenerational study of 10-15 households were conducted in each site. Interviews were conducted in Ga and Dagomba with 40 young men and women (aged 16-25), their mothers and fathers (or equivalent), and with elders/gatekeepers. Three educational pathways of youth were sampled in each site:

- No schooling or incomplete primary schooling;
- Basic: Those who had completed primary schooling (P1-6) and Junior High School (JHS 1-3)
- Post Basic: Those who had attended or completed secondary schooling (SHS1-3, technical vocational, commercial schooling, higher education).

The interviews were coded with atlas ti and analysed according to three dimensions of wellbeing and empowerment:

- I. Self Protection/Well Being: from violence, disease, early marriage, traditional gender roles, unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS;
- II. Livelihood/Entrepreneurialism: learning skills and enterprise life-long learning;
- III. Citizenship/Empowerment: belonging, participatory citizenship, political decision-making

The findings reported below are indicative of Northern and Southern youth's perspectives (see Arnot et al, 2009; Casely-Hayford et al. 2009 for more detail).

Raised Expectations

Young people and their parents associated education with social mobility and with the enhancement of their social position. Education represented a form of social capital that might be transferred at some point into economic benefit. The markers of success for the Northern community members were that their children would be able to speak, read, and write in English and get a 'good job' and send back remittances to their families. Rural parents expected that schooling would enable their children to become upwardly mobile which, in the North, meant obtaining a 'government well paid job' and becoming a 'big man'. They and the youth pointed to role models like education MPs or politicians who had become a 'somebody' in their society through education.

Southern urban parents similarly hope that education would mean that their children would attain a 'better life than they themselves had'. Single mothers in the study felt particularly strongly that they had to work hard to ensure that their children were schooled and thus escape the same fate.

Valued 'Beings' and 'Doings'

In both sites, parents and youth spoke positively about the personal benefits of education. Their most valued 'beings and doings' [which Sen (1999) described as functionings] were the achievement of a sense of self-worth and dignity. They associated schooling with the achievement of 'enlightenment', knowledge, self-knowledge and 'sense' as well as

social respect. Schooling provided young people with communicative competencies such as: literacy and English language skills to cope with the demands of the public sphere (government bureaucracies), communication with, and toleration of outsiders and to help their parents and the community with reading letters etc. Amartey, a JHS completer living in La the southern site commented: 'Schooling gives you confidence and helps you to be able to express yourself. You get confidence ... and you are not afraid to go to places ... Schooling could take you everywhere'. A SHS educated young man reported that he felt different about 'the way I view other people's lives'.

Typical of West African women (Oppong, 1974), young Ghanaian women with basic schooling managed to use the basic skills of reading and counting to support their trading activities and their families. Such employment was in traditional female spheres; there was little suggestion that they had moved out into male economic spheres or more skilled work. The young women we interviewed were positive about the economic gains from even a little schooling:

Because of school, I am able to speak English and reading, do additions. I could not write but now I can write because I went to school, it has enabled me count money ... Skills acquired from school will also help me in hawking things ... (*Naa Ode, f, urban, JHS*).

...schooling helps a lot, especially the maths that you learn because I know some people who did not go to school and find it difficult doing additions and also giving change to people when selling but when you go to school a little it helps a lot ... (*Naami, f, urban, JHS*)

Secondary schooled young women and men in particular spoke of having the confidence to make their own decisions, and to relate to the opposite sex in a more equal way. Naa Baakey argued that he had '*akeshie* – that I can do anything' (Naa Baakey); knowing what to do in the future, and has made me know myself' (Annang). Those who succeeded in going to university spoke about feeling 'good', 'bold'.

Unfulfilled Expectations?

The Ghanaian young men and women in the sample expected that their poverty could be solved by schooling. One male educated youth summarised these feelings commenting: *'If all those who go to school can get jobs we will solve our community problems'*. However the rural youth recognised that they had not had 'good quality education' and recounted several examples of verbal and physical abuse by teachers. Having attended a Junior High School, they had not been able to find a formal job or earnings; most of those completing JHS could not read and write in English. They could not continue their formal education, particularly in the North where vocational training options and post basic education are more limited. Northern youth worried about not 'fitting back into the community' if they failed to fulfil the community's expectations. Often such youth drifted away from the community into the regional capital, no longer seeing farming as their main form of livelihood.

In the urban South, although appreciative of their ability to read, add, and calculate which had helped them in trading and to become more financially independent of their family, basic schoolers were aware of their lost potential:

Schooling to the JHS level, I have not seen any significant benefit from it and that is why I want to go further to at least to the SHS level. If I had completed the Technical School where I had wanted to study telecommunication, I would have had a job more easily and that would have been a much more significant benefit. (*Nii Okine, m, urban JHS*)

Similarly post-basic schoolers expected a good deal from schooling, with many wishing to progress into higher education but were prevented from doing so by lack of finance. A few who had vocational training tried to make a living. Most had high expectations of what their schooling could bring but many had not succeeded. Some Southern secondary educated youth turned to the street to make a living, as road side apprentices or using trading to supplement their income: some because members of local gangs or clubs where

they were reported to be involved in 'wee' smoking, internet fraud or prostitution.

Education and Social Differentiation

These unmet expectations were coupled with an awareness of a new form of differentiation in the community as a result of unequal schooling profiles between the 'educated' and the 'uneducated'. This stratification of the youth was apparent particularly in the North:

...if [secondary] students come back from school for weekends, they group among themselves and when I get to their group, I have to walk away. I cannot mix with them. I have to also go to a place where I know those people have not been to school and they and I will group together (*Washiru Mahami, m. rural, non-schooled*).

If you see those people who have been to school and those who have not, you see a big difference in terms of the way they lead their lives and they always want to be intellectuals (*Nii Bowa, m. urban Polytechnic graduate*).

Youth recognised that schooling had become a preserve of those who could afford to pay the fees, particularly to higher education. For the unschooled or less schooled this exacerbated the sense of social marginalization and disadvantage. Young people talked about the financial constraints that prevented them from moving on to higher levels of education. 'Education is expensive and any of us are unable to pay the fees. Poverty is the main problem to our educational success'. (*Hawalu Wunpini, m. urban post-basic*)

Quality Education and Support as a Right

Young Ghanaians told of the poor quality of their education and their subsequent failure to gain employment to their status as citizens. They employed the language of freedom, rights and entitlements learned at school to call for help in tackling their disadvantage. They recognised that as young adults they have rights as Ghanaians and duties that go with such rights and duties (expressed through notions of obedience to the law, leading exemplary moral lives etc.). They

expected the Government to improve their environment, protect their land and property, provide good drinking water, and address their right to good social amenities such as quality education and employment.

Ghanaian youth derived notions of human rights and personhood from their schools in ways that emphasised their own aspirations to be 'free' – free to own property, to go to school, to use hospitals and at a personal level – independence, the freedom to socialise, to speak, to 'visit friends and chat':

I have the right to do whatever I want because I have nothing to do with anybody. ..., the right to wash clothes, go out and come back anytime. I have the right to vote or not if I want. You have the right to walk on the street, but you need to be careful. .. it is our right for the government to fully implement education because the children in the community are not in school. At the moment, most of these seem to be a lie. I learn all these from school and through conversation in the house or at home. (*Amerley, f, urban, vocationally trained*).

My rights are the right to speak and the right to go about everywhere, the right to choose the kind of things, the right to be respected... I have the right to speak, right to go everywhere, to walk around the country, right to worship God, rights to make an operation and to serve my country. The right to decide what I want to do in the future. I learnt all these rights from TV, Radio and from people's mouths, but where I got it most is the school (*Annang, m, urban, SHS*).

Rural girls recognised that 'the education of girls is not that good'; unlike young men they could not fall back on farming. Yet as Mutala pointed out, the government should do more to help farmers:

... government can ... improve the situation of youth in my community by first providing them with *quality education*. Quality education can actually teach them how to fish. You know that they can fish for themselves when they grow up. And for those who are outside school, I expect the

government to provide them with technical support. I expect the government to always brief the youth in the community with issues relating to development, to political issues ... relating to what they need to know as citizens of this country. (*Mutala Baani, m, first university graduate from Northern community*.)

Many youth demanded local libraries for out-of-school learning and recognised that teachers needed to be paid more, schools needed textbooks, desks, targeted funding/scholarships for the poor, and better/renovated school buildings. Other youth in the city called for water and electricity, clean environment, and a lower price of petrol.

The demands on government were high, particularly in the interface between education and employment.

The government should help me move forward by going to school completing JSS, SSS and then get to polytechnic. It should also help me get a job to do. It should pay my school fees. I would like the government to help me build a house, get me a job. I would also want scholarship to go to school from the government. (*Nii Ankrah, m, urban, non-schooled*)

The government should help people acquire vocational and technical skills so that even if people fail in their farming or business, they can use those skills to support themselves ... Carpentry and joinery, building and construction, and auto mechanics... (*Baba Winpini, m, rural, JHS completer*).

Youth citizenship

The YGC study highlights how poverty reduction agendas need to recognise the civic frustrations and ambitions of young people and the part that they can play in shaping national and local policy and governance. Basic schooling has positive outcomes in terms of capability development, but creates disappointments when it fails to deliver the expected economic returns. Young Ghanaians have been taught in school that they have rights, that education is a social right; they expect to

continue with their studies after basic schooling and to measure their success in terms of employment. Policy-makers need to manage such expectations, to set out what can realistically be expected of education in Ghanaian society and consider adapting schooling to local rural and urban contexts. Young people see the rights associated with education as a matter of national pride: Annany (17yrs) from the city commented '... I feel proud that I am a Ghanaian because our country is moving forward like in education'. As future generations experience schooling, the issue for policy-makers is how to help youth make a contribution to their country.

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