J Educ Change (2012) 13:347–371
DOI 10.1007/s10833-012-9181-6

Unmasking complexities involved in operationalising UPE policy initiatives: Using the 'fCUBE' policy implementation in Ghana as an exemplar

Hope Pius Nudzor

Published online: 21 March 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2012

Abstract In most parts of the world today, the goal of providing all children with free and Universal Primary Education (UPE) has received broad national and international support and some educational systems have evolved from predominantly 'fee-charging' towards 'fee-free' status in recent times. In Ghana, for example, the endorsement of Education for All (EFA) and millennium development goals (MDGs) agreements coupled with commitment to internal constitutional reforms have resulted in the initiation of the Free Compulsory Universal, Basic Education (fCUBE) policy. Dishearteningly however, in many low-income countries (including Ghana), verbal commitments to these laudable social goals do not appear to be translated into the needed changes in policy and practice. This article draws on a case study of the fCUBE policy implementation to provide insights into the complexities involved in operationalising UPE policy initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa. The methodological approach involved the critical discourse analysis of interviews with Ghanaian education officials who mediate policy at the 'meso-level'. Owing to the commitments of the fCUBE policy to enhancing the educational opportunities and outcomes for the socially and economically disadvantaged, the paper sees it (i.e. the fCUBE policy) as deeply rooted in social democracy. However, it is argued that as long as there is a blurring in meaning of the intentions encapsulated in its title, primary education in Ghana cannot be said to be 'free', 'compulsory' and 'universal'. It is concluded that accentuating policy purposes in low-income countries is not inherently problematic but that the challenges lie with how the intentions and provisions of policy are conceptualised and operationalised in context.

H. P. Nudzor (✉)
Faculty of Education, Institute for Educational Planning and Administration,
University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana
e-mail: hpnudzor@gmail.com

Keywords Education for All · 'fCUBE' · Millennium development goals · Social democracy · Sub-Saharan Africa · Universal primary education

Introduction

The rationale for the introduction of the 'fee-charging concept' in education all over the world has always rested on the issues of 'quality' as well as the high costs of the sector and the considerable subsidies that they represent (Thobani 1984; Mingat and Tan 1986). However in recent times, arguments about primary education as a human right (Bray 1987; Tomasevski 2005) are principally based on two factors. First, the argument is based on the recognition that education is a critical determinant of personal development and social mobility, and that it is unfair that individuals or groups of individuals should be denied access or excluded from the educational process merely on the basis of their inability to pay fees. To this argument of equality may be added another about economics (Bray 1987). That is, the view that 'society as a whole benefits from having a literate and numerate population, and that charges (as in fees or levies) may keep talented individuals out of school and thus waste national resources' (p. 119).

Thus, owing chiefly to the social and economic arguments alluded to above, the goal of providing all children with free and Universal Primary Education (UPE) has received broad national and international support and some educational systems have evolved from predominantly 'fee-charging' towards predominantly 'fee-free' status in recent times. Dishearteningly however, in most low-income countries, verbal commitments do not always appear to be translated into much needed changes in policy and practice due to financial and practical implementation challenges. As cited by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) in 2004 for instance, 30% of children in seven countries (Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Mali and Niger) never even start school let alone attend regularly.[1] Whilst this could be taken as an indication that the millennium development goals (MDGs) and its related Education for All (EFA) goals were not taking hold, the UIS went on further to add that Africa was the only region where the end of primary education denoted exit from education for the majority of children (p. 26). To put these challenges into perspective, whereas it alleged that Eastern Europe and Latin America were on track towards meeting the EFA and MDG targets, or nearly so, sub Saharan Africa is cited as lagging behind desperately and irreparably.

In this article, I draw on a case study of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) policy implementation in Ghana to provide insights into the conceptual and operational challenges of UPE provision in sub-Saharan Africa. The fCUBE policy was launched in 1996 in response to the 1992 constitutional mandate

[1] It is important to acknowledge that the figure cited here from UNESCO (UIS) is not necessarily accurate. Rates of enrolment in many sub-Saharan African countries improved considerably as a result of their endorsement of EFA and MDGs agreements, and particularly the introduction of fee-free policy initiatives. (See UNESCO Global Monitoring Report (2009) for latest updates on enrolment rates in sub-Saharan Africa).

and was aimed at eliminating school fees in order to increase demand for schooling. At the heart of fCUBE essentially was government's commitment 'to make schooling from Basic Education Stage 1 through 9 free and compulsory for all school-age children and to improve the quality of the education services offered' (MOE 1996, p. 1). The policy makers argued that the right to education was unequivocal, and that fees of whatever nature constituted a disincentive to the enjoyment of that right (Akyeampong 2009). In other words, the crux of this argument was that the invidious existence of indirect costs, such as compulsory levies on parents, needed to be controlled to safeguard the provision and delivery of basic education as a fundamental human right. This article aims to unmask the conceptual and operational challenges that the articulation and interpretation of the fCUBE policy intentions encapsulated in the policy title pose to the implementation process. The methodological approach involves finding out what a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of interviews conducted with Ghanaian education officials say about how they conceptualised and articulated the policy intentions and what these suggest about the extent to which the 'free' 'compulsory' 'universal' and 'basic education' components of the policy title are reflected adequately in the implementation process.

The fCUBE policy in Ghana presents a rather interesting case of the impact of fee-free universal compulsory education policy in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because (and as Akyeampong (2009, p. 176) rightly points out), unlike other countries in the sub-region which introduced similar policies and saw significant rapid increase in enrolments (e.g. Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya), the fCUBE policy produced slower, steadier growth largely because it (the fCUBE policy) did little to eliminate or reduce significantly much of the schooling costs to poor households. Thus, the rationale for using the fCUBE policy in Ghana as an exemplar to explore the challenges of UPE initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa is grounded, among other things, in the belief that this attempt will help to deepen knowledge and understanding, particularly among stakeholders of education in low-income countries, of the conceptual and operational barriers to policy change and how these challenges could be conceptualized for mediation. In this article, I argue essentially that owing to the commitment of the fCUBE policy to enhancing the educational opportunities and outcomes of the socially and economically under-privileged in the Ghanaian society, it (the fCUBE policy) could be considered as a rights-based policy deeply rooted in social democratic ideals.[2] That notwithstanding, the point is also made forcefully that as long as there is a blurring in meaning and/or conception of the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes, primary education in Ghana cannot be said to be free, compulsory and universal.

The article is organised as follows. The next section presents a brief historical account intended to outline the changing context of education development vis-à-vis

[2] 'A rights-based policy' is defined here as a policy that takes education provision and delivery seriously as a human right issue whilst 'social democracy' as a political ideology rejects elitism and favours mass access to education. Essentially, where there is a concern about social inequality, social democracy advocates that education should give what Trowler (1998, 62) describes as 'step up' to disadvantaged individuals and groups in the largest numbers possible. (See "Appendix" for detailed description and a table illustrating further the principles underpinning social democracy).

attempts to universalise primary education in Ghana. This is followed by an exploration of the fCUBE policy context and the methodological design. Thereafter, the issues emanating from the interviewees' conception and articulation of the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes are presented before the conclusion.

Universalising primary education in Ghana: A brief historical account

Attempts to universalize primary education in Ghana date back to the era of colonial rule, particularly in 1945, when the then colonial government proposed a 10-year education expansion plan aimed at achieving UPE within 25 years (i.e. by 1970) (Akyeampong 2009, p. 179). However, a significant education expansion programme occurred towards the end of colonial rule when demand for education to serve a 'decolonising agenda' (Turner 1971; Nwomonoh 1998; Dei 2004, 2005) had increased. This period (i.e. the end of colonial rule) was characterised by the activities of leaders of 'national independence' ('nationalists' as they are commonly called) who sought to use education as a resource to emphasis the goal of national integration and nation-building and thereby disabusing the minds of the citizens of the colonial history, experiences and vestiges. This decolonising argument stemmed from the revolutionary ideas of avowed nationalists such as Franz Fanon, Mohandas Gandhi, Albert Memmi, Ame Cesaire, Che Guevara among others, who sought political liberation for all colonised people using the power of knowledge. Following from this example, prominent anti-colonial African thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Sekou Toure, Julius Nyerere and Leopald Senghor strategically evoked the goal of nation building as a necessary pre-condition for decolonisation (Dei 2005, 271–274). These anti-colonial and decolonising tenets were inculcated into Ghanaian Education Acts and programmes, especially the accelerated development plan (ADP) of 1951 and the 1961 Education Act, under which provisions were made to expand access to education. The ADP for decolonising purposes, for example, aimed to achieve UPE for all Ghanaian children within 15 years (i.e. by 1966). In pursuance of this aim, the ADP abolished tuition fees and this action set in motion rapid education expansion but this did not lead to universal enrolment (Akyeampong et al. 2007). The 1961 Act on the other hand, introduced legislation for compulsory UPE to consolidate the gains of the ADP. Again, although tuition fees were abolished, households faced charges for books, stationery and equipment (Akyeampong 2009).

Most of the following two decades (i.e. between 1961 and 1981) was characterised by instability in government as a result of successive military take-overs (in 1966, 1972, 1978, 1979, 1981). This was a period of harsh and repressive revolutionary zeal on the part of the military which resulted in a significant number of trained and highly qualified teachers seeking greener pastures in neighbouring Nigeria (Nti 1999, cited by Kadingdi 2004; Akyeampong 2009). The political instability coupled with the rise in oil prices in the 1970s for example resulted in a major economic decline. From 1979 to 1983, total economic output declined by 14% and real per capital income fell by 23%. The period between 1970s and early 1980s saw the index of real monthly earnings in the formal sector drop from GHc

315 to GHc 62. This caused poverty to spread. The poor economic circumstances adversely affected educational quality and outcomes whilst at the same time educational infrastructure and facilities deteriorated due to lack of funding (World Bank 2004). In one single year, primary enrolment fell by about 100,000 and stagnated until 1986/1987 when it began to increase. From 1980/1981 to 1987/1988, the average growth rate of primary enrolment stood at 1.59%, well below the 3% growth rate of the school-age population. Government spending on education also dropped from 6.4% of GDP in 1976 to just 1.5% of much lower GDP by 1984 (World Bank 2004). As school quality declined, the returns plummeted, causing demand for schooling especially among the poor to fall sharply (Glewwe and Ilias 1996, cited by Akyeampong 2009).

The road to Ghana's economic recovery however began in 1983 when structural adjustment reforms strongly supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were introduced by the revolutionary government of Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings (Akyeampong 2009, p. 179). The government distributed educational resources in favour of primary education to fulfil the agenda of making education a right for all children (World Bank 2004). Although structural adjustment was controversial in terms of its inherent cost sharing elements, it nevertheless helped to create the conditions for improving the economy that led to increasing investments in basic education. With financial support from international agencies (the World Bank in particular) basic education received US$260 million from 1986 to 2002. These investments averaged US$17 million a year, peaking at US$40 million in 1995 (World Bank 2004). The investments were principally aimed at increasing the proportion of educational resources allocated to a re-structured 9-year basic education system which had become the centre of wider education reforms by 1987 (Akyeampong 2009). Significant investment savings were also made, as part of the major educational reforms, by reducing Ghana's pre-tertiary system of education which comprised of 17 years (6 years primary, 4 years middle, 5 years secondary and 2 years 'A' Level) to 12 years (i.e. 6 years primary, 3 years junior secondary followed by 3 years secondary). With the aim of universalising primary education, the savings accrued from down-sizing pre-tertiary system of education were used to expand school places to increase intakes and enrolments. Expectedly, these reforms led to the doubling of the number of primary and junior secondary schools in the country. However, this did not result in steady growth in enrolment rates until after the initiation of fCUBE in 1996.

The next significant push towards deepening the provision and delivery of basic education embraces the period of major constitutional reforms. The phase was characterised by Ghana's participation and endorsement of international agreements and conventions such as the EFA, the United Nations (UN) Convention/Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the Beijing Declaration on Women's Rights, the Lome Convention, the MDGs among others. Ghana's participation in, and endorsement of these key international agreements and declarations coupled with her commitment to internal constitutional reforms in 1992 led to major constitutional and educational reforms of which the fCUBE policy initiative was a formidable part. The 1992 constitution and policy acts that followed it set the stage for the national provision of basic education (Maikish and Gershberg 2008). It (the constitution) formulated

the policy entitled 'Basic Education—A Right: Programme for the provision of Free Compulsory and Universal Basic Education by the year 2005' which was officially launched in 1996 (MOE/GES 2001). In principle, the fCUBE policy aimed to eliminate school fees in order to increase demand for schooling (Akyeampong 2009). With financial assistance from the World Bank, fCUBE focused on demand and supply educational activities. Regarding the former, investments went to support education policy and management changes with key areas targeted including (but not exclusive to): increasing instructional time, reducing fees and levies, improving headteachers' management skills an motivation levels and improving school supervision. Concerning the latter, investments focused primarily on improving physical infrastructure and increasing the number of school places through the large-scale construction of additional classrooms and schools (World Bank, cited by Akyeampong 2009, p. 181).

Although the 10-year period mandated by the 1992 constitution for the implementation and institutionalisation of fCUBE elapsed more than 5 years ago, the policy is still being implemented, showing the commitment and resolve of successive government to ensure that children from disadvantaged and/or marginalized communities are not denied the right to education on the basis of their inability to pay fees. While this attempt and/or resolve by government to universalise basic education is applauded by many (including international development partners/communities) in terms of the great strides it has helped to chalk up, critical analysis (as this article would show) reveals significant conceptual bottlenecks with which the fCUBE implementation process is bedevilled. In particular, despite an existing policy of fee-free basic education post-1996 as outlined by fCUBE, basic education could still not be said to be free, compulsory nor universal. This was largely due to the fact that the Government of Ghana simultaneously promoted a strategy of education decentralisation, thus shifting responsibility of education decision making into the hands of local educational authorities. As a consequence, many districts continued to charge pupils levies to attend school as a means of raising funds to cover what they termed as 'school-related expenses' and thus making it difficult for parents, especially the poor ones, to enrol their children in school. The Government at the time defended the decision of District Assemblies (DAs) by arguing that it was for this reason (i.e. the issue of indirect charges or school-related expenses) that the fCUBE policy was written with a small-letter 'f' demonstrating government's commitment to meeting the 'public' cost of education (in terms of the provision of infrastructural facilities, furniture, textbooks, payments of teachers salaries etc.) whilst parents/guardians take up the 'private', 'indirect' or 'ancillary' cost of funding education. As a result of the contestations that arose over what constitutes 'free education', the 'capitation grant scheme' was introduced in 2004 as a way of bolstering the 1992 constitution in which free, compulsory and universal basic education is mandated, and to support its educational policy (i.e. fCUBE), which was established as an outgrowth of the 1992 constitutional mandate (Maikish and Gershberg 2008). The capitation grant scheme (as would be discussed in the next section), delivers a per child grant to individual schools to offset the costs of such things as material, sports levies and cultural fees on poor and needy parents, and thus could be seen as a means of

reducing the wealth bias that characterises access to primary education and the incidence of cost-related dropout from school.

Thus by exploring this brief historical account, this section has highlighted the changing context of education development vis-à-vis the attempts to universalise primary education in Ghana. Next, the fCUBE policy context and the methodological design are presented before the exploration of the issues emerging from the research on which this article is based.

The fCUBE policy context

The acronym fCUBE was derived from the wording of the Fourth Republican Constitution of 1992 in Ghana, whose formulation and passage into law gave rise to the establishment of the fCUBE policy. The policy was set up in fulfillment of the Fourth Republican Constitutional mandate which states in Chapter 6, Section 38, sub-section 2 that:

> The Government shall, within two years, after Parliament first meets, after the coming into force of this Constitution, draw up a programme for implementation within the following ten years, for the provision of Free, Compulsory and Universal Basic Education to all Ghanaian children of school-going age. (Government of Ghana (GOG) 1992)

The Fourth Republican Constitution of 1992 came into effect officially on the 7th of January, 1993 and in line with the constitutional provision, the then Government of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), through the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ghana Education Service (GES) came out in April 1996 with a policy document to implement the fCUBE policy officially. The policy implementation process took off in 1996 and was expected to be completed by 2005. Among the aims of the policy, those that are worth stressing for the purposes of this paper are:

1. to make schooling from basic stage 1 through 9 (5–13 years), free, compulsory and universal for all school age children by the year 2005.
2. to improve the quality of teaching and learning: recognizing by then that 22% of children of school-going age (that is, P1 to P6) were not in school, 29% of students in JSS were not in school, and that there were less vacancies for students who qualified to enter SSS. (MOE 1996; GES 2004)

An fCUBE implementation plan which adopts a range of strategies, often referred to as the objectives of the fCUBE, was also developed to guide execution of the policy. These strategies revolve around three main components:

1. Improving quality of teaching and learning
2. Improving management efficiency
3. Improving access and participation. (MOE 1996)

In 1997, a fourth objective—decentralization and sustainability of management structures—was added to the three main objectives. The objective of the

decentralization component of fCUBE includes decentralization of the management of the sector's budget for pre-tertiary education to DAs. This involves capacity building and financial management at the district level (MOE 1998; GES 2004).

Granted that the implementation of the fCUBE policy is still on-going (i.e. in spite of the fact that the 10-year period mandated by the 1992 constitution had elapsed some 5 years ago), it is imperative to question the extent to which the policy intentions and/or purposes are taking hold. In its sixteenth year of initiation, evaluative reports on the fCUBE policy implementation are somewhat cursory, inconsistent and contradictory. A case in point is the national mid-term stocktaking exercise undertaken on the fCUBE policy by GES in the year 2000. The aim of this nationwide review was to evaluate the programme for the first half of the implementation period (1996–2000) to identify achievements and constraints with the view to mapping up strategies for improvement (MOE 2000). Part of the findings of the stocktaking exercise were reverberated in the report on the Development of Education in Ghana, presented by representatives of GES at the forty-seventh session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) in Geneva (GES 2004). The report emphasized that with the help of International Funding Agencies and donors, the education sector had made significant progress in the sense that pupils' enrolment has increased slowly and steadily, and so were other areas such as equity and content of education. Citing an example from the 'access to education' component of 'fCUBE' to buttress this point, the report noted, for example, that the second phase of the Basic Education Sector Improvement Programme (BESIP), which was under the sponsorship of the World Bank provided the following infrastructural facilities for 44 districts among other things:

- 172 No. 4-Unit Teacher Accommodation Blocks;
- 50 No. Basic Stage (BS)-6 Classroom Blocks;
- 19 No. BS7-9 Classroom Blocks and;
- 69 No. 4 Seater Kumasi Ventilated Improved Pits (KVIP) Blocks (Toilets). (GES 2004, 5)

Regarding constraints, both reports (MOE 2000; GES 2004) catalogued a number of issues affecting the implementation process, which include among other things: inadequate supply of logistics; lack of community cooperation and participation in education; inability of parents/guardians to supply school needs of children owing to poverty; high level apathy of parents/guardians towards the programme; inadequate supply of teachers; inadequate financial support from DAs; teacher absenteeism; low retention rate, especially for girls due to the parents/guardians' inability to pay levies that many DAs continued to charge as a means of raising funds to cover school-related expenses such as repairs, cultural and sporting activities.

These concerns about the constraints to implementing the fCUBE policy were summed up by Tomasevski's (2006) in her Global Report of the State of the Right to Education. Citing from a wide range of sources (notably: MOE 1996; GOG (Poverty Reduction Strategy) 2003, 2006; Asmah 2004; Education International Barometer 2004; EFA/UNESCO 2002, 2006; Ministry of Education and Sports (MOESS) 2006), she painted a rather gloomy picture in her assessment of Ghana's efforts at meeting the EFA and MDGs. She stressed that the commitment to free, compulsory

and universal basic education in Ghana followed from the 1992 Constitution, which has affirmed that basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all. These constitutional guarantees, according to her, were inspired by the fact that prior to the official inception of the fCUBE policy in 1996, education was neither free, compulsory, nor available to all those who could not afford the cost. She added that 10 years later, Ghana's educational performance has not improved and that by 2003, merely 59% of 6–11 year olds enrolled in primary school. She argued that although the current debt relief process in place might lead to making education less costly, there was no commitment whatsoever to make it free in the 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). She emphasized that although the PRSP has confirmed that one-third of out-of school children could not meet the high cost of education, there was no pledge to eliminate that financial barrier. The government has only pledged that 'regulations on illegal fees will be enforced to ensure that the approved fees (which in most cases are disguised as 'levies') are charged'.

From 2000 onwards, owing to these and other related constraints, new policy initiatives intended to strengthen and revitalise the 'fCUBE' policy implementation were introduced. Notable among these policies are the introduction of the 'capitation grant scheme', the 'school feeding programme', and the '11-year basic education policy' (GES 2004; MOE 2005, 2006).[3] In case of the capitation grant, the Government of Ghana conceded that the levies charged for school-related costs had the effect of deterring many poverty stricken families from sending their children to school (GES 2005), hence its introduction to increase access to basic education. As Maikish and Gershberg (2008) succinctly point out, the capitation grant scheme was developed and is currently being administered by Ghana's Ministry of Education and Sports and its implementation wing, the Ghana Education Service, to support financially and administratively the fCUBE policy of free, UPE. The scheme was launched as a pilot programme in 2004–2005 and launched country-wide in 2005–2006, and is aimed basically at removing the financial barrier to enrolling in schools while, at the same time, compensating schools for any loss of revenue incurred by eliminating students levies. It allocates a per pupil allotment of funding (i.e. 3 Ghana Cedis (GHc) per pupil per year) to all basic public schools (kindergarten through junior secondary school) to encourage effective implementation of decentralisation by empowering schools to plan and carry out school quality improvement activities using accountability guidelines and forms. In the initial 2004–2005 pilot year, an estimated amount of GHc 11,100,000 was requested from the government to fund the initial implementation of the scheme financed in part through the release of GHc 9,500,000 from Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Fund (GHc 4,750,000) and Social Impact Mitigation Levy (GHc 4,750,000) (MOE 2007, cited by Maikish and Gershberg 2008, pp. 8–9). While the total capitation grant budget is seemingly large, it is important to note however that it does not fully cover the actual costs of educating a student. The funds provided by the capitation grant to schools are supposed only to be channelled towards the

[3] As the names suggest, the 'school feeding programme' policy provides at least a decent meal a day for vulnerable children in deprived settings, whilst the 11-year basic education' policy extends primary education from 9 to 11 years in Ghana, comprising 2 years Kindergarten; 6 years of Primary Schooling; and 3 years of Junior Secondary School (JSS) (which is also now known as Junior High School).

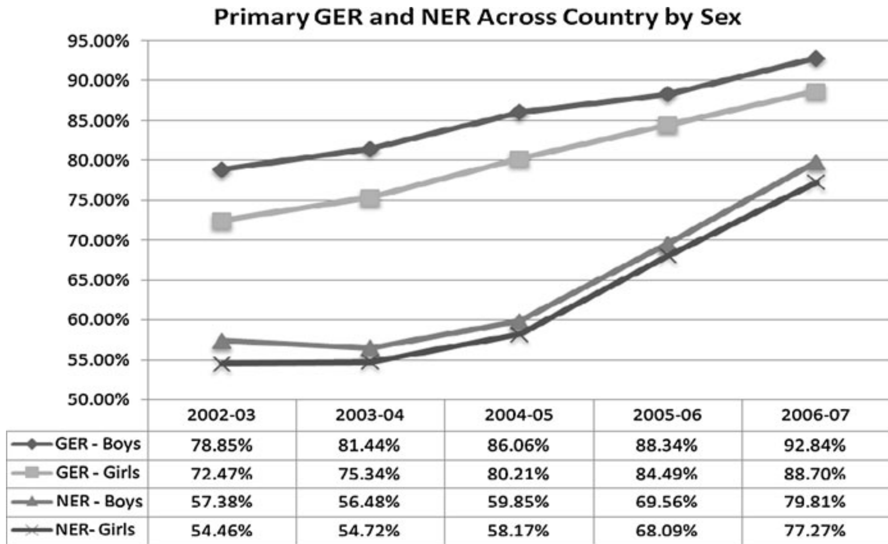
provision of teaching and learning materials, school management (including travel and transportation, stationery and sanitation) community and school relationship, support to needy pupils, school-based in-service training, minor repairs and the payment of sports and culture levies and not teachers' salaries and other service and administration costs (GES 2005).

The introduction of the capitation grant scheme and its associated initiatives undoubtedly resulted in significant surge in enrolment thus accelerating progress towards EFA goals. (See, for example, World Bank 2004; Maikish and Gershberg 2008; Akyeampong 2009; UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2009; for full/further discussion on this.) In its survey, the Operations Evaluations Department (OED) of the World Bank, for instance, conducted an impact evaluation of education reforms in Ghana, and concluded that enrolments had risen in all population groups, and that primary enrolment, in particular, had grown faster among lower income groups (World Bank 2004). Maikish and Gershberg (2008), on their part, analyse trends from 2002 to 2007[4] in primary and junior secondary school gross enrolment ratio (GER) and net enrolment ratio (NER) across the country by sex, region and district deprivation level, and have reported significant increases in enrolments due to the introduction of the capitation grant scheme. They assert, for example, that the margin of difference in GER between boys and girls decreased from 6.1% in 2003–2004 to 4.1% in 2006–2007 suggesting a fair impact of the capitation grant on narrowing the gap between girls and boys. They add, among other things, that the basic school GER in the deprived districts[5] exhibited a steeper growth rate after 2005–2006 bringing the gross enrolment rates in deprived and non-deprived districts basic schools from roughly an 8% margin to within less than 3% by 2006–2007. (See Figs. 1 and 2 below for illustrations of these facts.) They are however quick to point out that this is not the case for net enrolment rates, arguing that once the scheme was initiated in the non-deprived districts in 2005–2006, growth in the non-deprived districts outstripped growth in the deprived districts further widening the gap between the two.

These achievements of fCUBE are remarkable as they appear supposedly to move Ghana closer to the attainment of EFA. Nonetheless, the preponderance of available research evidence (e.g. Tomasevski 2006; Maikish and Gershberg 2008; Akyeampong 2009; Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah 2009; Rolleston 2009 etc.) show that there are still conceptual and operational bottlenecks that needed to be surmounted in order for primary education to be provided free of charge for children from disadvantaged and/or marginalized communities. The research evidence indicates, among other things, that there is still significant confusion and/or blurring as to what the policy intentions encapsulated in the fCUBE title actually stand for. The compulsory element of fCUBE, for instance, signals the determination to put pressure on parents to enroll their children for the full duration of what is known and

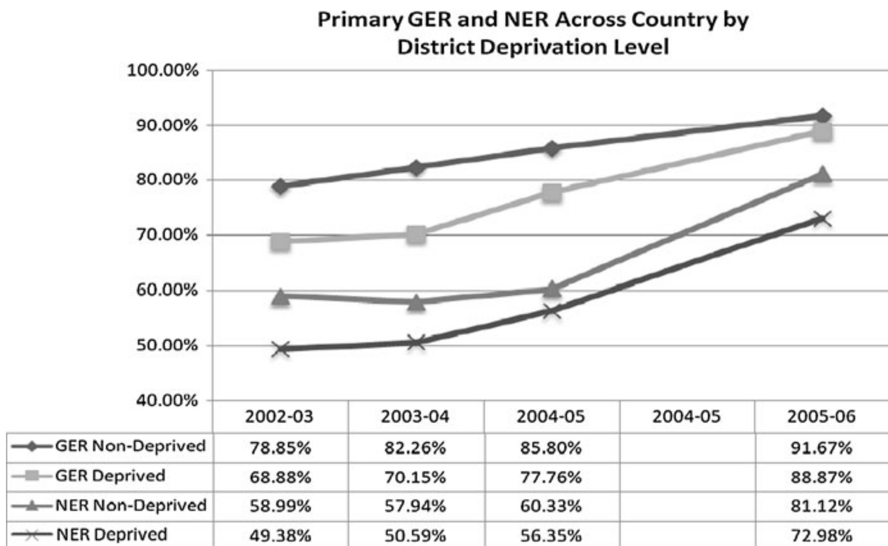
[4] Data at the district level for 2005–2006 is not covered or represented in Maikish and Gershberg's analysis because (as they explained), this was the year Ghana was redistricted and that requests for data for this period is still pending.

[5] Until 2004–2005, there were 40 deprived districts and 70 non-deprived districts in Ghana. When the country was redistricted in 2005–2006, 53 districts were labelled as deprived while 98 remained non-deprived (Maikish and Gershberg 2008).



	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
GER - Boys	78.85%	81.44%	86.06%	88.34%	92.84%
GER - Girls	72.47%	75.34%	80.21%	84.49%	88.70%
NER - Boys	57.38%	56.48%	59.85%	69.56%	79.81%
NER- Girls	54.46%	54.72%	58.17%	68.09%	77.27%

Fig. 1 Primary school GER and NER by sex. *Source*: Maikish and Gershberg (2008)



	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2004-05	2005-06
GER Non-Deprived	78.85%	82.26%	85.80%		91.67%
GER Deprived	68.88%	70.15%	77.76%		88.87%
NER Non-Deprived	58.99%	57.94%	60.33%		81.12%
NER Deprived	49.38%	50.59%	56.35%		72.98%

Fig. 2 Primary GER and NER by district deprivation level. *Source*: Maikish and Gershberg (2008)

referred to in Ghana as ‘basic education’. However, as illustrated by Akyeampong (2009, pp. 181–182) for example, without an enforcement strategy this simply amounted to an empty threat. Similarly, although in principle the capitation grant arrangement is commended by many, there is still contestation over what constitutes ‘free education’. Concerns are beginning to emerge about the adequacy and sustainability of the capitation grant, and questions are being asked about whether or

not the grant should extend to cover 'private' costs or what Akyeampong (2009) calls 'ancillary costs' of funding basic education. This article, a timely response to the above concerns, purports to demonstrate how Ghanaian education authorities conceptualise and articulate the fCUBE policy intentions, and what this says about the extent to which the policy intentions and/or purposes are reflected visibly in the process of implementation. Essentially, the article uses the fCUBE policy in Ghana as a case, and with a view to gauging understanding of the intricacies involved in conceptualising and operationalising UPE policy initiatives in sub-Saharan African countries. The researcher is of the view that this endeavour could provide vital information that could be useful in deepening understanding of the barriers to policy change in Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries.

Methodological design

This article is culled from research which explored the policy phenomenon the author describes as the 'policy implementation paradox' (i.e. the apparent disjuncture between policy intention in theory and outcomes in practice) using the fCUBE policy implementation process in Ghana as an exemplar. In the light of the research questions posed and the fact that the study purported to shed insights into and/or deepen understanding of the reasons why there is often dissonance or disconnect between policy intentions and purposes enacted in theory and outcomes of implementation processes in practice, the interpretivist approach and its underlying qualitative strategy was adopted. In the process, the fCUBE policy implementation was taken as a 'case' and studied in its real life context, using more than one sources of evidence. The approach involved the use of the conception of policy as 'text' and 'discourse' (Ball 1994) as an analytical framework, whereby a range of publicly available texts/extracts from documents on the fCUBE policy were subjected to CDA. These were complemented by the analysis of semi-structured opened-ended interviews conducted with Ghanaian educational authorities mainly on a range of issues concerning how they perceived the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes to be reflected visibly in the implementation and institutionalisation processes.

This article focuses primarily on the CDA of the semi-structured, opened-ended interviews conducted with the Ghanaian education officials to scope understanding of the complexities involved in conceptualising and operationalising UPE policy initiatives in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa for that matter. In all, sixteen (eleven individualized and five group) semi-structured, opened-ended interviews were conducted with Ghanaian education officials who mediate policy at the 'meso-level' over a 2-month period in Ghana. The focus on the meso-level implementers was not intended to achieve any parochial interests. As mediators of policy between the policy makers and actual implementers (i.e. headteachers and teachers at school level), the Ghanaian education officials often create public conversation that sets legitimate boundaries of discourse owing to the venerable positions they occupy and the 'power' they wield. Hence the decision to interrogate and make sense of how they conceived and articulated the fCUBE policy purposes and what these indeed

suggest about the extent to which the policy intentions could be said to be reflected visibly in the implementation process. The interviewees, who comprised of senior officials at the GES Headquarters, Regional Directors of Education and their assistants, District/Municipal/Metropolitan Directors of Education and an Executive member of the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), are spread across the ten regions of the country[6] and were selected using 'purposeful sampling technique'.[7] The rationale for using purposeful sampling technique for the selection of interviewees was grounded in the three critical conditions outlined by Neuman (2004, pp. 138–140) and which are particularly relevant to this study. These three conditions are:

1. when the researcher wants to select unique cases that are informative for in-depth investigation—in this case, finding out the extent to which the fCUBE policy implementation is leading to the realisation of the policy intentions;
2. when the researcher wants to select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialised population—in this case, Ghanaian education officials who by virtue of the nature of their work and position are very difficult to reach for research purposes;
3. when the purpose of sampling is less to generalise to a larger population than it is to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied—in this case, gaining insight into the complexities involved in conceptualising and operationalising UPE policy initiatives in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa for that matter.

The number of interviewees was based primarily on achieving a fuller understanding of the implementation process and involved the kind of variation sampling that cuts across urban, semi-urban and rural spectrums. The five group interviews (which consisted of 2, 3, 3, 3 and 5 members respectively) were not carried out with capricious or whimsical intentions. In all, sixteen individualised interviews were scheduled to be conducted from the outset. However, this did not materialise in the field due to new appointments made at the time by the then Government to senior positions within the GES. The five group interviews thus resulted from requests from some interviewees (i.e. some Regional and District

[6] Granted that the interviewees were selected from different regions and contexts for the purpose of this study meant that regional or positional differences and issues could have affected their responses. This issue was however mitigated largely by the focus of the study (not on the vast regional differences in enrolment rates, but rather) on interrogating the extent to which the interviewees as mediators of policy in the Ghanaian educational system perceived the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes to be reflected visibly in the processes of implementation and institutionalisation.

[7] The issue of sampling is crucial and lies at the heart of any good research. Sampling refers simply to "the search for typicality". In other words, finding out the extent to which what has been observed in a particular situation at a particular time applies more generally. However, given the aims and purpose of the research on which this article draws, the notion of 'sampling' here is taken to mean a 'reflection' of broad characteristics of the population rather than being 'representative' which implies or connotes the ability to use certain statistical techniques. In line with this thinking, the 'purposeful' sampling technique was adopted in the identification and selection of interviewees. By definition, purposeful sampling is described in the context of this article as the selection of the respondents for an empirical study with a specific purpose in mind. That is, selecting respondents who (by virtue of their position and the power they wield) have experience and knowledge of the case under investigation.

Directors of Education) who, being relatively new to their respective posts felt they were more comfortable if their substantive assistants who were very knowledgeable about the fCUBE policy implementation joined them for the interviews. The interview schedule had ten items which were grouped into three main sections which probed the interviewees on a range of issues hinging particularly on their interpretation and experiences of the fCUBE implementation process.

Responses were transcribed manually and analysed thematically. The thematic analysis involved coding the transcripts. Coding in this context is used to mean re-arranging the transcripts into thematic categories. In all, fourteen codes/thematic categories emerging from the interview responses were identified. Out of the fourteen emerged three major themes under which all the categories were re-organised and merged. The first theme comprised of responses to three questions which probed the interviewees' conception, articulation and/or interpretation of the fCUBE policy intentions and purposes encapsulated in the policy documents. The second theme contained responses to more extensive set of eight questions which probed the interviewees' experiences of the implementation process and their perceptions of its strengths/successes and weaknesses or constraints. The last theme comprised of responses to two questions which interrogated the interviewees' suggestions and recommendations to improve practice. The theme additionally had responses to a third question which encouraged interviewees to raise any other points and/or concerns not covered in/by the interview.

A key component of the thematic analysis was the use of 'common-sense hypothetico-inductivist model' (Wengraf 2001), whereby insights are gained from data through the process of induction. However, granted that this article aims to gain a deeper insight into the fCUBE policy implementation process rather than theorizing, in the actual reportage of the interview findings in this article, a combination of narrative and interpretive approaches are used. The rationale for this stems from the need to narrate the interviewees' experiences as a story while pausing intermittently to reflect upon what is being said, its interpretations and the implications therein. The researcher's own personal biases about the fCUBE policy implementation process are mitigated/minimised considerably by adhering to Cookson's (1994, p. 129) suggestion to remain very close to the words of the respondents and with minimum interpretation so as to understand their views properly before jumping to conclusion. For ethical reasons (i.e. for the purposes of protecting the anonymity of the interviewees whilst at the same time ensuring the validity of the interview data), pseudonyms (Ghanaian household names) are assigned to the interviewees. This thus insulates the interviewees from unnecessary vilifications and/or victimisation for political expediency when the findings of this article are disseminated particularly in Ghana.

The interviewee accounts presented in the following section purport to illustrate what their (interviewees') conceptions, articulations and experiences of the fCUBE policy implementation) suggest about the conceptual and operational constraints to implementing UPE policies in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa for that matter. The examples presented are therefore not intended to illustrate necessarily the homogeneity of the interviewee response but rather the range in perceptions and experiences.

Emerging issues

The analysis of the interviewee accounts indicates generally that they (the interviewees) all perceived the fCUBE policy purposes and intentions to be deeply rooted in social democracy. This is indicative of the social justice (and its related principles of equity, inclusion, equality of opportunities) and progressive ideological readings they appeared to have associated with the fCUBE policy goals and purposes. The ensuing excerpts illustrate how the fCUBE policy intentions were articulated and accentuated in their respective interview sessions by Elorm (a District Director of Education) and Kweku (a senior official of the GES National Headquarters) for example:

Elorm: …The free nature of the programme is that children should not pay for education. Compulsory, meaning that any parent who has a child of school-going must ensure that the child is in school. 'Universal', meaning that irrespective of the location of a child, s/he must be able to access education. Yes, so it is universal irrespective of colour, creed, tribe whatever. Yes, nothing should hinder the child in accessing education at least at the basic level…

Kweku: Looking at the fCUBE as a policy or constitutional requirement, we are saying that in Ghana every child must have access to schooling and then it is obligatory on the state and parents to make sure that the children go to school…Then the universality here means that it covers all children irrespective of gender, ethnicity, geographical location, or may be in terms of physical disability or whatever…And it is at the basic level, 6 years primary and then 3 years Junior Secondary School

From the above, the fCUBE policy is seen essentially as a way of enhancing the educational opportunities and outcomes for the socially and economically disadvantaged in the Ghanaian society. Trowler (1998, p. 62) refers to these social democratic impulses in educational ideological terms as 'progressivism' and reports that it rejects elitism and is intended to give what he describes as 'step up' to disadvantaged individuals and groups in the largest numbers possible. These social democratic and progressive imports inferred above are thus consistent with the wording of Article 38, Sub-section 2 of Chapter 6 of the 1992 Republican Constitution of Ghana out of which the fCUBE policy emerged as an outgrowth. (See page 15 under the section on 'the fCUBE policy context' for this quote.)

Armed with these progressive ideological readings of the policy, the researcher proceeded to probe the interviewees' perception and experience of the implementation process particularly regarding what they perceived to be the successes and/or constraints to implementing the fCUBE policy. For the purposes of making the complexities involved in implementing fCUBE clearer to readers, the issues emerging from the interviews are presented under key themes. The process involved asking the interviewees to make an assessment about the extent to which the 'free' 'compulsory' 'universal' and 'basic education' intentions of the fCUBE policy were being met. The result of this exercise, as presented below, was fascinating.

Evaluating the 'free' and 'compulsory' intentions of fCUBE

The interviewees generally emphasized that the 'freeness' of primary education in Ghana is in the fact that parents/guardians do not pay tuition fees for their children/wards' education neither were they made to pay for the cost of teaching and learning materials, furniture and infrastructural facilities. When quizzed as to whether what parents/guardians pay as 'developmental levies' did not constitute fees, they argued that Government has taken note of what they referred to as the issue of 'private cost' of funding education and has hence initiated the 'capitation grant concept' (the payment of GHc3 (now increased by the current Government to GHc4 (less than £2) per child per year to offset the burden on needy parents. However, when probed about how adequate and sustainable this measure was, they became very defensive. The ensuing excerpts present Torgbui (a Director of Education of one of the ten regions) and Enyonam's (a Metropolitan Director of Education) defense to the question of the adequacy and sustainability of the 'capitation grant' arrangement:

Torgbui: When children graduate from school and become productive in society, is it to the credit of themselves or the State? We are saying the children (and their parents) are educational clients or consumers and we're encouraging them to take advantage of the educational opportunities to develop their skills to the very best of their abilities. The Government only acts as (if you like) a referee in increasing human capital…

Enyonam: …we have brought our own children into the world and we have a responsibility to them. Knowing our economic situation, we can't just put everything on the Government…So I think we can't just usher ourselves into a project that will be too much for us…

In other interview encounters (particularly the group interviews), the interviewees in their defense generally expressed divergent views regarding what the 'developmental levies' were meant for and who had the legal backing to charge them. For example, Yayra (a senior official of the GES Headquarters) and Akpene (a Regional Director of Education) thought that these levies were meant for the provision of infrastructural facilities and were therefore charged by the schools with approval from the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). Kodzo (a District Director of Education), on the other hand, argued that DAs by law had the responsibility for all educational matters in their respective districts and therefore the issue of 'developmental levies' fell under their remit. Again, most of the interviewees were generally not sure what the 'capitation grant', which they saw as a remedy to the issues of 'private' cost of education, was meant to be used for:

Kwabla: …the 'capitation grant' is not money to be given to schools or pupils directly. I believe it is meant to be used by the District Assemblies mainly for the rehabilitation of the school buildings and the provision of textbooks and furniture…

Aseye: Government directive is still not clear what these grants are to be used for. The parents for instance are claiming that these monies are meant to be given to them to cater for their children's uniforms, transportation

> fares, food and the likes. This I think is not the case. I want to believe that the capitation grant is meant for extra-curricular activities such as, sports, music and cultural festivals etc.…

These insights are interesting as they unmask key issues concerning the complexities involved in conceptualising and operationalisation the fCUBE policy intentions. First, the above insights show that although they saw the fCUBE policy to be committed implicitly to social justice ideals, for economic reasons the interviewees felt if the 'free' component of the 'fCUBE', for example, is accentuated and operationalised in a restricted sense to mean non-payment of tuition and infrastructural and facilities user-fees (in other words, 'absolute exemption' of citizens from contributing their quota to educating the country's future leaders), 'economic chaos' will ensue and Government will cease to exist.

Second, and following from the first point, the insights suggest that there are two 'faces of the coin' when it comes to financing education. There are both private and public costs. The 'private' cost involve those costs that parents or guardians have to incur—feeding, provision of school uniforms, provision of writing materials, and in some cases transportation to and from the institutions of learning—in preparing the children/ward for formal teaching and learning. The 'public' costs have to do with the investment of Government—in the form of teachers' salaries, provision of school infrastructure, bearing the cost of training teachers and so on—towards education. The insights further seem to suggest that whilst Government is seen as playing its part of the bargain, parents on the other hand seem to, or are inclined to be shifting their responsibilities to Government.

Third, the implicit or explicit call on parents and guardians to be directly responsible for the educational needs of their children/wards (and in particular, Torgbui's reference to words/phrases such as 'clients', 'consumers', 'skills' and 'human capital') could be interpreted to mean a case against the creation of 'Keynesian welfare state' which emphasizes the principles of state before market and social justice conception of collective responsibility for all. In particular, the view could be seen as smacking the rolling back of the state away from fulfilling its civil responsibilities towards its citizens, and a call for the establishment a kind of 'neo-liberal' and 'knowledge-based society' where ideals such as individualism, consumerism, competition and privatization are entrenched.

Fourth (and as it will become clearer in subsequent responses of interviewees), the above insights show that perhaps the interviewees were kind of reticent to engage in the complexities involved in implementing the fCUBE policy. The insights show quite ostensibly that either the interviewees did not have a grounded conceptual conceptualisation of the policy provisions themselves (and therefore they did not want to go deeper into the conceptual issues affecting the implementation process in practice) or that they were simply not ready to 'bite the hands that fed them' due to the fear of vilification and/or victimization by the education authorities and/or government when the findings of the study are made public.

In other interview sessions, the last of the above claims became even more apparent. The interviewee responses gave credence to the claim that as mediators of

policy at the meso-level, the Ghanaian education officials either did not have a grounded conceptual understanding of the policy intentions themselves, or that they were presenting 'a public relations accounts' of events. In these interview encounters, the interviewees made statements which sought to confirm that the 'compulsory' component of fCUBE was an endorsement of the 1992 Constitutional provision of Ghana which stipulates that education is a right, not a privilege, and that all Ghanaian children of school-going age (that is, between the ages of 6–13) irrespective of their diverse differences were by law required to be in school. However, when asked about the practicality of this, they all resorted to the use of rhetorical questions rather than answering the question directly. For example, Senyo (an Assistant Director of Education of a Metropolis and a member of a group interviews), like many others, suggested an interconnection between the various components of the fCUBE policy title and used this as an impetus to fashion out his argument about the complexities involved in conceptualising and operationalising the policy purposes and intentions in quite straightforward and rational sense:

Interviewer: So is the inter-connectedness between the 'free' and 'compulsory' components the reason why there is difficulty with enforcing the compulsory component of the policy?

Senyo: …But if there are schools which have no teachers, particularly in the rural areas, teachers are sent to schools but because the places are not attractive they don't go, and you expect the parents to send their children to school? When they send their children to school, and there are no teachers, who's going to teach them?…If the teachers are not there and you have enacted a law that whoever doesn't send his or her child to school will be sanctioned and the teachers are not there then what do you think is going to happen?…

In another development, Dzifa (an Assistant Director of Education of a Metropolis) made revealing comments which suggest that perhaps no legal framework or law was made and put in place since the inception of the policy to enforce compliance with the constitutional order:

Dzifa: …this policy is to make it for school-going-children to be in school…Right, we're saying that it's compulsory because in a society, we have realised that there are situations where whatever you do people would not want to comply to/with policy. So we're thinking of, you know, backing it up with some legal document that would force parents as well as guardians to send every child of school-going age to school…

Although the above account to a large extent reveals the 'compulsory intent of fCUBE, Dzifa's reference to the expression '…we are thinking of, you know, backing it up with some legal document that would force parents…' suggests that as of the time of the interview the 'compulsory' aspect of fCUBE was not being enforced. This thus goes to suggest that laws for free, compulsory and universal education in developing countries are typically aspirational, and have a long time horizon for implementation. In other words, they are rarely pursued due to the

obvious adverse legal consequences they may have for parents, particularly the poor ones.

Articulating the ‘universal’ component of fCUBE

The interviewees’ articulation of the ‘universality’ of fCUBE was not without issues of a clear blurring in meaning of the components of the policy title. For example, in one of the group interviews participants expressed divergent and contrasting views about their understanding of the ‘universal’ component of fCUBE. Whilst Mawunyo (a Regional Director of Education) thought and interpreted the universality of fCUBE to mean that all Ghanaian children are to ‘enjoy some basic educational provisions and facilities’, Atta (an Assistant Director and a Public Relations Officer) was of the view that the component basically encourages ‘freedom of choice’. Again, Elinam (an Assistant Director of Education in-charge of Finance) and Dziedzorm (an Assistant Director in charge of Human Resource Development) both interpreted the universality of fCUBE as meaning ‘equity in terms of inputs into education’.

In yet another group interview encounter, Worlali (an Assistant Director in-charge of Technical/Vocational Education) and Enam (Assistant Director and Co-ordinator of ‘Special Schools’) took the ‘universality’ of primary schooling in Ghana to mean what they referred to as ‘inclusive education’. For them the universality of fCUBE rested in the fact that basic education in Ghana is open to all children of school-going age, particularly the ‘disabled’. Although the identification of all children of school going age, can be said to have set off an inclusive agenda about the ‘universal’ component of fCUBE, the interesting thing, of course, was their emphasis on the ‘disabled’, ‘blind’ and the ‘deaf’. The use of these words in their explorations restrict inclusive education in some way to the teaching of pupils with a range of (dis)abilities, or specifically integrating ‘additional support needs’ children into ‘regular’ classrooms. Taken in context, such a definition of inclusive education is limited as it appears to have fallen short of the ‘bigger picture’. Dei (2005, p. 268) reminds us of the broad definition of inclusive education. He defines it as ‘education that responds to the concerns, aspirations and interests of a diverse body politic, and draws on the accumulated knowledge, creativity and resourcefulness of local people’. For him, a school is inclusive to the extent that every pupil is able to identify and connect with his/her social environment, culture, population and history. Seen in this light, the version of ‘inclusivity’ referred to in this context is limited in scope as it appears to focus only on ‘part’ of the ‘whole’.

Interpreting the ‘basic education’ component of fCUBE

One would have thought that the ‘basic education’ phrase of the fCUBE policy title would entail issues relating to ‘school curriculum’ or the quality and/or sophistication of education children were to receive. However, the interviewees’ accounts indicated that they focused rather on age and stage considerations, indicating a significant blurring in meaning of what the ‘basic education’ provision practically entails. Their explorations point to the fact that basic education in the Ghanaian

context is taken to mean the first 9 years of education, which was extended by the former Government of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) to 11 years. These 11 years of initial education comprise 2 years Kindergarten; 6 years of Primary Schooling; and 3 years of JSS (now known as Junior High School). With this working definition, the major question put to the interviewees was whether or not any provisions were made and/or put in place for children to have access to a broad-based and an all-inclusive national curriculum. This question however attracted mixed and contradictory responses. The general consensus however pointed to the fact that adequate provisions cannot be said to have been made to ensure that children have equal access to the curriculum (i.e. if there was one), neither were steps taken to ensure that school drop-outs were attracted back and retained in the educational process. This feeling was, for instance, made known by Kweku in the following excerpt:

Kweku: Yea, the first 9 years of education is the 'basic education'. Our structure is in such a way that it is terminal and continuing. So it means that after the first 9 years the child who is not able to continue can terminate at the JSS 3 level and enter into the world to take up a vocation…But with this, I think I'll admit that we seem to have some problems. Most of the children, who after JSS are unfortunate to continue don't find themselves well fitted into society. Most of them end up in the streets selling various items, 'dogs chains', here and there…

Thus, the issues explored in this paper are significant as they highlight the complexities involved in conceptualising and operationalising the fCUBE policy intentions. Essentially, the accounts of the interviewees show quite clearly a significant blurring in meaning and/or ambiguity in the wording of the fCUBE policy intention and purposes (in particular, the components of the policy title) owing principally to the issues of economics: 'private' and 'public' costs of funding education. Whilst it is suggested that perhaps the interviewees either did not have a grounded conceptual understanding of the policy intentions and purposes or were bent on presenting a 'public relations accounts' of events, the point remains to be made that the insights in this paper show generally that because primary education is not totally free, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make it compulsory and universal. In particular, these issues explored serve as a good example of a possible high opportunity cost of sending children to school and thus go to suggest that perhaps there is no such thing (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa) as 'free' 'compulsory' and 'universal' education.

Summary and conclusion

This article has explored UPE provision agenda in Ghana using the fCUBE policy implementation as an exemplar. The accounts in the paper suggest that the fCUBE policy could be considered as a 'rights-based policy' (Bray 1987; Tomasevski 2005) deeply entrenched in social democratic ideals. This is indicative of the fact that the policy purposes and intentions (as articulated by the interviewees) appear to extend beyond what Trowler (1998) describes as giving just 'step-ups' to disadvantaged

children to access primary education, to include the issues of social justice and its related principles of inclusion, equity and equality of opportunities.

That notwithstanding, the exploration of issues indicated that the implementation process appears to be faced with the difficulty of conceptualising and operationalising these progressive ideals. This, the paper argues, is due to the ambiguity in the wording of the policy intentions and purposes encapsulated in the policy title. In particular, the evidence indicates that as long as there are what could best be described as 'public' and 'private' costs of funding education owing significantly to the existence of a high opportunity cost of education, and dissenting views among mediators of policy regarding the universality of primary education, the 'free' 'compulsory' and 'universal' intentions of the fCUBE policy cannot be said to be reflected visibly in the process of implementation. Similarly, the evidence suggests that because the 'basic education' component of fCUBE does not seem to have been conceptualised and articulated in a manner consistent with issues of the 'quality' of education Ghanaian children are to receive, nor the sophistication of the curriculum of that education, that component could not also be said to be reflected adequately in the implementation process.

Thus, while this article typically explores the challenges of the fCUBE policy implementation in Ghana, the evidence reverberates strongly a number of issues. First, the evidence from this paper shows implicitly that compulsory education legislation may itself not be a necessary or sufficient condition for the achievement of UPE. What is important rather than state coercion [and in the words of Appleton et al. (1996), Mehrotra (1998), Little (2008), Akyeampong (2009)] is strong local community advocacy and support. As Akyeampong (2009, p. 176) for example argues, "compulsory legislation often provides the legal framework for government action to supply basic education services more widely and equitably, but that action, especially in poor countries, does not necessarily motivate demand". For him, demand is a function of household cost-benefit analysis and their assessment of the opportunity costs.

Similarly, the exploration of the fCUBE policy implementation process reiterates a strong issue of economics (i.e. the opportunity cost of educating children) that pervades not only the provision of adequate resources for education but also in persuading parents/guardians not send their children/wards to school because children are or could be a more valuable economic asset if they help out in economic or occupational activities. Kofi (an executive member of the Ghana National Association of Teachers) captures this issue of public/private cost of funding education succinctly in his final thought on the fCUBE policy implementation process:

Kofi: …If we talk about free education, we need to operationalize the concept 'free'. Education has an opportunity cost. You decide to go for education and you do that at a cost, otherwise you may be doing some other thing which perhaps could be income earning. So, anybody who decides to participate in education at whatever level is incurring these costs among others. Education has private cost, in the form of feeding, uniforms and transportation fares that the person who is being educated or those who offer to help him, in the form of parents, have to provide…

> Then the public also has to incur certain costs. For instance, the Education Act, Act 87 talks about the local authorities building, maintaining schools and things like that, so it means infrastructure has to come from the local authorities as far as basic schools are concerned…So the question of free?, yes, it is good that we fashion a beautiful policy like that but the objectives more and more are becoming elusive because you cannot divest that access to free education from the workings of the general economy…So that is the problem we have with running the fCUBE…

Thus, although the analysis in this article suggests that perhaps the interviewees were either reticent to engage in the complexities of implementing the fCUBE policy, or that they (themselves) may not have had a grounded conceptual understanding of the fCUBE policy purposes, taken together, the issues explored in this paper are intriguing. Essentially, the issues reinforce Tomasevski's (2005, p. 2) contention that for education, especially in low-income countries to be made free and (perhaps) universal, all direct, indirect and opportunity costs would have to be identified as to be gradually eliminated through their substitution by public allocations. The article posits that the principal implication of the issues explored in this paper is that accentuating policy purposes, intentions and components, particularly in low-income countries is not inherently problematic. Rather the challenges appear to lie with how, or the extent to which such provisions are conceptualised and operationalised, taking into account the complex socio-cultural, economic, political and discursive contexts within which policies are enacted in these countries.

Acknowledgments I am thankful to the reviewers of this paper and to all the researchers/scholars whose work I have drawn upon in this article. I am also indebted to Professor Donald Christie for being my mentor and a critical friend.

Appendix: Key ideological principles underpinning social democracy

Social democracy as a political ideology shares common idealism, features language and values with 'socialism' particularly regarding education (i.e. personal development and social co-operation). However, in this context, the difference between these two ideological positions rests in the fact that whereas the social democracy is strongly committed to the ideals of social justice and its related concepts of inclusion, equality, equality of opportunities (and of outcomes), fairness etc., what is referred to in the context of this article as 'socialism' advocate the use of local and national state to achieve a socially just (defined as egalitarian) anti-discriminatory society. In education, the social democratic principles require, among other things, comprehensive schooling; expansion of educational opportunities and provision; local community involvement in schooling; a commitment to policies of equal opportunities; a degree of positive discrimination and redistribution of resources within and between schools; a curriculum and education system that recognises issues of social justice (Hill 2001, 14).

The table below illustrates further the principles underpinning social democracy as a political ideology (Table 1).

Table 1 Principles underpinning social democracy

Political ideological terminology	Social democracy
Educational ideological terminology	Progressivism
View or purpose of education	Social justice (personal and social development)
View of pupils	Entitle
View of education policy	Rights-based/human right issue
View of parents	Partners/stakeholders
View of teachers and other stakeholders	Partners/stakeholders
Role of Government	Partner/majority stakeholder
Appropriate curriculum	Student centred
Key principles	a. There is a need for intervention by state into most aspects of social provision, including education
	b. Without regulation social inequalities will become exacerbated and the disadvantaged will become relatively worse off
	c. Emphasis on the creation of Keynesian welfare state which emphasizes the principles of state before market and social justice conception of collective responsibility for all
	d. Encourages pluralistic decision-making with the involvement of all stakeholders
Principles applied to education	a. Education is an important means by which social inequality can be mitigated and made more meritocratic
	b. Encourages and promotes local community involvement in education
	c. Education leads to greater levels of social mobility based on merit, particularly intelligence and hard work
Key points	a. This ideology rejects elitism and favours mass access to higher education
	b. The role of education is to give a 'step-up' to disadvantaged individuals and groups where there are concerns about social inequality
	c. 'Student-centred' in the sense of valuing students' participation in planning, delivering, assessing and evaluating courses

Adapted and revised from Trowler (1998) and Hill (2001)

References

Akyeampong, K. (2009). Revisiting free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) in Ghana. *Comparative Education, 45*(2), 175–196.

Akyeampong, K., Djangmah, J., Oduro, A., Seidu, A., & Hunt, F. (2007). *Access to basic education in Ghana: The evidence and the issues*. Falmer, Brighton Centre for International Education, Sussex School of Education, University of Sussex.

Ampiah, G. J., & Adu-Yeboah, C. (2009). Mapping the incidence of school dropouts: A case study of communities in Northern Ghana. *Comparative Education, 45*(2), 219–232.

Appleton, S., Hoddinott, J., & Mackinnon, J. (1996). Education and health in sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of International Development, 8*(3), 307–339.

Asmah, G. F. (2004). Ghana: Highway to heaven? *New African Magazine,* August/September issue, (pp. 4–7).

Ball, J. S. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bray, M. (1987). Is free education in the Third World either desirable or possible? *Journal of Education Policy, 2*(2), 119–129.

Cookson, W. P., Jr. (1994). The power discourse: Elites narratives and educational policy formation. In G. Walford (Ed.), *Researching the powerful in education: Social research today* (pp. 116–130). London: UCL Press.

Dei, S. J. G. (2004). Dealing with difference: Ethnicity and gender in the context of schooling in Ghana. *International Journal of Educational Development, 24*(3), 343–349.

Dei, S. J. G. (2005). The challenge of inclusive schooling in Africa: A Ghanaian case study. *Journal of Comparative Education, 41*(3), 267–289.

Educational International. (2004). *Education International barometer on human and trade union rights in the education sector*. Brussels: Education International.

EFA/UNESCO. (2002). *Education for All: Is the world on track*? EFA Global Monitoring Report. Paris: UNESCO.

EFA/UNESCO. (2006). *Global Monitoring Report*. Paris; Oxford: UNESCO/EFA; Oxford University Press.

EFA/UNESCO. (2009). *EFA Global Monitoring Report: Overcoming inequality: Why governance matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GES. (2004). *The development of education national report: By the Basic Education Division, Ghana Education Service, for presentation at the 47th session of the international conference on education (ICE), Geneva*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

GES. (2005). *Guidelines for the distribution and utilisation of capitation grants to basic schools*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

Glewwe, P., & Ilias, N. (1996). The determinants of school attainment in sub-Saharan Africa: A case study of Ghana. *Journal of International Development, 8*(3), 395–413.

GOG. (1992). *The fourth republican constitution of Ghana*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Cooperation.

GOG. (2003). *Ghana-poverty reduction strategy 2003–2005: An agenda for growth and prosperity*. Accra: GOG.

GOG. (2006). *Ghana 2006 budget statement to parliament*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Cooperation.

Hill, D. (2001). Equality, ideology and education policy. In D. Hill & M. Cole (Eds.), *School and equality: Facts, concept and policy* (pp. 1–22). London: Kogan Page.

Kadingdi, S. (2004). Policy initiatives for change and innovation in basic education programmes in Ghana. *Educate, 14*(2), 3–18.

Little, A. W. (2008). *EFA politics, policies and progress*. CREATE pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 13. London/Brighton: Institute of Education, University of London/University of Sussex.

Maikish, A., & Gershberg, A. (2008). *Overcoming inequality: Why governance matters*. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009. Paris: UNESCO.

Mehrotra, S. (1998). Education for All: Policy lessons from high-achieving countries. *International Review of Education, 44*(4–5), 461–484.

Mingat, A., & Tan, J. P. (1986). Who profits from the public funding of education: A comparison of world regions. *Comparative Education Review, 30*(2), 260–270.

MOE. (1996). *A policy document on the Free, Compulsory and Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) of Ghana*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

MOE. (1998). *Education sector strategic plan 1998–2003*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

MOE. (2000). *GES report on field verification on the fCUBE. Stocktaking in the ten regions of Ghana*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

MOE. (2005). *White paper on the report of the Education Reform Review Committee*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

MOE. (2006). *Education strategic plan*. Accra: Ministry of Education Science and Sports.

MOE. (2007). *Education sector performance report*. Accra: Ministry of Education Science and Sports.

MOE/GES. (2001). *Report of the study on the constitutional and legal framework for the right to pre-tertiary education*. Accra: Ministry of Education.

MOESS. (2006). *Education sector performance report*. Accra: Ministry of Education Science and Sports.

Neuman, W. L. (2004). *Basics of social science research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Nti, J. (1999). *Ministry of education report of consultancy on organisation and institutional analysis*. Accra, Ghana: Ministry of Education.

Nwomonoh, J. (1998). *Education and development in Africa: A contemporary survey*. London: International Scholars Publications.

Rolleston, C. (2009). The determination of exclusion: Evidence from Ghana Living Standards Surveys 1991–2006. *Comparative Education, 45*(2), 197–218.

Thobani, M. (1984). *Charging user fees for social services: The case of education in Malawi.* Staff Working Paper No. 572. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Tomasevski, K. (2005). Not Education for All, only for those who can pay: The World Bank's model for financing primary education. *Journal of Law, Social Justice and Global Development, 1*(1), 1–14.

Tomasevski, K. (2006). *The state of the right to education worldwide: Free or fee*. 2006 Global Report. Copenhagen: World Bank.

Trowler, P. (1998). *Education policy: A policy sociology approach* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Turner, J. (1971). Universal education and nation-building in Africa. *Journal of Black Studies, 2*(1), 3–27.

Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing*. London: Sage.

World Bank. (2004). *Books, building and learning outcomes: An impact evaluation of World Bank support to basic education in Ghana*. Washington, DC: Operations Evaluation Department (OED), World Bank.

Copyright of Journal of Educational Change is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.