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## Education for the “Freebies” Generation: Teenage Mothers in the Classrooms

George Asante<sup>1\*</sup>, Samuel Bentil<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

With barely half a decade remaining to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets outlined in the 2030 Agenda, and as part of the promise to equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all (SDG 4.5), the effective and efficient practices of girl-child education and empowerment are recognized. In qualitative case study fieldwork in the Ayensuano District in the Eastern Region of Ghana, data from 83 assistant headteachers during a workshop/conference on Child Labour Issues and Safe School Environment was gathered through unstructured discussion or interview. This was to better understand teachers' and parents' talk on basic education for teenage mothers in the light of Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy. The discussion discloses interesting perspectives from teachers and parents about adolescent mothers in the classrooms such as the uncritical behaviour of a “freebies” generation, the needless pampering of teenage mothers or expectant mothers which will be a form of insult to unmarried/childless/infertile teachers., the poorly resourced nature of our schools to cater for them, an addition to the already large workload of teachers, and a negative form of influence on ‘good’ or ‘morally upright’ students. Could these perspectives fit the “progressive” description of Ghana's Basic Education, the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.5, the Era of Leaving No Child Behind, and the hope of building the World We Want?

### INTRODUCTION

In 2015, world leaders agreed to 17 Global Goals (Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs). As part of that they promised equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all. However, efficient and effective equitability and inclusivity for quality of education require more action, especially in basic schools. This SDG targets 4.5. commits substantially to eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous people, and children in vulnerable situations (United Nations, 2024; UNESCO, 2017). The target further expects that all girls and boys, women and men, should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education. Adolescent girls and young women, who may be subjected to gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy and a heavy load of household chores, as well as those living in poor and remote rural areas, require special attention.

Therefore, Ghana responded to the SDG 4.5 call by adopting the Inclusive Education Policy in 2015 as an approach to accommodate all children in schools regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. It includes children with disabilities; gifted, street and working children; children from remote or nomadic populations; children from linguistic, ethnic, gender or cultural minorities; and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups. Expectant and delivered mothers should be included or accepted in the school. There should be no

threats, nicknames and harassment levelled against them (Ghana VNR, 2022; 2019).

Findings from the rapid assessment of school absenteeism and dropout by girls show that school attendance and completion rates have improved at all levels, however teenage pregnancy is a major contributor to school absenteeism and dropout among girls, particularly in rural areas (Ghana Factsheet, 2020). We focus this piece on the teenage mother, or adolescent expectant mother who is a girl-child in the basic education classroom.

### Contextualizing Girl-Child Education within Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy

Since Ghana's independence, its successive governments have recognized education's indispensable role in the country's socio-economic development. Accordingly, some measures have been and continue to be taken to expand education at all levels. The evolution of education in Ghana since its beginnings in the nineteenth century has involved all levels of education from preschool, primary, middle (now junior high), secondary, and teacher training to tertiary. The Inclusive Education Policy of Ghana draws on several national and international commitments to the provision of education for all. At the national level, it confirms government pronouncements in the 1992 Constitution to ensure that every Ghanaian is afforded equitable opportunity in terms of access to quality education (FCUBE), the Accelerated Development Plan of 1951, the Education Act of 1961, and the Ghana Government's Education Strategic Plan 2010-20 (Ministry of Education, 2013; Ekundayo, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Department of Business and Social Sciences Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

\* Corresponding author's e-mail: [asantegeorge931@gmail.com](mailto:asantegeorge931@gmail.com)

It further draws on other national legal documents including the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA), the Disability Act, and the Education Act. It is also based on the international commitments to education to which Ghana is a signatory, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); the World Declaration on Education for All - Jomtien (1990); the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 1993); the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994); the Millennium Development Goals (2000); The Dakar Framework for Action (2000); and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (MOE, 2013).

The overarching goal of Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy is to redefine and recast the delivery and management of educational services to respond to the diverse needs of all learners within the framework of Universal Design for Learning and Child-Friendly School Concept. The policy, therefore, covers learners beyond the differently-abled children who experience barriers to achieving optimal progress in their learning and development. It recognises the different groups of learners which include but are not limited to persons with intellectual disability, street children, gifted and talented persons, nomadic children (shepherd boys, fisherfolks children and domestic child workers), persons with physical disability, children exploited for financial purposes, persons with specific learning disability, persons with autism, children living with HIV/AIDS, persons with attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder, persons with hearing impairment, persons with visual impairment, persons with deaf-blindness, persons with speech and communication disorders, persons with other health impairment and chronic diseases (rheumatism, epilepsy, asthma, spina bifida and sickle cell anaemia), children displaced by natural catastrophes and social conflicts, persons with multiple disabilities, persons with emotional and behaviour disorder (MOE, 2018; 2013).

The underlying principles of Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy considers that:

- Every child has the right to quality education; thus, all children should have equal opportunity to access education.
- All children can learn and benefit from education.
- No child should be excluded from, or discriminated against within, education on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, age, class or social group, religion, political or other opinion, national, or ethnic origin, poverty, disability, birth, or any other status.
- Changes need to be made throughout the education system and with communities, to ensure that the education system adapts to the learner, rather than expecting the learner to adapt to the system.
- All aspects of education, including the curriculum, teaching methods, assessment, school culture and environments, present opportunities for promoting inclusion.

- Individual differences among learners are a source of richness and diversity and not a problem.

- The diversity of needs and patterns of development of children should be addressed through a wide and flexible range of responses.

- Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

The policy, therefore, considers pregnant and teenage mothers to be in the classrooms. It frowns upon all forms of discrimination against females on grounds of gender-induced restrictions which affect their recognition to realize their rights, gender equality, and freedom in political, economic, cultural, social and other affairs. Ghana's Inclusive Education thus, greatly considers the Girl-Child for Education, which is the deliberate effort towards achieving higher females (girl-child) at all levels of formal education from start to completion. It is to eliminate gender disparity which is to the detriment of the girl-child in primary and secondary education, preferably at all levels of education. The overarching goal of the Girl-Child in Education Policy is to mainstream gender equality concerns to involve into the national development processes by improving the social, legal, civic, political, economic and socio-cultural conditions of the people of Ghana. This is particularly to women, girls, children, the vulnerable and people with special needs; persons with disability and the marginalized (Ministry of Gender, Social and Children Protection, 2015). These are strategies for reducing poverty levels, and social injustices among women and men, improving health standards and enhancing efficiency of public and private sector investments and domestic finance. Thus, achieving gender equality is regarded as the attainment of human rights and a prerequisite for sustainable development.

Based upon the strategic focuses of Inclusive Education and Girl-Child in Education policies, teachers and learners in Ghana are equipped with relevant knowledge and skills to deal with diverse learners in their classrooms. Learning and teaching environments are expected to be free from discrimination, are safe and friendly for all children within the school and sanctions are in place for those who transgress this requirement. Again, educational personnel are further sensitised and trained to understand and respond to diverse educational needs. Teaching practice or internships are focused on inclusive education practices and ideals which include child protection programmes and services, cognizance of the extra vulnerabilities of children with disabilities or learning difficulties or other special needs, and can safeguard such children and serve their needs. Parents and communities are further encouraged and supported to change their attitudes that will be detrimental to the well-being of learners from poor backgrounds, minority, linguistic, religious or ethnic groups, children with disabilities and others who are marginalised. (MOE, 2013).

Although these policies are very worthy, many of the strategies articulated in national plans have fallen far short

of achieving their objectives due to limited resources (MOE, 2013). Efforts by the government to achieve SDG 4.5 remain priorities for government spending (MOE, 2018). The socio-demographic characteristics typical of Ghana as a developing country-state include high levels of poverty and increasing illiteracy, poor infrastructural resources, high child-labour practice, high teenage pregnancy, high school dropout rate, which highly challenge proper inclusive education practice for the betterment of the girl-child. An example of these geographical areas in Ghana is the Ayensuano District.

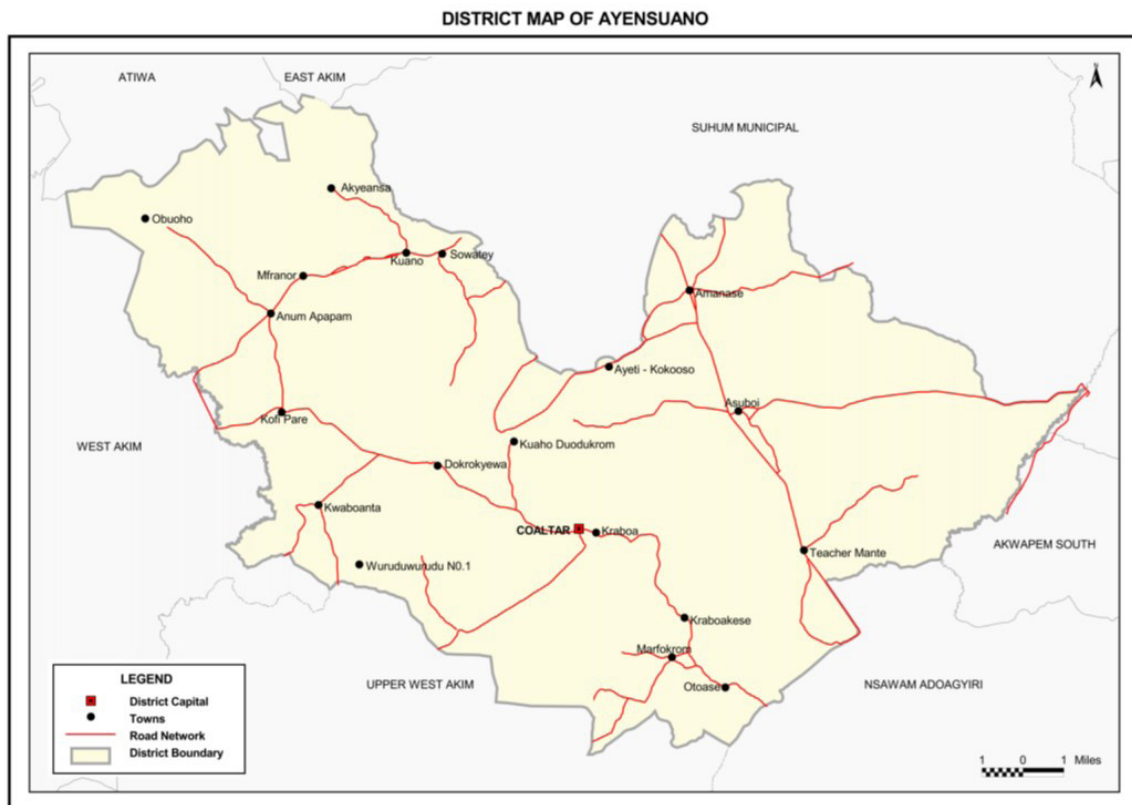
**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This is a qualitative case study narrative on girl-child education within the context of inclusive education in Ghana. The study aims to reveal the perceptions and the practices of inclusive education in basic schools during this 21st century though, the advocacy for quality teaching and learning in education are confounded in Ghana by the issues of high child labour, unsafe school environment, poor nature of girl-child education, and limited infrastructural growth to practice effective and efficient inclusive education. This paper aims to analyze teachers’ and parents’ talk on basic education for teenage mothers, in the light of Ghana’s inclusive education. We describe the study site, methods, participants, and limitations in this section.

**Study Site**

The study was undertaken in the Ayensuano District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The was carved out of

the Suhum Kraboa Coaltar District Assembly in 2012. It is located in the southern part of the Eastern Region and shares boundaries with Suhum, Nsawam Adoagyiri, and West Akim Municipalities as well as Akuapem South, Upper West Akim Districts. Agricultural activities employ 64.9% of the inhabitants which is, however, with low-level technological or mechanised methods or practices. There are One Hundred and Eighty (186) schools including Sixty (60) pre-schools, 66 primary schools, fifty-seven (57) Junior High Schools, and two (2) Senior High Schools (Ayensuano District, 2024). This case study was undertaken in this area since the district has been flagged as one of the child-labour-prone areas in Ghana due to poverty. Data shows that the district has a total of 27,209 (29.1%) of the 93,640-household population in Ayensuano multidimensionally poor. Among the poor, the degree of poverty is 42.9 percent in the district, 27th out of the 33 districts in the Eastern Region, and the 158th out of Ghana’s 261 districts. Females in the district are the worse off when it comes to multidimensional poverty- child labour, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout (Ghana Statistical Service, 2024). Due to the high-level child labour issues, a five-year national plan for the elimination of child labour was launched in Ayensuano, (Onua-online, 2023; Ghanaian Times, 2023), the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) in partnership with Inspire Today commemorated the 2023 and 2024 World Day Against Child Labour in the Ayensuano District. They aim at supporting the Girl-Child in school (ICI, 2024; Star Fm, 2024).



**Figure 1:** Map of Ayensuano District  
*Source: Ghana Statistical Service, GIS (2014)*

## Methods

This study adopts much from unstructured discussions or interviews with assistant headteachers during a one-day workshop/conference held on 4th of September, 2024 by the Ayensuano District Directorate of Education on the theme “Child Labour Issues and Safe School Environment”. Extracts from narratives given by the Girl-Child Coordinator of the district have been included as data. The researchers were present at the meeting. Themes were developed into codes through interpretive analysis. The codes were structured into broader sections of meaning. The researchers performed the analysis.

## Limitations and validity

Due to the one-shot nature of the workshop, there were a limited number of discussions or interviews with the respondents. We believe that more data from follow-up workshops and conferences with the general teachers in the district or on a circuit basis, with the parent association, the school management committee, and educational managers from other districts, will reveal more strongly constructed findings. The researchers practised peer debriefing (before the start of the workshop/conference) and member checks (after the workshop/conference) with the headteachers and girl-child coordinator to ensure the study's validity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The narrative testaments from respondents (assistant headteachers) on the main issue are under the following:

- The freebies generation
- Needless pampering and an insult to unmarried/childless/infertile teachers
- Poorly resourced schools
- Additional workload for teachers
- Negative influence on ‘good’ or ‘morally upright’ students
- Some extracts from the District Girl-Child Coordinator

### The Freebies Generation

Assistant headteachers' talk about the kind of student generation in this era are as follows:

“This is the generation of students who have had many “freebies” in their early years. They behave uncritically since two major necessities for living which are health and education are freely provided for them in our developing world. Through the National Health Insurance Scheme, an affordable health service is delivered to the majority of Ghanaians. The scheme also covers free maternal delivery to all citizens, including the adolescent and or girl-child”. “Also, we can talk about the Free Basic and Senior High School Education/Technical and Vocational Education Training. The majority of parents in our area either pay little to nothing in monetary terms or attach seriousness to childcare when it comes to education. Such attitudes from the parents affect the living conditions of the girl-child or adolescent female the most. The idea of free pre-tertiary education comes with free school feeding, free

textbooks, and free uniforms; however, these are below expectations of what “free” education stands for. There are Parents Association levies to be paid, examination or assessment levies, sports and cultural levies, levies to schools as ways to generate internal revenue and extra costs for feeding their wards. Parents aren't doing the needful for their wards, especially the adolescent female or girl-child”.

“There is the issue of the provision of sanitary towels in our schools. The girl-child in education is suffering in this district. The females are unable to attend school during their menstruation. Some NGOs step up to provide but can't on a large scale. They select some pockets of villages in the district for their exercises every year. These, they mostly do during national and international days to celebrate the fight against Child Labour. The idea of “free” pre-tertiary education in Ghana has made both parents and their wards relax. The children who are our students in the same way aren't putting in much effort to add value to their lives. They don't want to pay anything great for their own lives, not even attention to our pieces of advice. Teachers' talks to them are falling on deaf ears. They are enjoying the “freebies” of “our” time, which they feel to get more through the promises and policies from successive governments”.

### Needless Pampering and an Insult to Unmarried/Childless/Infertile Teachers

Assistant headteachers again spoke this way:

“We practice inclusive education or instruction in our schools. We also respect differentiated teaching and learning in our classrooms. However, the idea of providing teenage mothers or expectant teenage mothers with comfort in our schools will be a needless pampering to them. The explanation to the extent that the teenage mother or expectant adolescent mother should be permitted to use the headteacher's office for breastfeeding and rest periods will be a needless discomfort to us. Although they have the social right to enjoy school, however, they shouldn't discomfort the teachers and even the rest of the students with their spitting, cries from their children, and consistent short-term breast-feeding errands. Why shouldn't they stay home to wean off their babies before coming back to the classroom?”

“Why should we pamper them? Why should the government permit them to bring their babies to school whilst female teachers are not given the same chance when they deliver babies? Is this a fair policy? The government should go back to the drawing board. Equality and equity to freely deliver quality education must consider both the teacher and the student. If we are dealing with feminism here, the female teacher counts too”.

“This policy will be an insult to some teachers especially, the unmarried, and the married but childless or infertile or impotent ones. How would they cope with lactating and expectant mothers in their classrooms and schools? How would the lactating and expectant mothers look at these teachers when they realize that their teachers are

married but childless or infertile? How could this feeling encourage a safe school environment? Lactating and expectant adolescent mothers must stay home and wean off their babies before getting back to the classroom”.

#### **Poorly Resourced Schools to Accommodate Them**

Some assistant headteachers further remarked that:

“Educational policies must be put in use when the needed structures are put in place. How can we accommodate teenage mothers and expectant mothers at the basic level when there is little to nothing in terms of school resources? There are very limited tables and chairs for both teachers and students to sit on. There are instances where some schools do not have toilet facilities: teachers and students go into the bush around to respond to nature’s call. The schools which are fortunate to have lavatories cannot boast about decency to ensure better hygiene for all”.

” Some of our schools do not have proper buildings. We sit in half-bult clayey structures with thatched roofs as classrooms. There are no cemented floors but sandy or dusty ones. In this district, most of the schools are positioned along our untarred roads. There is always dust in our classrooms. How would teachers respond effectively to inclusive education, looking at all these limitations in our district? Would our poorly-resourced schools be able to meet well the health conditions of the teenage mothers, their babies, and the expectant mothers?”

“Ghana must stop the trial-and-error way of playing with education. Education is well advanced in other countries around the world. Most of our policies are borrowed from these developed countries. However, our leaders fail to see how these countries have consciously resourced their schools. Buildings do not hang in the air. They have foundations. The Inclusive Education Policy has strategies to be put in place before or as it is implemented. School buildings, the needed equipment and resources must not be overlooked if indeed, nursing and expectant teenage mothers must be allowed in the classrooms”.

#### **Additional Workload for Teachers**

Furthermore, some opinions from assistant headteachers went this way:

“Teachers in this area are already overburdened. There are many interventions in our schools, but no allowances are given to us. Mention can be made to our positions as assistant headteachers. We combine classroom work with administrative work, but we are given nothing at the end of the month. We can further, talk about interventions such as Jolly-Phonics, Differentiated Learning in Mathematics and English Language (DL and DL+), Translation-to-English (T2E), Ghanaian Language of Instruction (GLOI), School Health Educational Programme (SHEP). These are additional workloads we combine with our traditional subjects. Bringing mothers suckling their babies, and expectant mothers in the classrooms to be catered for by teachers, eight hours a day, five days a week,

and for a minimum of twelve weeks in a term will break us down”.

“We know that education must be comprehensive. Teachers commit to achieving bits and pieces of students in terms of their traditional/cultural, social, intellectual, physical, religious spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects. However, practising policies which will bring lactating mothers and expectant mothers into the class would be a full glide into the dimensions of the social and health professional. Experiencing students’ illnesses is different from lactating mothers and their infants, or expectant mothers. These are critical issues when they are to happen in our rural settings. We don’t want problems. Lactating and expectant mothers can stay home, wean their babies and then come back to the classrooms”.

#### **Negative Influence on ‘Good’ or ‘Morally Upright’ Students or Children**

Some headteachers shared these feelings:

“How could the policy curtail the issue of moral decadence in our society? How could this limit pre-marital sex among the youth? How could it limit teenage pregnancy and teen-parenting? How would the aftermath form these questions solve child labour, child trafficking, domestic violence, and poverty in this district? Would these teenagers “fear” the consequences of becoming a teenage parent if our schools continue to be too accommodating? The Safe School ideology is very good, but it also means we cannot comment about the teenage and expectant mothers in our classrooms. We cannot even use “gossip” as a means to ensure social order in our schools. How then can we protect the morally “good and upright” students?

“Won’t other students have the mindset that, being a teenage parent is a normal thing in our environment? Can we foresee the negative ripple effects it will have on other students in this district? These kinds of policies do not fit in this rural district”.

#### **Some Extracts from the District Girl-Child Coordinator**

She shares this story:

“Parents/guardians form the notions that their teenage daughters are stubborn when they get pregnant during schooling. The parents either leave these children to cater for their selves. Some “caring” parents will opt for birth control measures for their teenage daughters. Think about a girl-child who has had the understanding that her indulgence in premarital sex either safe or unsafe will not result in pregnancy. Can we think about the consequences on the education and health aspects of the girl-child? Some parents also opt for abortion for the girl-child. Others will sometimes leave the babies born to the care of your teachers and me. I was pressured by some parents to adopt their grandchildren because I advised them against abortion. I couldn’t adopt about three or four babies to add to my children. We know the kind of economy we live in. The parents explained to me that their daughters had the choice to be in school or become

teenage mothers. They, now grandparents were doing their best to put food on the table, clothe them, and foot their educational bills for them. However, their daughters didn't respect or care about their efforts. Now they in turn don't care about their teenage daughters who have become teenage mothers".

### The Coordinator Further Continued

"These parents described their children as "democracy babies". They are the "talk-make-I-also-talk", "do-make-I-also-do" children. We can't control them very well. They don't even respect you teachers now. They know teachers don't have control over them now. But when they got pregnant you "defended" them to protect their babies. We didn't want grandchildren now. You wanted them. Come for them".

### She Ended Like This

"Adolescents are always or mostly in a state of confusion. They are torn between childhood and adulthood. They question themselves or are questioned about issues such as what, when, whom, where, and how they should play with; do something with; talk to and behave. However, most parents do not understand the plight of their wards when they transition to this stage. As professional teachers as we are, we are conversant with the series of changes these children go through. Though both boys and girls go through, we should be extra keen about the girls. They are very vulnerable in our district. The bit we could do to help, let's all try and do. There are talks, guidance and counselling we give to them but, the policies plea with us that, aside from all our talks if the teenage females get pregnant or deliver, we should encourage them to come back to the classroom. We should encourage them to understand that their lives are not over. They can surely sail through and become valuable to themselves, their children, their families, their societies, this country and the wide world".

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, we focused on teachers and parents talk on basic education for teenage mothers, in light of Ghana's inclusive education. We employed conference or workshop narratives (qualitative data) from the case of high child labour practices and their dire effects on the girl child in Ayensuano District.

From the above narratives, could Ghana realize the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.5, the Era of Leaving No Child Behind, and the hope of building the

World We Want as some positives from the practice of Inclusive Education in teaching and learning? Could Ghana achieve the 21st-century global advocacy for gender equality, and quality teaching and learning, to ensure equal access to all levels of education? Can we still reflect on the revelations of this study as "progressive" of Ghana's education?

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