

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION REGARDING GHANA'S FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY

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Abstract

This research examines public perceptions of government communication on Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) policy. The human capital, two-way symmetrical communication and resistance theories underpinned this study. A total of 491 Ghanaians responded to a set of questionnaires distributed to them via Google Forms. Data was analysed using cross-tabulations, means, standard deviations, independent samples t-test and One Way ANOVA. Respondents perceived the Free SHS policy as a good initiative which has increased secondary school enrolment, brought financial relief to parents and guardians, and promoted equity in secondary education. Nevertheless, respondents saw the policy as inadequate in achieving quality secondary education due to implementation challenges. Respondents perceived awareness creation on the policy as very effective. However, public education and advocacy on the policy by the government were not very effective. Also, government communication has not been very effective in explaining the policy to persuade the public to fully support it. Significant differences manifested in the views of respondents on the level of effectiveness of government communication on the policy due to differences in educational backgrounds. Respondents identified factors including transparent communication, reliable funding source, periodic research and evaluation, improved consultation and de-politicization as critical to the sustainability of the policy. The theoretical and policy implications of the findings have been outlined in the study. The Ministries of Education and Information should collaborate with the Free SHS Secretariat to organize training programmes on participatory, transparent and clear government communication strategies to all relevant stakeholders to promote public understanding of the policy.

Keywords: free senior high school, government communication, public policy, sustainability

Introduction

Policies are critical to the success of every organisation and society. Organisations and nations continue to institute policies to bring about positive change. Historically, the origins of policy are often traced to the works of Harold Lasswell, who is seen as the father of policy sciences. The field of policy sciences is rooted in the contributions of political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, statistics and mathematics (Pal, 2010). It is even argued that the physical and natural sciences also played a role in the development of the field. As a concept, policy is defined as a "course of action (or inaction) chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or an interrelated set of problems" (Pal, 2010, p. 10). In essence, policies are clearly defined actions initiated by public officials or agencies mainly to tackle identified societal problems.

Policies are improvement initiatives proposed by multiple actors based on carefully negotiated collective agreements and implemented through collective actions (Parsons, 1996). As an aspect of policy, public policies relate to officially expressed intentions backed by sanctions in the form of rewards and / or punishments aimed at solving identified problems (Lowi & Ginsburg, 1996). They can be in the form of laws, rules, statutes, edicts, regulations, or orders. Public policy-making is a dynamic process involving various decisions, actions, reactions and interactions of the actors and citizens (Nwekeaku, 2014). Public policy mainly starts with policy conceptualisation, formation, implementation, and evaluation. These stages of the policy process are vital to every public policy decision (Juma & Onkware, 2015). A critical mechanism for promoting public policy success is effective communication (Juma & Onkware, 2015; Nwekeaku, 2014; Quy & Ha, 2018). Public policies are to be effectively communicated by relevant governments officials to enhance public acceptance and support. No public policy goal becomes successful if governments or public officials fail to effectively communicate the policy to the public. Effective communication helps governments to achieve policy goals and promote mutually beneficial relationships between governments and the publics on whom policy success or failure rests (Howlett, 2009, 2011).

Discussions around communicating public policies by governments will be incomplete without the consideration of the role of government, hence the concept of government communication. Government communication is defined as a well-designed process of releasing or withholding information or knowledge-based resources from policy target groups to influence and direct their attitudes, behaviours and actions regarding the policy (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). This means that government communication involves proper planning and execution strategy, bearing in mind the unique characteristics of the target audience and political forces who are affected by the policy. Pasquier (2012) states that government communication is a planned effort by government or public officials to present and explain government decisions and actions; enhance the legitimacy of these actions, defend recognized values, and help maintain social bonds. Clearly, governments are obligated to present and explain policies to foster public understanding and support for the policies.

Government communication is vital to all public policies across all sectors including the education sector. Education is a vital tool for poverty reduction and sustainable development. Globally, nations initiate educational policies to improve the lives of their citizens. Education policies are mainly systematic interventions aimed at improving educational practices at all levels. No educational policies are effective if they are poorly planned and implemented (Papanikos, 2010). Indeed, without effective educational policies the vision of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which advocates for equitable quality education for all citizens will be a mirage.

Several educational policies have been initiated by various countries at various levels. One common form of educational policies in Africa at the primary and secondary levels is free education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2013). This is a policy which provides access to free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for citizens (Mensah, 2019). Free education policy helps to provide financial relief to many people. Free education policy in Africa has had positive effects on student enrolment. In places such as Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda, free education policy has helped to increase student enrolments (Asankha & Takashi, 2011; Ohba, 2011; UNESCO, 2013).

Like Kenya and Uganda, Ghana has implemented free secondary education policy. The current New Patriotic Party (NPP) government has implemented Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy as one of its flagship policies. This was a significant policy initiative meant to improve the progressively free secondary education which was started by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) party (the previous government). According to Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2020), FSHS policy is an important policy in Ghana, which has increased student enrolment in the country. However, the implementation of FSHS policy has ignited public debate. The optimists of FSHS policy defend the policy on the basis that the policy has the power to dismantle the walls of poverty in Ghana. The optimists argue further that the policy can help to dissolve illiteracy and ignorance, and inspire innovations needed to make Ghana a better place for all citizens (Matey, 2020; Nsiah, 2019).

However, the pessimists believed that the FSHS policy is a poorly thought-through policy largely due to implementation concerns. One of the concerns stems from the use of a double-track system. There is a double-track system Ghana operates aimed at managing the increasing rates of students' enrolment. This arrangement ensures that while some students are at home their colleagues are in school

due to infrastructural deficit. Botchway (2019) opines that though the double track system can help to improve school curricular and attendance, its implementation has been problematic. Another concern about Ghana's Free SHS policy relates to its over-politicisation. It is believed that the policy is overly politicised, which makes it difficult to stand the test of time (Matey, 2020). Moreover, there are concerns about the planning of the policy. For some Ghanaians, the policy lacks proper planning that complicates its implementation. Other concerns relate low public commitment and support, low funding, and poor stakeholder consultation. There are fears that the Free SHS policy cannot be sustained due to these concerns (Azumah, 2020; Matey, 2020). The concerns about the FSHS policy potentially obliterate the government's efforts to communicate the policy to the public. Indeed, it is not clear how government has communicated the policy to the citizens as there is no empirical research on government communication on the policy.

There are no empirical studies on how Ghanaians perceive government communication on the policy, which is very problematic given the positions of scholars (Juma & Onkware, 2015; Kwegyiriba, 2021; Liu et al., 2012; Nwekeaku, 2014) who argued for effective communication as a critical requirement for achieving public policy objective and sustainability. Though a few studies have been done on communicating public policies in Ghana (Gomez & Patel, 2020; Odoom et al., 2023; Williams & Jackson, 2021) none of them focused on the educational sector of the country. This research helps to fill this gap by examining public perception of government communication on Ghana's FSHS policy. Specifically, the study ascertained the general views of respondents on the FSHS policy, examined the views of respondents on the level of effectiveness of government communication on the Free SHS policy, and explored the measures required to promote sustainability of the policy.

Literature Review

Theoretical Issues

The value of education to national development is often expressed theoretically. The human capital theory sees education as one sure way of achieving national development. A high level of illiteracy threatens the development of nations (Korres, cited in Robinson & Pope, 2023). Educated populations help to achieve increased productivity. To this end, stakeholders including governments and civil society organisations continue to initiate various educational policies for human capital formation and ultimately for the development of their nations (Almendarez, 2010). Thus, the FSHS policy implemented by the Ghana government is a significant commitment for achieving the intent of the human capital theory. The policy is a direct effort towards promoting the human capital formation needed for Ghana's growth and development agenda.

Again, the resistance theory helps to explain the success or otherwise of educational policies and the need for stakeholders in education to adopt proper communication strategies to reduce resistance. Resistance theory outlines the basis on which established authorities may be opposed or challenged by individuals or groups. The theory explains how individuals or groups challenge or oppose decisions and actions of governments or public officials when they consider those decisions and actions as unhelpful, or the processes which birthed those decisions and actions as coercive, or when they feel that their rights have been trampled upon when taking those decisions and actions (Hong & Ostini, 1989; Quy & Ha, 2018; Wen, 2023). In the context of public policy, the theory states that when individuals or groups are coerced by authorities to accept certain public policies, they tend to feel that their discretion and rights are being threatened, or if the policies are not properly communicated to them, they tend to feel alienated from the policies. This leads to a psychologically discontent state, resulting in psychological reactions including doubts, non-compliance and low trust in the policies (Dowd et al., 1991; Hong & Ostini, 1989; Quy & Ha, 2018). To avoid public policy resistance requires effective public policy planning.

There is no proper educational policy planning without effective communication strategies. Poorly planned educational policies result in low public commitment and support for those educational policies, and ultimately policy resistance. Resistance is bound to occur in educational policy implementation if the policy is poorly planned (Papanikos, 2010). For the FSHS policy to overcome resistance and ultimately garner public support needed for achieving the desired outcome requires effective communication strategies that are based on proper planning. There will be resistance to the

policy due to low public trust in the absence of proper communication strategies. Clearly, the success of Ghana's FSHS policy largely depends on effective communication strategies (Juma & Onkware, 2015; Nwekeaku, 2014; Quy & Ha, 2018).

Another theory reflecting the need for effective communication is the two-way symmetrical communication model, which was first developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The model highlights mutual understanding and reciprocity between organisations and their stakeholders. The model focuses on dialogue, feedback, and engagement to foster a balanced relationship where both parties influence each other (Grunig et al., 2002). Over the years, scholars have acknowledged the importance of the principles of the symmetrical model in public policy communication, noting that interactive platforms and clear, honest communication foster trust and engagement (Willacy, 2016). In the FSHS policy context, communication strategies aligning with transparency, openness, engagement, and responsiveness to public feedback will likely enhance public acceptance and support for the policy. Implementing the two-way symmetrical communication model can significantly improve the effectiveness of Ghana's free secondary education programme by promoting cooperation and interaction between the government and its citizenry. This strategy enables enhanced stakeholder interaction, promoting a greater understanding of public issues and expectations about the policy. Through mutual communication strategies, the Ghanaian government can successfully address misunderstandings, gather vital input, and adjust policy execution measures depending on public feedback, potentially resulting in heightened public support and confidence in the policy.

Conceptual Issues

Literature (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007; Howlett, 2009, 2011) have affirmed the need for governments to effectively communicate public policies in order to positively influence the citizenry to accept and support the policies. Thus, government communication is the heart of all successful educational policies. Canel and Sanders (2013) conceived government communication as consisting of the *role, practice, aims* and *achievements* of communication that occurs in and on behalf of *public* institution(s). The authors assert further that government communication enables public institutions and state executive arms to perform their functions effectively. Implicit in Canel and Sanders' (2013) position on government communication is the recognition that without effective government communication, it will be difficult for public officials to execute their mandates. Pasquier (2012) opines that government communication entails all types of activities within the public sector institutions and organisations mainly to convey and share information.

Government communication is a complex field of communication. It is far more complex than corporate communication. Its complexity is occasioned by the variety of needs, goals, definitions, resources and audiences within which it operates (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Da Silva & Batista, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Sanders, 2011). The complex nature of government communication is further ascribed to the fact that it involves a multidimensionally and organisationally varied environment. For example, in terms of goal setting, government communication usually occurs within much more conflicting goals set by political masters. In terms of audience, government communication happens on multifaceted levels, taking into consideration very diverse publics and stakeholders such as minority groups, other politicians, service users and regulatory agencies. It is noteworthy that individuals who are the heads of communication in government institutions, ministries, departments and agencies may be appointed simply based on partisan considerations rather than professionally determined-meritocratic criteria (Canel & Sanders, 2013).

In their efforts to extend the discussions on government communication, Mu et al. (2018) identified two broad forms of government communication activities. First, there are government communication activities that are carried out before policy implementation. Such communication activities tend to focus on policy design and policy release. Government communication activities before policy implementation seek to provide a healthier policy design by incorporating the practical situations of the target groups. They also help to give clearer and more useful information and assistance to the target group to help them appreciate the policy initiative before implementation. Second, there are government communication activities that deal with communication activities after policy implementation. The second form of government communication aims to generate data in the form of feedback on policy

performance. It also enables policymakers and other stakeholders to conduct policy evaluation, promote policy adaptation and trigger policy learning (Mu et al., 2018).

Scholars (Ho & Cho, 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021) have emphasized the importance of effective communication in the delivery of government policy initiatives. Government communication on policies ensures good governance and strengthens democracy. Effective government communication occurs when it supports the ideals of transparency, honesty, accountability, and stakeholder participation and when it is carried out in support of more responsive and inclusive policies and services (OECD, 2021). If governments impose their political will on their citizens and force them to accept the non-preferred and unpopular public policies without effectively communicating the needs, goals and expected outcomes, citizens may become more hesitant toward accepting such policies (Kang et al., 2013).

Free education policies have been implemented by a number of countries globally with varying outcomes. According to Hossler (2000) and Singell (2004), free education policy significantly increases student enrolment and student retention. Particularly in Africa, free education policies have had positive effects on student enrolment. For example, in Kenya, the introduction of free day secondary education increased enrolment in secondary education by 50% over the past years (Ohba, 2011). The case in Uganda is very much the same. In Uganda's universal secondary school policy witnessed an increase in gender enrolment in public schools (Asankha & Takashi, 2011). Also, free education policy initiated by Rwanda in 2009 helped to increase students' enrolment by 25% in a year (UNESCO, 2013).

Ghana has implemented various free education policies at primary and secondary levels such as Free School Uniforms, Capitation Grant and Free Feeding to ensure access, quality and equity in education. The previous NDC government introduced what is commonly called "Progressively Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy" in 2015 and invested an estimated amount of GH¢ 12,178,544.00 into the policy during the first term of the academic year in 2015/2016 (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020). The fund was expected to cover the cost of entertainment, the examination, Student's Representative Council, library, culture, Science Development and Mathematics quiz, sports, Information Communication Technology, and co-curricular fees for about 320,400-day students in public senior high schools. This was to improve both access and quality in attaining education for all (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020).

On their part, the NPP government launched the free SHS education policy in 2017, just after assuming office. Unlike the NDC, the NPP embarked on a full funding policy and the initial cost was estimated at GH¢400 million (Ministry of Education, Republic of Ghana, 2017). The policy provides for daily meals of students at school for all eligible day students. This is to reduce the burden on parents and to improve the economic growth of each family and the country at large. Just like the Ugandan and Kenyan cases, the FSHS policy in Ghana has increased student enrolments in the country (Free SHS Ghana, 2020). Again, the policy has brought financial relief to parents and guardians (Asumadu, 2019; Matey, 2020).

The implementation of the free SHS has brought so much pressure on government with respect to the management of secondary education (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2020). To effectively deal with the pressure, the government will have to re-consider its communication strategies. It is important for authorities to pay increased attention to government communication associated with the policy as critical for managing the pressure associated with the policy. As stated earlier, government communication is critical for achieving public policy goals. Nevertheless, the field of government communication seems to be one of the highly neglected areas of communication. Literature on government communication, especially in terms of public policy, is very scanty (Johansson & Raunio, 2019; Liu et al., 2012; Quy & Ha, 2018).

Government communication has received very little attention both in practice and research. In places such as Vietnam, communicating government policies is often understood as a propaganda of state-issued policies and legislations to the citizens. In fact, the little research attention that the field has received is hugely dominated by experts in the Western world. Africa is one of the heavily under-researched continents in terms of government communication (Johansson & Raunio, 2019). This study interrogates government communication within Africa's education sector using Ghana as a case. As already indicated, though successive governments have implemented various educational policies aimed at achieving quality education to promote Ghana's development, not much research has been done on the government communication around these policies.

Methods and Materials

The study relied on a quantitative research approach and descriptive survey design. Ghanaians who were 18 years and above constituted the study population. A simple random sampling method was used to select 491 Ghanaians for the study. A set of questionnaires was used to obtain data from the respondents. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms. The form was distributed to the respondents using various social media platforms. Notable platforms used were WhatsApp and e-mail. Initially, the Google Form was sent to respondents on platforms researchers were familiar with. Respondents were urged to complete the form and forward it to other Ghanaians on other platforms who were interested in and were willing to be part of the study.

A total of 491 Ghanaians who were interested and willing to provide data for the study responded. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data, including percentages, cross-tabulation, means and standard deviations. Inferentially, independent samples t-test and One Way ANOVA were used to analyse the data obtained. Apart from the demographic features, frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the general views of respondents on the Free SHS Policy. Again, means and standard deviations were used to analyse the effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the policy, as well as the measures to sustain it. An independent samples t-test was used to determine the differences in the general views of male and female respondents on the policy. Further, one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences between respondents' education levels and their overall views on the effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the policy. A similar analytical tool was used to test the differences between respondents' ages and their overall views on the measures to promote the sustainability of the Free SHS Policy. Ethical issues were considered critical in this research. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured. Respondents were first asked to indicate their consent before being allowed to take part in the study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include its dependence on self-reported data, which can introduce bias, and its narrow emphasis on a solitary policy (FSHS) in Ghana. Again, the use of online survey for data collection potentially denied persons who were unable to read and write as well as those who are not conversant with Google Forms to participate in the study, thus hampering the generalisability of the findings. Also, the use of quantitative methods could hinder a more thorough appreciation of the policy and communication dynamics around it. It is suggested that longitudinal studies on government communication impact on the policy be conducted by future researchers. Other studies can compare government communication of FSHS policy with other educational policies in Ghana such as Free School Feeding and Capitation Grants for a more balanced understanding. Future studies can utilise methods suitable for qualitative and mixed-methods analyses to yield an in-depth appreciation of the communication dynamics on the policy.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Features of Respondents

Table 1 shows that majority (52.5%) of the respondents were females whilst 47.5% of them were males. In the same vein, most (87.2%) of the respondents had obtained education up to the tertiary level, with very few (2.8%) who had basic education. Again, many (63.5%) of the respondents who took part in the study were not less than 26 years.

Table 1: Demographic Features of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	233	47.5%
Female	258	52.5%
Education Level		
Tertiary Education	428	87.2%
Secondary Education	49	10.0%
Basic Education	14	2.8%
Age		
Below 26	179	36.5%
26-30	73	14.9%
31-35	117	23.8%
36-40	73	14.9%
Above 40	49	10.0%

The study further found that four of the respondents were males who had education up to the tertiary level and were below 26 years of age (Table 2). Similarly, 37 of the respondents were females between 26 and 30 years and had education up to tertiary level. The cross-tabulation further shows that a total of 14 respondents were between 36 and 40 years and had secondary education, whereas 45 respondents were above 40 years and had obtained tertiary education.

Table 2: Cross-tabulation of Gender, Age and Educational Level of Respondents

Gender		Age	Educational level			Total
			Basic education	Secondary education	Tertiary education	
Male	Age	Below 26 years	2	4	23	29
		26-30years	1	4	29	34
		31-35years	5	14	63	82
		36-40years	2	13	39	54
		Above 40years	0	2	32	34
	Total		10	37	186	233
Female	Age	Below 26years	1	9	140	150
		26-30years	1	1	37	39
		31-35years	0	0	35	35
		36-40years	1	1	17	19
		Above 40years	1	1	13	15
	Total		4	12	242	258
Total	Age	Below 26years	3	13	163	179
		26-30years	2	5	66	73
		31-35years	5	14	98	117
		36-40years	3	14	56	73
		Above 40years	1	3	45	49
	Total		14	49	428	491

General Views of Ghanaians on Free SHS Policy

The study first sought to ascertain the general views of Ghanaians on the Free SHS Policy (see Table 3). In reporting the findings, responses for Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) are grouped together and captured as generally agree, whilst responses for Strongly Disagree (SD) and Disagree (D) are grouped together and captured as generally disagree. In Table 3, it is seen that 63.5% of the respondents generally agreed that the FSHS policy is a good initiative whilst 81.9% felt that the policy has increased secondary school enrolment in the country. Most (81.9%) of them said the policy has increased secondary school enrolment. However, most (67.8%) of the respondents believed the policy was not

well-thought through. This revelation could be attributed to the implementation challenges the policy is faced with. For example, there are many Ghanaians who believe the policy should target only those who are unable to pay school fees. Some Ghanaian parents also sceptical about the quality of education given to their wards.

A good number (57.6%) of the respondents agreed that the policy has brought financial relief to parents and guardians (see Table 3). Parents and guardians of wards had obtained financial and economic reliefs due to the policy. Parents and guardians could now invest what is regarded as surplus income into other viable economic ventures. About 58% of the respondents agreed that the policy helped to promote equity in secondary education. More so, 63.7% of the respondents generally agreed that the FSHS policy responds to the nation's educational needs, although 23.7% held a contrary view.

Table 3: General Views of Respondents on Free SHS Policy

View on the FSHS policy:	Strongly Agree (%)		Agree (%)		Neutral (%)		Disagree (%)		Strongly Disagree (%)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Is a good initiative	100	20.4	237	48.3	60	12.2	37	7.5	57	11.6
Is a well-thought through policy	29	5.9	57	11.6	73	14.7	228	46.4	104	21.2
Has increased secondary school enrolment	276	55.4	130	26.5	46	9.4	13	2.6	26	5.3
Has brought financial relief to parents and guardians	202	41.1	96	16.5	81	16.5	58	11.8	54	11.0
Has helped to promote equity in secondary education in the country	178	36.3	108	22.0	67	13.6	85	17.3	53	10.8
Is responsive to the 'nation's educational needs	222	45.2	91	18.5	62	12.6	45	9.2	71	14.5
Is adequate in improving access and quality of secondary education in Ghana	33	6.7	66	13.4	91	18.5	145	29.5	156	31.8
Is appropriate in addressing educational problems and challenges of the country	152	31.0	116	23.6	70	14.3	102	20.8	51	10.4
Has been efficiently implemented	45	9.2	74	15.0	114	23.2	173	35.2	85	17.3
Has been managed well	43	8.8	70	14.3	66	13.4	119	24.2	193	39.3

On the other hand, 61.35% of the respondents generally disagreed that the policy is adequate in improving access and quality of secondary education in the country, coupled with the fact that the majority (52.5%) of them generally stated that the policy had not been implemented well (see Table 3). Finally, most (63.5%) of the respondents indicated that the FSHS policy has not been properly managed, whilst only 23.1% believed the policy had been managed well. Clearly, the results show that Ghanaians have mixed perceptions about the policy.

The researchers further examined the differences in the general views of male and female respondents on the policy using an independent samples t-test (see Table 4). The purpose was to determine whether both male and female respondents had different views about the policy and whether the variations in their views are significant to influence policy decisions. A p-value of 0.666 which is greater than the alpha value of 0.05 implies that no significant differences existed in the general views of male and female Ghanaians on the Free SHS policy. In short, there were no major variations in the views of male and female respondents to influence policy decisions.

Table 4: An Independent Samples T-Test of Differences in the General Views of Male and Female Respondents on Free SHS policy in Ghana

Item	Sex	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
General views on Free SHS Policy	Male	233	31.978	6.721	.431	489	.666
	Female	258	31.701	7.434			

Views of Respondents on the Level of Effectiveness of Government Communication on the Free SHS Policy

The second objective of the study examined the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the policy. The result (see Table 5) shows that government communication activities and strategies to create awareness about the policy initiative (M=3.82, SD=1.01) were perceived as highly effective. Again, communication activities to educate the public about the policy (M=3.35, SD= 1.32), advocate the benefits of the policy (M=2.59, SD=1.28), and advertise and persuade the public to accept the policy (M=2.59, SD=1.28) were all seen as moderately effective. This means that unlike awareness creation on the policy initiative which was highly effective, public education, advocacy and persuasive communication strategies on the public were not very effective on the policy. This could be due to the overly politicised nature of the policy as many people who led the communication were political actors who may not possess skills in government communication to achieve the desired results.

Table 5: Respondents’ Views on the Level of Effectiveness of Government Communication on the Free SHS Policy

Government Communication Activities and Strategies	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Awareness creation on the policy initiative	1	5	3.82	1.01
Public education on the policy goal and rationale	1	5	3.35	1.32
Advocacy programmes on the policy benefits	1	5	2.59	1.28
Advertisements to persuade the public to accept the policy	1	5	2.59	1.28
Communication strategies to generate shared understanding and public trust in the policy	1	5	2.48	1.18
Communication strategies to promote positive behaviour change and public support for the policy	1	5	2.43	1.21
Public discourse and dialogue on the policy	1	5	2.40	1.11
Communication activities and strategies to empower citizens towards the policy	1	5	2.38	1.23
Communication activities and strategies to explain the policy details to the public	1	5	2.25	1.19
Stakeholder engagement on the implementation and sustainability of the policy	1	5	2.25	1.19
Press releases, press conferences and reports on the policy	1	5	2.18	1.21
Use of traditional and social media to communicate the policy to the public	1	5	2.14	1.30
Communication strategies on policy success and constraints	1	5	2.12	1.13
Communication strategies to mobilise citizens and communities to support the policy	1	5	2.10	1.15
Total			2.50	1.20

On the other hand, communication activities and strategies to generate shared understanding and public trust in the policy (M=2.48, SD=1.18), promote positive behaviour change and public support (M=2.43, SD=1.21), and promote public discourse and dialogue on the policy (M=2.40, SD=1.11) were

perceived as lowly effective. Similarly, government communication activities and strategies to explain the policy details to the public (M=2.25, SD=1.19), government press releases, press conferences and reports on the overall policy initiative (M=2.18, SD=1.21), and government's use of traditional and social media to communicate the policy to the public (M=2.14, SD=1.30) were all lowly effective. Clearly, government needs to do more in terms of its communication strategies to promote shared understanding and public trust in the policy. The government needs to re-examine its communication strategies to incorporate traditional and social media communication strategies to promote positive behaviour change and public support coupled with carefully designed public discourse and dialogue to explain the policy details to the public.

Government communication activities and strategies to promote stakeholder engagement on the implementation and sustainability of the policy (M=2.25, SD=1.19) were all lowly effective. This is not very surprising as there were no serious measures to promote public dialogue on the policy. However, the policy will fail if there are no effective stakeholder engagement strategies in place. Effective stakeholder engagement strategies involve identification of key stakeholders, interviews with stakeholders, town hall meetings and clear communication plans based on policy goals.

A further analysis using a one-way ANOVA was done to test the differences between educational levels of respondents and their overall views on the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the FSHS policy (see Table 6).

Table 6: ANOVA test of differences between levels of education of respondents and the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the policy

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size
Between Groups	816.496	2	408.248	3.397	.034	0.013
Within Groups	58521.553	487	120.167			
Total	59338.049	489				

Here, the researchers sought to find out whether there were variations in the views on the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the Free SHS for respondents of different educational backgrounds, and whether those variations should inform government communication strategies. Subjects were divided into three groups (Group 1: Basic Education; Group 2: Secondary Education; and Group 3: Tertiary Education). The significance level (p=0.034) which is less than the alpha value of 0.05 suggests that there were significant differences in the overall views of respondents on the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies based on their educational levels. This shows that significant differences existed in the mean scores and standard deviations for Group 1 (M=36.60, SD= 14.07), Group 2 (M=31.24, SD=11.16); and Group 3 (M=35.11, SD=11.01). By implication, variations exist in the views on the level of effectiveness of government communication activities and strategies on the Free SHS for respondents of different educational backgrounds which may have implications for government communication strategies. However, further analysis shows that the effect (eta-squared=0.013) of the differences was small, according to guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988). Only 1.3% of the differences in respondents' views on the level of effectiveness of government communication on the policy is due to differences in educational levels.

Measures to Promote Sustainability of the Policy

The final objective focused on the measures to promote the sustainability of the policy. Several measures were identified as critical to the sustainability of the Policy (see Table 7). They include increased accountability on the implementation of the policy, more open and transparent communication on the policy's success and failures.

Again, Table 7 shows that getting clearly defined and reliable sources of funding for the policy is essential to sustaining the policy. This means that Free SHS policy can be financially sustained if there are reliable sources of funding for the policy. The study further observed that sustaining the FSHSP

requires proper coordination and supportive relationship among stakeholders of the policy. This implies that proper coordination among stakeholders helps in sustaining policies and projects.

Table 7: Measures to Promote Sustainability of the Policy

Measure There should be:	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Periodic research and evaluation of the policy	491	1	5	4.36	1.066
Increased accountability on the implementation of the policy	491	1	5	4.25	1.169
More open and transparent communication on the policy success and failures	491	1	5	4.23	1.188
Clearly defined and reliable sources of funding the policy	491	1	5	4.22	1.165
De-politicization of the policy	491	1	5	4.21	1.191
Proper coordination and supportive relationship among stakeholders of the policy	491	1	5	4.19	1.102
Free provision of information on the implementation challenges by Implementers	491	1	5	4.15	1.156
Constant suggestions by key stakeholders to improve the policy	491	1	5	4.13	1.175
Consultation among all stakeholders	491	1	5	4.10	1.170
Increased commitment of all stakeholders	491	1	5	4.04	1.107

Additional measures to help sustain the policy are broader stakeholder consultation and increased commitment of all stakeholders. This shows that stakeholder consultation is critical to the sustainability of the policy. Other measures proposed to sustain the policy include periodic research and evaluation of the policy and de-politicisation of the policy. Encouraging implementers of the policy to freely provide information on the implementation challenges was seen as useful to sustaining the policy.

Finally, Table 8 presents the results on the differences between ages of respondents and their overall views on the measures to promote the sustainability of the policy. The rationale for this test was to examine if there were differences in the overall views of respondents on the measures to promote the sustainability of the policy based on their different ages, and whether these differences could have implications on the strategies to sustain the policy. Subjects were divided into five groups (Group 1: Below 26 years; Group 2: 26-30 years; Group 3: 31-35 years; Group 4: 36-40 years; Group 5: Above 40 years). The significance level ($p=0.106$) which is greater than the alpha value of 0.05 suggests that there were no significant differences in the overall views of respondents on the measures suggested to sustain the FSHS policy across the different age groups. Thus, no significant differences occurred in the mean scores and the standard deviations for Group 1 ($M=44.60$, $SD= 12.17$), Group 2 ($M=45.84$, $SD=11.25$); Group 3 ($M=47.30$, $SD=9.95$); Group 4 ($M=46.41$, $SD=12.22$); and Group 5 ($M=48.97$, $SD=9.94$). This means the views of respondents on the measures to sustain the policy were the same regardless of the differences in their ages.

Table 8: ANOVA Test of Differences Between Ages of Respondents and Their Overall Views on the Measures to Promote Sustainability of the Free SHS Policy

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (2-tailed)
Between Groups	988.828	4	247.207	1.922	.106
Within Groups	62507.754	486	128.617		
Total	63496.582	490			

Discussion of Results

Most respondents stated that the FSHS policy is a good initiative. This result aligns with a report by Free SHS Ghana (2020) which shows that the policy is good because it has expanded access to secondary education in Ghana. Again, respondents believed that the policy has increased secondary

school enrolment in the country. The result on secondary school enrolment is refreshing given Watkins' (2013) observation that access to secondary education is problematic in Sub-Saharan Africa due to neglect of the sector by governments and donor agencies. The value of the result on secondary enrolment further finds expression in Ndong-Jatta (2006) who argued that enrolment is vital in a successful secondary education system. Indeed, two years (2015 and 2016) before the implementation of the FSHS policy, over 226,690 qualified students could not get access to secondary education in Ghana. However, this figure dropped to 170,331 just after the first three years of implementing the policy by the government (Free SHS Ghana, 2020). The result on student enrolment corresponds to earlier study in Kenya which found that free secondary education policy led to increased student enrolment (Ohba, 2011).

A good number of the respondents agreed that the policy has brought financial relief to parents and guardians. This agrees with previous studies (Asumadu, 2019; Matey, 2020), which established that parents and guardians of wards had obtained financial relief due to the policy. There is a reduction in the economic burden on parents and guardians due to FSHSP because the policy absorbs tuition and feeding fees (Matey, 2020). Many respondents agreed that the policy has helped to promote equity in secondary education. The finding on equity in secondary education converges with previous studies (Kwegyiriba, 2021; World Bank, 2021). According to the 2017 World Bank publication, as cited in Kwegyiriba (2021), Ghana is one of the nations in Sub-Saharan Africa where equity in education has been successfully championed.

However, many respondents said the policy is inadequate in improving access and quality of secondary education in the country, coupled with the fact that the majority of them stated that the policy had not been implemented well. Besides, many respondents said that the policy was not well-thought through. This revelation could be attributed to the implementation challenges the policy is faced with. Finally, most respondents stated that the FSHS policy has not been managed well. Clearly, the results show that Ghanaians have mixed feelings about the policy.

Additionally, government communication activities and strategies to create awareness about the policy initiative were perceived as highly effective. Awareness creation is critical to influence public attitudes towards public policies (Reynolds et al., 2020). Again, government communication activities to educate the public about the policy, advocate the benefits of the policy, and advertise and persuade the public to accept the policy were all seen as not very effective. According to Reynolds et al. (2020), public education and advocacy strategies on the policy by governments can serve as a catalyst to influence public attitude towards the policy if they are very effective. Moreover, government communication activities and strategies to generate shared understanding and public trust in the policy, promote positive behaviour change and public support, and promote public discourse and dialogue on the policy were perceived as generally ineffective. It is vital for government to improve these strategies and the overall communication channels around the policy to help reduce any form of resistance from the public on the policy (Dowd et al., 1991; Hong & Ostini, 1989; Quy & Ha, 2018).

Similarly, government press releases, press conferences and reports on the overall policy initiative, and use of traditional and social media to communicate the policy to the public were lowly effective. This contradicts Mu et al. (2018) who argued that effective government communication activities involve press releases and reports. Government communication activities and strategies to promote stakeholder engagement on the implementation and sustainability of the policy were generally ineffective. Government communication is deemed effective when it is geared towards supporting stakeholder engagement and when it is carried out in support of more responsive and inclusive policies and services (OECD, 2021).

Factors critical to the sustainability of the policy include increased accountability on the implementation of the policy, more open and transparent communication on the policy's success and failures. The findings on transparency and accountability support previous studies (Hemphill, 2013; Odoom et al., 2023; Silvius & Schipper, 2014) which established that transparency and accountability are critical to the sustainability of development policies and programmes. Getting clearly defined and reliable sources of funding for the policy is essential to sustaining the policy. This affirms a position expressed by Matey (2020) to the effect that Free SHS policy can be financially sustained if there are reliable sources of funding for the policy. The result also aligns with that of Mensah (2019), who found that obtaining adequate funding is a major challenge faced by the FSHSP in Ghana. Mensah (2019) added that poor logistics also threaten the sustainability of the policy initiative. The study further

observed that sustaining the FSHSP requires proper coordination and supportive relationship among stakeholders of the policy. The value of coordination is evident in Nalubiri (2010) who submits that proper coordination among stakeholders helps in sustaining policies and projects. Friedmann (1992) extends the debates on supportive relationships by arguing that ensuring supportive relationships helps to promote the sustainability of policies and programmes.

The result on stakeholder consultation as vital to the sustainability of the policy mirrors Matey's (2020) who found that stakeholder consultation is critical to the sustainability of the policy. Ahenkan et al. (2013) maintain that ensuring effective and sustainable development policies and project depends on the proper participation of all stakeholders. Broader consultation and active participation of stakeholders in formulating policies enhances policy acceptance, popularity and implementation (Juma & Onkware, 2015). When citizens are regarded as key participants in achieving policy success, it makes it easier for governments to galvanise the citizens to own the implementation of a policy (Servaes & Malikhao, 2020). Effective educational policies are designed with inputs from all stakeholders at all levels of society (Papanikos, 2010; Reid, 2002)

Other measures proposed to sustain the policy include encouraging implementers of the policy to freely provide information on the implementation challenges and de-politicisation of the policy. The result on providing information on the implementation challenges of the policy is echoed in the works of Odoom et al. (2023), who observed that communication is critical to the sustainability of public policies. Communication becomes useful in policies and programmes when it is liberating, dialogic and empowering (Quarry & Schoemaker, 2010; Mefalopulos, 2005; Odoom, 2020).

Theoretical and Policy Implications

This research offers several implications for both theory and policy. Theoretically, the findings on the government's commitment to achieving educated population for Ghana through the FSHS policy heightens the relevance of the human capital framework which recognizes the place of education in national development (Goldin, cited in Robinson & Pope, 2023). Again, the study highlights the importance of audience segmentation, transparency, inclusion, and multi-channel communication in effectively spreading educational policies. The research reinforces the two-way symmetrical communication model, highlighting the importance of inclusion, and engagement in government communication strategies in educational service delivery. To achieve this requires the application of participatory communication approaches which seeks to improve the participation of all stakeholders in issues and projects which affect them (Anani-Bossman & Blankson, 2023).

The respondents highly prioritised transparent communication regarding policy objectives and obstacles, underlining the need to foster trust and transparency. Interactive channels for public discourse and interaction are essential. Nevertheless, the actual execution varies, exhibiting deficiencies in effectiveness and a perceived absence of authentic communication. Reliance on diverse government communication strategies such as traditional and social media and stakeholder engagement underscores the practical relevance and preference for the two-way symmetrical communication model, which requires more interactive and engaging communication strategies such as dialogue and feedback to foster mutual understanding (Grunig et al., 2002). Also, the results confirm the value of all-encompassing strategies which appeal to both genders and promote utilisation of communication channels to ensure wide-reaching and engaging communication. This approach provides a strong foundation for comprehending the effectiveness of government communication dynamics. Consequently, effective government communication strategies such as awareness creation will help reduce resistance to the FSHS policy (Wen, 2023). However, low commitment to the use of effective public education, advocacy and persuasive communication strategies can make the policy unpopular in line with the resistance theory. This, as Wen (2023) opines, will lead to rightful public resistance to the policy in so long as the policy is perceived as unpopular by the public who are the target beneficiaries.

Again, the result on low government communication of the FSHS policy can contribute to low public understanding of the policy intention and low public support for the policy. Low public understanding and low public support can consequently lead to some psychological reactions, including doubts, non-compliance and low public trust for the policy as envisaged by the resistance theory (Dowd et al., 1991; Hong & Ostini, 1989; Quy & Ha, 2018).

The study shows the necessity of implementing a more sophisticated and focused communication strategy concerning the FSHS policy. The government should employ targeted communication strategies that consider the diverse demographic composition to disseminate information to various age groups and educational backgrounds effectively. Establishing and upholding transparent communication techniques, such as providing frequent updates and truthful reporting on policy objectives, advantages, and obstacles, is crucial for cultivating and preserving public confidence.

More so, the Ministries of Education and Information should team up and adopt both traditional and digital media platforms to effectively distribute information to a large audience and actively involve the public in this very vital policy. These two ministries should rely on inclusive communication strategies to effectively connect the public to the policy details irrespective of their gender to ensure wider acceptance and support. To strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of its educational programmes, the government can develop strong accountability mechanisms and participatory communication approaches to promote the success of the FSHS policy.

Also, the result on stakeholder engagement implies that the government needs to re-examine its stakeholder engagement plans for the FSHS policy (Matey, 2020). The government needs to adopt stakeholder engagement strategies including clear identification of all key stakeholders, objective analysis of the various stakeholders, interviews with key stakeholders, stakeholder mapping, and clear communication techniques which are essential to the success of the policy (Sedmak, 2021).

Similarly, the Ghana Education Service should liaise with the Ministry of Education, Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies and community-based organisations to adopt more localised communication channels including community radio station and community information centres to ensure effective framing of context-specific messages and regular feedback mechanisms especially to parents and guidance who may lack adequate understanding of the enormous value of the FSHS policy. The government should use communication strategies characterised by transparency, engagement, openness and responsiveness to public feedback to enhance public acceptance and support for the policy.

Despite the study being conducted in Ghana, the findings can be widely utilised in policy communication initiatives in other African countries, improving public knowledge and acceptance of diverse policies. The study highlights the need for African governments to create robust communication strategies that are inclusive and honest. Multi-channel communication tactics can enable African governments to reach different audiences and derive advantages. Consistent assessment and clear disclosure are essential procedures that can bolster public confidence and acceptance of governmental initiatives. Involving community leaders, educators, and civil society organisations in policy communication can ensure that government activities align with the community's needs, promoting a cooperative atmosphere.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, respondents generally believe that the FSHS policy is a good policy initiative which has helped to increase secondary school enrolment, provide financial relief to parents and guardians, promote equity in secondary education in the country. However, the policy is perceived as inadequate in improving access and quality of secondary education. There are misgivings about the management of the policy due to its implementation challenges. Both male and female respondents have the same perceptions about the policy. Further, though government communication has effectively helped to increase awareness about the policy, public education and advocacy on the policy have not been very effective. Government communication strategies to persuade the public to accept and support the policy have equally not been very effective. Government communication strategies to generate shared understanding and public trust in the policy, promote public support, and public dialogue on the policy are generally not very effective. These communication inadequacies have the potential of impeding the attainment of the policy goal. Importantly, government should improve its commitment to the sustainability of the policy since it is a good initiative. If the government improves its accountability and transparency on the implementation of the policy, it will generate trust and public support for the policy. Again, the government should find clearly defined and reliable sources of funding the policy and conduct periodic evaluation of the policy.

Overall, the study demonstrates that by implementing focused, all-encompassing, clear, and participatory government communication strategies, the government of Ghana may bolster widespread acceptability and backing for the FSHS policy and other initiatives especially in the educational sector to ensure their effective performance and overall sustainability.

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