



## Politicization of Education Policies: The Case of Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy

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**Abstract:** While many scholars recognize and criticize the politicization of education policies, scholarly attention to the strategies politicians utilize to politicize educational policy discourses remains limited. Focusing on the officials of Ghana's two major political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), as policy actors, this paper investigates how officials of these two parties operationalized discussions regarding Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) to garner support for their parties while stoking resentment for their political opponents. The study employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework and a dataset of 175 documents, including news stories, press releases, party manifestos, and government publications. The analysis reveals that both parties resorted to strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. The NPP contrasted its regime with the NDC's tenure and framed the NDC as a threat to FSHSP and the education of the poor and vulnerable. The NDC problematized and highlighted implementation bottlenecks while framing the NPP and FSHSP as threats to quality education. I argue that through these strategies, NPP officials aimed to maintain incumbency while NDC officials advocated a regime change. The paper concludes by emphasizing the potential risks associated with politicizing education policies.

**Keywords:** politicization of education; Free Senior High School Policy; critical discourse analysis; Ghana

### **Política de las políticas educativas: El caso de la Política de Enseñanza Secundaria Gratuita de Ghana**

**Resumen:** Aunque muchos académicos reconocen y critican la politización de las políticas educativas, la atención académica a las estrategias que los políticos utilizan para politizar los discursos de políticas educativas sigue siendo limitada. Centrándose en los funcionarios de los dos principales partidos políticos de Ghana, el Nuevo Partido Patriótico (NPP) y el Congreso Nacional Democrático (NDC), como actores políticos, este artículo investiga cómo los funcionarios de estos dos partidos operativizaron las discusiones sobre la Política de Escuela Secundaria Gratuita (FSHSP, por sus siglas en inglés) de Ghana para obtener apoyo para sus partidos mientras fomentaban el resentimiento hacia sus oponentes políticos. El estudio emplea un marco de análisis crítico del discurso (CDA) y un conjunto de datos de 175 documentos, incluidos artículos de noticias, comunicados de prensa, manifiestos de partidos y publicaciones gubernamentales. El análisis revela que ambos partidos recurrieron a estrategias de auto-presentación positiva y presentación negativa del otro. El NPP contrastó su régimen con el mandato del NDC y enmarcó al NDC como una amenaza para la FSHSP y la educación de los pobres y vulnerables. El NDC problematizó y destacó los obstáculos en la implementación mientras presentaba al NPP y la FSHSP como una amenaza para la calidad de la educación. Sostengo que a través de estas estrategias, los funcionarios del NPP apuntaron a mantener la incumbencia mientras que los del NDC abogaban por un cambio de régimen. El artículo concluye subrayando los riesgos potenciales asociados con la politización de las políticas educativas.

**Palabras-clave:** politización de la educación; Política de Escuela Secundaria Gratuita; análisis crítico del discurso; Ghana

### **Política das políticas educacionais: O caso da política de Ensino Médio Gratuito do Gana**

**Resumo:** Embora muitos acadêmicos reconheçam e critiquem a politização das políticas educacionais, a atenção acadêmica às estratégias que os políticos utilizam para politizar os discursos sobre essas políticas ainda é limitada. Focando nos oficiais dos dois principais partidos políticos de Gana, o Novo Partido Patriótico (NPP) e o Congresso Democrático Nacional (NDC), como atores políticos, este artigo investiga como os oficiais desses dois partidos operacionalizaram as discussões sobre a Política de Ensino Secundário Gratuito (FSHSP) de Gana para angariar apoio para seus partidos enquanto fomentavam o ressentimento por seus opositores políticos. O estudo utiliza uma estrutura de análise crítica do discurso (ACD) e um conjunto de dados de 175 documentos, incluindo notícias, comunicados de imprensa, manifestos partidários e publicações governamentais. A análise revela que ambos os partidos recorreram a estratégias de autopromoção positiva e apresentação negativa do outro. O NPP contrastou seu governo com o mandato do NDC e apresentou o NDC como uma ameaça à FSHSP e à educação dos pobres e vulneráveis. O NDC problematizou e destacou os obstáculos na implementação, ao mesmo tempo que enquadrava o NPP e a FSHSP como ameaças à qualidade da educação. Argumento que, por meio dessas estratégias, os oficiais do NPP visavam manter a permanência no poder, enquanto os oficiais do NDC defendiam uma mudança de regime. O artigo conclui enfatizando os potenciais riscos associados à politização das políticas educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** politização da educação; Política de Ensino Secundário Gratuito; análise crítica do discurso; Gana

## **Politicization of Education Policies: The Case of Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy**

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, politicians increasingly harness education policies to garner support for their political aspirations. Increased educational access, in particular, becomes a promise made to garner votes. In the early to mid-1990s, new governments in Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda announced Universal Primary Education (UPE) immediately after winning elections because they promised it before the elections (Riddell, 2003). President Hakainde Hichilema's introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Zambia in 2022 fulfilled a campaign promise (Zenda, 2022). Apart from these, the introduction of free secondary school policies in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda fulfilled campaign promises (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). So was Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP). Before Ghana's 2012 general election, Nana Akufo Addo, then opposition leader, promised to implement FSHSP if voted into power. However, he lost the 2012 election. In the 2016 election, he reiterated the promise and won overwhelmingly, with many people believing that the policy played a significant role in his victory.

In September 2017, the Akufo Addo-led government introduced FSHSP, removing school fees, which constituted the most significant barrier to secondary education. With this policy, secondary school education in Ghana became entirely free, as the government absorbed all the fees parents usually pay (Addae et al., 2019). The effect of FSHSP has been swift: enrolment figures in Ghanaian secondary schools surged significantly (Kerr, 2020; Kwegyiriba, 2021). However, a few years after the policy's implementation, its shortcomings are becoming increasingly apparent. As with expanding free primary education across the global South, policymakers and government officials prioritized educational access over other metrics (Akyeampong, 2009; Sifuna, 2007). Thus, though many parents were satisfied with the policy (Addae et al., 2019) and that the policy can and has reduced household poverty (Adu-Ababio & Osei, 2018), the implementation has been dogged by many challenges, chiefly, infrastructural deficit (Asante & Agbee, 2021; Chanimbe, & Dankwah, 2021). Moreover, serious concerns emerged regarding equity (Akuffo, 2024; Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Kwegyiriba, 2021) and quality (Duah et al., 2023; Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Many scholars attributed the problems of the policy to the rushed nature of its implementation, with many stating that the government was overly concerned with fulfilling its campaign promise (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). These concerns regarding politics and education in Ghana are not novel. Owusu-Kwarteng et al. (2018) state that a change in government in Ghana invariably results in a change in education policy. Adam-Yawson et al. (2021) believe there is a need to divorce politics from educational issues to improve Ghana's education. To Amarh (2017), the politicization of education hinders Ghana from attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is also the view that political parties include education policies in their campaigns without first considering the implementation cost, resulting in an impasse (Gunu, 2019).

Furthermore, anecdotal claims of politicization of education policies exist in Ghana. Significantly, FSHSP featured prominently in political debates before the 2020 elections. Indeed, Peter Anti Partey, an education economist and curriculum expert at the University of Cape Coast, described FSHSP as a political policy (Partey, 2020).

### **Current Study**

Despite scholarly recognition of the prevalent politicization of education policies and its subsequent effects on education in Ghana (Amarh, 2017, Gunu, 2019), little attention has been paid to discourses surrounding the policies and how those discourses are manipulated to politicize

education policies. Focusing on FSHSP, this article investigates how political figures<sup>1</sup> of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana discursively constructed and framed the FSHSP. Following Greene's (2022) assertion that the politicization of something entails concentrating mainly on how to use it to gain an advantage in the quest for power and status, I discuss how officials of the NPP and NDC operationalize various discourses to politicize and use FSHSP as a campaign tool to garner support for their parties. My research question is straightforward: *What strategies do the NDC and NPP officials employ to politicize Ghana's FSHSP?* To address this question, I draw on the conceptual lens of critical discourse analysis to uncover the subtleties and nuances involved in the discourses of party officials as policy actors, as they attempt to mobilize voter support for their parties and stoke resentment for their political opponents. To understand the policy, however, it is necessary to contextualize the political landscape of Ghana.

### **The Political Landscape of Ghana**

Ghana operates a multi-party system, and political parties are regulated by the Political Parties Act 574, which was established in 2000. As of October 2023, 27 political parties are listed on the website of the Electoral Commission of Ghana,<sup>2</sup> yet only the NDC and the NPP possess the capability to win elections (Osei, 2013). Of all the existing parties, these are the only parties to have tasted power after Ghana returned to constitutional rule from military governance in 1992.

#### ***New Patriotic Party (NPP)***

Founded on the 28th of July 1992, and with an African elephant as its emblem, the NPP describes itself as a center-right, liberal, conservative party (Ofori, 2015). The motto of NPP is Development in Freedom. After its formation, it stayed in opposition from 1992 until 2000, when it wrestled power from the NDC. From 2000, the NPP ruled for eight years, after which they lost the 2008 election to NDC, only to bounce back in 2016. The NPP was re-elected in the 2020 election, thus forming the current government. The NPP receives most of its votes in Ghana's Akan-dominated areas, including Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, Eastern, Western, and Central regions. It is, however, unpopular in the Volta, Upper West, Upper East, and Northern regions (Ofori, 2015). Presently, the party is under the leadership of President Akufo Addo, and the Vice President is Bawumia.

#### ***National Democratic Congress (NDC)***

The NDC was founded in 1992 under the leadership of Jerry John Rawlings. The NDC party's symbol is an umbrella with a dove's head on the tip. The party's colors are red, white, green, and black, and the party motto is "Union, Stability, and Development." NDC won both the 1992 and 1996 elections. They lost to the NPP in the 2000 and 2004 elections but were again triumphant in the 2008 and 2012 elections before succumbing to defeats in the 2016 and 2020 elections. The NDC is not very popular in the Akan-speaking regions of Ghana but is popular among the Volta and Northern regions (Ofori, 2015). Presently, the NDC is under the leadership of former President John Dramani Mahama.

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, I define political figures as people who are professionally or actively involved in party politics. The officials of Ministry of Education (MOE), Ghana Education Service (GES), and the entire publication on the Free SHS Website is considered to represent the voice of the ruling NPP party.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.gov.gh/>

## **Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy**

Before the 2012 presidential elections, Nana Akufo Addo, the NPP flagbearer in opposition, promised to introduce free senior high school if the electorates give him the mandate. The NDC party criticized him for adopting a populist gimmick to win the election. At a rally in Kumasi, President John Dramani Mahama remarked, "...because he (Nana Akufo Addo) wants power, he is preaching free education, but I say it is 'sakawa'<sup>3</sup> and shouldn't be trusted" (GhanaWeb, 29/11/2012). Nana Akufo Addo and the NPP party lost the 2012 presidential election to the NDC. However, in September 2015, in a move many believed was aimed at deflating the campaign of the NPP, the NDC Government, under the leadership of President John Dramani Mahama, introduced the Progressively Free Senior High School Education (PFSHSE). PFSHSE provided partial funding, where students were exempted from paying examination, sports, entertainment, and library fees. However, students still had to pay for accommodation and food (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021), and these fees remained as barriers to education. As the PFSHSE was merely a reaction to the campaign message of the NPP, no proper preparations were made prior to rolling it out. Though few students benefited, its impact was, therefore, modest.

Consequently, before the 2016 elections, Nana Akufo Addo made FSHSP his major campaign message, emphasizing that his concept of Free Secondary Education encompassed all fees. His message was again met with stiff opposition from the NDC. The then-President, John Dramani Mahama, insisted that "Ghana must not introduce FSHSP on the whimsical promise of a desperate politician" (GhanaWeb, 23/06/2021). However, unlike in the 2012 election, Nana Akufo Addo won overwhelmingly. In September 2017, Nana Akufo Addo fulfilled his campaign promise by introducing the FSHSP, which absorbed all fees for senior high school students. With the FSHSP, students did not have to pay any fees associated with secondary education, including tuition, textbooks, and utility fees as well as free accommodation, uniforms, and meals (Ministry of Education, 2017). Essentially, the government assumed total fiscal responsibility for secondary education.

Yet because of the rushed implementation, essential stages, such as consulting stakeholders and considering alternatives, were neglected or poorly executed (Adarkwah, 2022; Mohammed, 2020; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). For example, the General Secretary of the Ghana National Association of Teachers disclosed that his union was sidelined from initial discussions regarding the FSHSP (Adogla-Bessa, 2017). The policy also was not subjected to parliamentary debates (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021).

## **Effects of Politicizing Education Policies**

Politicians tend to implement populist policies that enhance their chances of winning elections, and this leads to the formulation of education policies without consulting and collaborating with major stakeholders who could provide vital feedback to make these policies more feasible. Consequently, elected officials sometimes formulate policies that are too idealistic and doomed to fail (Hudson et al., 2019). Such failures could be blamed on a lack of proper feasibility analysis to determine the contextual practicality of such policies. For example, the bottlenecks with implementing UPE in Kenya (Sifuna, 2004) and USE in Uganda (Chapman et al., 2010) occurred because their governments implemented those policies for political gains rather than as a response to educational concerns. Thus, the implementation exposed their unreadiness in terms of infrastructure and personnel. Politically motivated populist education policies often sidestep important discussions

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<sup>3</sup> The term Sakawa is originally a Ghanaian term for internet fraud mainly targeting foreigners. The term is now used to describe any type of scheme targeted at outwitting someone through deceit.

regarding affordability or feasibility, overly concentrating on the acceptability of the policy by the masses. Nevertheless, “even a widely accepted policy may run into trouble while being implemented” (Patton et al., 2013, p. 288).

In the Ghanaian context, several scholars have bemoaned the inclusion of educational policies in the manifestos of political parties, indicating that it weakens the process of ascertaining feasibility and serves as a hindrance to adopting evidence-based policies (Amarh, 2017; Donkoh et al., 2019; Donkoh et al., 2023; Gunu, 2019; Nudzor, 2014). This is because political transitions are often associated with changes in education policies, disallowing continuity (Adam-Yawson et al., 2021; Nudzor, 2014; Owusu-Kwarteng et al., 2018). The duration of secondary education is demonstrative. For example, in 1974, the National Redemption Council mandated a 4-year duration, which the Provisional National Defense Council changed to 3 years in 1987. In 2000, the NPP reversed it to 4 years—NDC later changed it to 3 years in 2009 (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016). Politicizing education policies undermines the credibility of formulated policies and inhibits implementation, causing many failures and bottlenecks (Donkoh et al., 2019). Politicizing education policies keeps curriculum experts and teachers away from policy discussions, denying the nation from benefitting from their valuable insight and expertise. Moreover, when teachers feel overlooked in the formulation process, they are less motivated to implement the policies.

### **Policy as Discourse**

Discourse encompasses what is said, who said it, whom it was said to, and why it was said. According to Bacchi (2000), policy-as-discourse concerns “ways in which language, and more broadly discourse, sets limits upon what can be said” (p. 48). Discourse thus becomes a collection of ideas and concepts that provide meaning to social and physical occurrences. Policy actors generate and reproduce discourses through distinct practices and storylines. Policy actors comprise persons and organization representatives involved in policy processes, and storylines provide an aperture for policy actors “to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternate social arrangements” (Hajer, 2006, p. 71). Thus, speakers use discourse to describe themselves and others because “it is through language that one goes about constructing their [own] identity, ascribing identities to others, positioning others” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 3).

Yet, discourse is not merely a way of representing the world but rather connected to the structures of power, helping perpetuate or resist power imbalances and the consequent (re)production of dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; Hernández, 2016; Lester et al., 2016; Woodside-Jiron, 2011). There is, therefore, the need for a critical study of discourse to ascertain what it seeks to achieve and the underlying power dynamics inherent in such discourses.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

CDA plays a crucial role in revealing “underlying issues of power, social, (re)production of dominance, as well as the formation of identities within policy ‘talk’ and/or legislative texts” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 2). It uncovers what is “implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious” in text or talk (van Dijk 1995, p. 18), highlighting subtle manifestations of power indices in speech and text (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). CDA has been used extensively in education (Rogers et al., 2016). For instance, it was used to explore how school leaders interact with formulated policies (Hernández, 2016). Little and Cohen-Vogel (2016) also used discourse analysis to explore the arguments for and against academic content in kindergarten. CDA has also been used to analyze teacher-student interactions (Brooks, 2015; Wallace, 2020). Furthermore, CDA focuses on how “formalized actors espouse and reproduce particular ideologies” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 3).

In this paper, I draw on van Dijk’s (1993, 1998, 2017) sociocognitive approach to CDA, which emphasizes how social cognition shapes discourse production and comprehension. van Dijk

(2017) contends that researchers must recreate speakers' reasons, interests, intentions, and objectives to decipher the rationale behind a particular speech or text. Within the sociocognitive approach, the concept of othering is key. Othering is defining and maintaining one's identity through naming or establishing oneself as the normative standard and categorizing (an)other as a deviant (Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021). Othering can be a valuable framework for exploring pronouncements of political actors since politicians rely on positively presenting themselves to the electorates and negatively framing their political opponents.

Political parties are apparatuses that produce and reproduce ideologies (Althusser, 2006). Ideology is a "one-sided perspective or worldview composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations" that members of a specific social group share (Resigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88). Ideologies are subjective positions that make members of a social group act in unison, and political allegiance can be a manifestation of ideology (van Dijk, 1997). van Dijk (1998) proposes the concept of an "ideological square" for analyzing ideological communication. The ideological square comprises four main moves that dominate ideological communication:

(a)expressing or emphasizing information that is positive about *Us*, (b)expressing or emphasizing information that is negative about *Them*, (c) suppressing or de-emphasizing information that is positive about *Them*, and (d) suppressing or de-emphasizing information that is negative about *Us*" (van Dijk, 1998, p.267).

The aim of adopting any of these moves is either positive self-presentation or negative other presentation. The ideological square offered me a valuable lens to explore how officials of the two parties framed each other with the aim of garnering support for their parties while stoking resentment for their opponents.

## Methodology

For this research, I employed document analysis, a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The strengths of document analyses cannot be over-emphasized. Documents are readily available and accessible and offer comprehensive coverage. Aside from that, documents are stable and do not alter their behavior or story, as can be the case for respondents in an interview (Bowen, 2009).

### Data

I drew from a dataset of 175 documents, including news stories, press releases, and pieces of publication on the Free SHS website. News stories were collected from leading online news portals: Ghanaweb and Myjoyonline. These sites were selected because of their credible and comprehensive coverage of news items (Bronteng et al., 2019). I searched these websites using relevant keywords such as "Free Secondary Education," "Free SHS," "Free Senior High School Policy," and "Free Education," concentrating on publications attributed to figures of the NPP and NDC, spanning from 2016 to 2022. This generated over 500 results, including duplicates.

Duplicates were eliminated, after which I winnowed the documents to 175 key sources. I also collected documents produced by the Government of Ghana and the Ministry of Education, party manifestos, and party campaign posters between 2016 and 2022. I focused on this period because, even though the idea of FSHSP was mooted before the 2012 election, the idea gained traction almost immediately after the implementation of the PFSHSE in the latter part of 2015.

Also, I chose this period because it contained the two most recent general elections, and discussions about FSHSP were rife then.

All the documents were publicly available online. Throughout, I was guided by the proposition that “Participants in professional roles often don’t speak ‘for themselves’, but as representatives of an organization or institution, and as representatives who in principle can be replaced by other institution members” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 223). This way, any utterance by an official party member was taken as their political party’s voice.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis drew on a hybrid of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993). Yin’s (2011) five-stage framework for analyzing qualitative data—data compilation, disassembling, data reassembling, data interpretation, and conclusion—also proved helpful in the analytic process. In the data compilation stage, I imported all the documents into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The software helped with the organization of the data. The data disassembling and reassembling stages were realized through multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I drew deductive codes, such as “increasing access,” “quality concerns,” “infrastructural deficit,” “mobilizing voter support,” and “criticizing political opponents,” from personal experience and the related literature. Emergent codes were generated through iterative readings of the documents. Relevant emergent codes were reapplied to the entire data, resulting in a process of coding and recoding.

Consequently, I reassembled and reduced the data to the essential parts that provided answers to the research question. I employed semantic and latent coding. According to Byrne (2021), semantic coding focuses only on identifying explicit or surface meanings of data, while latent coding focuses on identifying “hidden meanings or underlying assumptions, ideas, or ideologies that may shape or inform the descriptive or semantic content of the data” (p. 1397). The coding process was accompanied by concurrent memo writing, which entailed writing down thoughts as they occurred in the analytic process. The data interpretation phase encompassed moving from individual data items to finding “meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset” (Byrne, 2021, p. 1403). The search for meaning culminated in the development of themes. Through conversations with my supervisor and some colleagues, some initial themes were refined, renamed, and some discarded.

To interrogate pronouncements of political figures about FSHSP in their social and political context, I drew on CDA to examine themes identified in the preliminary document review. CDA entails going beyond the sentence level to explore the connection between language use and the sociopolitical contexts in which it is used. Context, according to van Dijk (1998), is “the structured set of all properties of a social situation that are possibly relevant for the production, structures, interpretation, and function of text and talk” (p. 211). Context influences how participants produce and understand discourse. Participants thus adapt discourse or its interpretations to the communicative situation at each stage of communication (van Dijk, 1998).

Consequently, the analytical procedure for the CDA followed a three-stage process of (a) close reading to identify politicization strategies (b) interpreting these strategies, paying close attention to contextual and historical information, and (c) explaining the possible impact of these strategies on readers or listeners (adapted from Nartey, 2021, p. 660). Drawing on van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square, this paper illuminates how discussions regarding Ghana’s FSHSP by the leading figures of the NPP and NDC constitute a conscious attempt to mobilize voters for their respective parties and stoke public resentment for their opponents through positive self-presentation and negative other presentation.



## Strategies Adopted by the NPP to Politicize FSHSP

### Projecting the Policy on Campaign Posters

Projecting FSHSP on campaign posters was the most overt way it was politicized. Before the 2012 and 2016 general elections, the NPP mounted large billboards with the inscription “Free SHS Now. Not in 20 years. Your vote can make it happen.” This inscription sought to assure the public of NPP’s desire to implement the policy immediately, unlike NDC’s stance that the policy was feasible only after building more schools and expanding infrastructure in the existing schools (Afrane, 2022). The expression, “Your vote can make it happen,” calls the electorates to vote for NPP to implement the policy “now.” It is essential to note the expression “Not in 20 years”. As of 2016, the NPP was in opposition while the NDC was ruling. This statement was meant to convey to the public that retaining NDC would delay the implementation of the FSHSP. This was because the NDC insisted that the country needed to be infrastructurally ready before implementing the policy. However, at no point did any official of the NDC give a specific time. Thus, emphasizing 20 years was supposed to negatively project the NDC to the Ghanaian public and make the implementation agenda of the NDC look very distant to the public.

### Figure 1

*An NPP Campaign Poster for the 2016 General Elections*



The NPP used the same tactic before the 2020 presidential elections. Campaign posters bore the inscription: “Free SHS is here to stay. Let’s go out and vote massively for Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP to protect the progress and secure the future of our children. [#VoteNumber1](#) [#4MoreForNana](#).” While this highlights another overt way of politicizing the FSHSP, it suggested that a vote for NPP would protect and secure the future of Ghanaian children. The NPP sought to say that a vote for the NDC would constitute a reversal of all the progress made by the NPP regime from 2016 to 2020.

**Figure 2***An NPP Campaign poster for the 2020 General Elections*

Figures 1 and 2 are very instructive in the sense that their backgrounds feature jubilant children, wearing broad smiles, with hands raised. Note the difference between the children used for the 2016 and 2020 campaign posters. While the children used for the 2016 campaign posters wore uniforms for basic school students and mufti, the students in the 2020 campaign poster wore secondary school uniforms, signifying that FSHSP was a hope for basic school students in 2016, while in 2020 the hope became a reality. Further, the 2020 poster featured only female students, which possibly suggests, via the FSHSP, the NPP worked to dismantle the colonial marginalization of girls and patriarchal structures (Darkwah, 2010) hindering girls' education.

### **Contrasting the Tenure of the NPP and the Tenure of the NDC**

The most dominant discourse associated with the FSHSP is that of access. NPP officials explicitly mentioned the policy's enrollment boost, often contrasting it to the period before the rulership of the NPP. Here, NPP officials produced statistics showing the number of people who could not access secondary education in the past or who are benefiting from the policy now. Explicit or implicit reference was made to the fact that access to secondary education had been limited by past NDC administrations and that the implementation of the policy sought to address the situation caused by the NDC. NPP officials did this by contrasting the current situation versus the situation predating the implementation of the FSHSP. For example, the President stated that "between 2013 and 2016, there was the unfortunate situation in Ghana where, on the average, 100,000 children, every year, who passed the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), could not take up their places in Senior High Schools" (Myjoy Online 1/12/2019).

In this excerpt, the President boasted about enrollment growth while lamenting the pre-FSHSP situation. Throughout the data, there were subtle instances of blaming the previous administration for the previous system, where children had to pay fees. President Akufo Addo mentioned "between 2013 and 2016," which corresponded to his predecessor NDC's term.

Additionally, the President's use of the past tense in the statement implied that the "unfortunate situation" had ended. Contrasting the two periods enabled NPP officials to frame the policy to indicate a dramatic break from the past—a rupture. This was to suggest that there was a reversal or correction of past wrongs perpetuated by the (in)actions of previous administrations.

Intended to politicize the policy and urge listeners to solidarize with their party, many government officials used this technique to associate a feeling of hopelessness and pity with NDC's rule while concurrently positioning the FSHSP as a significant factor responsible for turning around the "unfortunate situation" of the Ghanaian youth. Contrasting the two periods performed a dual function of projecting the NPP as having moral superiority and integrity and being responsive to the populist while simultaneously projecting the NDC as a party that did not care for the citizens. The choice of lexemes such as "unfortunate situation" to describe the NDC periods of ruling sought to blame the previous administration for causing the problem but not doing enough to remedy the situation.

For NPP, FSHSP represented a significant distinction between the past NDC government and theirs, noting that the difference was made visible through access/enrollment numbers and shifting gender relations. Thus, the administration change had effects that trickled down to the household level, leading to more equitable educational opportunities irrespective of gender, location, or socio-economic background. Historically, educational access had been geographically disproportionate, as the colonial authorities concentrated on Southern Ghana and neglected Northern Ghana (Bening, 1990). The colonial authorities also made education primarily available to sons of prominent merchants or chiefs (Boadu, 2021). The FSHSP was thus framed as a way to make educational opportunities available to all to level the playing field for all, regardless of status or geographical location.

### **Framing NDC as a Threat to the Policy**

NPP officials created a narrative suggesting to the public that NDC's desire to return to power was to cancel FSHSP. This was done overtly and covertly by the NPP officials. Take, for example, the utterances Vice President Bawumia made to the people of Saboba in Northern Ghana: When we gave Mahama the chance, what did he do to teacher trainee allowance? He cancelled it. We gave him the chance, what did he do to nurse trainee allowance? He cancelled it. We gave him the chance, what did he do to Arabic teachers' allowance? He cancelled it. So, what will he do to free SHS? He will cancel it (GhanaWeb, 07/09/2020).

Here, the vice president used parallel structures to state that a vote for NDC was a vote against the FSHSP. He referred to the cancellation of the teacher trainee allowance, nurse trainee allowance and Arabic teachers' allowance as evidence that the NDC was capable of cancelling the FSHSP. Because Northern Ghana has traditionally been a stronghold of the NDC (Ofori, 2015), Bawumia used the personal pronoun "we", creating the impression that he and the community gave Mahama a chance. Reference to the Arabic teachers' allowance cancellation was to whip up opposition for the NDC, given that most inhabitants of Northern Ghana are Muslims. Here, the vice president used history to demonize the NDC and construct them as a threat to the FSHSP. Similarly, President Akufo Addo, on a campaign tour stated:

I know that there are people in this country who don't want this policy, who have been campaigning against this policy. They are dreaming that they are going to come back to power to cancel the policy. I want them to know that they are not coming back to power, and the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy has come to stay. (Myjoy Online, 13/08/2019)

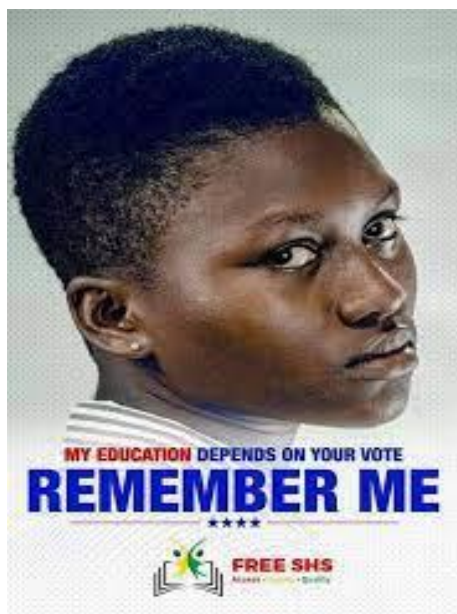
In the above extract, the President, like his vice, framed the NDC party as a threat to the FSHSP, suggesting that the only way to sustain the FSHSP was to retain the NPP government. Notice the distancing implied in the sentence through the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’. A further illustration of framing NDC as a threat to the policy is in an extract posted on the official Facebook page of NPP: “Let us protect the Free SHS policy for future generations. Register now and vote NPP in December to protect the Free SHS policy... Register now to protect the policy from those who want to cancel it” (NPP, 2020).

### **Framing NDC as a Threat to the Education of the Poor and Girls**

The NPP officials framed the opposition NDC as a threat to the education of the poor and girls, suggesting that with the NDC, the poor and girls had no hope of secondary education. Before the 2020 presidential election, NPP mounted large billboards featuring a girl with the inscription “MY EDUCATION DEPENDS ON YOUR VOTE, REMEMBER ME.” This campaign message has one main meaning: a vote for NDC is a vote against girls’ education.

### **Figure 3**

*An NPP Campaign Poster for the 2020 Election*



In the above picture, the girl appeared in school uniform, signifying that at the moment, she was in school, a situation which would change should NPP lose power to the NDC. The sunken eyes of the girl and her uncombed hair is to portray a feeling of dejection and appeal to the emotions of the voters. The girl’s poster represented an implicit way of creating a narrative that NDC would not proceed with the policy and that voting against NPP was tantamount to voting against FSHSP, which meant an end to the girl’s education. Note the important differences between the girls in *Figure 2* who all wore broad smiles and looked well groomed, and the girl in *Figure 3*. Her dejected look was supposed to display her anxiety and fear that the NPP could lose the 2020 general election, which would signify the end of the FSHSP—her education. The girl’s helplessness was compounded by the fact that she had not yet attained the voting age of 18 and her fate lay in the hands of those eligible to vote.

Furthermore, many government/party-sponsored adverts featuring students, mostly girls purportedly coming from impoverished homes, shared stories of how their education would have been impossible had it not been for NPP's FSHSP. For example, the viral story of Faith Louis circulated via the official YouTube page of the education minister, Matthew Opoku Prempeh.

I was 14 years when I dropped out of school because I was pregnant. That was in the year 2009. I was 14 by then. Since then, when I had my first child, I was having this desire to go back to school, but because of financial constraints, I was hawking to provide for myself and child. So, I decided that I will go back to school so as I was preparing, I got pregnant again because I was staying with the man. So, I had to drop that desire again and start all over. But along the line, I had the desire that I wanted to go back to school and unfortunately, I got pregnant the third time but after that, I decided that I would go to school, I left the man, and I started my life. From there, I started selling to provide for myself and the children and many people were advising me that I was brilliant and that I should go back to school. So, I took the bold step, and I went to Sorkorde Gborgame MA JSS form two. That was 2018 and in 2019, I wrote my BECE, and I passed. I was admitted in Mawuli Senior High School, which was last year. I want to thank the government. I know it is not only me that is going through this and because of the Free SHS have come back to school. There are a lot out there. To me, it is a good thing. And I thank the government. I want to become a midwife. (Prempeh, 2020)

According to Hajer (2006), “the essence of a story is that it has a beginning, middle, and an end” (p. 69). This story begins with the girl dropping out of school during NDC's tenure, staying home, and getting pregnant twice during NDC's tenure (middle of the story), and the happy ending is when the girl returns to school (during NPP's reign). The word “desire,” mentioned three times in this short story, seeks to suggest that with the NDC, secondary education can only be a desire for girls like Faith Louis. There is a subtle suggestion that Faith's path of staying home and giving birth to three children would have been averted if there was FSHSP. It is worth noting that Faith went back to school in 2019, a period corresponding to the governorship of NPP. The video ended with Faith thanking the government and declaring “I want to become a midwife,” to show that the policy offered hope and was crucial for human capital development. Significantly, the video premiered on the 15th of November 2020, less than a month before the 2020 general election.

Using girls for such advertisements is significant since girls have been historically marginalized in terms of educational access in Ghana (Darkwah, 2010). It was, therefore, not strange when the Vice President stated that FSHSP was a “game changer for females” since it had “ended a disturbing trend, which saw the education of many females from poor families being truncated in favor of sponsoring a male child due to lack of funding.” To buttress, he added, “Now, people find it difficult to get young girls to be their house girls” (MyJoy Online, 13/10/2020). The adverb “now” indicates the positive change in girls' education in the current regime. The phrase “disturbing trend” was used to negatively project the time NDC was ruling.

### **Creating Ambiguity Regarding the Policy Targets**

NPP officials made a conscious effort to create ambiguity regarding the policy targets. While some sections of government officials construed FSHSP as a policy for the poor, others projected it as a policy for all, regardless of economic situation. For example, at a media briefing before the launch of the policy, Dr. Mathew Opoku Prempeh, the minister of education, insisted that, through the FSHSP, the NPP government sought to eliminate financial obstacles to secondary education

(Bessey & Quarshie, 2017). . In this context, he dubbed the policy as a pro-poor intervention. This stance was further corroborated by the President during the launch of the policy "...because I know that knowledge and talent are not for the rich and privileged alone, and that free education widens the gates of opportunities to every child, especially those whose talents are arrested because of poverty" (Free SHS Policy, 2017). Here, he presented himself as a leader against elitism. He used the first-person singular "I" to draw attention to himself. This was an instance of self-promotion by centering himself and his government. Further self-promotion was evident in the phrases, "this government", "my government", "government's view" and no mention of the state.

Contrariwise, the information minister presented the policy as non-discriminatory when he argued: "... FSHSP is a heritage of the Ghanaian child. It is not necessarily based on whether your parents are rich or poor" (Myjoy Online, 3/11/2019). While this statement framed the policy as non-discriminatory, it contradicted the point made by other NPP officials heralding the policy as a pro-poor social intervention. The point I seek to advance here is that, though the government touted the policy as being for the poor, they did not want to risk the ire of the affluent by presenting a policy that catered solely for the poor. By creating an all-encompassing narrative, government officials ensured that FSHSP gained acceptability as a non-discriminatory policy and thus could garner support for the NPP from both the rich and the poor.

### **Framing Parents as Beneficiaries of the Policy**

Though children of secondary school-going age are the direct beneficiaries of the policy, NPP officials insisted that, since fees were a parental burden, FSHSP lifted the burden from the backs of parents. Thus, parents were framed as the policy's indirect beneficiaries, as illustrated in the extract below.

The President Akufo-Addo Government has eased the burden of hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians and invested in the future of our children. Apart from building a strong human capital for the future there are immediate cash benefits to the parents... FSHSP has really lifted a burden off the shoulder of parents (GhanaWeb, 25/09/2018).

The vice president made several claims about parents' difficulties paying fees in the above extract. The phrase "The President Akufo-Addo government" in the subjective position was intended to present the President and his government positively. Also, as of this pronouncement, the policy had been in place for more than a year, and one would have expected the vice president to be privy to the official numbers of those enrolled. However, he chose to be vague and used "hundreds of thousands" to exaggerate. He then discussed how saving money on school fees would benefit parents financially. His argument was bolstered by citing statistics demonstrating parents' immediate financial advantages. For instance, the vice president noted that "this has translated into GH¢2.2 billion in savings" for their parents (GhanaWeb, 25/09/2018). Here, he used figures (GH¢2.2 billion) to justify the policy. Also, at the policy's launch, the President stated: "We lift the financial burden off our parents and the heart-rending anxiety that accompanies the beginning of every school term" (Free SHS Policy, 2017). By advancing the argument of relieving parents of their burden, the President again presented himself as the savior of the parents. Notice the pronoun "we," used by the President to refer to himself and his party, creating the impression that he and his government were parents of the parents. In using "we," he created a sort of dichotomy of *we* versus *them*, where "we" referred to the NPP and "them" was the NDC. The President used "burden" as a metaphor for school fees. This meant school fees had burdened parents, and the NPP came to "lift that burden" off parents, something the NDC could not do. Moreover, framing parents as beneficiaries of the policy was vital for NPP since parents were undoubtedly the voters.



## **Referencing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**

NPP government officials project the FSHSP as part of the concerted efforts being made at the global, regional, and national levels to improve educational access, particularly in developing countries. They posited that the FSHSP conformed to best practices worldwide. For example, at the launch of the policy the President stated:

In so doing, we would be on the way to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 4,... As co-chair of the Advocacy Group of Eminent Persons of the SDGs, their implementation is a matter of the highest public priority for me.  
(Free SHS Policy, 2017)

By referring to the SDG, the NPP government officials sought to, on the one hand, politicize the policy in the Ghanaian context while simultaneously depoliticizing the policy by suggesting that the policy was just a universalizing strategy that aligned Ghana with global conventions, and not a vote-winning scheme as the opposition claimed. Thus, implementing FSHSP was a move toward world culture, which holds that irrespective of one's local culture, they are nonetheless exposed to and significantly impacted and influenced by a more all-encompassing world culture (Ramirez & Boli, 1987).

Meant to politicize the policy, the President used the personal pronoun "we" to solidarize with the citizenry. Notice the personal pronoun "me" to suggest personal responsibility and agency. Furthermore, the FSHSP website states, "The NANA AKUFO ADDO-led government has given full effect to SDG 4.1 with the implementation of FSHSP" (Free SHS Policy, 2017). Here, it is vital to notice the block capitalization of "NANA AKUFO ADDO" to bring full attention to the President and suggest that he brought FSHSP even though the SDGs predated his reign. The revised SDGs were adopted in 2013 (when NDC was ruling). Therefore, NPP's implementation in 2017 shows their willingness to give students a world-class education, while hinting that the previous administration (NDC) failed to work toward achieving SDG 4.1.

Evidently, NPP officials focused on politicizing the policy through positive self promotion of their party and negative other representation of the NDC. While this manifested in diverse ways, the aim was to maintain incumbency. In what follows, I discuss the various ways NDC officials also discursively framed and operationalized discussions regarding the FSHSP to politicize the policy through positively representing the NDC and negatively representing the NPP to instigate a regime change.

## **Strategies Adopted by the NDC to Politicize the FSHSP**

Perhaps the most significant evidence that NDC thought the FSHSP played a role in the 2016 election and could play a pivotal role in the 2020 general election was reflected in their choice of running mate for John Dramani Mahama. The NDC chose Professor Nana Jane Opoku-Agyeman, a well-accomplished educationist, to partner with Mahama heading into the 2020 election. She was a minister of education and a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast. The expectation, I suppose, was that, due to her immense experience in the education sector, she could dominate arguments about the FSHSP. In the sections below, I discuss some strategies the NDC adopted to politicize the FSHSP.

## **Referencing the Constitutional Irrevocability of the FSHSP**

To counter the narrative that NDC would cancel the FSHSP, NDC officials insisted that FSHSP was irrevocable. This stance was vital for two reasons: first, it assured the electorates that the

NDC government would continue with FSHSP. Second, it portrayed the FSHSP as a constitutional provision—something the NPP should not take credit for. John Dramani Mahama, for instance, stated at an NDC event, “Indeed, no government either present or in the future can reverse the policy because it is captured in our 1992 constitution” (MyJoy Online, 15/08/2019). Also, an NDC member of parliament (MP) noted:

Yes, it’s constitutional that we allow our children have access..., no one is against that but the way they are implementing it is not helping ... politicians under the current administration would have lost their jobs were they in the US. (MyJoy Online, 29/10/2019).

In this excerpt, the NDC MP criticized the policy’s implementation only after clarifying that FSHSP was a constitutional provision. Significantly, he indicated that no one was against the policy to allay fears that NDC would cancel it. Stating that the NPP officials “would have lost their jobs” if they were in the US amounted to a negative representation of the NPP and a subtle call on Ghanaians to vote against the NPP.

### **Claiming the Policy**

Apart from referencing the constitutional irrevocability of the policy, NDC officials noted that the NDC was the originator of the policy by referencing the PFSHSE introduced in 2015, which emphasized a piecemeal approach. For instance, the National Communications Officer of the NDC, Sammy Gyamfi, stated, “It doesn’t matter the number of lies that the NPP tells, the facts show that it was indeed President Mahama who launched the program with 360,000-day students” (Myjoy Online 26/11/2020). Thus, the NDC communicator first asserted that NPP officials had been peddling lies before referring to the “facts” using numbers. Moreover, within a month of the 2020 election, while on a campaign tour, the NDC flagbearer remarked, “we started the program and the NPP came and continued it.” And to take a swipe at the government, he continued, “unfortunately, the implementation has been very poor...” (Myjoy Online, 29/11/2020).

### **Denying the Claims of NPP Officials**

To counter the allegation by the NPP that NDC was a threat to the FSHSP, NDC officials made it explicit that NDC was not against the policy. For instance, the General Secretary of the NDC, Johnson Asiedu Nketia, placed his political career on the line if any claim that the NDC would cancel FSHSP was valid.

If President Akufo-Addo or any other Ghanaian can produce a recording, either pictorial or vocal recording of President Mahama saying that he will cancel FSHSP when he comes to power... I will resign... (MyJoy Online, 16/10/2019)

Similarly, in August 2020, four months before the general election, during a campaign tour, John Dramani Mahama declared: “FSHSP has come to stay. If anybody tells you that I, John Dramani Mahama, son of E.A Mahama will abolish FSHSP when I come, tell the person he is a bloody liar”. The flagbearer debunked the notion that he sought to cancel the FSHSP if voted into power. He made it explicit that the NPP officials suggesting he would cancel the policy were “bloody liars.” He used the personal pronoun “I” to indicate his commitment to continuing the policy and mentioned his official name for emphasis. He invoked his dead father’s name to enhance his credibility and to coerce the gathering to trust him. His father, E. A. Mahama, was a presidential adviser during Ghana’s Third Republic and the first MP of the West Gonja. In Ghana, ancestral worship is



common, and the dead are held sacred, so mentioning his dead father's name allowed him to use history and the credibility of his dead father to make the people trust him.

Relatedly, NDC resorted to debunking some of NPP's claims regarding FSHSP. For example, in their 2020 Manifesto, NDC claims that FSHSP has somewhat increased the cost for parents due to the prevalence of "hidden costs" (NDC, 2020, p. 71). There was no description of what constituted the "hidden cost," as it was stated to be taken as a universal truth known to all Ghanaians. They continued to demonize the NPP further; "without proper planning, the NPP introduced the Free Senior High School Programme, which was to come at no cost to parents, as promised. Unfortunately, it has rather increased the cost burden on some parents" (NDC, 2020). Significantly, Mahama calls the initiative "program" as opposed to "policy." While this statement may be due to the absence of a clear policy document, it also suggests that Mahama thinks the initiative does not meet the standard to be called a policy. As suggested earlier, the policy was not debated in parliament, and many stakeholders were not adequately consulted before implementation.

### **Problematizing the Implementation of the Policy**

The opposition NDC officials drew a clear line between criticizing the policy and criticizing its implementation because any direct criticism of FSHSP would confirm NPP's claim that NDC would cancel the policy if elected. For instance, Mahama said this.

What I am against is the poor implementation of the FSHSP which is creating great inconvenience for the parents, for the students and for the teachers ...If this government had followed our plan of continuing with the 200 new schools that we were building, we will not have the current situation... (Ansaah, 2020)

Mahama noted the NPP's "poor implementation" in the above excerpt to represent the NPP negatively. He also noted the "great inconvenience" wrought by the FSHSP. To promote his former administration, he claimed that the NPP could have avoided policy implementation problems by following the NDC's plan. Also, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe, an NDC MP, said, "The silencing of these heads has given a false impression as though all is well with the FSHSP. We are sitting on a time bomb which can explode with devastating consequences anytime, maybe soon" (GhanaWeb, 7/11/2019). The phrase "false impression" suggested that even though all seemed to be well, "all is not well", and the metaphor of a "time bomb" highlighted the imminent danger the NPP and their handling of FSHSP posed to Ghana's education. All these were moves aimed at discrediting the NPP government.

Offering alternatives was an inevitable corollary of problematizing the implementation. For instance, at the NDC's 2020 Manifesto launch, John Dramani Mahama's running mate, said, "We have every plan and desire to make the FSHSP much better by ensuring that numerous challenges are addressed and that higher operational and academic standards are introduced and sustained". Saying the NDC would address "numerous challenges" and ensure that "higher operational and academic standards are introduced and sustained" implied that, at that time, the system was substandard with the NPP in charge.

### **Blaming FSHSP for Teenage Pregnancies**

The opposition NDC officials argued that teenage pregnancies increased due to long vacations occasioned by the Double Track System (DTS)<sup>4</sup>. For instance, speaking at an NDC press conference, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe stated:

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<sup>4</sup> The Double Track System (DTS) involves the division of the total student population into two tracks, with one track attending school while the other is on vacation, and vice versa.

One major disadvantage of the DTS is the area where many heads of second-cycle institutions are afraid to comment. That has to do with the high rate of teenage pregnancies being recorded in some Senior High Schools. Within a space of one year, alone (2018-2019) over 1,433 girls at Senior High Schools across the country were impregnated...(GhanaWeb, 7/11/2019)

In addition to citing a rise in teenage pregnancies, Peter Nortsy-Kotoe said heads were being silenced. To him, that explained why the public was unaware of the policy's adverse effects. The use of huge numbers, such as 1,433, painted a dire picture of the teenage pregnancy situation in the country. Similarly, the NDC Deputy General Secretary reiterated:

The last time we conducted a survey in Ghana and realized that averagely, in every constituency, 20 teenage girls under the DTS are pregnant ... if this is not a bad government, then I don't know another definition for a bad government. (GhanaWeb, 29/08/2019)

The NDC deputy General Secretary blamed the NPP for rising teen pregnancies in the above excerpts. He did not indicate who conducted the survey or when the survey was conducted. He used numbers to prove his claim and to convince listeners that the NPP government was terrible and should be voted out to stop teen pregnancies. Negative other presentation occurs in the sentence, "if this is not a bad government, then I don't know another definition for a bad government" (GhanaWeb, 29/08/2019). However, this stance of the NDC officials discounted the fact that the problem of teenage pregnancies predated the implementation of FSHSP (Tetteh et al., 2022). Therefore, blaming only the FSHSP and the DTS for the surge in teenage pregnancy was geared toward a negative portrayal of the NPP government.

### **Raising Concerns Regarding Quality**

Raising concerns about quality under the FSHSP was the primary way to express opposition to the policy. As stated earlier, the NDC officials tried not to bastardize the policy, but to criticize the NPP's implementation strategy. By negatively representing the ruling party and positioning themselves as the people with workable solutions, the opposition NDC sought to assure the public of a better implementation if given the mandate, calling on voters to vote out the NPP to enable the NDC to implement the policy better and ensure quality education. For example, an NDC MP, Zanetor, said: "It's about quality education, not just education" (MyJoy Online, 24/11/2019). Also, Mahama stressed the importance of decoupling increased access from quality: "What is the use of education if it does not have the quality to give the learner a chance and opportunity in life?" (City Newsroom, 17/08/22). These two quotes illustrate NDC's stance that the prevailing system lacked the needed quality. This was an apparent response to NPP officials waxing lyrical about the increase in enrolment.

Furthermore, critiquing the DTS provided NDC officials with a valuable opportunity to portray the NPP negatively and, more significantly, promote the NDC positively. In their 2020 Manifesto, NDC assured Ghanaians of "a better and improved FSHSP" and to "end the dreaded DTS which has increased cost of SHS education for some parents" (NDC, 2020, p. 68). This was meant to assure citizens that the NDC would sustain and improve the policy by abolishing the DTS. It refuted NPP's claim that FSHSP had relieved parents of the secondary education costs. It is also important to note the use of the word "dreaded" to modify DTS. NDC also noted that DTS "has brought untold inconvenience to students, teachers, and parents and negatively impacted quality

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teaching and learning.” Another NDC MP, Eric Afful, noted, “If the government wants to see quality education, the best thing is to eradicate the DTS for students by building enough school blocks” (GhanaWeb, 26/03/2021). This statement presupposed that, at that time, there was no quality. To him, quality education was contingent on abolishing the DTS. This NDC MP seemed to offer a solution by suggesting that the government should build more schools. However, he aimed to positively project NDC’s long-held claim that FSHSP was only feasible after building more schools (Afrane, 2022). Significantly, the flagbearer of NDC promised to abolish the DTS within 100 days if voted into office.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

While many research studies address how educational policies are adopted and implemented as a matter of political expediency, many do not account for how the politicization manifests itself. This study focuses on Ghana’s FSHSP and examines pronouncements of NPP and NDC officials to ascertain the politicization strategies adopted to shore up support for their respective parties. Drawing on CDA (van Dijk, 1997, 1998, 2017), I have shown that the ruling party’s desire to stay in power was reflected in glorifying their regime, painting a picture of massive, unprecedented strides in secondary education that resulted in an enrolment surge (Adarkwah, 2022; Kwegyiriba, 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021), positive impact on girls’ education (Stenzel et al., 2024), education of poor and rural folks Animah (2018), and relief for parents (Addae et al, 2019). These arguments sought to shore up regime support and maintain incumbency. The politicization manifests itself in touting these claims as indications of good stewardship under the NPP rulership and juxtaposing these achievements against those of the NDC. This thus amounts to a positive representation of the NPP and a negative representation of the NDC.

Equally, the NDC resorted to painting a gloomy picture of the current state of secondary education by highlighting implementation bottlenecks, especially regarding the infrastructural deficit (Adarkwah, 2022; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Furthermore, the NDC noted the decline in the quality of secondary education occasioned by the FSHSP (Duah et al., 2023; Dwomoh et al., 2022). Importantly, given parents’ satisfaction with the FSHSP (Addae et al, 2019), NDC avoided criticizing the policy but focused on blaming the NPP government for poorly implementing the policy. Significantly, NDC officials framed the NPP as a threat to Ghana’s education and created the narrative that the situation could only be redressed by giving power back to the NDC. According to Darmoe et al. (2024, p. 12), political opposition parties in Ghana view themselves as a “government in waiting” and act as “watchdogs over the ruling government.” This is reminiscent of the bipartisan support that No Child Left Behind policy received, with the leaders of the Democrats and Republicans disagreeing only on issues of funding (Hursh, 2007; Torres, 2005).

In sum, in their attempt to politicize the FSHSP and use it as a campaign tool to win elections, both parties adopted a strategy of “expressing or suppressing information” in the interest of their parties (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267). Thus, NPP officials “emphasize information that is positive” about NPP while suppressing “information that is negative” about NPP. On the other hand, NDC officials “emphasize positive information” about NDC, while suppressing “negative information about NDC. Conversely, while NPP officials emphasize the negatives of the NDC and suppress the positives about the NDC, officials of the NDC also emphasize the negatives of the NPP while suppressing the positives of NPP. Both parties did this overtly and covertly. Thus, the NPP glorified the present while bastardizing the erstwhile NDC regime and their handling of secondary education, while the NDC officials problematize the present NPP regime, while promising a better future implementation. Ultimately, the aim of NPP officials’ pronouncement

about FSHSP was to maintain incumbency while NDC officials sought to advocate for regime change.

The issues discussed in this article are not peculiar to Ghana. Instead, they highlight a growing trend in Africa where political actors capitalize on global education policy packages, such as democratizing education to win elections. While this strategy has almost always worked to win elections and notably increased access, its unfortunate corollary has been an instant decline in educational quality (Chapman et al., 2010; Moussa & Omoeva, 2020; Sifuna, 2004, 2007). This could be adduced to the fact that these governments overly concentrate on fulfilling campaign promises without considering whether or not the countries have the resources to facilitate and sustain implementation. Furthermore, it also highlights a failure of international funders like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to fulfill commitments made through major international policy platforms like Education for All (EFA) initiatives and the Millenium Development Goals (Colclough et al., 2003; Kendall & Silver, 2014).

Yet, politicizing education policies is not exclusive to Africa. In 2009, Hacsí wrote about the situation in the US, and how political interests pushed by politicians greatly affect how people feel about education policies. He further warned that politicians often let their ideological views take precedence over facts because getting elected is more important to them than doing what is best for the public.

I contend that the prominence gained by the FSHSP in political debates in Ghana is not necessarily a function of the concern the political parties have for education; rather, it is because both parties believe that talking about it can help sway voters in their favor. However, letting politics take center stage in educational issues presages a dangerous future for education because politicians tend to disproportionately focus on quantifiable metrics of education, such as access and grades, at the expense of quality and equity, resulting in unintended negative consequences. This view is not counterintuitive, given that the principal aim of every political party is to win elections and not to improve education.

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