

Public Private Partnerships and Social Mobility in Ghana

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Abstract

The completion of senior high school (SHS) is important for the formation of youth aspirations with regard to professional employment. Currently, youth who drop out take up jobs in the informal sector, while successful students are able to gain access to professions. While private schooling seems to be a stepping stone to professional employment there is a strong gendering of subject choices at SHS level that gives girls less opportunities in the job market. One solution appears to lie in provide new areas of professional jobs such as in sport or entertainment industries at the top end, and to improve and regularise informal sector training at the bottom end.

Background

At the end of nine years basic education, Ghanaian students completing Junior High School (JHS) sit a nationwide examination, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). They are then admitted into one of five types of second cycle institutions for a three year secondary education.¹ These secondary schools constitute the terminal points in pre-university education with the categories of schooling indicating a strong gendering of opportunities - with the technical and vocational schools regarded as the domain of boys and vocational schools that of girls.² This gendering occurs in a situation where there is no official streaming of youth into a school type by gender but neither is there a government policy to reverse this social trend. Whilst no deliberate official activity exists to coerce girls into vocational schools, nor boys into technical schools,

similarly there are no official programmes to reverse the trend in gender differentiation.

This gendered streaming of secondary school youth has become prominent over the last three decades, which commenced with the education reforms in 1987 that liberalised educational provision in the face of the inability of the government to provide enough quality basic schools (see table 1 below). With the growth of private schools there were hopes that there would be greater evidence of youth becoming independent, self reliant and gaining social mobility (Oheneba-Sakyi 1989).

Table 1: Growth in numbers of Primary schools 1986-2000

	1986/ 87	1992/ 93	1997/ 98	2000/ 2001
Public schools	9424	11270	11236	11750
Private schools	145	740	1,090	2,215

Source: Education Sector Review Report 2002

The Gendered Context of Public and Private Schooling

This brief draws on doctoral research conducted in the Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti region of Ghana between 2007 and 2008. Obuasi is Ghana's largest gold mining town and attracts a large immigrant community where mining is the regular employment for migrant men.³ Among the sample selected there was a greater percentage of boys and girls attending private school than government schools. The aspiration for private schooling at the basic level indicated in the sample is in line with research that shows that private high schools are regarded as a pathway to social mobility- with a majority of students in Ghana's elite secondary schools

¹ These are the technical schools; vocational institutions; general or grammar type; business/commercial and agricultural colleges.

² Kane (1992)

³ The study sampled 58 youth between the ages of 15 and 23. This was based on a purposive and random sampling method and subdivided into those enrolled in education at the time of data collection (in-school) and those out of formal education (out-of-school group).

and universities coming from a small cluster of private schools that constitute 7% of the enrolled numbers (Addae-Mensah, 2000).

The school choice decision is a complex phenomenon. Income fluctuations due to changes in economic and social status (particularly loss of a job and divorce) are the most commonly cited factors that led to a shift from private to public school, which would point to the private school being the preferred option. Yet, there was also an indication that youth who had moved from the private to the public school at basic level were excelling at the BECE examination and gaining entry to the secondary school.⁴ While difficult financial circumstances and increasing impoverishment were identified as key factors in school choice it was an equally important reason cited for leaving education altogether and seeking a trade as a form of future employment. The youth interviews revealed that the decision to go into trading was sometimes a decision that they made for themselves while on other occasions it was due to the intervention and support of family members.

There was a sense among these youth that learning a trade would provide a direct and quicker route to self-employment in a social context where formal employment opportunities were hard to get. Additionally, they indicated that such employment allowed them to earn while learning, a system they termed as '*work and pay*'. In particular, they appreciated the fact that they were regarded as productive since they were contributing to the growth of the business of the master craftsmen while advancing in their training at the same time. There was also the appeal of working within a flexible environment where hours and days of work could be negotiated and re-negotiated to fit in with shifting priorities in the community and their personal lives.

In the sample those who left school to join informal work were predominantly from the government school and at the JHS level of education. While the informal sector was their preferred avenue to earn their living, this often led to livelihoods that were based on illegal and high-risk activity. Economic reasons were not the only cause for dropping out of school. Violence in school, particularly corporal punishment, was identified as a major reason for the decision to drop out. Youth indicated that corporal punishment was still commonplace in all schools - some even regarding the terms 'schooling' and 'caning' as synonymous with one another. Others

underlined how they felt unable to cope with education at the top end of JHS- in particular, that the education imparted in the final years was not comprehensible to them and that they were not 'academic' enough to be in school. This sense of *diminished capability* was often linked to the fact that there were no real opportunities to use any education that they could have received from school in and around their locality of Obuasi. The opinion among the drop-outs that there was nothing to be gained from schooling came through in their express wish never to return to education, even if the opportunity were to present itself.

This sense of diminution in capabilities was not expressed by those who had succeeded in completing secondary school. Their response was to regard the informal sector as a lesser and inferior option to more regular, even formal, employment - such as teachers. The interviews indicated that the selection of subjects at the SHS level were key to their eligibility to pursue particular careers. The success in SHS and its ability to direct youth to particular career paths was regarded as an aspirational feature of education by this group. In particular, this group of youth indicated that they would regard informal sector work in a trade as an unacceptable form of employment as it was both difficult work and an insecure source of income. These qualitative results are in line with the quantitative results regarding the differential perceptions of JHS and SHS students regarding the returns and value of employment in the informal sector in Ghana (Monk et. al. 2008).

Among those who do succeed at the SHS level, there is a decidedly gendered attitude to subject choice that then further genders the employment opportunities for young men and women. In Obuasi, the youth indicated that there was community opprobrium if a girl considered taking up science or technical subjects, so there were rarely any girls (the maximum number of girls recorded in any technical subject was 2). Equally, the take up of Home Economics by boys as a subject at SHS was frowned upon and the youth indicated that only one boy had registered for this during their time and had discontinued shortly after the commencement of the second year at secondary school. Furthermore, it would appear that the presence of an elder brother at the secondary school was inimical to younger sisters being able to take technical subjects. The youth in the sample indicated that the elder brothers discouraged their sisters from such subject selection by indicating that these were more challenging and so they should choose easier options. The reinforcement of gender norms regarding subjects by both the community and the family do not provide girls with the same employment opportunities as boys with regards to professional careers. This is the case even with those youth who have completed JHS at a private school. While these

⁴ The interviews reveal that in recent years the inability to gain admission into the senior high school in a number of cases had little to do with poor performance in the BECE but due to large scale bungling with regard to the government's newly introduced computer selection and placement system.

girls did express strong aspirations to have professional careers, they indicated that they were discouraged by their families as the costs of professional courses, particularly in the sciences, was regarded as exorbitant. These arguments were not raised with the same regularity among the boys in the family.

Schooling and Voice

While the responses of youth completing JHS and SHS were distinct with regard to the livelihood outcomes of education, there was a far more uniform response with regard to their sense of participation in their educational experience. In a school environment where corporal punishment was regarded as the norm, the youth turned to parents or guardians in situations where they had problems at school. The youth did not regard teachers as a group that they could automatically turn to in order to resolve any educational or personal difficulties. They differentiated between the general teacher body whom they tended not to engage with and those teachers with whom they shared a common social affinity—youth who were Muslims or Catholics felt that they could turn to teachers from their faith. There was unanimity among the youth that there was no functional feedback mechanism between the school and students, and that the school did not want to work to create a process by which complaints could be registered. Both successful students in the school system as well as drop-outs concurred that the school was not a space where their voices would be listened to. It is worth noting that those who had dropped out to take up an apprenticeship regarded their relationship with the master craftsman as more amenable for discussing problems since there were social ties between them. In addition, the apprentice often resided in the same household as the master craftsman making for a more conducive environment for discussion.

The difficulties of exercising voice and exit in the presence of local loyalties, as expressed by the youth of Obuasi, point to the need to expand the traditional Exit, Voice and Loyalty model (Hirschman 1970) concurring with the methodology and analytical framework used in the project on Public Private Partnerships and the Educational Outcomes of the Poor (P³EOP) on the RECOUP consortium.

Furthermore, there are aspects of schooling and its outcomes for the social mobility of youth that do not readily emerge from examining their educational achievements or success. One such important area, highlighted by in-school and out-of-school youth, was the central role that sports and entertainment played in fashioning their time at school. The youth interviews indicate how moments relating to sports and entertainments were unanimously regarded as high

points in school life. Both the playing of team sports and the opportunity to fraternise at school musical programmes were regarded as important ways for young people to interact in an informal way and also to develop social skills. The youth indicated, in particular, that the opportunities to bond through such interactions, and the friendships that these gave rise to were significant in shaping their social interactions and were valued highly. These moments were also contrasted with the hard academic work that they had to undertake during the normal school day. It is interesting that these sentiments were echoed by both those who were able to move onto professional employment as well as those who entered the informal sector.

Policy implications

1. There is an absence of guidance and counselling departments in Ghanaian secondary schools. The introduction of career guidance service in schools can undo some of the gender biases that constrain the choices girls make in schools. The availability of counselling services will provide a formal medium where voice is exercised without fear of victimisation by teachers.
2. The JHS schools currently lack appropriate tools and resources to run workshops regarding the value of technical and vocational training. This has been a major cause of youths lacking information about the opportunities available in the labour market and has been the cause of a major setback regarding the value of the education sector among poor youth. Given the limited resources available within the state, it might be better to create specialist JHS in strategic locations that could be shared by a cluster of schools. This model could also be adopted for the sharing of scientific resources such as laboratories by a cluster of schools.
3. The state should move towards formalising apprenticeships by awarding certificates to those who successfully complete their training. The introduction and monitoring of a gradation system in apprenticeship skills would benefit those who drop out of secondary school to the extent that they would be able to return to obtain a hands-on training scheme at a vocational or technical secondary establishment in later years.
4. The sports and the entertainment industry should be seen as alternative employment avenues for Ghanaian youth. The creation of a competitive environment for new professional courses, such as sports and entertainment, at the secondary school

level would powerfully reshape the potential educational outcome for poor youth.⁵ Creating more opportunities by providing proper training will enable many talents to flourish in the secondary school and pursue these deliberately as a career option.

The views expressed here are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

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⁵ In a total of 58 interviews, only one person aspired to be an actress yet she was held back by a number of social mores.