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# The socio-economic influencers of school dropout amidst the implementation of the Free Senior High School policy in Ghana: A case study approach

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**Abstract:** The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy implementation in Ghana has garnered significant attention in academic research, with various studies delving into its advantages and implementation obstacles. Nevertheless, there has been a rise in school dropout rates among secondary school students amidst the programme implementation. There is therefore the need for a more localized scientific inquiry into the socio-economic factors contributing to school dropout among Senior High School (SHS) students in the Abofour community. The study employed a qualitative approach, using the case study design to conduct interviews with 22 students who had dropped out of SHS, to explore their experiences and identify key socio-economic factors influencing their decisions to leave school. Thematic data analysis revealed six main themes, namely, lack of parental support, peer influence, early marriage and pregnancy, economic conditions, and unsupportive school environment, as among the causative factors. The findings suggest that while the Free SHS policy has removed some direct financial barriers, other social, economic, and institutional factors continue to spur up dropout rates. The study concludes that addressing these underlying issues requires a multi-faceted approach that includes strengthening family support systems, improving school environments, and providing targeted interventions for at-risk students. In this regard, policymakers and other educational stakeholders are required to provide targeted supports to enhance student retention and reduce dropout rates in the Abofour community.

**Keywords:** School dropout, Free Senior High School, Socio-economic factors, Abofour community

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## 1. Introduction

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy implementation in Ghana has garnered significant attention in academic research, with various studies delving into its advantages, obstacles, and other relevant factors. Duah et al. (2023) [1] specifically highlights the impact of increased student enrollment. For instance, Shamo (2023) [2] examines the advantages and challenges associated with the execution of the Free SHS policy in Ghana, particularly, focusing on its effects on educational practices in senior high schools. On the reverse, Gruijters et al. (2023) [3] point out impediments such as deficiencies in infrastructure, delays in financial allocations, and staff shortages as having direct link with the implementation of the Free SHS policy. In this light, Abizari et al. (2020) [4] analyze the positive influence of the introduction of complimentary school feeding programs in senior high schools under the Free SHS policy on the nutritional quality of non-residential students. Frimpong et al. (2023) [5] concur by underscoring the significance of non-profit organizations in tackling issues related to the Free policy execution, advocating for a collaborative strategy to ensure its success.

Nyadzi et al. (2024) [6] evaluate the socio-economic ramifications of free senior high school education. Azumah et al. (2021) [7] embark on a study to investigate the correlation between illicit gold mining and school dropout rates, revealing that children engaged in illegal gold mining are more likely to abandon their education. Additionally, Anima and Tampah-Naah (2023) [8] outline the resources available to adolescent mothers who have discontinued their schooling. These research findings collectively shed light on the diverse facets of the Free SHS policy in Ghana, underscoring the necessity for ongoing assessment and enhancement to optimize its advantages for students and the educational system.

In line with this, the current study aims at providing a thorough comprehension of the factors that lead to student dropouts within the framework of the Free SHS policy in Ghana. Through a meticulous examination of dropout trends from the initiation of the policy, the study endeavors to identify the socio-economic, academic, and environmental factors that impact these trends. Ultimately, the research identifies the reasons behind school dropout amidst the Free SHS policy implementation, using the Abofour community as the study area.

### **1.1. Research problem**

The introduction of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy by the Government of Ghana in 2017 marked a significant step towards broadening access to secondary education nationwide (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021) [9]. Despite the policy's potency of enhancing enrollment and academic outcomes, concerns persist regarding its equity and inclusivity (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013) [10].

Existing research has extensively examined the impact of the Free SHS policy on Ghana's education system, emphasizing its success in enhancing access to secondary education and positive outcomes like improved student nutrition (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Dzikunu & Ansah, 2023) [9,11,12]. Moreover, studies have also identified obstacles such as resource limitations, inadequate infrastructure, and operational inefficiencies (David & Andrews, 2022; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2019) [13-15]. A related study has been conducted in the Offinso Municipality on students' truancy. For instance, Yankyerah et al. (2023) [16] through a descriptive study with a total population of 429, comprising school authorities and students, established the growing trend of truancy in the Offinso Municipality. The authors further maintain that teachers and administrators contribute to students truancy as well as the academic inabilities of students (mean=3.25 and SD=0.82).

The current study seeks to build on these findings by expanding the investigations to cover the underlining causes of school dropout amidst the Free Senior High School policy implementation as well as narrow the discourse on Abofour community. The findings will thereby aid in providing targeted solutions to mitigate school dropout in this community. Limited scientific studies have been done to help establish the precise reasons behind students' dropout within the Free SHS framework. This study thereby sought to contribute to the extant knowledge by conducting a case study investigation to ascertain the socio-economic reasons why people of school going age in the Abofour community of the Offinso Municipality, dropout from school.

### **1.2. Research objectives**

The aims of this research were outlined as follows:

1. identify the reasons behind school dropout amidst the implementation of the free SHS policy in the Abofour community.
2. ascertain the socio-economic factors that contribute to school dropout in Abofour community.

### ***1.3. Scope and limitation of the study***

The study specifically focuses on Free SHS beneficiaries in the Abofour community within Offinso municipality. It aims to evaluate the factors leading to school dropout among students benefiting from the free SHS policy in this locality, encompassing both genders. The study seeks to gather insights into their reasons for discontinuing education, and the corresponding factors that led to their dropout.

The limitation of this study is its geographical scope. The research is confined to the Abofour community, which may affect the generalization of the findings to other areas. The unique challenges and circumstances in the chosen community might differ significantly from those in other areas across the country. As a result, the insights and conclusions drawn from this study may not fully apply to regions with different socio-economic, cultural, or educational contexts.

Furthermore, the research is also time-bound, which may not capture prolonged trends or changes in dropout rates and influencing factors. Recent policy adjustments or interventions may not be fully reflected if they were implemented close to the study time frame.

This paper is structured into five sections. The initial section seeks to present the background information, research problem as well as the overriding study objectives. The subsequent section makes a thematic review of existing theoretical and empirical literature on the introduction, implementation successes and challenges of the flagship Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy as well as delve into the scholarship on the school dropout concept. The materials and methods section establishes the research design and approaches utilized in conducting the scientific inquiry. The next two sections will cover the analysis and presentation of results as well as curate an academic discussion of the major findings relative to the extant literature. The paper climaxes with an informed conclusion and policy recommendations to identified stakeholders for practical actions on curbing the school dropout menace in the Abofour community in particular, and Offinso Municipality at large.

## **2. Theoretical literature**

The paper is largely guided by the Academic Mediation Theory and the Social Learning Theory. The issue of school dropout has been extensively reviewed in the extant literature within the premises of several theories. Nonetheless, this paper settles on the aforementioned theories due to their bearing on the study objectives. For instance, the Academic Mediation Theory (AMT) of Vygotsky which received emphasis from Tinto (1975) and Presseisen and Kozulin (1992) [17,18], explored the role of social interaction in shapping the cognitive development of learners. This theory will aid the current research to investigate the possible role of parents and other family structures in students' tendency to remain in school. Moreover, the Social Learning Theory (SLT) postulated by Albert Bandura advances the idea that people mostly learn from their peers. In that, those who associate with deviants, normally learn their behaviours. The study on school dropout amidst the implementation of the Free Senior High School policy in Ghana, can well be situated in the SLT. Hence, its adoption to provide theoretical basis for the investigation of the impact of peers in school dropout in the Abofour community.

### ***2.1. Empirical literature***

This section presents a comprehensive review of existing scholarships on the phenomenon under study.

### ***2.2. Accessibility of Free Senior High School***

Various governmental initiatives have been put in place to enhance educational accessibility in Ghana. Among these measures is the introduction of the free senior high school (SHS) system in 2017 (Boateng, 2019) [19]. A primary objective of this system is to boost enrollment rates, a goal that has been successfully achieved as evidenced by a notable rise in the number of students able to attend SHS without the financial burden of tuition fees (Ministry of Education, 2022). Research by Kwegyiriba and Mensah (2021) [20] indicate that the Free SHS policy has significantly increased enrollment figures in secondary schools, justifying the continued allocation of a larger budget towards this policy as an investment in Ghana's human capital development.

The study also suggests that the policy has effectively alleviated financial constraints for students and their families associated with secondary education. This comprehensive financial assistance, encompassing various aspects such as tuition, admission, textbooks, library resources, science centers, computers, examination fees, utilities, boarding, and meals. They also highlight the real impact of the Free SHS policy in reducing or eliminating financial barriers that previously hindered accessibility and equity in secondary education. Kwegyiriba and Mensah (2021) [20] further point out that before the introduction of the Free SHS program in 2017, a significant proportion of students who had successfully completed the Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E.) and were eligible for SHS admission were unable to enroll due to financial limitations. The analysis by Kwegyiriba and Mensah (2021) [20] also demonstrate that since the implementation of the program, there has been a substantial decrease in the percentage of students who are unable to pursue senior high school education.

In line with this, the study makes a further investigation to ascertain whether the policy has reduced or eliminate the seemingly financial barriers that previously hindered accessibility to second cycle education.

### ***2.3. Perception of Quality Education***

A study conducted by Adu-Agyemang and Osei-Poku (2012) [21] highlight the crucial significance of quality education in any educational framework. They defined quality education as a concept that necessitates the implementation of efficient mechanisms, which include the provision of top-notch resources and the dissemination of educational content, to facilitate exceptional educational results. The authors emphasized that quality education involves the establishment of suitable mechanisms and procedures to ensure the effective and efficient functioning of the educational system, ultimately leading to favorable educational outcomes (Adu-Agyemang & Osei-Poku, 2012) [21]. They stressed that investing in various elements of the educational process, such as curriculum design, teaching materials, teacher training, and infrastructure, is essential for providing quality education. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of delivering educational content and instruction effectively, indicating that not only the resources but also the teaching methods and educator-student interaction must support effective learning. The authors' perspective on quality education aims to attain outstanding educational results, including positive academic accomplishments, the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and the preparation of students for success in their personal and professional endeavors.

Abdul-Rahim et al. (2022 [22]) elucidates quality education as a comprehensive concept that revolves around various key factors. Central to this concept is the principle of access, ensuring that education is accessible to all individuals, irrespective of socio-economic status or geographical location. The maintain that equity is equally vital, emphasizing the importance of providing every student with an equal opportunity for success, particularly addressing disparities among marginalized groups. On this

backdrop, the study will seek to know how FSHS policy has fared to keep learners in school.

#### **2.4. Benefits of Free Senior High School Policy**

Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] state that the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy has positively impacted the moral development of students. This initiative ensures that all children have the opportunity to attend a school that actively contributes to their moral education by instilling societal standards of behavior. The Free SHS policy not only enhances academic progress but also fosters students' ethical and moral comprehension, enriching their overall educational experience (Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2019) [15]. Alhassan (2020) [23] highlights the significance of the quality of the educational institution in determining future educational and economic outcomes. Concerns have been raised regarding the policy's effectiveness in addressing issues of unequal access to higher-quality secondary schools. While the Free Senior High School policy aims to eliminate financial barriers to secondary education, its impact is hindered by systemic challenges within the education system, such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and variations in instructional quality across schools (Alhassan, 2020) [23].

#### **2.5. Equity in education**

Equity in education means providing each student with the necessary resources to develop fundamental skills in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic (Kwegyiriba, 2021) [20]. Mensah (2020) [24] emphasize the Ministry of Education's primary goal of providing quality education to all Ghanaians, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to equip them with the necessary skills for productivity.

Disparities in access to secondary education in Ghana have been well documented, with notable gaps based on socioeconomic status, geography, and gender (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013) [10]. Historically, students from low-income families, rural areas, and female students have encountered obstacles in accessing quality secondary education (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013) [10]. The Free SHS policy aims to mitigate these disparities by eliminating tuition fees and providing additional support to marginalized students (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018) [25].

Nevertheless, initial findings suggest uneven implementation of the policy, with certain regions and communities facing persistent challenges (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018) [25]. Factors such as school infrastructure, teaching quality, and resource distribution have been identified as influencing the equity and inclusivity of the Free SHS program (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021) [9].

Furthermore, the Ghanaian educational system continues to exhibit inequities, particularly in access to higher education and gender disparities (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013) [10]. Addressing these systemic issues is essential to ensuring that the Free SHS policy benefits all Ghanaian students, regardless of their backgrounds.

#### **2.6. Double Track System**

The Double-Track (DT) system was implemented to tackle the issues stemming from the growing number of students enrolling in top senior high schools across the country, coupled with limited infrastructure capacity (Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2019) [15]. According to Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] this innovative approach allowed schools to cater for a larger student population within the same physical space, effectively addressing overcrowding challenges during the period of free education, which witnessed a notable increase in student admissions. The DT system segregates students and faculty into two separate tracks: the Green Track and the Gold Track. Under this system, one track attends classes while the other is on break, with the rotation continuing.

The academic year typically commences with the "Green Track" attending classes for one semester while the "Gold Track" students are on break, after which they alternate. Following the introduction of the free senior high school policy in Ghana, student enrollment has surged by 50%, demonstrating the success of the Double-Track system in meeting the heightened demand for education (Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2019) [15]. Granted that the DT has catered for the overcrowding challenges in schools, the pertinent question left unanswered is what could possibly inform the rampant school dropout in Ghanaian secondary schools?

### ***2.7. Challenges of Free SHS Policy Implementation***

The Double Track system in senior high schools, despite its advantages, raises notable concerns. Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] highlight that a key issue is the disruption it causes in the learning process, instructional flow, and educational continuity. They argued that the system's extended holidays can lead to gaps in education, potentially resulting in a loss of knowledge, skills, and social values among students. Moreover, the prolonged break can offer students excessive free time, which, in some instances, may lead to unethical behaviors that could impact their moral development.

Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] also point out that the absence of co-curricular activities is a significant worry alongside the learning interruptions. The Double Track system often leads to a decrease or elimination of sports events, cultural activities, and interschool competitions. This lack of social and aesthetic benefits can affect students' holistic development, including their moral principles. The emphasis on shortening the school day and semester raises questions about whether the system prioritizes quantity over quality, potentially compromising the depth of classroom teaching and extracurricular involvement.

Furthermore, the strain on teachers' workload should not be underestimated. Educators handling multiple sessions may experience fatigue, impacting their ability to provide effective instruction. Lastly, there are social considerations to ponder, as students spending more time at home and less in class could influence their cultural values and moral growth (Tawiah & Addai-Mensah, 2019) [15].

A significant challenge has been the pressure on educational infrastructure, as the policy led to a sharp rise in student enrollment. This surge has resulted in overcrowded classrooms and a deficiency in facilities, affecting the learning environment's quality (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) [14]. Alongside this, worries have emerged about the overall educational quality, with overcrowding, inadequate teaching resources, and teacher-student ratios potentially undermining the educational experience (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) [14].

In the same vein, financial sustainability has been a hurdle, as highlighted by Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) [14]. Despite government funding efforts, questions linger about the long-term financial viability and resource allocation for ensuring quality education (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) [14]. They also stressed the emergence of teacher shortages and training issues due to the expanding student population, placing added demands on the education system. Properly training and motivating educators are vital for the policy's success.

Persistent equity and accessibility challenges remain, with concerns about whether all students, particularly those in remote areas, have equal access to quality education and resources. Adapting the curriculum to the increased educational access has proven challenging, requiring efforts to keep it relevant and responsive to the diverse student population's needs (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021) [14]. Additionally, administrative and

logistical hurdles have surfaced, especially in managing enrollment, distributing learning materials, and effectively overseeing school operations.

Base on this, this study will like to further investigate to see challenges that people in Abofour face.

### **2.8. School Dropout**

De Witte et al. (2013) [26] provide a definition of school dropout as the act of leaving education without attaining a basic credential, often a higher secondary education diploma. This concise definition effectively encapsulates the essence of school dropout. Departing from education without achieving a minimal credential, such as a higher secondary education diploma, is a significant issue due to the incomplete educational journey it signifies, with potential repercussions for individuals and society (De Witte et al., 2013) [26]. Monitoring dropout rates is common practice to evaluate the efficiency of educational systems and pinpoint areas where interventions may be necessary to assist students in completing their education and obtaining vital credentials for future success (De Witte et al., 2013) [26]. School dropout is characterized by students prematurely exiting the educational system before finishing a specific level of education or course of study. This typically involves students stopping their education before acquiring the anticipated credentials or qualifications, like a high school diploma or its equivalent. Dropout incidents can happen at various educational stages, ranging from primary school to higher education, and are often an intricate issue impacted by a variety of individual, family, societal, and educational factors (Ananga, 2011) [27]. The definition of school dropout poses a challenging and intricate task. It becomes especially convoluted when considering scenarios where a child temporarily stops attending school but later resumes their education (Ananga, 2011) [27].

The issue of school dropout, a persistent challenge in numerous African nations, carries extensive implications for both individuals and communities. The underlying causes of this phenomenon are multifaceted, involving economic, social, and educational factors that converge to create obstacles to educational achievement. Economic hardship stands out as one of the primary catalysts for school dropout. Departing from school prematurely poses a critical issue not just for the individual, the educational system, the community, or society, but for the entire nation. Individuals who leave high school prematurely face limited job prospects and, if employed, typically engage in low-skilled, low-paying roles with limited avenues for progress (Christle et al., 2007) [28]. Studies have shown that poverty significantly contributes to premature school exits (Zengin, 2021) [29]. Families facing financial difficulties may prioritize their children's work over their education, leading to early exits from the educational system.

Moreover, the indirect expenses linked to schooling, such as transportation and supplies, can present obstacles for low-income households (Imoro, 2010) [30]. Apart from economic factors, social dynamics also wield considerable influence on school dropout rates. Peer influence can play a pivotal role, as students associating with non-enrolled peers are more likely to emulate such behavior (Lonang et al., 2022) [31]. The level of parental involvement and support, or the lack thereof, can also mold a student's educational path (Lonang et al., 2022) [31]. Moreover, challenges arising within the familial environment, such as parental separation or domestic issues, have the potential to disturb a student's concentration and result in detachment from the learning process (Nasir et al., 2021) [32]. The occurrence of students leaving school prematurely is influenced by a range of factors. Various elements contribute to school dropouts, including "financial status, nature of educational program (general or vocational), pregnancy, economic hardship, discomfort, student misconduct, health issues, interests,

cultural practices, parental educational background, parental occupation, parental age, number of family dependents, living conditions, and parental involvement (Singal et al., 2020) [33]. The outcomes of dropping out of school reach beyond the individual. Psychologically, individuals may experience reduced self-worth, feelings of inadequacy, and heightened susceptibility to societal exclusion (Zengin, 2021) [29]. School dropout represents a concerning occurrence as it generates adverse effects on both personal, psychological, and communal levels.

Psychologically, the impact involves a shift in the self-perception of the student at hand, who harbors apprehensions of failure and a diminishing belief in their own capabilities. Socially, academic underachievement equates to "stigmatization" and "labeling" and frequently results in social exclusion, characterized by elevated levels of delinquent conduct (Stanica, 2019) [34]. According to Lonang et al. (2022) [31] children who abandon schooling often associate with peers who are not enrolled in educational institutions.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

This section outlines the methodology employed in conducting the study. It delves into the research design, research approach, sources of data, study population, target population, sample size, sampling technique, method of data collection, data collection instrument, reliability and validity and method of data analysis.

#### ***3.1. Research design and approach***

The study adopted a case study design based on the qualitative approach to help gather in-depth understanding of the complex issues of school dropout in a holistic manner from the Abofour community's perspective. The qualitative approach proves relevant to the study as it creates the opportunity for understanding the state of school dropout amidst the implementation of FSHS in the community.

The paper relied on first-hand information from a total of 22 identified school dropouts in the Abofour community, selected using the purposive/judgemental and the snowballing non-probability sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was selected due to several reasons. First, it facilitated focused data collection, ensuring that the individuals targeted had directly experienced school dropout under the Free SHS policy. This made the data highly valid and reliable to the research objectives. Second, the technique allowed for the conduct of an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, which is critical in qualitative research where understanding complex social phenomena is the goal (Palinkas et al., 2015) [35]. The snowball technique aided in receiving real-time recommendations and referrals from already interviewed participants so as to contact fellow FSHS dropouts in the Abofour community.

Based on the scope of the study, the sample was drawn from the target population which encompasses individuals who are temporarily or permanently out of school upon benefiting from the Free SHS, without completing their WASSCE. The units of analysis is thereby justified as they can provide direct insights into the personal, socio-economic, academic and environmental factors that informed their decision to leave school despite the availability of free education. To this end, the study sought to understand the specific challenges and barriers faced by these students, thereby identifying the underlying reasons for dropout rate under the Free SHS policy.

#### ***3.2. Research instrument design and administration***

The data collection instrument employed for the study was a semi-structured interview guide. It was a self-made interviewed guide that was designed to cover the bio

data of the study participants and the main thematic areas forming the stated objectives. The instrument allowed for quality engagement with participants on the field as well as making room for alterations and further explanations of items to those who might be challenged with the English language. The interview took a form of a 20 minutes open – ended questions where the participants were allowed to respond to the questions to their best satisfaction.

### ***3.3. Instrument Reliability and Validity***

Whereas data reliability assures that measurements made by research instruments are consistent in terms of stability of outcomes, data validity assures the researcher that the measurements are accurate as it measures what is intended (Kothari, 2004) [36]. In this study, both face and validity were achieved by crafting the interview items to measure what it is intended to measure based on subjective assessment, as well as run a pilot study with a small portion of the sample prior to the primary data collection to test the items respectively. In order to make necessary adjustments based on participants' feedback, the pilot test assisted in covering all pertinent areas and the identification of ambiguous or unclear questions for review.

### ***3.4. Method of Data Analysis***

Qualitative data obtained were presented and analysed under themes. This was done by grouping the views of the participants under recurring themes.

### ***3.5. Ethical Issues***

The study was guided by ethical principles such as anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents were first asked for their willingness to participate and they were assured that they can leave the whole exercise anytime they want.

## **4. Data Analysis and results**

This section presents the analysis of data, results presentation and discussion of the main findings. The findings are organized according to the research objectives and recurring themes that emerged from the interviews with participants who dropped out of school following the implementation of the Free SHS policy in the Abofour community.

The study adopted thematic data analyses. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within a dataset, typically in the context of textual or visual data (Bruan & Clarke, 2006) [37]. Thematic analysis involves a systematic approach to uncovering meaningful patterns and themes within the data.

The ensuing paragraphs present the overview of the key steps involved in the data analysis.

### ***4.1. Reason behind school dropout since inception of the free SHS policy implementation in Abofour.***

This research objective sought to find out the reasons why SHS students in the Abofour community dropout amidst the Free SHS Policy implementation. The emerging themes are as follows;

#### ***4.1.1. Theme 1: Financial Constraints and Economic Survival Pressures***

Economic and financial barriers refer to the challenges students face due to limited financial resources, which hinder their ability to continue or complete their education (Ghisetti et al., 2017) [38]. And from the responses, most participants asserted that financial barrier is a prime cause of school dropout under the Fee SHS Policy. For instance,

an interviewee opine that *“My family could not meet basic needs like food and shelter, so education became my lower priority”*. (Participant 12, Field interview, 2024). This was concurred by a female participant that *“I felt obligated to drop out and start working as a street vendor to support my parents because my parents are not working.”* (Participant 2, Field interview, 2024)

The reviewed literature shows that the Free SHS policy has successfully increased enrollment rates by reducing financial barriers (Boateng, 2019; Kwegyiriba & Mensah, 2021) [19,20]. This aligns with the general success of the policy in increasing access to education. However, findings from the study show that despite the policy’s intention, economic survival pressures remain a significant factor causing dropout in Abofour. In this regard, students who dropped out unequivocally, mentioned financial hardships, such as the need to work to support their families. This suggests that while the policy covers tuition and some basic necessities, deeper economic issues still force most students to prioritize financial survival over education.

#### **4.1.2. Theme 2: Struggles with Academic Comprehension and Lack of Support**

Academic challenges refer to the difficulties students encounter in their educational journey, which can impede their ability to succeed in school and may contribute to their decision to drop out. These challenges can arise from various factors related to the curriculum, instructional methods, individual learning needs, and the overall educational environment (Cavazos Jr et al., 2010) [39]. From the responses, some participants confirmed that academic challenge was the main reason of their dropped out. For instance, a participant mention that

*“I struggled with mathematics and science. I did not understand anything when the teacher teaches, because it is very difficult for me”* (Participant 4, Field interview, 2024). In line with this, another participant maintain that *“for me, I do not understand English, I cannot speak it as well. I found it difficult to understand lessons delivered in English, and because of that my performance was very poor.”* (Participant 2, Field interview, 2024). To further argue out the academic challenge menace, a breastfeeding female participant intimated that *“I did not receive adequate academic help from teachers in the school. Because of this, I was frustrated and eventually dropout.”* (Participant 6, Field interview, 2024).

The aforementioned assertions by participants corroborate with Ananga (2011) [27] observation that academic struggles are among the multifaceted reasons contributing to school dropout. When students face difficulties in understanding core subjects, it can lead to frustration and disengagement from the learning process.

The findings on the lack of adequate academic support aligns with the findings of Imoro (2010) [30] who notes that insufficient educational support and resources can significantly impact student performance and motivation. It also strongly attests to stands that effective support systems are crucial for student retention, particularly in challenging subjects like mathematics and science (De Witte et al., 2013; Kwegyiriba & Mensah, 2021) [20,26].

#### **4.1.3. Theme 3: Health-Related Barriers to Academic Continuity**

Health issues as a reason for dropping out of school refer to any physical or mental health conditions that impede a student’s ability to participate fully in their education. These issues can directly affect a student’s attendance, performance, and overall engagement in school activities (Wilkie, 2012) [40]. On this theme, most of the participants recounted issues relating to their health as a reason for their dropped out. From the field interview conducted, one participant said it clearly in tears that *“I have been suffering from chronic disease. I have to go to the hospital frequently, which made it hard for me to keep up with*

*my school work, and that eventually led to my dropout.”* (Participant 8, Field interview, 2024). Agreeing to this, another participant revealed that *“I’m struggling with mental health issues, I feel overwhelmed and anxious all the time, which makes it difficult to focus in class and do my homework.”* (Participant 18, Field interview, 2024).

This finding reaffirms that of Nasir et al. (2021) [32] that physical and mental health conditions can profoundly impact a student's educational engagement and performance. Chronic diseases and mental health issues can lead to absenteeism and difficulties in maintaining focus and completing assignments. In line with this, Zengin (2021) [29] emphasizes that health problems, whether physical or mental, can lead to significant disruptions in a student's education, ultimately contributing to dropout rates. Christle et al. (2007) [28] further illustrate that students facing health issues are more likely to struggle academically and may eventually leave school if their conditions are not adequately managed.

The current study discovered that most victims of school dropout suffered emotional and physical tolls including frequent hospital visits as well as mental health challenges. To this end, the paper aligns with Abdul-Rahim et al. (2022) [22] recommendations for comprehensive support systems for students with health issues as a mitigating tool to impact their academic achievement and retention.

#### **4.2. Causative factors of school dropout in Abofour community**

This research objective sought to ascertain the factors that pushed people of school going age in the Abofour community to dropout amidst the Free SHS Policy implementation. The contributing factors discovered were framed into the following themes.

##### **4.2.1. Theme 1: Lack of Parental Support**

Lack of parental support refers to situations where students do not receive the necessary emotional, financial, or academic encouragement from their parents or guardians to continue their education. This can manifest in several ways, each of which contributes to the risk of students dropping out of school. Parental support is crucial because it provides the foundation for a student's motivation, access to educational resources, and ability to overcome challenges. When this support is lacking, students may struggle to stay in school (Siddiqui, 2011) [41].

The field interview conducted revealed that majority of the participants rooted for lack of parental support as one of the overriding factors that contributed to their dropout. In this regard, one participant who tasted only first year SHS education said that *“My father believed education was not that important. He asked me to start working so I could support the family instead of wasting time going to school.”* The participant ended by saying *“He never wanted me to have continued my education after Junior High School.”* (Participant 11, Field interview, 2024). This assertion was hyped by a female respondents with the saying *“My parents could not afford to provide my basic needs like books and transport fare. They told me to stop going to school and help at home.”* (Participant 10, Field interview, 2024).

The findings from the participants' testimonies align closely with the literature on the economic and social factors influencing school dropout (Imoro, 2010; Zengin, 2021) [29,30]. The participants' experiences reflect the substantial impact that economic hardship and parental attitudes have on students' ability to continue their education. This finding thereby resonates with Zengin (2021) [29], which highlights how families facing financial difficulties may prioritize immediate financial contributions over long-term educational investments. It also reiterates Imoro (2010) [30] argument that indirect costs of education, such as transportation and learning materials, can present significant challenges for low-

income families. The expression that *"parents told me to stop going to school and help at home"*, further reinforces the claim that children in such households are often expected to contribute labor to support the family, particularly, in the face of financial instability.

Moreover, Lonang et al. (2022) [31] and Nasir et al. (2021) [32] discuss how parental attitudes and support play a significant role in shaping a student's educational trajectory. The current study revealed a disconnect between the value of education and the economic pressures the family faces. In this light, Nasir et al. (2021) [32] ingeminate that parental involvement, or the lack thereof, can directly influence school dropout rates, particularly when economic hardships take precedence over educational pursuits.

Overall, the participants' experiences portray that inasmuch as the Free SHS policy may address tuition-related barriers, underlying economic and social factors such as family support and the ability to provide for students' needs, continue to drive school dropout in communities like Abofour.

#### **4.2.2. Theme 2: Social and Peer Influence**

Social and peer influence refers to how a student's social environment and relationships with peers can affect their behaviour, attitudes, and decisions regarding education. In the context of school dropout, social and peer influence plays a significant role, especially in adolescence, when students are more susceptible to the opinions and behaviours of those around them. Negative peer pressure or a lack of supportive peer networks can make students to prioritize other activities over schooling, contributing to dropout (Sijtsema & Lindenberg, 2018) [42].

Peer Influence emerged as another significant factor contributing to dropout. In this regard, a male participant pointed out that *"most of my friends had already dropped out, and they kept saying school was a waste of time. After a while, I started to feel the same."* (Participant 18, Field interview, 2024). Confirming this, another participant indicated that *"I was influenced by my friends who spent more time doing business and making money, so I thought it was better to work than to continue schooling"* (Participant 19, Field interview, 2024).

The aforementioned views of participants highlight the significant role that peer influence plays in shaping students' perceptions of education. This finding is consistent with the work of Nasir et al. (2021) and Lonang et al. (2022) [31,32], who argue that when students are surrounded by peers who undervalue education, it can create a negative social environment, leading to a higher likelihood of dropping out. The finding clearly demonstrates how continuous exposure to negative attitudes about education from peers, can erode a student's motivation, reinforcing the idea that peer pressure is a critical factor in educational decision-making. As Zengin (2021) [29] noted, economic opportunities outside of school can become more appealing to students, especially when peers are engaged in business activities and earning money. In this case, peer influence is not only social but also economic, as students may perceive the immediate financial benefits of working as more tangible and rewarding than the long-term investment in education.

Additionally, Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) [10] established the interaction between economic conditions and educational outcomes. In environments where financial stability is fragile, students may be more easily swayed by friends who choose work over education, especially when education seems to offer no immediate financial rewards. The current study reaffirms the phenomenon in the Abofour community as a significant number of sampled participants revealed how social pressures from friends who had dropped out or are working, significantly diminished their perceived value of education. This thereby suggests that while the Free SHS policy aims at addressing structural barriers to education, calculated steps ought to be taken to address some social and peer-related influences to ensure students remain engaged in their schooling.

#### 4.2.3. Theme 3: Early Marriage and Pregnancy

Early Marriage and Pregnancy were discovered to be other significant factors contributing to school dropout, especially among female students in the Abofour community. These factors often lead to the interruption of education, either because of societal expectations, the responsibilities associated with marriage and parenting, or the stigma attached to early pregnancy (Birchall, 2018) [43]. In the Abofour context, early marriage and pregnancy are particularly impactful, as they force students mainly girls to abandon their education prematurely.

In this light, a participant established that *"I got pregnant when I was in my second year. After the baby was born, I could not go back to school because I had to take care of him"* (Participant 7, Field interview, 2024). This was concurred by another female participant that *"My parents arranged for me to get married when I was still in school. After the marriage, I didn't go back because I had to focus on my home duties"* (Participant 16, Field interview, 2024).

The extant literature supports this observation, noting that economic hardship and family responsibilities can significantly contribute to school dropout rates. For instance, Christle et al. (2007) [28] opine that economic difficulties, such as those arising from pregnancy, often force students to leave school prematurely to support their families or manage new responsibilities. Similarly, Zengin (2021) [29] indicated how financial constraints and added family responsibilities can hinder most students' ability to continue their education. Atuhene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) [10] earlier discussed how early marriage disrupts educational pursuits by imposing additional domestic responsibilities on young women. To this end, the current study argues that the Free SHS policy's impact on students affected by early marriage might be limited if it does not address the broader socio-cultural factors influencing educational persistence. That is, while the policy aims to reduce financial barriers, it might not fully address the underlying socio-cultural dynamics that lead to early marriages and their consequent impact on education.

#### 4.2.4. Theme 4: Economic Conditions

Economic conditions are critical factors contributing to school dropout rates, particularly in contexts where families face financial hardships. Economic challenges can create barriers that prevent students from continuing their education, either directly through financial constraints or indirectly through the impact on their overall well-being and academic performance (Olgun et al., 2010) [44]. The field interviews revealed that economic conditions are other significant contributing factors to school dropout in the community.

The extant literature labels economic hardship as one of the crucial drivers of school dropout. In this regard, Christle et al. (2007) [28] maintain that financial constraints are a major reason for students leaving school before completing their education. Similarly, Zengin (2021) [29] highlights how poverty and the need to contribute to family income can force students to abandon their studies. Flowing from the field interviews, this current study further establish the sting of economic conditions on school dropout rates. For instance, a female participant intimated that *"I dropped out because I had to work to support my family. We were struggling financially, so continuing school wasn't an option for me."* (Participant 10, Field interview, 2024). In line with this, another female student iterated that *"Sometimes I had to choose between going to school and working for daily wages to help my parents. Eventually, I stopped school altogether."* (Participant 11, Field interview, 2024).

Imoro (2010) [30] notes that the indirect costs of schooling, such as transportation and educational materials, can be significant barriers for low-income families. The experiences shared by the interviewees reflect the prevalence of economic barriers in the Abofour community, where financial responsibilities necessitate working instead of attending

school. This study thereby aligns with Abdul-Rahim et al. (2022) [22] advocacy for the need for equitable access to education, particularly, for students from economic disadvantaged backgrounds.

While the Free SHS policy aims at eliminating direct financial barriers by covering tuition and related costs, it might not have fully addressed the broader economic challenges that students face. Accepting the evaluation of Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] on how the Free SHS policy has positively impacted enrollment, this current study further expands the discourse to reveal the broader economic context, such as the need for students to contribute to family income, as one of the hurdles to scale. The policy's focus on financial assistance for school-related costs might not fully alleviate the economic pressures that compel students to prioritize work over education.

#### 4.2.5. Theme 5: School Environment

School Environment refers to the physical, social, and psychological atmosphere of a school, including the facilities, culture, and interactions among students, teachers, and staff. A positive school environment supports student engagement, learning, and overall well-being, while a negative or unsupportive environment can contribute to various challenges, including school dropout (Martrah & Mojom, 2024) [45]. To help explain the role of school environment in school dropout, a participant opine that *"the classroom was overcrowded, and the teachers did not have time to help students like myself, who were struggling. It was hard to learn in that environment, so I left."* He further buttressed that *"there was a lot of bullying in my school. I did not feel safe, and the teachers did not seem to care. I decided to stop attending school because of that."* (Participant 14, Field interview, 2024).

The issue of overcrowded classrooms affecting educational quality is discussed by Chanimbe and Dankwah (2021) [14]. They note that increased student enrollment due to policies like Free SHS has led to overcrowded classrooms, which can impede effective teaching and learning. In such environments, teachers may struggle to provide individualized attention, leading to students who need extra help falling behind. The current study positions this finding with that of Tawiah and Addai-Mensah (2019) [15] that overcrowded conditions can limit the ability of teachers to address individual student needs effectively. When teachers are overwhelmed by large class sizes, they may have less time to assist struggling students, which can contribute to disengagement and eventual dropout. To this end, the paper corroborates with the recommendations of Martrah and Mojom (2024) [45] for the need for school authorities and other stakeholders of education to institute measures aimed at creating conducive teaching and learning environment.

## 5. Conclusion

The study reveals that while the Free SHS Policy has made significant strides in improving access to education, several persistent challenges continue to push-up school dropout rates in Abofour. The current findings underscore that lack of parental support, negative peer influence, early marriage and pregnancy, economic hardships and a negative school environment are critical factors influencing students' decisions to leave school. These challenges highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing dropout rates, one that not only alleviates financial barriers, but also supports students' emotional, social, and health needs. To effectively reduce dropout rates and enhance educational retention, policymakers and stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education through curricular development by the Ghana Education Service (GES), Parent and Teachers Association (PTA) as well as the local authorities, ought to provid targeted interventions to help address these multifaceted issues and foster a supportive educational environment in the Abofour community and Ghanaian schools as a whole.

### 5.1. Policy implications

A multifaceted approach needed to be adopted to address the factors contributing to school dropout in Abofour. Educational authorities should enhance parental engagement by providing educational programs and support services to improve parental support and attitudes toward education. Schools and local government authorities of the Offinso Municipality are encouraged to implement peer mentorship and counseling programs to mitigate the negative impact of peer influence and offer positive role models. To address early marriage and pregnancy, community leaders and NGOs should prioritize awareness campaigns and support services to assist affected students as well as provide alternatives for continuing their education.

Additionally, policymakers and educational planners should develop targeted financial assistance programs and economic support for families to alleviate economic pressures. Finally, the government agencies and school administrators must work together to improve school infrastructure, reduce overcrowding, and create a safe and supportive school environment to enhance student engagement and retention. These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem, ultimately reducing dropout rates and improving overall educational outcomes.

### 5.2. Implications for further research

Future scientific investigations could be conducted to explore the effectiveness of specific parental engagement programs and their impact on student retention and performance. A qualitative research could also examine the role of peer mentorship programs in counteracting negative peer influences and how they promote educational attainment. Finally, a quantitative study could help evaluate the effectiveness of school environment improvements, such as reducing overcrowding and enhancing safety and how they impact student engagement and dropout rates. These areas of research would provide valuable insights for developing comprehensive strategies to reduce school dropout and improve educational access and quality.

Authors' Declarations

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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