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Articles

Youth's Perspectives of Ghana's Education System: Implications for Educational Policy Formulation

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Abstract

This study investigated Ghanaian youth's perceptions of the purpose, learning environment, and pedagogical effectiveness of their education system. Employing a robust concurrent mixed-methods design, data were collected from 1,451 Junior/Senior High School students via surveys and from 120 in-school and out-of-school youth through focus group discussions across Ghana's diverse ecological zones. Findings reveal youth profoundly value education for future employment, leadership, and societal contribution, yet identify a significant disparity between these aspirations and the system's current theoretical, exam-oriented focus. While physical environments are generally perceived as conducive, qualitative insights highlight pervasive resource deficiencies, notably in laboratories and technology. Despite high confidence in teacher competence, traditional pedagogies, often constrained by resource scarcity, impede the acquisition of practical skills. The study underscores an urgent need for targeted educational interventions that bridge this gap, fostering practical, skill-based learning and genuinely integrating youth perspectives into policy and practice.

Keywords: 21st-Century Skills, Educational Outcome, Ghana, Mixed Methods, Schooling, Youth Participation.

1. Introduction

Globally, education is unequivocally recognised as a critical driver of national development, moulding human capital and equipping individuals with the requisite competencies for personal and societal transformation (Ghouse et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023). This understanding is clearly articulated in Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In alignment with this global educational framework, Ghana has implemented numerous

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educational policies, with the recent Free SHS policy aimed at improving access, equity, and the quality of educational outcomes (David, Andrews, 2022). This policy has increased enrollment rates, but quality outcomes have remained wanting. While youth constitute the majority of education beneficiaries, their involvement in policy and operational discourses concerning their education and training is often overlooked or not readily accessible for public scrutiny (Gupta et al., 2025; Hlungwani et al., 2021; Sanny et al., 2023). This issue is particularly pressing in many African contexts, including Ghana, where top-down policy formulation often prevails (Ampah-Mensah et al., 2024).

Youth appreciation of the educational system is essential because their viewpoints are shaped directly by firsthand experiences, and they are more likely to be influenced by their holistic involvement in learning. The relevance of policy, content, and delivery is hinged on the voices behind them. Theoretically, Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961)'s human capital theory, which posits that investment in human capital enhances an individual's productivity, contributing to economic growth and societal welfare, clearly establishes the general utilitarian value of education. Translating this into the classroom, Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy theory advances approaches that utilise education as a tool to empower learners with the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate societal transformation. Research consistently demonstrates that a supportive educational system focused on creating future economic opportunities for youth positively influences their engagement and satisfaction with the system (Lambon-Quayefio et al., 2023; Prodanova, Kocarev, 2023). Consequently, it stands to reason that if youth feel connected to their education system and if educational policies are in sync with learners' aspirations, addressing their current needs while empowering and preparing them for future opportunities, students are more likely to participate actively in the learning process.

Despite the wide availability of information in the current digital and artificial intelligence (AI) era, which offers numerous avenues for reaching out to young people, many remain disengaged from the policy formulation and implementation processes that shape their education (Vetrivel et al., 2024). Manu et al. (2024) suggested that a technological revolution might lead to meaningful youth engagement in educational policy formulation in Ghana. However, Ampah-Mensah et al. (2024) indicated that the prevailing old system, characterised by a top-down approach in which educational policies emanate from bureaucratic structures at the top of the hierarchy, still suppresses the invaluable contributions of youth. Undoubtedly, an educational system that disregards the voices of its primary stakeholders is prone to failure, as it may fail to align with future global trends and realities. Rodrick (2024) argued that limited youth participation in policy processes and procedures could lead not only to apathy but also to the underutilization of educational resources, thereby widening the lacuna between policy goals and desired educational outcomes.

Empirical literature indicates several hindrances to educational effectiveness in Ghana, including inadequate infrastructure, teacher attrition, insufficient attention to practical and technical education, and a mismatch between the curriculum and labour market demands (Addae-Kyeremeh, Boateng, 2024; Antwi-Boampong, 2024; Awuah, 2024). These challenges, recounted by practitioners – i.e., faculty and teacher trainees – were not adequately addressed in the new curriculum, nor in individual studies, and failed to capture the voices of learners in general (Addae-Kyeremeh, Boateng, 2024; Antwi-Boampong, 2024; Awuah, 2024). Moreover, each of these studies focused on a specific level of Ghana's education system without examining learners' experiences across different levels within the same system. This creates a gap in how the affected, i.e., learners, experience the education offered and how they perceive it in fulfilling its utilitarian and empowering roles, both presently and in the future. To this end, this study aimed to understand the perspectives of Ghanaian youth on their overall educational experience, from primary to tertiary level. Particular interest is given to the school environment and the pedagogic experiences of the student youth. The insights gained were intended to serve as prima facie evidence for policymakers to target educational interventions that are directly responsive to the needs and aspirations of the youth. The research question guiding the course of the study is: "What perspectives have youth formed regarding schooling and the pedagogical environment within which they access schools in Ghana's education system?"

2. Literature Review

This study is fundamentally grounded in the theoretical frameworks of human capital theory and critical pedagogy, which offer valuable lenses through which to examine Ghana's youth engagement in their schooling. Human capital theory, pioneered by economists such as Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), posits that educational investments enhance individuals' productivity, thereby contributing to economic growth and societal well-being. This perspective is particularly relevant to Ghana's context, where policies such as the Free Senior High School (SHS) initiative aim to enhance access, equity, and educational quality (David, Andrews, 2022). By improving educational outcomes, these policies seek to develop the human capital of Ghana's youth, equipping them with the skills and competencies necessary for personal and national development. The extent to which youth in Ghana perceive these policies as aligned with their needs and aspirations is crucial, as their perceptions can significantly influence their engagement, academic performance, and contributions to society.

Critical pedagogy, as advanced by Freire (1970), provides a complementary lens by emphasising the transformative potential of education. This theory views education as a tool for empowerment, social justice, and challenging oppressive structures. In applying critical pedagogy to the context of Ghana, one would seek to explore how the nation's education system empowers or disempowers youth in general. More critically, it examines the extent to which the education system transitions youth into functioning adults who are responsible and contribute to meaningful national development through the skills and knowledge they acquired during schooling. The prospects of education are not evident only at post-completion, but also during the period of schooling, making the learner's perspectives critical to the schooling process. It is to this that Anyidoho et al. (2012) argued that policies that do not adequately consider the perspectives of young people can be less impactful and may not effectively address their needs. Therefore, understanding youth perceptions is crucial for ensuring that educational policies are relevant, responsive, and empowering, ultimately fostering greater engagement and ownership of the learning process among young people in Ghana.

Integrating human capital theory and critical pedagogy provides a robust theoretical framework for this study. While human capital theory emphasises the importance of education in developing a productive workforce and driving economic growth, critical pedagogy underscores the need for education to be empowering, equitable, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of young people. This dual perspective aligns with the study's aim to assess the perspectives of youth on the schooling they access in Ghana's education system and to advocate for their voices to be central in educational policy formulation. By prioritising youth participation, this research seeks to bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical educational outcomes, contributing to a more agile and focused education system in Ghana.

The essence of youth engagement in public policy formulation and implementation is widely recognised. Policy credibility is predicated on the involvement of all relevant stakeholders from the inception of policy framework formulation to its implementation and institutionalisation. Flodgren et al. (2024) suggest that youth involvement in policy formulation enhances democratic practices and promotes the development of young people. However, they found that the extent of youth involvement in policy formulation is often unknown, highlighting inadequate deliberate efforts to bring youth to the policy table.

Aman (2021) critically analysed the policy formulation and implementation of the Ethiopian Youth policy. The analysis focused on enabling legislative instruments, organisational structure, and processes. It concluded that the policy document failed to provide for youth inclusion in decision-making procedures for policy implementation. Evidence suggests that youth participation is a valuable tool for encouraging young people to engage in public life and contribute to development. Borodin and Kalashnyk (2020) emphasise the role of youth participation as a public policy instrument in Ukraine. Similarly, studies across contexts, such as those by Shafique (2024) in Pakistan and Boldt et al. (2021) in Europe, highlight a positive correlation between meaningful youth engagement and the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policies.

Challenges of youth involvement in policy formulation and implementation. In Nwafor-Orizu et al.'s (2018) study, intolerance and conflict, corruption, strong individual factors, inadequate resources, broad policy scope, and continuity deficiency problems emerged as critical hindrances to youth participation in policy formulation and implementation. To mitigate these challenges, the

researchers proposed, among others, citizenry orientation, sensitisation, and ideological social engineering to correct misconceptions among the youth. They also suggested that policy continuation should be encouraged without recourse to partisan politics. In another study by Titigah et al. (2023), political polarisation and the lack of formalised channels were highlighted as barriers to youth voice in Ghana's educational reforms. The importance of participatory actions in promoting the educational outcomes of youth, as asserted by Ahmad and Islam (2024), is indisputable if Ghana's Education Strategic Plan (2018-2030) are to be achieved (Abreh, 2025).

3. Methods

Research Design

This study employs a concurrent mixed-methods design, which involves the simultaneous gathering of quantitative and qualitative data (Deshmukh, Cornman-Homonoff, 2023). This dual approach was chosen for its strength in providing an understanding that has both depth and breadth of the issue under discussion (Deshmukh, Cornman-Homonoff, 2023; Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2024), allowing for a comprehensive analysis and the formulation of well-informed recommendations for educational policymaking.

Study Setting and Participants

Considering Ghana's diverse ecological landscape, the study drew participants from its three distinct zones: Savannah, Forest, and Coastal. A multi-stage, stratified purposive sampling approach was utilised to select two municipalities within each zone. From each municipality, three schools and one focus group of out-of-school youth were chosen. Participants for the qualitative focus groups included a purposive sample of Junior High Schools (JHS), SHS, and out-of-school youth to capture varied experiences. Schools were selected from three levels of schooling: JHS representing the basic level, SHS representing the secondary level, and out-of-school youth (recent tertiary graduates currently engaged in national service). The target population comprised youth enrolled in JHS and SHS, and those undertaking national service. This geographical spread and the selected levels ensured that regional differences and commonalities in the educational experiences of the target population were captured. The three key demographic groups targeted in this study typify the three levels of Ghana's school-going age youth, namely, 13-15 years (JHS), 16-18 years (SHS), and 19-22 years (tertiary graduates). This allowed for insights into experienced events, both current and future, of schooling, as well as the applicability of content learned in school to work engagement.

In summary, a more detailed description of the participants' demographic characteristics is provided, explicitly mentioning the age ranges for JHS, SHS, and tertiary graduates, as well as the geographical spread across Ghana's ecological zones. Additionally, confirmation of gender balance in the sampling is noted (See the distribution in Table 1).

The study's participant demographics reveal a well-distributed sample across educational levels and geographical regions in Ghana. The JHS and SHS students were surveyed, with JHS showing slightly higher female representation and SHS showing slightly higher male representation. Critically, student participation was notably balanced across the Coastal, Forest, and Savannah zones for both educational stages. Age-wise, the JHS group primarily consisted of younger adolescents, while the SHS cohort largely comprised older teenagers, reflecting the typical age progression through Ghana's secondary education system.

The out-of-school youth participants, comprising recent tertiary graduates, were a diverse group of 120 individuals. Of this qualitative sample, 58 (48.3 %) were female and 62 (51.7 %) were male, ensuring a close gender balance. Their ages ranged from 19 to 24, with a mean age of 20.5 years. The group was purposively sampled from all three ecological zones to capture a broad range of post-secondary experiences and to provide regional perspectives on the link between education and employment.

Ethical Considerations

The study has been framed and implemented within the remit of an ethically sound ethos, and consistent with national research protocols for pre-tertiary institutions in Ghana. Approval for this study was obtained from the Ghana Education Service, as per GES/DG/247336/24/037, on January 16, 2024. All participants provided informed consent prior to the collection of data. For participants under 18 years of age, guardian consent was obtained, in addition to the assent of

the minors themselves. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Table 1. Distribution of youth participants by demographics and schooling level

Variable	Category	Level of Education			
		JHS		SHS	
		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	554	57.3 %	224	46.4 %
	Male	409	42.2 %	258	53.4 %
	Total	**968**	**100.0 %**	**483**	**100.0 %**
Zone	Coastal	322	33.2 %	159	32.9 %
	Forest	323	33.4 %	162	33.5 %
	Savannah	321	33.2 %	161	33.3 %
	Total	**968**	**100.0 %**	**483**	**100.0 %**
Age Group	12 and below	19	2.0 %		
	13–15	737	76.1 %		
	16–18	185	19.2 %		
	18+	27	2.7 %		
	Total	**968**	**100.0%**		
	15 and below			10	2.0 %
	16–18			379	78.5 %
	19–21			84	17.5 %
	21+			10	2.0 %
	Total			**483**	**100.0 %**

Sampling and Data Collection

The quantitative approach utilised surveys administered to 968 JHS students and 483 SHS students, resulting in a total of 1,451 student participants. The qualitative approach, involving focus group discussions (FGDs), engaged 120 youth comprising a purposive sample of in-school [made up of JHS students {sample size of 48 with 3 FGDs per zone}, SHS students {sample size of 48 with 3 FGDs per zone}, and out-of-school {sample size of 24 with an FGD per zone} (Sarfo et al., 2021). This sample size was carefully determined to ensure statistical validity for the quantitative data while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis. Although gender was not a primary focus, meticulous effort was made to ensure gender balance in the sampling of respondents, thereby reflecting the diverse experiences of students.

The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to capture a wide range of data points on perceptions of the education system's purpose, the conduciveness of the learning environment, and pedagogical effectiveness. The questionnaire was developed based on the study's research question and objectives, drawing insights from existing literature on youth education and policy. Focus group discussions were employed to delve deeper into emerging and questionable themes identified from the survey data, allowing participants to share personal experiences, nuanced opinions, and collective perspectives in a more conversational and interactive setting. Focus group discussions were employed with a subset of both in-school and out-of-school youth to delve deeper into emerging and questionable themes identified from the survey data, allowing participants to share personal experiences, nuanced opinions, and collective perspectives in a more conversational and interactive setting. A semi-structured discussion guide was used to facilitate these discussions, ensuring consistency across groups while allowing new themes to emerge.

Data collection was carried out by a team of trained research assistants between February and March 2024. They utilised digital tools for efficient data recording, following a structured protocol to ensure consistency and accuracy. All data was securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Collected data underwent rigorous analysis. Quantitative survey data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25 for Mac, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify patterns and trends in youth perceptions (Abreh, 2015; Loeb et al., 2017). Qualitative FGD data were subjected to thematic analysis. This involved transcribing the discussions, coding the data, and identifying recurring themes and patterns related to youth experiences and perspectives on schooling. To maintain the zonal identities of the data, pseudonyms were used to delineate the sources by their categories as references for quotes. For example, the first basic school selected in this study for the FGD in the Forest zone is given the pseudonym, Forest JHS 1. This comprehensive approach enabled the identification of statistical patterns and trends, alongside rich and unique insights, considered essential to understanding the multifaceted perspectives of youth and to informing robust policy recommendations. To validate the findings from the data, a stakeholder workshop was held that brought together young people, government representatives, and other stakeholders to confirm the experiences and expectations of the youth.

4. Results

This section presents the study's results and findings from the data gathered through surveys and focus group discussions, addressing the research question: "What perspectives have youth formed regarding schooling and the pedagogical environment within which they access schools in Ghana's education system?" The objectives were to assess the perceived strengths of the educational system, the challenges hindering it, and proposed strategies for mitigating these challenges. Through the lens of youth's lived experiences of schooling in Ghana, two overarching themes emerged from the data: youth's perspectives on schooling in Ghana and the conduciveness of the school environment to attain their schooling aspirations. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, the following section aligns the supporting themes with their related major themes. Representative examples and quotations are provided, where necessary, to illustrate the respondents' voices.

Youth Perspectives on Schooling in Ghana

The data categorise the youth's perspectives on schooling in Ghana under two main sub-themes: the purpose of schooling and participation in schooling. According to the survey, 95 % of the SHS student respondents indicated that their schooling aims to produce future leaders (60 %), prepare children for the world (28 %), and primarily create an environment for learning (7 %).

Data from the FGD revealed more diverse perspectives on schooling by the different categories of respondents. From the basic education level, respondents perceive the purpose of schooling to include a space to "*... explore individual talents*" (Coastal JHS 1, March 2024) and to develop assertiveness and discipline among learners. Respondents from the SHS perceived the central purpose of schooling in Ghana as a platform for acquiring essential skills that would prepare them for work and enable them to assume leadership positions for social change and transformation. For instance, with a pointer to leadership, one of the students indicated, "*I want to become the president of the country, and for the country to develop, I have learnt about natural resources and how to use them...*" (Savannah SHS 1, March 2024). This view represents a realistic, purpose-driven perspective on schooling. Similarly, another student indicated "*to gain leadership skills*" (Coastal JHS 2, March 2024). The out-of-school youth, as recent tertiary graduates, confirmed the views of the SHS respondents, indicating that education helps them acquire specific professional skills, such as mechanical engineering, agriculture, and teaching, to increase their chances of being gainfully employed and of impacting society.

Some contradictions, however, were expressed regarding the opportunities that schooling in Ghana offers. According to some youth, Ghana's educational system offers *"... a lot of subjects to allow students to identify their talents*" (Coastal SHS 2, March 2024); yet for its thick theoretical leaning, the nation's "*... educational system is*", considered as, "*restricting, without making room for students to explore their talents*" (Forest SHS 2, March 2024). According to one FGD, schooling in Ghana is "*Bad ...*" since "*there is less research on the part of the learners*" *(Coastal JHS 2, March 2024).* From this thick-theoretical impression, participants in the FGDs contended that "Ghana's {educational} system categorises {prioritises} intelligence {cognitive skills} (Savannah SHS 1, March 2024); thus, the concern that Ghana's "Education is just trying to train people to

become lawyers, doctors without making any efforts to develop technical and vocational skills" (Coastal SHS 2, March 2024). This fixation to train students for the academically traditional professions impressed some students to find schooling in Ghana to be "*Both inspiring and boring with little focus on creating a future*", meaning a lack of interest in developing a variety of possible futures that include the practically oriented trajectories. In fact, the emphasis on some courses has resulted in "*Some people looking down on the courses pursued by some students*" (Savannah SHS 2, March 2024). Quantitatively, the curriculum was considered "very relevant" by 48.13 %, 20.86 %, and 20.75 % of respondents from the Coastal, Forest, and Savannah zones, respectively. Deviating slightly from the focus of schooling, one FGD asserted that Ghana's "schools are biased toward girls and give them too many preferences" (Forest SHS 2, March 2024).

Youth's Perspectives on the Conduciveness of the Environment for Schooling

Under this central theme of the conduciveness of the environment, the paper addresses the issue from two sub-levels: the physical environment, including teaching and learning resources, and the responsiveness of teachers' pedagogical skills to students' needs. First, regarding the physical or built environment, the students' feedback is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Perception of school environment conduciveness for teaching and learning

Response	Student Category	
	JHS	SHS
Very conducive	63 %	54 %
Conducive	27 %	35 %
Not conducive	5 %	9 %
Not sure	5 %	2 %

Quantitatively, more than 50 % of the respondents from both JHS and SHS agreed that a very conducive schooling environment exists. However, further analysis revealed that these learning environments are deeply constricted in resources and the prevalence of traditional learning approaches.

As the major human resource responsible for delivering the curriculum content, the adequacy of the number of teachers and the responsiveness of their pedagogical skills to the students' educational needs were two major issues raised regarding the sufficiency of resources. The outlook on the issue from a country-level perspective revealed that more than half of the respondents, notably 70 % from the Savannah, 61 % from the Coastal, and 56 % from the Forest zones, reported inadequate teaching staffing. Relatedly, youth participants believed their teachers possessed the necessary skills to execute their teaching tasks effectively. This is evident, for example, in the fact that the majority (83 %) of JHS respondents found the pedagogical skills of their teachers to be "very appropriate." Very few respondents found their teacher's teaching either "not appropriate" (1 %) or "not sure" (1 %).

This confidence in teachers' pedagogical skills was also confirmed in the FGDs, where one group expressed that their teachers are "... well trained and they teach us many things ...they are our role models (Coastal JHS 4, March 2024). Similarly, another group said, "teachers help to teach to the understanding of all. Teachers have made us great. We have met very nice teachers who have greatly impacted our educational journey and experiences" (Coastal JHS 3, March 2024). A downside in students' experiences with teachers was that respondents reported other teacher-related issues, including 16 % teacher absenteeism, 15 % insufficient teacher numbers, and 14 % inadequate contact hours. For FGD, however, "... some teachers have not lived up to expectations and they can beat us too much" (Coastal JHS 3, March 2024). The out-of-school youths generally agreed with these findings (*Coastal/Forest/Savannah NSS FGD, March 2024)*

The staffing of teachers was not the only limitation experienced by the youths, but also the requisite teaching and learning resources for effective lesson delivery. According to the survey, 67 % of the youth indicated that insufficient resources were a major problem that confronted Ghana's school system. In confirmation, the FGDs revealed different ways the school environment faced resource scarcity. From one of the FGDs, the youth articulated that "*our greatest challenge is insufficient learning resources*" *(Forest JHS 1, March 2024)*. Giving a breakdown, one FGD group

expressed that the insufficient resources they cry about include *"... textbooks, no science and ICT Laboratories, etc." (Coastal JHS 4, March 2024)*; and *"... certain facilities such as libraries in our school" (Forest JHS 2, March 2024)*. Students in the Savannah zone specifically viewed these inadequate resources as a result of parents' inability to provide basic needs, such as textbooks, exercise books, and notebooks.

The effects of this shortage are enormous, as its ripple effects have been experienced in diverse aspects of the youth's schooling experiences. Within the space of pedagogy, it emerged strongly from the FGD sessions that teachers adopt teacher-centred approaches, which are characteristically more lecturing than practice-oriented or interactive and are often thick in theory rather than applications. For instance, discussants from one of the FGDs revealed, "*Teaching and learning is teacher-centred. Our learning process is also theoretical all the time. We do not have more practical sessions during learning" (Forest JHS 3, March 2024)*. This creates "*the monotonous ways of teaching make learning theory-based and stressful, and I wondered whether specific courses were needed in the first place*". There is an excessive amount of theory-based content with a minimal practical component. The out-of-school youths could confirm that (*Forest NSS FGD, March 2024)*

"The education system is more knowledge-based (typical of memorisation and recall strategies) than skill-based" (Coastal SHS 1, March 2024). From the quote, the overutilization of the teacher-centred approach creates a monotony that makes the teaching and learning process boring, and in some cases, fails to establish the significance of certain course content; thus, the FGD participants' questioning of the need for some courses. Content-wise, it also emerged from the FGD with the SHS that the *"... practical component of courses is too small (Coastal SHS 2, March 2024)*. Buttressing the stress on theories, it was expressed in one FGD that *"... my program is vocational and technical, which is supposed to be purely practical oriented. In General Science, the teaching is the same, and practical work is limited. We don't have the practical materials to work with, and we have not been to the lab before; everything is book..." (Forest SHS 2, March 2024)*. Significantly, the non-practicality of schooling in Ghana is not limited only to the pedagogic stage, but according to one FGD, even "*Final examination is not practically based. Practical questions are set on paper for students to answer instead of doing the real experiments" (JHS FGD, March 2024)*.

Regardless, the FGD expressed that participants, *"said get good grades but they are not fully prepared for the real world" (Forest SHS 1, March 2024)*. This depicts either a lack of relevance of content to the real world or a lack of depth in schooling to translate into the real-world situation. In fact, another FGD response said, "*Education in Ghana is just exams oriented and does not create the platform for us to exhibit any practical skills. It also all about theory and not focusing on acquisition of skills. It's just chew and reproduce" (Forest JHS 4, 2024)*. This second quote reveals a situation of students lacking depth in content in terms of applicability rather than relevance of content, thus, 'chewing to pass exams and forget'. In terms of literacy, the same FGD revealed that the absence of practicals, "*has affected our spelling abilities" (Forest JHS 4, March 2024)*.

As an intervention to the limited opportunity for practical-based teaching, youth participants from both JHS and SHS levels indicated the desire for more take-home assignments from teachers. As illustrated by 99 % of JHS respondents, who indicated that teachers' pedagogical skills are "appropriate" or "very appropriate," students strongly desire teacher assessments through homework or project work to allow exposure to a variety of engaging ways to acquire multiple skills and capabilities.

Despite the challenges and issues raised regarding the schooling of youth respondents, the participants were not unaware of the benefits of schooling, even at the various stages they found themselves in. Health-wise, two FGD acknowledgements were made on "*personal hygiene" (SHS, 2024)*; and due to having *"... health information, so I eat better and can perform CPR accurately" (Coastal SHS 1, March 2024),* and "... administer first aid" (Coastal JHS 4, March 2024). In terms of literacy, communication, and presentation, "*Knowledge in Fante {L1} language ... helps me to communicate orally and in writing well" (Coastal JHS 1, March 2024)*. The out-of-school youth FGD group also asserted, "*We can write letters to seek employment and other forms of writing" (Savannah NSS FGD, March 2024)*, just as another out-of-school youth FGD expressed that, "*Good communication skills, public speaking skills, self-confidence,*

cooking skills improved, time management improved, roles and responsibilities of a citizen. How to create your own business, printing of T-shirts, designing of books, making of batik tie and dye" (Coastal NSS FGD, March 2024).

In terms of numeracy, SHS youths indicated that they had developed the ability to calculate mathematical concepts, basic accounting principles, and acquired art skills (Savannah SHS, 2024). For science, vocational, and technical subjects, some knowledge and skills that youths expressed they have gained from schooling and are currently applying include "*rearing of animals learnt in science and how to administer first aid" (Forest SHS 2).* For others, the skills include sewing, using technological devices, electricity, and animal husbandry, which are learned in science. In one example, the youth FGD asserted that, "*Mathematics has helped us to produce robots, cars, etc." (Coastal SHS 2, March 2024).* Socially, the host of values and attitudes youths referenced as having acquired from Ghana's schooling system included self-examination, tolerance, teamwork, creativity, hard work, time management, comportment, punctuality, and the ability to resolve conflicts.

With such gains already made, respondents expressed high confidence in the schooling they were receiving or had received. This is apparent as 99 % of SHS students expressed confidence in the education system. Specifically, 98 % indicated that they were "confident," with 2 % indicating "very confident" in the schooling they accessed in Ghana. One percent of the respondents, however, indicated that they were either "not confident" or "not sure" about their schooling in Ghana.

The findings reveal a wide range of perspectives, representing both positive and negative opinions and experiences, ascribed by youths on schooling in Ghana and the conduciveness of the environment for effective schooling. The data, however, revealed either stronger or overwhelming biases toward the positives, indicating that, regardless of the negatives, the youth do not entirely find their education irrelevant. With the identification of benefits from the school system at their various stages, the youth definitely find prospects in their schooling. However, this does not imply that they are oblivious to challenges that, in their estimation, would have widened and diversified their opportunities.

5. Discussion

The overall purpose of education in Ghana, as perceived by the youth, is to produce responsible, aspiring individuals for work and leadership positions, and to prepare them for the world. Without resorting to the instrumental view of attending school to satisfy their parents and guardians, youth actively expressed their perspectives, reflecting their participation in education as well as the constricted prospects they are likely to confront in the future. Indeed, without losing sight of the ideals of employment, civic responsibility, and leadership in the country, the youth's accounts also echo cries to be saved from a potential future that could be foiled by not being heard and taking the necessary action immediately. The active expression of youth's understanding of the overall purpose of their education, vis-à-vis the ideal output/outcomes within the constricted schooling spaces, reveals a profound sense of readiness and capability essential for meaningful engagements in decisions that shape their lives and their country's future. Without much ado, policymakers and implementers are therefore presented with willing youth who seek to offer their experiences as direct beneficiaries of schooling in Ghana for the necessary interventions.

The positive perception of the environment's conduciveness suggests a generally positive outlook on Ghana's schooling environment. However, the issue of resource constraints, as experienced by the youth, was not addressed in their responses. Resonating with Prodanova and Kocarev's (2023) argument that a supportive system focused on creating more future economic opportunities for youth directly impacts their engagement and satisfaction with the education system, the place of adequate teaching and learning resources cannot be overlooked. A conducive environment possessing the requisite attributes – both physical, psychological, and emotional – promises to boost youth confidence and active participation in their education and other engagements. This aligns with Abreh (2025) and Ahmad and Islam's (2024) support for participatory development theories that not only emphasise pleasant physical spaces, but genuine inclusion and empowerment. From the findings, however, environments perceived as positive often presented deeper issues regarding resource constraints, which could be detrimental to future opportunities. A major implication here is that the government, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, including the youth, must explore avenues to ensure the sustainable provision of educational resources across all levels of Ghana's schooling system.

Despite the positive perceptions of teachers' pedagogic prowess, the observed lack of practical application points to a system-level challenge related to curricular design and implementation, which highlights, among others, issues of time and physical space, as well as the availability and usage of teaching and learning resources in places where they are available. Interventions specifically targeted at addressing issues related to teaching and learning resources can resolve the disparities highlighted by Baffoe et al. (2021) and Ewulley et al. (2023) in terms of supplies and usage between urban and rural contexts. Further in the findings, the compelling matter is the formed mindset of both school service providers and students, focusing on passing examinations, after which the redundancy or lack of usage of knowledge and skills is left with the learner. Either by intention or not, the youth are convinced that the absence of teaching and learning resources is a major rationale for the examination-focused approach by schools.

The insights from the out-of-school youth group, in particular, highlight the profound impact of this theory-practice gap. The assertion that even schools with resources do not see teachers utilising them further questions the seriousness with which school authorities relate the content to real-life situations, and by extension, helps students connect more with the content. A school system that seems to have lost this sense of duty, however, is enrolled with students who are very much aware of and desire the ideal. Out-of-school youth who find themselves at the end of the continuum, fortunately, find a linkage between their schooling and their work, although they express that their schooling could have offered them more. Such benefits in schooling were not lost to youths at the JHS and SHS levels, for even what they can currently do. Yet, it was overwhelmingly clear that there was more in the youth; they felt their schools could have unearthed and developed if practical components were equally attended to.

In conclusion, youth in schools in Ghana currently perceive their education provision as a mixed bag of foundational awareness and aspirational purpose, although fundamentally hampered by resource deficits that dictate the theoretically laden pedagogic approaches. This failure in the environment, however, has not quenched the fire in the youth, as they remain hopeful and, with the help of their teachers, strive for higher aspirations. Bridging the gaps highlighted in the findings would require concerted efforts, but not without the youth, who can best express, beyond examination results, their experiences and the extent to which interventions are responsive to their needs.

6. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths of the Study

This study makes several significant contributions. Firstly, its concurrent mixed-methods design offers a robust and comprehensive understanding of youth perceptions, combining the breadth of quantitative survey data with the depth of qualitative focus group discussions. This triangulation of data sources enhances the validity and richness of the findings. Secondly, the study's focus on youth voices is a critical strength, as this demographic is often underrepresented in educational policy discourse, particularly in African contexts. By prioritising their perspectives, including those of recent tertiary graduates, the research provides direct, lived experiences that are invaluable for informing relevant and responsive policy reforms. Thirdly, the wide geographical spread across Ghana's diverse ecological zones (Savannah, Forest, and Coastal) and the inclusion of participants from different educational levels (JHS, SHS, and out-of-school youth/tertiary graduates) ensure a more representative understanding of youth experiences nationwide, capturing both regional specificities and commonalities. Finally, the stakeholder validation workshop, held after data analysis, further strengthens the credibility of the findings by involving key actors – including the youth themselves – in confirming the experiences and expectations reported.

Limitations of the Study

While valuable, the study has certain limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time, preventing causal inferences or the tracking of longitudinal changes in youth perspectives over time. Future research employing longitudinal designs could provide deeper insights into the evolution of these perceptions. Secondly, while the mixed-methods approach offers depth, the specific sample selection means the findings, though regionally diverse, may not be fully generalizable to all diverse youth experiences across Ghana, especially those in highly remote or specialised educational settings not covered. Future research should consider

broader stakeholder engagement beyond youth for an even more comprehensive understanding of the educational system's challenges and opportunities.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study reveals the complex and often contradictory perceptions of Ghanaian youth regarding their national education system. While they hold profound aspirations for education to serve as a transformative force for personal advancement, securing future employment, and contributing to national development, their lived experiences are significantly shaped by a system perceived as fundamentally theoretical and constrained by pervasive resource deficits. This persistent disjuncture between aspirational purpose and current practice represents a critical challenge, diminishing the system's effectiveness in preparing them for the demands of the 21st century.

The findings unequivocally underscore the urgent imperative for policymakers to genuinely incorporate learners' direct insights and perspectives, moving beyond mere quantitative metrics to truly understand the impact and responsiveness of educational interventions. Without this critical feedback loop, Ghana risks perpetuating an educational model misaligned with the very future it aims to build. Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are put forth for consideration by policymakers and educational stakeholders in Ghana:

Curricular Overhaul for Practical Skill Integration: A fundamental overhaul of the existing curriculum is unequivocally recommended to bridge the identified purpose-practice gap. This transformation must extend beyond superficial updates, focusing instead on a comprehensive framework that rigorously integrates practical, vocational, and essential life skills across all learning stages. Such curricular reform should prioritise experiential and project-based learning, foster critical thinking, and encourage problem-solving abilities, thereby directly aligning educational outcomes with the dynamic demands of both local and global labour markets. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships with industry and vocational training institutions could provide invaluable real-world exposure, ensuring the curriculum remains relevant to Ghana's evolving economic landscape and empowering youth to pursue entrepreneurship and innovation.

Equitable Investment in Educational Infrastructure and Resources: Addressing the severe environmental constraints is equally vital for fostering a truly effective learning ecosystem. Despite youth's general perception of school environments as conducive, qualitative data consistently highlight critical shortages in essential learning resources, notably modern science and ICT laboratories, adequate libraries, and up-to-date teaching materials. This pervasive scarcity directly limits hands-on learning experiences and hinders the development of digital literacy, thereby perpetuating a reliance on theoretical instruction. Therefore, substantial and equitable investment in educational infrastructure is paramount at all levels of schooling and across all geographical zones. Strategic public-private partnerships should be actively pursued to ensure the consistent provision and sustainable maintenance of these vital resources, creating genuinely conducive and stimulating learning environments for every Ghanaian student.

Enhancing Teacher Pedagogical Approaches: While teachers are widely recognised for their inherent pedagogical skills, the study reveals a persistent reliance on traditional, teacher-centred methodologies, often a practical consequence of large class sizes, limited resources, and an examination-driven culture. To counteract this, comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs for teacher educators are crucial. These initiatives must transcend one-off workshops, focusing on equipping educators with modern, student-centred, and technology-integrated pedagogies, such as inquiry-based learning, collaborative projects, and blended instruction. Empowering teachers with these skills will enable them to utilise available resources creatively, foster deeper student engagement, cultivate critical thinking, and transition learning beyond rote memorisation, thereby transforming classroom dynamics and improving educational outcomes.

Institutionalising Meaningful Youth Participation: Crucially, the documented limited youth participation in the very policy processes that shape their education signifies a substantial missed opportunity for genuine reform. Despite the vast potential of the digital age for inclusive engagement, youth voices remain largely unheard or unheeded in the policy formulation and implementation process. To foster a truly responsive and effective education system, it is imperative to establish precise, formalised, and accessible channels for meaningful youth involvement. This includes creating youth advisory councils, implementing digital feedback

platforms, conducting youth-specific town halls, and integrating student representation at various levels of educational governance, thereby enhancing policy relevance, securing greater buy-in, and nurturing active civic participation.

In essence, the study's findings collectively necessitate a systemic and holistic transformation of Ghana's education landscape. This monumental endeavour demands a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort – involving government, educators, communities, industry, and critically, the youth themselves– to fundamentally redesign curriculum, bolster resources equitably, revolutionise pedagogical approaches, and institutionalise genuine youth participation at every level. By proactively addressing these identified gaps and placing the aspirations and lived experiences of its young population at the very core of educational reform, Ghana can cultivate a more dynamic, relevant, and globally competitive education system, thereby unlocking the full potential of its human capital for sustainable national development and a prosperous future.

8. Declaration

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ghana Education Service, as per GES/DG/247336/24/037, on January 16, 2024 and the study was conducted in accordance with the (1) Code of Conduct: *Principles for integrity – the underlying ethics for achieving our goals,* and (2) *Child Protection Guidelines of the Fondation Botnar.*

Consent for publication

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. For participants under 18 years, informed consent was obtained from their legal guardians/parents.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors (M.K.A., L.E.X., M.E.A., C.A.M., J.S.D., R.K.A) contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, writing – original draft preparation, and review management and editing. The quantitative analysis was overseen by M.K.A., J.S.D., R.K.A. In contrast, the qualitative analysis was done by L.E.X., M.E.A., C.A.M., and the manuscript preparation was supervised by M.K.A. of this manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement:

The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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