

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULUM IN GHANA AND MATTERS ARISING: FROM 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS TO A BIPOLAR GLOBAL PROBLEM?

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Education is an essential vehicle that could be used to promote the development drive of developing countries including Ghana. This is because education imbibe in the citizens useful cultural traits including knowledge, values, attitudes and skills. A combination of internal and external factors however, combine to limit the levels of educational attainment for people in developing countries, but also act to alter the socio-cultural standards of these countries. Using a combination of mixed methods and desktop review of published and unpublished data sources the author attempts a chronicle of Ghana's past curriculum designs and its local cultural impacts viz-a-viz its correlation with issues bothering the global community.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Education, curriculum, cross-cutting issues, differentiation, pedagogy, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, gender.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The education industry in Ghana has over the years witnessed some cataclysmic reforms some of which are revolutionary if not liberal in nature. Since the introduction of the Junior Secondary School concept that was piloted from 1987 and fully implemented nationally in the early 1990s, the motives have always been similar in one way or the other – produce quality human resources required for societal transformation and overall national development (Osei, 2004). Whilst there are successes in most cases the drawbacks inherent in some other cases are hard to ignore. Earlier education reforms instituted by the Nkrumah regime for instance, have been hailed as laying a solid foundation for the take-off of the nation's socio-economic development albeit so from the nostalgic point of view (Osei, 2004). Such optimism may however, be data driven. Empirical evidence and indeed, data on recent industry reforms point to an upward trend in literacy abilities among basic and second cycle students in Ghana today (GSS, 2021) (see figure 1). Others point to obvious upward trajectory in enrolment figures and success rate for both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle school candidates for a given ten-year period data analysis (World Bank, 2024; WAEC, 2023) (figures 2 & 3). Thus, both earlier and recent reforms, have been liberal in shaping society in line with national development goals and ideals (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Dzobo Committee Report, 1974). Talk of the FCUBE programme of old, or even more recent policy interventions as the progressively free SHS and its antithesis the free SHS, and you are not far from right in this regard.

A disconnect however arises when one takes a critical look at the current standards-based curriculum that run concurrently with the objective based curriculum (MOE, 2023). Started in 2019 the new curriculum is expected to be fully implemented nationally by 2025 at the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle

level. This disconnect could likely pose a hypothetical problem for society in the long term. For the sake of clarity, the new standards-based curriculum incorporates cross-cutting issues such as Gender Equity & Social Inclusion (GESI), Social & Emotional Learning (SEL), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, Digital Literacy, among others (MOE, 2023). Whereas it is a good thing for our industry to constantly undergo reforms to align with national development goals, but also global societal demands, it is equally necessary to do so with caution in order to preserve certain aspects of our cultural values that keep us together and maintain our dignity and pride as Africans/Ghanaians (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002). This paper examines the Gender aspect of the new standards-based curriculum as a key cross-cutting issue in Ghana viz-a-viz the bipolar global gender problem. The main objective of the study was to unmask the unseen faces and hands behind the determination of educational content, including cross-cutting issues that is added in the new SHS standards-based curriculum and its possible socio-cultural impacts in the long term.

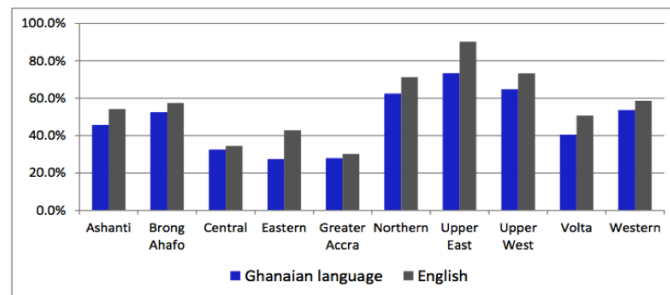


Figure 1: Literacy rate in Ghana by Regions. Source: GSS, 2021.

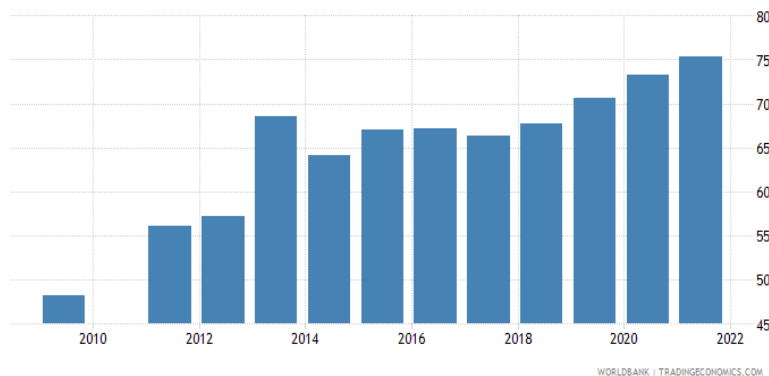


Figure 2. SHS enrolment figures in Ghana, 2010 – 2022. Source: World Bank, 2024.

WASSCE (SC) 2020 PERFORMANCE OF CANDIDATES				
SUBJECTS	NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF CANDIDATES OBTAINING			
	GRADES A1 – C6	GRADE D7	GRADE E8	GRADE F9
ENGLISH LANGUAGE	212,866 (57.34%)	68,525 (18.46%)	46,732 (12.59%)	42,500 (11.45%)
MATHEMATICS (CORE)	243,904 (65.71%)	38,984 (10.50%)	37,551 (10.11%)	49,721 (13.40%)
INTEGRATED SCIENCE	194,891 (52.53%)	54,053 (14.57%)	48,081 (12.96%)	73,242 (19.74%)
SOCIAL STUDIES	238,584 (64.31%)	25,108 (6.77%)	29,466 (7.94%)	77,192 (20.81%)

Figure 3. Subject by subject performance of WASSCE candidates in 2020. Source: WAEC, 2023.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In terms of research approach mixed methods were employed in the study. This is a blend of both the qualitative and quantitative methods for the collection and analysis of data. The qualitative approach is a very efficient technique in the generation of detailed data on the experiences, perceptions, emotions, behaviour and beliefs of respondents (Bryman, 2001). Accordingly, some in-depth interviews and personal observations were conducted to solicit the views and understanding of the target population on the topic under study. In like manner, the quantitative method can prove useful for the analysis of quantifiable data, generalizations and predictions (Smith, 1975). A major asset of the qualitative approach lies in the fact that it creates room for important dimensions to emerge from the cases under study without supposing in advance what those cases will be (Smith, 1975). Its drawbacks lie in the fact that it can be subjective; it is also inappropriate for predictions and generalizations (Smith, 1975). It is in the light of these strengths and weaknesses inherent in the qualitative and quantitative approaches that the researcher opted for mixed methods which has gained grounds in social science research in recent years (Laar, 2015).

## 3. THE OBJECTIVE-BASED CURRICULUM

The processes leading to curriculum design and implementation in Ghana is done by the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NaCCA). Like other auxiliary bodies of the Ghana Education Service (GES) that have recently been upgraded to autonomous status, NaCCA is the soul public institution mandated to from time-to-time initiate steps for a new curriculum design, and/or conduct comprehensive assessment and review of an existing curriculum implemented for all pre-tertiary public/private basic and second-cycle educational institutions (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Education Act 2008; IDCL, 2022). Studies have shown that curriculum designs by NaCCA often follow the traditional top-down approach other than the more pragmatic bottom-up approach (IDCL, 2023). A major strength of this approach lies in the fact that educational aims/goals/objectives are clearly stated; it also involves the active participation of the learner (IDCL, 2023). Its draw-backs however lie in the fact it may be comprehensive with regards to the stages involved but less interactive (IDCL, 2023). And so, this is the trend that the objective-based curriculum essentially followed. The processes leading to its design lacked the interactive component of stakeholders especially at community and local school levels. But this was planned

and had mostly been the case with previous design/construction processes by NaCCA as a public agency for most part of Ghana's post-colonial era even if that came with mixed results over time. In 2008, the newly reformed NaCCA by Act 778 rolled out the roadmap for the implementation of the Objective-based curriculum (MOE, 2010; MOE, 2015). Armah (2017) opines that this curriculum marked a departure from its predecessor that was based on the 3-Rs, i.e. (Reading, writing and arithmetic). Whilst the latter was designed to help bridge the gap in the manpower requirements needed to facilitate national socio-economic development, the former represented a paradigm shift in structure, content and methodology with emphasis placed much more on technical/vocational skill training and acquisition (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Osei, 2004), i.e. (training of the head, heart and hand). Indeed, there was a dire need for change as the 3-Rs curriculum which was essentially designed in line with colonial models and ideals was no longer relevant in modern era (Aryeetey, 2000). Tertiary institutions were compelled to churn out hundreds of thousands of graduates each year who had no guarantee of formal job employment (Armah, 2017; Osei, 2004). When the bells for change to the objective-based curriculum was sounded, it was meant to: evaluate learning outcomes over the short-term period (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002). But evaluating students' learning achievement over the short term rather than the long term had its flaws in terms of assessment, content and methodology (see figure 3). It will be injustice to leave it here without further and better elaboration.

### Determinants of Unemployment in Ghana



Figure 4. Rates of unemployment in Ghana, 1970 – 2010. Boateng, 2013.

In terms of pedagogical approach/methodology, the objective-based curriculum is teacher-centred (MOE, 2023). This means the teacher is seen as a highly resourceful person whose skills and competences must be high above that of her/his students so that he/she is best placed to dominate the classroom teaching and learning process in line with the Gold-sack Theory (IDCL, 2023). But it also means that students become passive listeners which has higher aggregate of creating boredom especially among gifted learners (MOE, 2023). Issues with the objective-based curriculum became increasingly grave with time more so with regards to content and assessment mode. With its summative assessment where basic level assessment is delayed until Basic 9 when the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) is conducted for placement into Senior High Schools (SHS), desperation for securing placement into category 'A' or 'B' schools soon gives rise for all manner of widespread.

cheating and exam malpractices during BECE. This has not only compromised standards for which the curriculum was established, but has also complicated national discourse in terms of what represent a hypothetical utopia in curriculum design for mother Ghana going forward.

With exam malpractices and cheating en masse most stakeholders soon resorted into teaching and learning of content for ‘grades’ rather than for skill or knowledge acquisition (Osei, 2004). Indeed, the Africa Education Watch – a key educational think-tank based in Accra, Ghana chronicles that some schools, teachers and parents have somehow collaborated to carry out this activity of exam malpractices. This makes it somewhat ‘an organised crime’. This status quo has in no doubt negatively affected the spirit and purpose of the objective-based curriculum, a situation that has made it to lose its impetus and spark through a combination of factors already seen. These factors are not only seen from the perspectives of a mere local resistance theory but a potential human-induced catastrophe – a situation that could have both national and international repercussions. Human-induced catastrophe because of the continued production of sub-standard human resource base especially felt across the education and health sectors. Thus, considering the inadequacies outlined of the objective-based curriculum, reasons for its continued existence became untenable in the eyes of many right-thinking Ghanaians. A change into something more appropriate in meeting modern societal standards became inevitable.

#### **4. THE NEW STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULUM**

Like the objective-based curriculum the new SHS standards-based curriculum is designed by NaCCA and is being implemented by teachers under the umbrella of GES (MOE, 2015 & 2023). It was first rolled out in 2019 at the basic level and is expected to be fully implemented at the SHS level by 2025 (MOE, 2023). Indeed, in-service training in the form of Professional Learning Community (PLC) is already underway to enable SHS level teachers acquire the skills and competences needed to fully implement the new curriculum.

Unlike the objective-based curriculum the new SHS standards-based curriculum is student-centred in subject matter, pedagogy and mode of assessment (MOE, 2023). Additionally, the new curriculum consciously integrates cross-cutting issues such as GESI, SEL, ICT and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and competences, along with national values in the teaching and learning process (MOE, 2023). For convenience and clarity’s sake, some of these cross-cutting issues will be delved into in a separate section later.

The subject matter or content in any curriculum refers to what is to be taught or studied by students in educational institutions (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Armah, 2017; IDCL, 2023). It is usually broken down into subjects and teachable units called syllabi (MOESS, 2007). In answering the question ‘what do teachers teach?’ or ‘what will students learn?’, you may be looking at English Language, Integrated Science or Geography, or even more specific topics or units in the individual subject areas (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; IDCL, 2022). The new standards-based curriculum is in this regard moving away from the status quo by introducing students to content that is relevant in meeting demands of the 21st century job market and global society (MOE, 2023; Armah, 2017). Students are expected to imbibe digital literacy skills, in addition to competences like communication skills, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking (MOE, 2023). To measure learning progress, a variety of assessment modes are spelled out viz: assessment as learning, assessment for learning, and assessment of learning. Thus, to ensure that the core principles of the new curriculum are imbibed by learners, both the formative and summative assessment modes are highlighted and emphasised in the teaching and learning process (MOE, 2023). But this is also significant for good reasons in that it reduces competition for good grades and its corresponding nefarious activities of exam malpractices and mass cheating for good grades during one final examination that typifies the objective-based curriculum.

Different content and assessment also mean that teachers will have to contend with changes in pedagogical approach (Monteiro, 2014; Akyeampong, 2003; MOE, 2015). The new standards-

based curriculum is student-centred and teachers are required to adopt suitable teaching methods, techniques or strategies of differentiation in guiding learners to learn efficiently (MOE, 2023; Monteiro, 2014). In addition to differentiation in the teaching process, national values like patience, integrity, honesty, among others are also expected to be imbibed by students (MOE, 2023). Although it is obvious that values are hardly taught in the context of lesson planning and delivery, teachers are expected to be driven by their professional values and practice to serve as guide and role models for students to emulate (MOE, 2023; Monteiro, 2014). Thus, a lot of confidence is reposed on the teacher to exhibit premium professional standards for a smooth implementation of the new SHS standards-based curriculum.

## **5. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND THE BIPOLAR GLOBAL PROBLEM**

As has been the norm over the years the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Ghana formulates educational policies and the Ghana Education Service (GES), along with other ancillary bodies earlier mentioned help to implement same (Armah, 2017). As a non-partisan state agency, the GES has carried out this mandate without any hint of fear or favour since its inception in the mid-1950s and their recalibration in 1974. But not anymore! The rise of certain political demagogues in our body political space has somewhat changed the narrative. Hitherto, appointments to top leadership positions had followed a traditional bottom-up approach which means one could literally ride on the wings of the scheme of service within the GES to get to the top (Education Act 2008). It also meant that top leadership positions in the GES was not in the menu of ‘jobs for party boys’ but had to be on merit for personnel within the service. And so, although the office of the Director General (head of the GES) for instance was an appointee by the president such an appointee must necessarily be an active servant within the service. This trend had been established. It had to be so as to maintain its integrity as a non-partisan state institution devoid of any political manipulation in terms of functions and personnel (Akyeampong, 2003).

However, as it is commonly said when a man decides to trade in human excreta, he must be prepared to accept criticism that his products stink. A top leadership appointment outside the status quo added to some suspect introduction of new content that not only deviates from past curricula subject matter but are also alien to our cultural standards and branded as ‘cross-cutting issues’ deserve further interrogation. Indeed, this proper interrogation will likely lead us to the discovery of the common truth that gender issues – as in what is considered natural and acceptable by Ghanaian/African cultural standards has been a matter of global and/or geo-political disagreement (Parliament of Ghana, 2024), i.e. what I term as The Bipolar Global Problem. But this problem deserves further elaboration.

Throughout antiquity, human existence had followed the trend of Charles Darwin’s hypothesis – ‘survival of the fittest’ (Ainger, 2004; Wolfe, 1997). In this analogy human existence is akin to a wild ecosystem where the strongest of animal species dominate over their less fancied fellows (Power, 2002; Eze, 1998). As a student of history, I have learnt of powerful nations including the Great Britain and how they rode on this hypothesis to impose their hegemony across people and places (Ainger, 2004; Wolfe, 1997). In modern era the narrative does not quite fit into this trend. Yet it is well documented that the global north (a league of elite wealthy nations with huge economic potential and power) tends to dominate in almost ubiquitous fashion over the global south (less developed countries) (Schuurman, 2001; Simon, 2006). This dominance has almost compelled southern countries into accepting even socio-economic and cultural spill over from their rather more illustrious peers who, in addition to their economic status, also use multi-lateral organizations (the World Bank and IMF inclusive) to influence and/or impose policies that are inimical to national interest of this less fancied nations (Potter et al, 2008; Binns, 1995a; Chandra, 1992). Thus, what our students are being made to study as subject matter (GESI, SEL, SEN, etc.) in the name of cross-cutting issues under the new SHS standards-based curriculum

could actually be a 'Trojan gift horse' that is imposed on us by these elite nations albeit so in a shrewd and crafty manner.

This hypothesis is without paranoia whatsoever. As part of the study, I set out to find the individuals or organizations who are pulling the strings from behind the scenes. And it was discovered that all activities leading to the design and implementation of this new SHS standards-based curriculum is sponsored but not limited to the Mastercard Foundation, T-TEL and Government of Ghana (GoG). Activities like printing of training materials for the Professional Learning Community (PLC), among others are covered by these sponsors (MOE, 2023). Without being overly inventive nor disrespectful of the works of these sponsors, it is obviously a lightwork to establish the connection between some of these sponsors to the global economic elites who could be championing the course of this so called 'human rights' discourse in our classrooms. It is said that nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction are useless in the total annihilation of a nation. Indeed, all that is required to destroy a nation is to mess up their cultural foundations including education and knowledge (Alonso, 1968).

To further make sense of these, it is okay for our students to learn about 21<sup>st</sup> century skills acquisition including digital literacy, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration or communication. Indeed, these skills and competences are sine qua none in putting our students in the mix of a competitive global job market (MOE, 2023). The Chinese and the Asian Tigers for instance have used this model to indelibly put themselves on the global map of industrialisation and economic prosperity (Chandra, 1992; Potter et al, 2008).

At the same time, it is definitely not okay when our children are being asked to study Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI), or Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Some hypothetical questions could be posed that: what indeed is so cross-cutting about gender; or what does the social inclusion element entail; are this content wholesome for our students; or are our psyche being prepared in advance to accept the practices or activities of LGBTQ in our classrooms and society by extension; or are teachers being forced to unconsciously implement what society abhors? Answers to some of these questions may vary depending upon which angle one is coming from, but obviously the GES is constitutionally mandated to help formulate and/or implement educational policies that ensure smooth development of our children at the pre-tertiary level (Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Education Act 2008). They must do so within the spirit and purpose of acceptable norms and practices recognised by Ghanaians and not toeing the lines of whimsical gains of any selfish individual or so called superfluous multi-lateral entities (Pearson, 2000). Asking the right questions regarding what is to be taught or learned in our classrooms under any new curriculum must be seen as astute contribution to maintaining societal or cultural standards and by extension promoting national development rather than a call for chaos. We must develop a questioning attitude as posited by the Socratic ideals.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As a developing country there is no question about where our hunger and desire lie in the quest to obtaining quality education to better participate in the global craze of creating development across space (Apter, 1987; Auty, 1993). In recent times however, the global rhetoric on what should be considered as key components of a country's development has shifted from economic indicators (GDP growth rate, inflation rate, unemployment rate, etc.) to a more realistic index (Human Development Index) (Sen, 2000; Potter et al, 2008). The introduction of the human development concept in the discourse of measuring development means that national governments including Ghana must strike a balance between creating macro-economic growth and stability, and promoting the well-being of its citizens (Barrett & Browne, 1995). This should be reflective in three key indices: Educational Attainment, Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), or

Life Expectancy (Blaike, 2000; Potter et al, 2008; Sen, 2000). Even more compelling is the fact that Ghana has subscribed to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of which SDG 4 demands that member countries put in measures to ensure equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNO, 2015).

The Government of Ghana and its ancillary agencies like GES or NaCCA must be guided by these international protocols of creating development viz-a-viz maintaining our core cultural values (Cohen & Hill, 2002). They must do this without losing their guard against deliberate but shrewd efforts by some of these international bodies infiltrating and corrupting our future in the name of aid or technical assistance. It is said that the ultimate educational goal should be to solve societal problems other than creating more of the same. GES and NaCCA owe Ghanaians more than diligence in ensuring that what is taught or learned in our schools is appropriate not only in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century global society but also meet our norms, customs, culture/traditions, religious and social standards.

Further studies are required to adequately establish the correlation between education and fallen socio-cultural standards across people and places in Ghana. This will be appropriate in putting experts in curriculum construction/design on alert to ensuring that educational content from other jurisdictions is not blindly adopted and implemented in Ghana as doing same could be a recipe for disaster in the long term.

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