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Understanding Educational Inequality and its Policy Implications: A Ghanaian School District Case

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Abstract
This study investigates structural inequalities in Ghanian basic school education to inform relevant strategies to uplift the education outcomes for rural and low-income communities. The study was designed as a case study of a Ghanaian rural local government district's basic education. Using a mixed-method approach, the study blends both qualitative data from community and households' meetings, discussions, interviews, and field notes with statistical data from the district's documents. A total of 148 people across a local government, local community, and local school level participated in this study. The findings revealed that inequality in the Ghanaian rural district researched is a problem of metro-centric education and development policies, as well as colonial legacies, layered on geographic, socio-economic, and cultural marginalisation. Therefore, the study concludes that education inequality in Ghana has more to do with the marginalisation of females., rural and low-income families' voices and cultural assets in the education process. The study recommends that local-level policy practitioners and educators approach education and development from a justice lens by re-thinking new possibilities of reaching out to, and including the most socially marginalized groups, especially females and rural and low-income families in the education process. Ghanaian policy stakeholders need to be socio-culturally sensitive and place conscious to confront the structural marginalisation when enacting education and development strategies.

Keywords: educational policy; educational inequality; basic schools; rurality; relevant strategies; critical grassroots policy analysis

Introduction

The conundrum of inequality in educational opportunities is a significant social justice problem visible in many countries globally. Educational inequality is forcing many people from underdeveloped regions to seek escape from marginalisation and poverty, and thus spreading global underdevelopment (Guenther et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2015, 2020; Winthrop, 2018).

Ghana, a West African country with a population of 31 million, is straddling an educational divide characterised by gender, geolocations, and socio-economic inequalities. Some 60% of Ghanaian school children between ages 6-18 could not achieve success in basic education in 2017. Two-thirds were children from rural communities (Ministry of Education–Ghana, 2018). Only 15% of the rural workforce, compared to over 45% of their urban counterparts, have attained a secondary education in Ghana (Amoako-Mensah et al., 2019). When poverty is measured across three broad areas of health, education, and living standards in Ghana by using Alkire and Foster's (2011) methodology, some 65% of the rural population were poor across multiple dimensions compared to 27% of urban residents (GSS 2020). Globally, measuring the extent of inequality in wealth distribution within countries, Ghana has a Gini coefficient of 43.5, making her the 39th-ranked country in the world with the worst forms of inequality (Ghana Statistical Service-GSS, 2020).

In furtherance with Ghana's renewed aspiration to create a just, learning, and sustainable nation, new education reforms ongoing since 2017 seek to enact locally responsive education that ensures that all Ghanaian children achieve success in education by (a) completing the full cycle of basic education[1] and acquiring functional skills reading, writing, arithmetic and creativity, evidenced by passing the national Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) at the end of Grade 9; (b) transitioning into and completing the full cycle of senior high school and acquiring intermediate competencies in arithmetic, literacy, digital literacy, life, problem-solving, and employment skills, then passing the West Africa Senior High School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) at the end of Grade 12, before transitioning to employment or tertiary education; and (c) becoming both locally and globally competent able to contribute to local and global sustainability. The starting point of Ghana's ongoing education reforms is to improve access, relevance, quality, and equity in basic education as a scaffold for transforming education and reducing social inequality in Ghana (Ministry of Education Ghana, 2018).

Therefore, using a case of one out of the 260 local government districts in Ghana, this study investigates the factors inducing educational inequalities in Ghana to inform leapfrogging strategies to improve education outcomes and justice for all Ghanaian children. The key research questions under investigation are as follows:

1. What is the extent of inequality in the Ghanaian basic school system?
2. What contextual factors influence educational inequality in Ghana?
3. What strategies will most effectively lessen inequality in Ghana?

Together these questions offer a fine-grained analysis of the existence of educational inequality and its contextual factors to motivate a broader theoretical discussion on ground-up strategies for enacting education justice in Ghana.

[1] Basic Education (BE) in Ghana is a 2-6-3-3 system comprising a 2-year Kindergarten, a 6-year primary school, a 3-year Junior High School, and a 3-year Senior High School. Basic Education in Ghana has two sub-sectors. The Basic School subsector provides education from kindergarten up to Grade 9. The Senior High School-upper secondary subsector provides education from grades 10-12. (Anlimachie, 2019a).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A broad research conclusion in rural and low-income communities is that children who suffer marginalisation in education due to location, history, ethnicity, race, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status (SES) have difficulties in achieving success in life (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Carter et al., 2020; Guenther et al., 2019).

Structural functionalist theorists led by Durkheim (1893) and Spencer (1898) theorised society as interrelated parts that functioned in harmony to create stable and equitable social order. Hence, social institutions, including schools, were meant to be a public good to prepare and ensure the equitable social progression of all individuals for society's collective good. However, Karl Marx's conflict theorisation of education argues that society was shaped by conflict as the capitalist bourgeois exploited the proletariat working class, creating and sustaining inequality. Social institutions and processes such as culture, education, and the system of value allocation reproduced inequality between the dominant class and minoritised groups (Burrell & Gareth, 1992).

The core-periphery analysis of the world system argues that colonisation and globalisation, as well as their attendant imperial capitalist economic system have worked together to confine the historically marginalized groups into a permanent peripheral developing economic and political region, limiting them to traditional modes of production, reliant on low-skilled labour and lower wages, rendering the peripheral regions less competitive, politically powerless and economically dependent on the core in global positioning (Macleans & Zajda, 2005).

The post-capitalist conceptualisation of inequality is characterised by complex class structures, habituated through social institutions, interest groups, collective bargaining, regionalism, and cultural differences. Therefore, collective social interests such as education must override individual interests so that both dissension and consensus drive social change toward a just society (Burrell & Morgan, 1992). In theorizing educational inequality as the relationship between knowledge and power, Taylor (1997) opined that education inequality is an amalgam of resistance, consensus, and adaptation, which in turn creates differences in outcomes for different social groupings across gender, race, and class.

Therefore, considerations of education equity are thus shaped by public policy issues of resource allocation, language, school, community cultural capital, and historical trajectories (Carter et al., 2020; Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021; Taylor, 1997). For ample, the authoritative power of the state in the allocation of resources or values constitutes a tension of a "continuous struggle between contenders of competing objectives and demands in the policy process" (Taylor, 1997 p.26). First, where, and how values and resources are located are greatly influenced by the dominant ideology and discourse. Second, government policy may be tilted toward symbolic gestures rather than a real commitment to advance justice (Rizvi-Lingard, 2010). The redistributive function of public policy in the allocation of values and resources to address inequity may be blocked by the dominant group that seeks to entrench its power (Rizvi-Lingard, 2010; Taylor, 1997). Regarding the school, it serves as an arena of transformation or reinforcement of social inequality within the broader social structure (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). The school meritocracy systems fit students into hierarchical social structures based on SES, culture, language, and ideology to perpetuate inequality. At the same time, schools can provide pathways to social mobility for low SES students toward creating an equitable society (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). Therefore, affirming learners' place and culture imperatives in school is critical to promoting social equity and social mobility for all (Anlimachie et al., 2023; Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021).

The above review shows that social inequality is inevitable and structural, needing a fine-grained analysis to inform contextually relevant equity-based strategies. Educational inequality is thus

defined in this study as the structural clustering of society into the core-periphery region of low and high social classes that causes deprivation of dignity, self-determination, recognition, actualisation, participation, and sustainability of the marginalised groups. The term is used interchangeably with "marginalisation" in this study to refer to historically colonised, low-SES rural communities and minority groups who are marginalised by the mainstream educational process. Therefore, the theorisation of educational inequality requires a critical and holistic policy approach transcending micro- and macro-level structures, politics; culture, and practice dynamics to bring about a more in-depth understanding of the broad discursive field and the contexts in which policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated to see the mediation among policymakers, practitioners, and beneficiaries and the linkages among policy text, practice and outcomes (Taylor, 1997).

The study is framed as a critical grassroots-based policy study (Taylor, 1997), drawing on social justice/equity theories and Bourdieu's (1998, 1990) socio-cultural theories of habitus and cultural reproduction, and complemented by Amin's (1976) core-periphery socioeconomic analysis. The critical grassroots policy lens draws inspiration from Taylor's (1997) work on the fine-grain analysis of education policy that elicits grassroots evidence to feed into the national policy process.

Carnoy's (1999) equity-driven framework for education policy argues for approaches that enhance equity within education to lift vulnerable groups from exclusion and poverty to facilitate social stability. Tomasevski's (2006) four-fold (4-As) schema to rights-based education also argues that for education policy to maximise equitable outcomes, it must consider the importance of the four interrelated concepts of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability to education to reconstruct inclusive education for social justice. There is a need for teachers to appreciate how educational inequality is reproduced across regions, generations, and social groups and to think spatially when designing transformative pedagogy to improve education equity (Anlimachie, 2022).

According to Bourdieu's (1986) socio-cultural theory, each habitus endows its participants – individuals, families, and community – with some amount of cultural capital, including cultural assets, wealth, knowledge, and skills for personal and societal advancement. However, these cultural capitals are distributed, affirmed, and utilise unequally to create social inequality. For example, the formal school system through its credential process and language tends to maintain a pre-existing order of affirming the cultural capital of the dominant group, while relegating minority cultures to the school gate to create social inequality in terms of school achievement, school progression, social mobility, and employment opportunities (Anlimachie, 2023). However, Mills (2008) argues that Bourdieu's cultural reproduction has a transformative perspective of the possibilities for the formal school system to be a transforming arena for promoting social justice and social mobility by embracing minoritised cultural capital.

The above-tested theories present a more practical and reasonable route of inquiry for this present study to engage with educational stakeholders to elicit grassroots evidence to understand the contextual or structural factors reproducing educational inequality in Ghana and to inform contextually relevant strategies towards educational justice and sustainable local community futures. This grassroots approach informs the study's critical grassroots education policy analysis methodological framework. Such critical grassroots analysis deepens the understanding of the relationship among power, practice, and action interests among educational stakeholders, shaping values allocation, deployment of cultural capital, and their impact on education outcomes (Anlimachie, 2019b; Taylor, 1997; Downes et al., 2021). The critical grassroots policy lens questions the institutionalised cultural structures, Westernised and urbanised-based educational approaches that marginalise the rural and low-income communities in education (Downes et al., 2021). This critical grassroots policy research methodological framework seeks to "address injustice within a lived domain" (Madison, 2005, p.5).

Methods and Methodology

The study's design was a case study using a mixed-method approach. The study's mixed-method approach concurrently collected and mixed both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). The qualitative data from a community meeting, household discussions, interviews, and fieldnotes was supported with statistical data from the municipal district policy and reports documents. The quantitative data tracks the existence of educational inequality in the study district. On the other hand, the qualitative data provides a deeper explanation of the contextual or structural issues fanning the inequality from research informants' lived experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

The site(s) of the study was a Ghanaian rural local government district that also doubles as a school district. Cluster and purposive samplings were blended to select one predominantly rural district from the 260 districts in Ghana, as well as one rural and one urban basic school in the district for the study (Bryman, 2012). The Asunafo North is a predominantly rural agrarian district with ethnic and religious diversity and less educated people. A total of 148 participants across a local government, local community, households, and a local school participated in the study in a major community meeting, two household discussions, and three one-on-one interviews.

The local government participants included three municipal officials, one each for pre-tertiary education, health, and civic education. The municipal officials joined the community and the school-level participants in one major community meeting discussion on education improvement in the district. Another municipal-level education official – the Municipal Education Examination Officer – participated in the interview.

The second group comprised the school-level participants. Two schools received site visits as part of this study. They were one urban private basic school and one rural public basic school. The principal of the private basic school participated in this study by means of an interview. The rural basic school principal participated in an interview as well as in one major community meeting discussion. Four teachers from the selected rural basic school also participated in the community meeting.

Community-level informants made up the third participant group. They included two households of 13 and 10 members respectively in one selected rural community that received site visits. Resident adult family members of the households participated in group (household/family) discussions. The selected rural households' adult members also participated in one major community meeting. Also, some 119 community members joined the school, household, and local government informants in the one major community meeting discussion organised at the selected rural community in the study district. The meeting discussed how to improve education equity and outcomes in the district.

Field notes from researchers' observations were also used to document rural education realities from the three interrelated sites. This was augmented by the analysis of document data from district and national reports.

The qualitative data analysis used a grounded theory approach. The qualitative data from the community and household meetings, interviews, and field notes were analysed thematically. The analysis threads together with key sensitising concepts emerged inductively from the systematic gathering and analysis of qualitative data. The key themes highlighting the essence of informants' experiences were captured (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

The statistical data from the district's documents were analysed quantitatively using Excel and the results were presented in tables and figures to foreground the emerging themes from the qualitative data. A summative write-up was then used to analyse the qualitative part of the document data tracking the central themes (Rapport, 2010) to combine with the qualitative data. This study reports focused on projecting the lived experiences of the participating groups, rather than individual informants.

This study was signposted by sound ethical adherence, informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and navigating the study's limitations to achieve credible results (Bryman, 2012). Ethical approval was sought and received from relevant institutional, international and local authorities. Approval was sought from relevant municipal local government and education offices in Ghana. Oral approval was given by the traditional council of the study community. The study was sensitive to, and was conducted within the acceptable cultural norms of the research community.

Results and Discussion

The extent of inequality in the Ghanaian education system

This section uses document data to quantitatively analyse the inequality in education in the study district. The selected indicators were students' achievement in national assessment tests, school participation rates, and the distribution of school infrastructure.

To begin with, the analysis of the study district's students' performance at the national BECEs from 2001-2018 shows gender, socioeconomic, and geolocation disparities. The BECE is a comprehensive school-leaving test at the end of lower secondary school (junior high school [JHS]) conducted every year to place students into senior high school (SHS). The BECE measures basic competencies in arithmetic, literacy, and social and problem-solving skills.

First, Figure 1 presents students' achievement data at the BECE across gender. The percentages represent the total JHS candidates achieving the required minimum pass mark for SHS placement at the end of basic school (Grade 9). It shows gender inequality in learning outcomes, with girls underperforming at school compared to boys. For example, the 2015 BECE results had a 69% pass rate for boys, against 61% for girls, while the 2016 results recorded 78% for boys and 72% for girls.

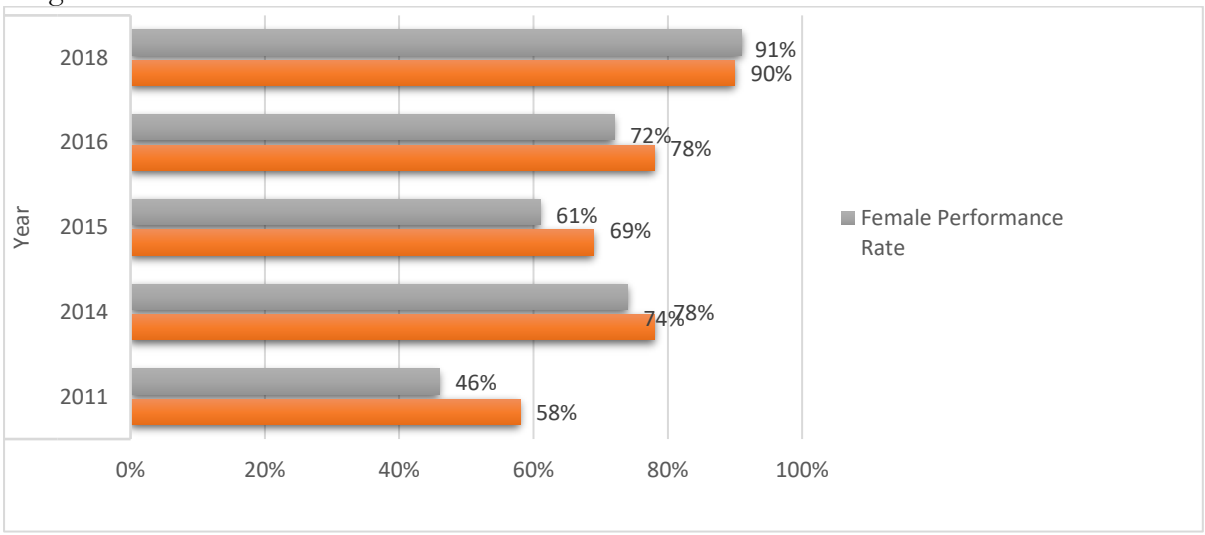

Figure 1: District's Gender Disparity in Students' Achievement at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (2011-2018)

Source: Authors' computation based on secondary data [on Excel document] collated from the Asunafo North Municipal Education Office

The analysis of the district's BECE results also revealed disparities in student achievement across socioeconomic status. In probing the educational inequality in the study district based on the socioeconomic or class dimension, the study analysed the BECE results from the public-private school dichotomy. This comparison was appropriate as the fee-paying private schools in the district tend to attract students from high-income families, as against the public schools which were free and thus affordable to low-income families. Figure 2 classifies the private–public status of the highest-ranked 20 of the 104 JHSs in the study district, based on the cumulative scores of students in the BECE 2015 to 2018. The results show a higher performance for private schools compared with those of public schools.

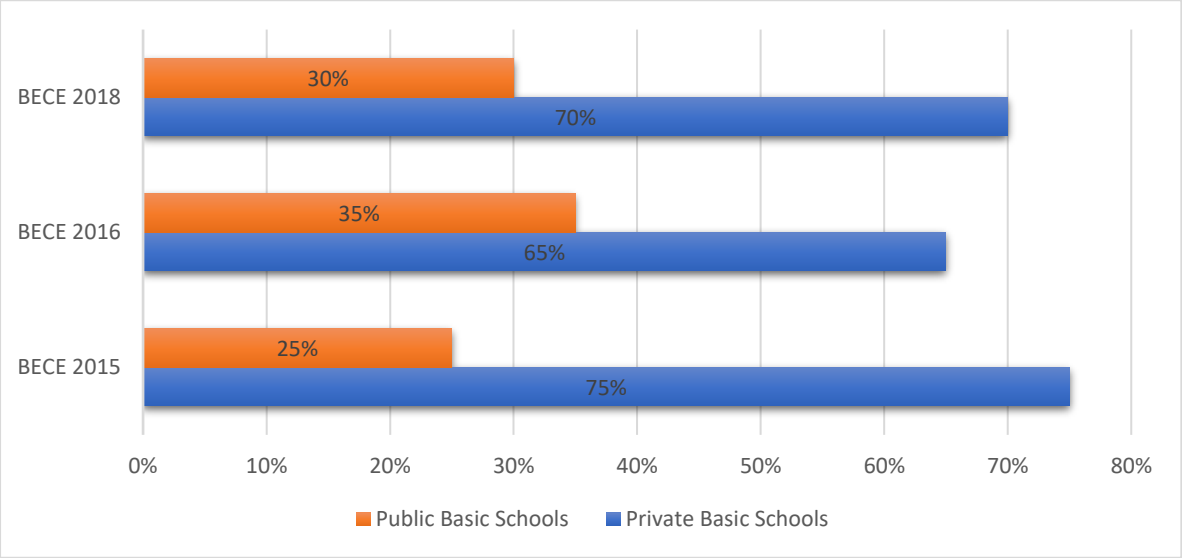

Figure 2: Private versus Public Basic Schools' Academic Performance, Distribution of the Twenty best ranked Junior High Schools at the BECE 2015-2018, Asunafo North

The study district's performance on the national BECE test also shows rural-urban inequality in student achievement. Figure 3 presents data on the rural-urban dynamic in BECE performance in 2015 and 2018. The results show a wide rural-urban gap in students' achievement. The urban basic schools scored a 72% pass rate in the 2015 BECE, compared to 54% for the rural basic schools. Also, some 16% of the rural basic schools scored zero per cent (0%) in the 2015 BECE (indicating that none of the students in those schools qualified for SHS placement), compared to 3% zero-scored by urban basic schools.

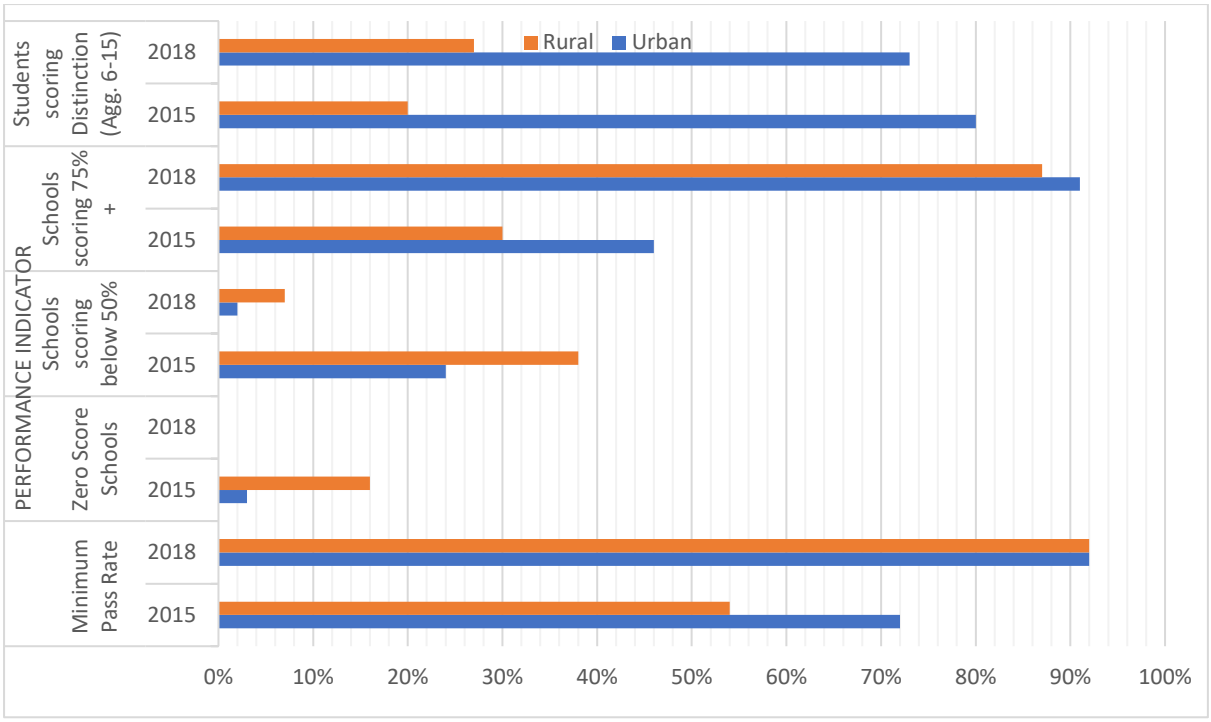

Figure 3: The District's Rural-Urban Disparity in the 2018 Basic Education Certificate Results
Source: Examination reports sourced from the Asunafo North Education Office, Ghana

The rural–urban access to education infrastructure in the study district was also analysed using the distribution of schools. Figure 4 shows that 80% of all the private schools, 69% of pre-schools, and 100% of SHSs and tertiary institutions were all concentrated in the urban areas of the study district. This indicates that rural children have less physical access to school, with less choice and longer distances to travel compared to their urban counterparts.

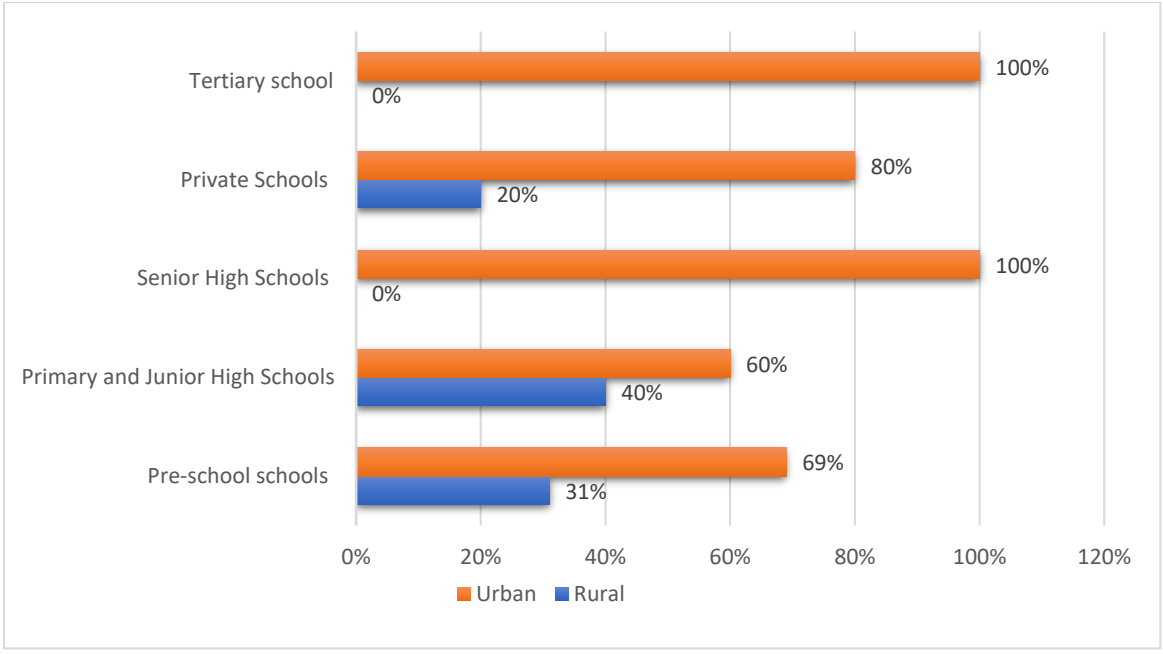

Figure 4: District's Rural-urban Inequality in Education Providers
Source: Author Analysis based on 2019 school data collated from the Municipal Education Office, Asunafo North Municipality, Ghana

Also, data on school participation rates show gender binaries. The school participation rate in the district for 2017 (Table 1) shows 74% for boys and 65% for girls, indicating more girls were did not attend school, compared with boys. Girls in the study district thus lagged behind boys in school participation rates owing to sociocultural factors, increasing social problems, and poverty.

Table 1: School Participation Rate [2017], Asunafo North

Level	Gender	
	Boys	Girl
KG	32.4	31.7
Primary (Grade 1-6)	99.5	91.2
JHS (Grade 7-9)	88.6	73.1
Basic School	73.5	65.3
SHS (Grade 10-12)	45.9	40.5

Source: Authors' computation based on 2019 enrolment data collated from the Municipal Education Office of the study District

Comparatively, the study district's overall education outcomes reflected the national picture of low education outcomes, rural-urban differences, and gender inequality. The findings resonate with similar studies (Amoako-Mensah et al., 2019; Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Anlimachie et al., 2022; Anlimachie, 2015; 2016; 2022) in Ghana that the stark educational inequality in Ghana is insufficient in meeting local and national development needs or creating a just and sustainable local community. Understanding the contextual or structural factors behind inequality in Ghana is needed to inform relevant interventions as analysed next.

Contextual factors driving educational inequality in Ghana

This section uses the qualitative data to distil the contextual factors driving educational inequality in the study district. Their effects were elicited from the study informants through one community meeting discussion, two separate household discussions, and four interviews.

The data revealed that socio-culturally constructed gender-prescribed roles, increasing girls-related social problems and poverty tend to marginalise girls in education in Ghana. The community meeting discussion elicited explanations that in the immediate, past women's role was relegated to the kitchen. Families were not much interested in seeing their girl-child through education to the highest level, hence the illiteracy rate among women in the district was higher than that of the men. Also, families (in this district) have higher expectations for boys' schooling compared to those of girls. In most homes, when families are faced with choosing between boys' and girls' education due to financial constraints, they tend to prefer boys over girls, with the view that their girls have higher risks of terminating their education at any point owing to pregnancy and marriage.

Other respondents linked the low girls' participation in school and school success to the increasing girls-related social problems and rural poverty. Research respondents at the community meeting reported that there were increasing social problems such as early marriage, teenage pregnancies, and single parenthood which tended to affect girls' education (Community meeting). The community meeting further elicited responses that owing to the high levels of poverty in their rural communities, some families are not able to provide basic sanitation for their teenage girls. This contributes to school absenteeism during the menstrual period. Furthermore, some of these girls are lured into sexual relationships for financial upkeep. Some of these girls are at risk of dropping out of school owing to teenage pregnancies (Municipal Officer at the community meeting).

Analyzing the above data on girls' education in the district from Bourdieu's (1990) cultural reproduction lens, the study district appears to be a traditionally male-dominant society. These

structural gender-prescribed social-cultural roles tend to marginalise females in education and the decision-making process. Also, owing to social problems such as poverty, teenage pregnancies, and early parenting, girls' school participation has been reduced, and thus school transition and social mobility. This finding corroborates Mohammed's (2016) study on community participation in Ghana which found that although social participation in development has been expanded in Ghana, women still tend to be excluded owing to cultural and financial reasons. The emerging theme of gender inequality in education and development in the district also resonates with Adjei et al.'s (2020) study on Ghana which revealed that Ghanaian traditional socio-cultural practices on inheritance and succession tended to deprive women of access to land as well as a voice in family land-use decision-making. This structural marginalisation against women in Ghana requires deliberate interventions that target women for social and economic empowerment.

The district context also revealed socioeconomic inequality in education. Commenting on the public–private basic schools' achievement gap in the BECE, an educator, the private school principal opined that following the abolition of cost in public basic schools in Ghana, as against the competitive cost charged by the private BSs, the only comparative advantage for the private school was to remain in business to maintain an image of excellence by outperforming the public schools in the BECE to attract more prospective fee-paying students from the wealthy elite class. Therefore, private school owners hold teachers strictly to account to ensure that students attain higher learning outcomes (Interview). Also, the admission process for private schools is based on rigid entrance examinations to select the best students, compared to the public-school admission process, which was open to all children, in line with the government's compulsory universal basic education policy (community meeting discussion). It also came to the fore that families of academically gifted children preferred to enrol them in private schools, along with students from wealthy and elite families with the view to their children achieving better grades at the BECE and earning admission into the elite SHSs in Ghana (Interview).

Therefore, there was an apparent institutionalised stratification of children into private and public schooling based on family incomes and prior learning abilities. By accepting high-performing students from middle-class and wealthy families, private BSs maintained their higher achievement levels and were thus able to transition children from the wealthy and elite class to the elites SHSs in Ghana. On the other hand, by embracing all children, the challenge of teaching becomes much more complex in public schools. Hence, many public-school students tend to achieve low scores at the BECE and thus miss out on placement into the elite SHSs[2].

The socioeconomic inequality in education outcomes in the district mimics reflects the entire Ghanaian context. Almost 99% of JHS graduates who achieved placement in the 5% top (elite) SHSs in Ghana attended private JHSs in urban areas. Further, students from the elite SHSs take up some 90% of the places in tertiary institutions in Ghana (Ministry of Education-Ghana, 2018). Therefore, the educational inequality based on SES is carried over from the basic to the higher education level to perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities in Ghana. Therefore, Bourdieu's (1998) concern that the practicability of schooling to reproduce social inequality by either explicitly or implicitly reinforcing the cultural capitals of the middle class at the expense of the lower class was therefore evident in Ghana and required leapfrogging strategies.

[2]Ghana's Ministry of Education classified public SHS into well-endowed (elite) and less endowed SHS based on the level of infrastructure and history of WASSCE results. The national Computerized School Selection Placement Systems (CSSPS) that places JHS graduates into SHS classifies public SHSs into categories A, B, C and D, and E schools based on the level of demand. Prospective applicants are made to select one school choice in each of the four categories for SHS placement. The categories A and B schools are the high performing oversubscribed top 5% and 20% elites SHSs.

As regards the underlying factors for the rural-urban inequality in education outcomes (Figure 3), the voices of the study informants summarised in Table 2 suggest that it had a link with the rural–urban disparities in income and access to opportunities, low rural income, less physical access to school, fewer school choices, and low family education attainment level, among other contextual factors (as summarised in Table 3). These work together to marginalise rural children in education in Ghana.

Table 2: District's Rural-urban Dichotomy in Education Provision Challenges

Urban	Rural
Age-appropriate enrolment due to proximity to and the availability of school, and better transportation	Late school enrolment due to long travelling distances to school occasioned by the inequitable distribution of schools and poor transportation network
Urban schools appear better staffed with quality and experienced teachers	The rural schools have more non-professionally trained and less experienced teachers. They are hard to staff
Better supervision by the circuit supervisors (CSs) due to proximity	Low supervision: Irregular visits to rural BSs by the CSs due to remoteness and long travelling distances and transportation logistical challenges
Higher teacher retention rates in urban communities promote the continuity of school culture	High teacher turnover in rural schools' limits collaborative school cultures
Urban families are better able to support education owing to comparatively better socioeconomic status	Rural families are less able to support education owing to high poverty rates and low educational attainment
Urban investment into education is higher than in rural areas due to comparatively better income and low dependency burden	Rural income support for education is low due to comparatively low incomes and high dependency burdens.
Urban schools are comparatively better equipped as urban families can exert political pressure and demand their rights to education and are better able to contribute financially to support school development owing to their relatively better income level	Most rural schools are poorly equipped with infrastructure, ICT, and IMs. Family financial support for school infrastructure improvement is low due to low-income levels. High rural dependency ratio diminishing rural investment in education
The urban population has relatively better access to improved housing conditions. This attracts and retains teachers in school	Rural areas are characterised by poor housing with poor water and sanitation facilities. Poor rural housing deters teachers from living in rural communities. Most rural teachers commute to school from nearby populated towns with relatively better social amenities. This travel time contributes to teacher lateness and absenteeism, and high teacher turnover
Urban areas have better access to social amenities and services such as electricity, water, waste management, roads, ICT, and banking, among others.	The poor access to social amenities and absence of services such as banking and the Internet in most of the rural communities in the municipality contributes to the problems of low retention of professionally trained teachers in the rural BSs in the municipality. Rural teachers tend to travel longer distances to access their salaries at urban centres. This contributes to teachers' absenteeism

Source: Community meeting discussion, household discussions, interviews, document analysis, and fieldnotes

Table 3: Contextual Challenges Reproducing Educational Inequalities in the Study District

Area	Impact of contextual challenges on children's learning
Geography& Population	– Tropical climate, including tropical rainfall, high incidence of malaria, diarrhoea and intestinal worms among children, which adversely increase school absenteeism – Long travelling distances and family work intensification reduce family time and energy to support children's learning at home. – Rural children and women cover considerable distances to collect firewood and water for domestic use. This diminishes the time and energy required for formal learning opportunities at home
	– High dependency burden limits families' ability to meet the basic educational needs of children financially
Livelihood	– Low and seasonal nature of income impacts households' financial support for education – Labour-intensive and rain-fed small-holding agriculture livelihood in the community leads to low productivity and thus low income to support – The rotational farming culture and its attendant movement of some families across communities negatively impacts children's school transition – Child labour – Lack of storage facilities for agricultural produce
Amenities	– Poor social amenities, including the lack of access to electricity. Children spend much time collecting water and firewood which competes with their school learning time at home – Poor ICT infrastructure limits the acquisition of digital competencies and promotion of collaboration – Poor housing does not create a conducive environment for children's school learning at home or attract teachers to live in the community – About 25% of rural households lack reliable lighting to facilitate children's learning in the evenings
Cultural and social	– Intense social changes introduced by colonisation, globalisation, migration, Christianising national laws, Christianised, and superimposing Islamised values on traditional values have sparked a movement towards individualisation and nuclear family living, thus, weakening the extended family value system of collective care for children. – Gender-prescribed socio-cultural roles leads to injustice against women – Increasing rural outmigration denies some children parental care and support from older family members in school learning at home – The multi-ethnic context of the district and its school classrooms have introduced the challenge of a mismatch between students-teachers' linguistic backgrounds, adversely impacting culturally responsive pedagogy
Education	– Low educational attainment level in rural communities deprives children of role models to cherish higher aspiration – The high teacher turnover in rural schools limits enduring collaborative culture for school success – There are challenges of age range within classrooms, late school enrolment, absenteeism, students' lateness, school repetition, and dropouts linked to long travelling distance

Source: Data elicited from participants at community meetings, and researchers' field observation

Another structural challenge underpinning inequality in Ghana is traced to the country's colonial legacy in development approaches. In acknowledging the impact of the colonial imprints on Ghanaian education at the community meeting, the participating municipal education officer explained that the colonial education system focused on arithmetic and English language acquisition to support the colonialist mission of trade and political domination. After independence, the colonial model dominates learners' life worlds and traditionally valued skills. There has been a new focus since 2017 to change and tailor education to Ghanaian needs (community meeting). A community member, an elder, who had experienced a taste of the British colonial system, observed that the adopted British colonial education system promotes the Western ideology of individualism at the expense of the collective way of life known by their

tradition, leading to the weakening of traditional social values and the quality of care for children (Household discussion). Also, participants at the community meeting cited increased child delinquency, teenage pregnancies, weakening parenting, and child welfare as some of the fallouts of the Westernised individualistic culture that has weakened their traditionally valued collective way of living.

The imprint of the colonial educational legacy on the Ghanaian psyche was further observed during a field visit to a private BS in the municipal capital which was deemed as high performing. In entering the school compound, there was a bold inscription on the school entrance which read: "Speaking in the vernacular is prohibited" (Fieldnote*)*. A subsequent follow-up interview with the municipal education officer on this issue revealed that the private BSs in the municipality, as in the rest of Ghana, prohibit students from speaking the local language in school, except during Ghanaian language lessons, with the view of carving an elitist image to attract students. The public attached prestige to private schools because they tend to speak the English language better than those in public schools and judge schools' performance based on the level of the English proficiency of their students (Interview). Therefore, was a general majority view in the research district that associates school success and high socioeconomic status with the speaking of colonial languages such as English. The emphasis on English proficiency resonates with the 21st-century reality where the English language has become the international language of academia, business, and diplomacy. However, downplaying local languages in school deepens the school–home cultural gap. This cultural gap denigrates rural children's cultural assets in school since their families mostly use local languages at home, compared with urban elite educated families who use English at home.

The colonial imprinted educational orientation was also apparent in the district's educational discourse, accountability for learning outcomes, and pedagogies, which were heavily driven by Western ideologies. For example, teachers, students, and schools' achievements were mostly judged based on test results. Therefore, the dominant interventions, pedagogies, and assessment tools were also tilted to test score improvement, teaching to the test, and root memorisation, rather than teaching to learners' life worlds and measuring learners' achievement in culturally valued competencies. This finding collaborates with the findings of Guenther et al. (2019) and Unsworth's study (2013) in an Australian rural remote indigenous school context that also found that rigid testing or accountability regimes tend to stifle local innovative learning and alienate learners' home cultural assets from the learning process. The rigid testing and accountability mechanism was incapable of measuring learners' cultural competencies, leading to low learning outcomes and the stereotyping of rural schools as non-performing. The pernicious effect of colonisation on the study district's education was a stumbling block for achieving education relevance and rural-urban equity. From Davies's (2018) decolonisation and indigenous epistemic lenses, decolonisation infused with cultural responsiveness is thus required to break the persistent colonial legacy impacting equitable educational experiences for rural and low-income communities in Africa.

In analysing the effect of educational inequality in the study district from Amin's core-periphery lens (Figures 6 & 7), the study found that the poor educational outcomes in the study district, particularly outside urban areas, had created a rural-urban development gap. This study termed this development conundrum as the four-square cycle jeopardy of rurality (Figure 6).

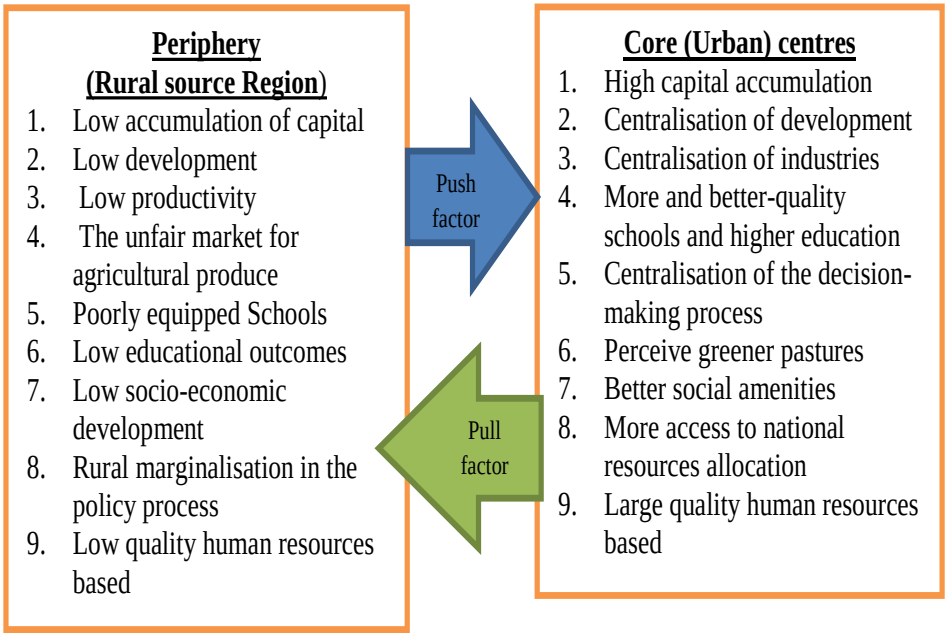

Figure 5: Core-Periphery Model Analysis of Development in the Study District

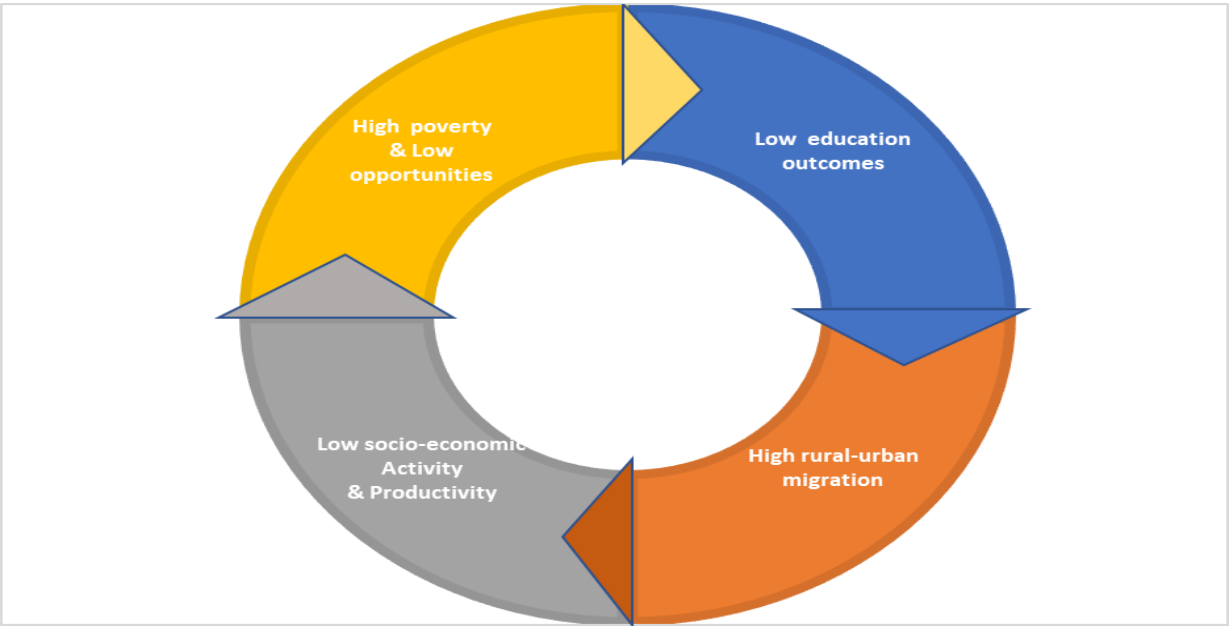

Figure 6: The Four-square Cycle of Jeopardy of Rurality in Ghana
Source: Authors' conceptualisation

The persistent chain of underdevelopment in the rural periphery areas of Ghana set into motion by the rural-urban inequality in education and development opportunities in turn triggers poor rural education outcomes to produce low rural productivity and a lack of sustainable local jobs. This then translates to high rural poverty, which further fuels high rural-urban migration. The rural-urban migration in turn transfers underdevelopment from rural to urban areas evident in overcrowded Ghanaian cities, urban housing deficit, and urban waste management challenges in Ghana. Most of the rural youth who migrate to the cities in search of jobs are those who have not

achieved success in basic education. Therefore, because the acquired skills of these rural migrants do not match urban jobs, they end up being un-/under-employed (Amoako-Mensah et al., 2019; Avoada et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a strong nexus between rural marginalisation in educational opportunities and national underdevelopment. Thus, improving educational outcomes and justice for rural communities is tantamount to tackling and curtailing national and global underdevelopment from the rural areas as the source region.

Strategies that can best reduce educational inequality in Ghana

The analysis of the extent of, and the contextual factors driving educational inequality in the study district show that rural children, girls, children from low-income families, and those attending public schools were the most educationally marginalised in Ghana. This marginalisation is due to poverty, higher risk of diseases, remoteness or long travelling distance, low access to services, some socio-cultural barriers and insufficient affirmation of families' cultural assets in schooling. This elevates the significance of Bourdieu's habitus conceptualisation of education, requiring policy actors and educators to be place- and socio-culturally sensitive in pursuing educational justice.

Tackling the structural inequality from an equity lens in Ghana requires leapfrogging the inequality approach to education (Anlimachie et al., 2022). Such leapfrogging inequality strategies must be both culturally responsive and place based. The culturally responsive strategy must bridge the home–school cultures to ensure all students achieve academic success, advance their community cultural heritage, gain access to dominant practices, and challenge existing social injustice (Anlimachie et al., 2023; Guenther et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Education stakeholders must collaborate to embrace the realities of the uniqueness of rural–urbanites spaces and culture in designing education curricula, and developing interventions to maximise local relevance in their outcomes (Anlimachie et al., 2023; Lewin, 2007; Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021). Such place-based strategies must be holistic transcending rural housing, livelihood, and health needs as also argued by Anlimachie (2022).

Also, the pernicious effect of colonisation on education and development outcomes in Ghana requires a decolonisation approach targeted at rolling back the negative colonial legacies that have infiltrated the local culture, education, and development approaches. This resonates with the views of Anlimachie (2023a,b), Emeagwali and Dei (20114), and Hlalele, (2019) on decolonizing and indigenizing approaches to education in Ghana and Africa. These argue for the need to fetch back and blend African traditionally valued social norms, skills, and ways of knowing doing and being with modern approaches to enact culturally sustaining development paradigms that meet African and global needs.

This Ghanaian school district's structural inequality requires rethinking educational transformation toward educational justice, social mobility, and education for sustainability. Policymakers, educators, and community-level education stakeholders in Ghana need to embrace learners' backgrounds and cultural capital as resources in education to create new opportunities for all children to succeed in BS education, resonating with the views of Anlimachie et al. (2023) and Hasnat and Greenwood (2021).

Conclusion and recommendation

The study identified that inequality in the study district and Ghana as a whole, and elsewhere with a similar context is a problem of colonial legacies, culturally prescribed-gender roles, metro-centric education, and development policies layered on geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural marginalisation. In the Ghanaian rural district researched, the study identified some traditionally gender-prescribed roles that limit females' participation in education and development. Also colonial hangovers in education, and a skewed allocation of educational resources tended to exclude rural communities and their cultural capital in education. Further apparent institutionalised

stratification of children into private and public schooling based on family incomes and prior learning abilities was also identified as deepening inequality in the study district. These structual marginalisation reproduce inequality in Ghanaian society.

Therefore, the study concludes that education inequality in Ghana has more to do with the marginalisation of females, rural voices, and low-income families' voices and cultural assets in the education process. Therefore, policy practitioners and educators must approach education and development from a justice lens by re-thinking new possibilities of reaching out to and including the most socially marginalised groups, especially females, and rural and low-income families in the education process. Policy stakeholders need to be socio-culturally and place-conscious about the contextual challenges that reproduce the development deficit in Ghana in designing education and development strategies. The policy process must leverage the wealth of local cultural capital, traditionally valued skills, and collectivist approaches as resources to enact relevant strategies to meet the development needs of the people at the grassroots level while positioning them as global citizens. The study therefore recommends culturally and geographically responsive strategies, with equity, place-based, assets-based, rural, and decolonial lenses as a ground-up approach to rebuilding education justice for substantial community futures.

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