



Research Article

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Trend Analysis of Admission, Enrolment, Completion, and Transition Rates in Primary Education in Ghana

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate trends in primary education admission, enrolment, completion rates, and transition rates to junior high school in the Bongo District from 2012 to 2021. A descriptive exploratory design was used. This study used secondary data from the Ghana Education Office of the Bongo District in the Upper East region of Ghana to analyse trends in access to and participation in primary education within the district during the period studied. Findings revealed that a significant number of children enrolled in primary education were not in the appropriate grade for their age; the majority were either below or above the age range of 6 to 11 years for primary education in Ghana. Additionally, the percentage of the out-of-school population within the appropriate age range for primary education (NER) increased by 1.1 percentage points, from 15.4% in 2012 to 16.5% in 2021. This study recommends community outreach programmes by the district education office to address sociocultural factors affecting pupils' participation in primary education.

Keywords: Admission rate; Completion rate; Enrolment rate; Gender Parity Index; Transition rate

1. Introduction

Education is regarded as a human right for all school-aged children, and as such, it is widely denoted as the pillar of nation-building (Appiah & Esia-Donkoh, 2018; Moses & Kingsley, 2013). According to Asafu-Adjaye (2012), education is an investment that yields returns and progress and is hence essential for individual and national development. According to Harbison, as cited in Alagbela (2015), because of the important role of education, governments provide more of it in various ways in the country. This clearly shows that the significance of education in the progress of individuals and society cannot be overlooked (Ampofo, Onyango & Olga, 2019).

In this regard, over the years, international organisations and bodies such as the United Nations (UN) signatory members have consistently shown firm determination to pursue equity-based education to ensure development of the marginalised from the stagnation of life. To achieve this, the declaration of education as a basic human right was passed in 1948, which is stated in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to education. Education should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education should be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (United Nations, 1949).

This declaration intended to transmit a clear and loud message to the member states that education is not only significant in the lives of people across the world but also a fundamental cornerstone of the socio-economic development of countries. It is, therefore, in this regard that many governments of the world at the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA) organised by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2000) have devoted themselves to ensuring access to quality basic education for children all over the world (Sabates et al., 2010). As a result, many countries have tried enrolling everyone in schools (Iddrisu, 2016).

According to UNESCO (2019), an estimated 59 million primary school-age children are out of school globally, with about 32 million, or more than one-half (54%), living in Sub-Saharan Africa. These statistics highlight a significant challenge and indicate a deceleration in universal primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa. This grim situation presents a worrying picture of the future human resource base of Sub-Saharan Africa. As a signatory of the UN charter, Ghana is obligated to build the necessary framework and groundwork to achieve the stated goals in the charter, including ensuring “Everyone has the right to education” (United Nations, 1949).

Many successive governments in Ghana have made efforts and initiated programmes with varying degrees of success, even before independence in 1957, to ensure universal basic education (Okujagu, 2013). The enactment of the Accelerated Development Plan (ADP) for education in 1951, which eliminated all fees in primary schools, was the first key effort to guarantee all school-age children, regardless of their

socioeconomic background and location, access to primary education in Ghana. Similarly, the Education Act of 1961 went further, making fee-free primary and middle schools constitutional. The Education Act of 1961 and the ADP laid the foundation for the swift growth of access to education for all and contributed to bridging the gaps linked with earlier access patterns. However, the period between the 1970s and early 1980s saw a long decline in Ghana's economy, which tremendously affected educational standards and outcomes. This was a result of the mass migration of teachers to Nigeria, especially the more highly trained ones, to seek greener pastures, which drastically reduced the teacher-to-pupil ratio, as well as educational infrastructures deteriorated due to funding (World Bank, 2004). The percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to education fell from 6.4% in 1976 to 1.5% in 1984 (World Bank, 1989). The actual stages of financing reduced by about two-thirds, which made the government's resources no longer available to establish, complete, or maintain educational facilities. During this same period, a shortage of foreign exchange occurred, which lessened the country's capacity to procure textbooks and other teaching and learning resources. As a result, enrolments at the primary level reduced by approximately 100,000 in a single year and remained stagnant until 1986/87 when it began to rise (World Bank, 1989).

In recent years in Ghana, the desire to attain economic and social development through expanding access to education has increased the commitment of various governments to create policies for universal basic education, especially the launch of FCUBE in 1995, with 2015 as the designated policy deadline to achieve universal basic education in Ghana. Other complementary policies were introduced to achieve these goals, including free exercise books, free pupil school sandals, free school uniforms, and free lunch for school-age children who come to school (Osei-Fosu, 2011). In addition, the pupil teaching policy module under the National Youth Employment Programme was tailored to bridge the teacher-student ratio and train teachers to fill in classroom gaps to increase access to education, especially in rural areas (Osei-Fosu, 2011). Despite successive governments' efforts over the years in expanding the national education delivery, resulting in a continuous rise in the proportion of children in school, Ghana is yet to achieve a 100% enrolment rate as envisioned under the constitutional requirement for Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education, there still exist difficulties in achieving the goal of access to and participation in basic education in the country (Mghasse & William, 2016). Thus, the objective has not been fully achieved for over 17 years (2005-2022) since the implementation of the FCUBE programme as enshrined in the constitution of Ghana. This is evident in the World Bank report (2022), which revealed that approximately 265,188 primary school-age children in Ghana are currently out of school. This figure represents a substantial increase of 229,756 children not attending primary school in 2019, as confirmed by the World Bank report in 2020 (Sasu, 2022). It is important to note that this high number of out-of-school children is prevalent across all regions of the country, with a particularly large concentration in rural areas, such as the Bongo District in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The researchers observed

that school-going-age children in the district often engage in various activities and odd jobs on the streets, markets, farms, and dams during school hours, as well as the prevalence of child-mothers and teenage pregnancies in the district. Given these circumstances, one cannot help but question whether children in the district enjoy their fundamental human right to education as enshrined in the Constitution of Ghana and whether the basic schools in the district successfully fulfil their fundamental objectives.

Copious studies have been conducted to assess issues of access to and participation in basic education in some regions and districts in Ghana (e.g., Akyeampong et al, 2007; Anlimachie, 2015; Arkorful et al, 2020; Alagbela, 2015). Akyeampong et al. (2007), in their country's analytical report, explored evidence and issues surrounding access to basic education in Ghana. Anlimachie (2015) explored the comparative strategies for rural and urban milieu towards equity in access to and quality of basic education in Ghana. Arkorful et al. (2020) also contributed to equitable access and inclusiveness in basic education, considering the roadblocks to sustainable development goals. Another study by Alagbela (2015) assessed the role of Non-Governmental Organisations in expanding access to and participation in Basic Education in Ghana. None of these studies systematically examined the trends of access to and participation in primary education in the Bongo district, highlighting key achievements and challenges. It was, therefore, worth discovering the number of children who had access to primary education, completed the level, and transitioned to junior high school.

2. Theoretical Framework

The fundamental theoretical support of this study is grounded on the Theory of Justice developed by John Rawl in 1971. This theory is based on the social contract approach to address the question of fairness in life and society. The tenets of this theory assist people in understanding which equalities are essential and ensure that all people are treated on equitable terms in all spheres of life (Meuret, 2002; Rawls, 1999). Theory of justice is appropriate for this study regarding the right of every individual to access and participate in education. The first principle states, "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others". On the other hand, the second principle reads, "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all" (Rawls 1999, p.53). The theory further adds that "all social values, liberty, and opportunity, income and wealth as well as the social bases of self-respect are to be distributed equally among members in society, that is, any, or all, of these values, is to everyone's advantage" (p.54). In education, the principles of social justice are related to fairness and equality for all learners in terms of access, opportunities, and academic achievement. This implies that the educational system should be responsible for ensuring that all children have equal opportunities to learn, achieve, and develop their potential according to

curriculum and policy interventions. Moreover, these principles indicate the importance of equitably distributing educational resources to reduce disparities and achieve fundamental liberties. According to García and Weiss (2017) and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015), many disparities exist in the world education systems, as shown in the literature, that adversely influence children's access to and participation in education as obvious in terms of the enrolment rates, learning, and learning outcomes. These inequalities result from socioeconomic status, parental level of education, poverty, and sociocultural factors (Anangisyé, 2020; García & Weiss, 2017; Humble & Dixon, 2017; Kapinga, 2014). According to Rawls (1999), any inequalities should be compensated by prioritising the needs of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups to ensure genuine equality of opportunity for everyone.

Based on the theoretical assumptions discussed above, access to and participation in primary education are fundamental human rights that everyone should have. This is enlightened by Anangisyé (2020) that "school-age children, irrespective of their physical and mental status, race, colour, culture, political affiliation, religious ideology, gender, or socio-economic status, have the right to basic education". Therefore, all school-age children must have equal opportunities to access education, learn, and develop their potential irrespective of race, colour, culture, political affiliation, religious ideology, gender, and socioeconomic status. The denial of this right can make a child susceptible to neglect, violence, and exploitation. Therefore, it is the government's responsibility to ensure that schools provide equitable learning conditions for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background or geographical location. This resonates with the idea that all districts must have equal opportunity for elementary school children. This study was based on the principles of justice that promote equal basic rights and opportunities and aimed to examine the trends in access to primary education, sex disparity in access to primary education, the factors that affect access and participation and the strategies to improve access and participation in primary education in the Bongo district. The objective is to make a significant contribution to the body of existing knowledge in Ghana and contribute towards the realisation of universal access to education as a fundamental human right for all children worldwide.

3. Literature Review

In Ghana, access to and participation in education is viewed as a fundamental human right and an important component of the national development strategy in ensuring growth and promoting preparedness for a productive life. Ghana's ambition to achieve full development largely hinges on its capacity to enhance educational access to the point where its population is highly educated, forming the essential human resource pool for rapid development (World Bank, 2004). According to the Ministry of Education of Ghana (MoE), primary education underscores the significance of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving abilities. Moreover, quality primary education establishes a

foundation for fostering inquiry, creativity and innovation among those who have access to it. Additionally, primary education plays a pivotal role in instilling the qualities of good citizenship in children, enabling their active participation in national development and equipping them with the necessary skills and attitudes for absorbing new knowledge (MOE, 2003).

Access to and participation in primary education in the country has expanded over the years. However, according to Lewin (2009), access to a particular level of education extends beyond enrolment rates, encompassing attendance, achievement, and progression to completion at appropriate age. Additionally, Lewin (2009) stipulated that even though there has been a significant rise in the enrolment of children in basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past two decades, a considerable number remain out of school because some do not enrol at all, and a majority of those who do enrol struggle to complete the education cycle and hence drop out of school. According to Entwisle et al. (2005), the factors that lead to high school dropout are not developed during high school, but they originate as early as kindergarten. In view of this, Fitzpatrick (2014) suggests that promoting children's readiness to face the demands of formal education through preschool represents one of the effective ways for them to benefit from instruction and decrease the rate of dropouts. Thus, early childhood education can enhance children's primary school readiness by providing them with the necessary cognitive, social, physical, and emotional preparedness needed for the smooth transition between home and school entry as they begin their first grade (Barnett, 2016; GES, 2013). This can increase students' participation in education by setting them up for success and reducing the likelihood of academic struggles that could lead to disengagement or dropping out (Taggart et al., 2015).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) as part of its target pledges to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality education by removing gender disparities at all levels of education (United Nations, 2015). However, gender has long been recognised as a significant determinant of access to and participation in educational opportunities. Gender disparities in education manifest in various forms, impacting boys and girls differently. Historically, cultural norms and societal expectations have often limited educational access for girls, perpetuating gender inequalities. On the other hand, boys can also face unique challenges, such as expectations related to their breadwinner's role.

Several studies have specified the number of reasons accounting for lower admission and enrolment rates of girls than boys, higher dropout rates, as well as less transition to the secondary level of education (Adams et al., 2013; Akinbi & Akinbi, 2015; Mallole & Mwakalinga, 2022). The report from the Ghana Statistical Service on girl child education showed that the trends of completion among girls tend to fall at the basic level mostly at the junior high school, thereby affecting enrolments at the senior high schools (GSS, 2015).

Socio-cultural factors have long tended to affect the education of girls and their

participation in school (Kipkulei et al., 2012; Ziyaba, 2015). According to Ndivo et al. (2021), cultural values ranging from early marriages to early pregnancies have contributed to the high dropout rate among female children. According to them, various parents and societies of these female children do not regard the schooling of the girl child and hence have the conviction that the girl child will eventually get married after being educated and hence consider it as a waste of family resources.

Alua et al. (2022) conducted a study that sought to assess the factors that limit girls' enrolment and performance despite policies and programmes in place to address gender disparity in education in the Kassena-Nankana East Municipality in Northern Ghana. The study found that although there was an increase in enrolment for both boys and girls, girls still lag behind boys in enrolment and performance. The study further concluded that poor parental control, teenage pregnancy, peer pressure, poverty, early marriage, and gender roles, as well as gender roles, were factors limiting the enrolment of girls. This study supports Britwum et al. (2017) findings that peer influence, financial constraints, and teenage pregnancies are the key factors that account for the dropout of girls and boys from school. This finding is consistent with Suleman et al. (2015) study, which indicated that the economic status of parents, poor parental control, and teenage pregnancy, among others, affect girls' education.

Similarly, Kahise (2013) also found that some parents and people have certain cultural beliefs that girls are not as important as boys, thus leading to a high preference for the male child's education at the expense of the female child. According to him, there is a lack of support for girls' education, which results in forced early marriages and pregnancies. This result confirms the findings of Leung and Zhang (2008) that parents' support for male children encourages them to invest more in their well-being with the belief of taking care of them in the future. However, the current story has been that boys have begun to lag behind girls in education, especially in Africa. For instance, in 2023, it was noted that more girls (300,391) than boys (300,323) out of a total of 600,714 candidates sat for the Basic Education Certificate Examination and more girls (52.6%) than boys (47.4) out of 447,204 candidates sat for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination in Ghana (WAEC, 2023). In Nigeria, a total of 1,621,853 candidates sat for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination in 2023, out of which 50.75 percent were females and 49.25 percent were males (WAEC, 2023). Similarly, In Uganda, 1,224,371 students registered to sit for final examinations in three education cycles; Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE), and Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE). Out of this total, 51% were female and 49% were male. In support of this, Muyaka et al. (2023) concluded that boys are beginning to have lowering standards and under participation in education and therefore recommend the need for gender intervention to target both male and female children to avoid gender disparities and to achieve education for all as enshrined as a basic human right, which is stated in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in the 1992 constitution of the Republic of Ghana.

4. Method

4.1 Research design

A descriptive exploratory design was employed in this study. This design was adopted because the study sought to explore the trend of access to and participation in primary education within the Bongo district of Upper East Region of Ghana over ten years (2012–2021) without any manipulation. The descriptive design mainly observes, describes, and document aspects of a situation as it naturally occurs (Amedahe, et al. 2015).

4.2 Data analysis

The data obtained were summarised using tables and percentage representations, such as time series graphs. Description of the trends in access to and participation in primary education in the Bongo district over a decade from 2012 to 2021. Specifically, this study documented the status of pupils' gross and net admission ratios, gross and net enrolment ratios, gender composition of admission and enrolment ratios and completion rates, as well as transition rates in primary education. This information was obtained from the Directorate of the Ghana Education Service in the Bongo District. In addition, empirical studies were reviewed to discuss the findings in light of the study objective. Content analysis guided the review and analysis of the data and information for this study. The findings have been presented in accordance with the research objectives, and the results were interpreted in relation to national and global contexts and commitments. These include the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), the 1992 Constitution of Ghana (COG), the Education for All (EFA) goals, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which describe education as a fundamental human right of every individual. The data were interpreted to determine the match or mismatch between international commitments, the country's plans and policies and actual practises.

5. Results

5.1 Gross and Net Admission Rates in Primary Education (2012-2021)

This section presents the gross and net admission rates in primary education from 2012 to 2021 (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the total number of children admitted to BS1 in the primary schools in the district in 2012 was 3,913 compared to 3,652 in 2021, indicating a decrease of 6.7%. This statistic shows that the Gross Admission Ratio (GAR) decreased from 110.7% in 2012 to 80.4% in 2021. Similarly, while the GAR fell by 30.3%, the Net Admission Ratio (NAR) also fell by 4.5%, from 72.2% in 2012 to 67.7% in 2021. These

statistics imply a substantial decrease in the enrolment of children into BS1 (Primary one), which is the entry point in the primary level of education.

Table 1: GAR and NAR in the Primary Schools in the Bongo District, 2012-2021

Year	Population 6 years	New entries in BS1	New Entrants in BS1 aged 6.	GAR (%)	NAR (%)
2012/2013	3,535	3,913	2,551	110.7	72.2
2013/2014	3,639	3,999	2,590	109.9	71.2
2014/2015	3,745	3,842	2,628	102.6	70.2
2015/2016	3,854	4,043	2,667	104.9	69.2
2016/2017	3,973	3,990	2,790	100.4	70.2
2017/2018	4,101	3,545	2,831	86.4	69.0
2018/2019	4,212	3,665	2,874	87.0	68.2
2019/2020	4,354	3,420	2,916	78.5	67.0
2021/2021	4,453	3,503	3,008	78.7	67.5
2021/2022	4,597	3,694	3,113	80.4	67.7

Source: District Education Office, Bongo (2023)

Comparing the GAR and NAR, the statistics show an increasing trend of admitting pupils who are not aged 6 to BS1, which could be due to various factors such as early or delayed school admissions. The data in Table 1 indicate that gross admission is higher than net admission for the decade. For instance, the gross admission of 3913 and net admission of 2551 in 2012 show that 1,362 pupils were either above or below the legal age for admission to BS 1 in the district. Overall, the rate of access in primary schools in the Bongo district indicates a decreasing trend for GAR and NAR. These findings imply that investing in pre-primary education enhances children's primary school readiness by providing them with the necessary cognitive, social, physical, and emotional preparedness needed for the smooth transition between home and school entry as they begin their first grade (Barnett, 2016; GES, 2013). This will also ensure the admission of pupils of the appropriate age to primary schools to avoid early or late admissions and increase admissions of school-age children into primary schools.

5.2 Gross and Net Enrolment Rates in Primary Education (BS1-BS6) (2012-2021)

According to the Pre-Tertiary Education Act of 2020, primary education is a 6-year education cycle after two years of kindergarten. Primary education is free and compulsory for all school-age children in Ghana aged 6 to 11 years. The primary level of education starts from Basic One (BS 1) at entry and ends with Basic Six (BS 6) at exit. The data shown in Fig. 1 shows a decade's gross and net enrolment rates.

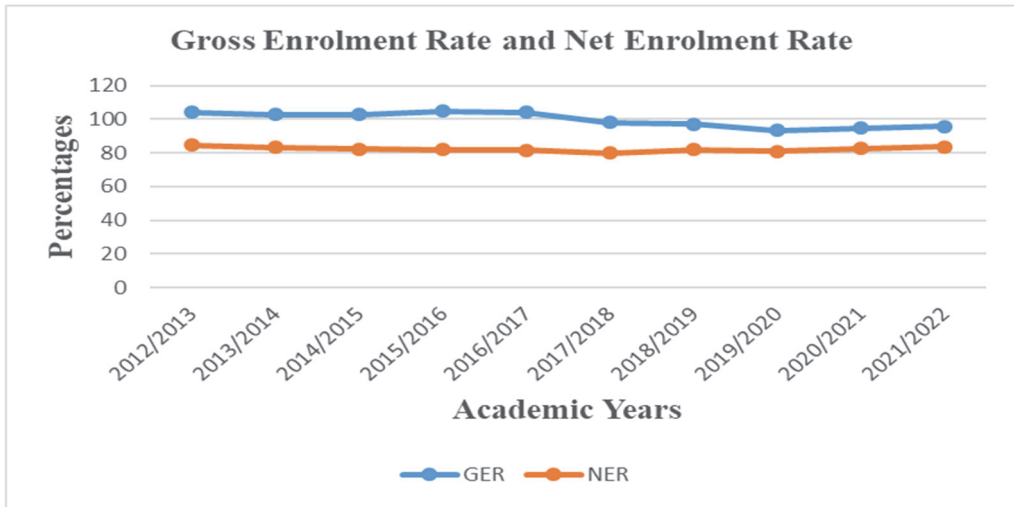


Figure 1: Gross and Net Enrolment Rate

Figure 1 shows that GER decreased from 104.0% in 2012 to 95.6% in 2021. The findings show that GER was more than 100% from 2012 to 2016 but fell to an average of 90% from 2017 to 2021; however, a GER greater than 90% indicates that the majority of the children were participating in primary education over the years in the district. This indicates that countries that have made impressive progress towards universal primary education include Ghana (Dufera, 2006; UNESCO, 2011), an achievement of universal basic education. The findings further demonstrate that NER experienced a slight decrease from 84.6% in 2012 to 83.5% in 2021. This implies that the percentage of the out-of-school age population for primary education increased by approximately 1.1% from 15.4% in 2012 to 16.5% in 2021; thus, approximately 3,858 (16.5%) children within the age range of 6-11 years who are out of school in the district. The results imply that the primary education system in the district has not yet absorbed all school-age children. This strongly indicates that more effort is necessary to ensure that all school-age children enjoy their fundamental right to education as enshrined in the 1992 constitution of Ghana (CoG, 1992).

5.3 Gender Composition of the Enrolment Rate in BS1 to BS6 for Primary Education (2012-2021)

Table 3 presents the trends in gender enrolment in primary education from 2012 to 2021 in Bongo.

Table 3 shows that male and female enrolment growth rates fluctuated over time, with years of positive and negative growth rates. A positive growth rate implies an increase in enrolment, while a negative growth rate indicates a decrease in primary

school enrolment. The male enrolment growth rate ranged from 3.9% to 3.8%, whereas the female enrolment growth rate ranged from 5.6% to 6.3%. The results revealed that the highest growth rates were 3.8% for males and 6.3% for females in 2014 and 2015, respectively. On the contrary, the worst growth rate observed was -3.9% for males and -5.6% for females in the 2012–2013 academic year. The implication is that gender enrolment does not follow a particular setting, as gender enrolment continues to fluctuate over the years with no consistent pattern.

Table 3: Trends in Gender Enrolments in BS1-BS6 in Primary Schools from 2012 to 2021

Year	Male Enrolment	Male Enrolment Growth Rates %	Female Enrolment	Female Enrolment Growth Rates %	Gender Parity Index
2012/2013	10,586	-3.9	9,944	-5.6	0.94
2013/2014	10,747	1.5	10,174	2.3	0.95
2014/2015	11,159	3.8	10,446	2.7	0.94
2015/2016	11,540	3.4	11,105	6.3	0.96
2016/2017	11,631	0.8	11,121	0.1	0.96
2017/2018	11,198	-3.7	10,579	-4.9	0.94
2018/2019	11,322	1.1	10,687	1.0	0.94
2019/2020	11,018	-2.7	10,383	-2.8	0.94
2020/2021	11,258	2.2	10,607	2.2	0.94
2021/2022	11,543	2.5	10,815	2.0	0.94

Source: District Education Office, Bongo (2023)

The findings further reveal that the gender parity index in enrolment from Basic One to Basic 6 ranges between 0.94 and 0.96. Even though the index values are less than 1.0, which implies an enrolment in favour of males than females, the closeness of the values to 1.0 in all the years under review indicates a fair representation of males and females in terms of enrolment. With no significant disparity. These findings are supported by the research conducted by Sasu (2020), who found that since 2015, boys and girls in Ghana have had equal primary education enrolment opportunities.

5.4 Gender Composition of Completion Rate in Primary Education (2012-2021)

The study further analysed the completion rate in the last grade of primary education by gender in each district from 2012 to 2021, as shown in Table 4. The last grade of primary education in Ghana is Basic Six, indicated in the table below as BS6.

Table 4: Completion Rate (CR) by Gender in the Primary Education (2012-2021)

Year	Male Population 11 yrs. old	Female Population 11 yrs. old	Male New Entrants in BS6	Female New Entrants in BS6	Male Completion Rate (CR) %	Female Completion Rate (CR) %
2012/2013	1557	1734	1,433	1,404	92.1	80.9
2013/2014	1606	1790	1,507	1,344	93.8	75.1
2014/2015	1658	1847	1,596	1,543	96.3	83.5
2015/2016	1702	1896	1,682	1,634	98.8	86.2
2016/2017	1725	1922	1,639	1,722	95.0	89.6
2017/2018	1752	1953	1,570	1,558	89.6	79.8
2018/2019	1787	1990	1,508	1,569	84.4	78.8
2019/2020	1804	2009	1,510	1,488	83.7	74.1
2020/2021	1858	2063	1,559	1,490	83.9	72.2
2021/2022	1907	2129	1,602	1,591	84.0	74.7

Source: District Education Office, Bongo (2023)

Table 4 shows that the completion of primary education in the district has substantially declined over the last decade. Male CR decreased by 8.1% (92.1% to 84.0%) and female CR also decreased by 6.2% (80.9% to 74.7%) from 2012 to 2021. This finding suggests a significant increase in the percentage of school-age children unable to complete primary education from 2012 to 2021. This rate of school-age children unable to complete primary education rose by 8.1% from 7.9% in 2012 to 16.0% in 2021 for males, whereas for females, it increased by approximately 6.2% from 19.1% in 2012 to 25.3% in 2021. This alarming trend indicates that despite efforts to eliminate financial barriers through the free education policy, a substantial portion of school-age pupils are unable to complete primary education in the district. Furthermore, the findings highlight a consistent pattern of higher completion rates among males than females from 2012 to 2021. This finding suggests that despite initiatives to promote access to primary education for both males and females, males consistently outperform females in completing primary education, and the gender gap remains persistent in the district.

6. Discussion and Implications of the Findings

Education is considered the single greatest investment countries can make to build equitable, healthy, and prosperous societies. Thus, expanding access to education for all has been one of Ghana's important targets for relieving poverty and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4: Ensuring Inclusive, Equitable, and Quality Education and the Promotion of Lifelong Learning. The struggles to improve access to education in Ghana have been evident from pre-primary to secondary education. Primary education in Ghana holistically promotes the acquisition of skills in the 4Rs of Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic and cReativity. In line with this, the learners should be digital literates, critical thinkers, and problem solvers, preparing them for lifelong

learning (MOE, 2019). In Ghana, governments have embarked on several national policy initiatives to improve access to and participation in primary education. Examples of these initiatives include Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education, capitation grants, education strategic plans, school feeding programmes, gender equity policies and special education policies (MOE, 2019). Also, the Directorate of Ghana Education Service of the Bongo district has rolled out policies such as the counselling policy, monitoring and supervision policy, as well as a strong school community relationship policy to support the national policies in their efforts to improve access and participation in primary education in the district. Notwithstanding the recognition of the significance of this level of education and the efforts made by both the national and district governments to ensure access and participation for all school-age children, the findings of this study reveal that a significant number of children (figure 1) are still out of primary education in the district. This situation gives cause for concern, as education is the basic building block of every progressing society.

As reported earlier, admission to the BS1 (primary one), the first grade of primary education, revealed a decreasing trend in the Gross and Net Admission Rates. Although GAR experience rates rose more than 100% from 2012 to 2016, indicating an increasing trend of admitting pupils who were not aged 6 to BS1 and a significant fall from 2017 to 2021. This incidence could be a result of early or delayed school admissions, a challenge that pre-primary education can deal with by providing children with the necessary cognitive, social, physical, and emotional preparedness needed for the smooth transition between home and school entry as they begin their first grade as well as enrolling the appropriate age group into Basic One of Primary Education (Barnett, 2016; GES, 2013).

The findings also reveal that the GER for a decade decreased from 104.0% in 2012 to 95.6% in 2021. However, GER, on average, exceeded 90%, implying that the majority of children were participating in primary education over the years in the district, an achievement of universal basic education. The findings showed that the NER experienced a fall from 84.6% in 2012 to 83.5% in 2021. This implies further that the percentage of the out-of-school age population for primary education increased by 1.1%, from 15.4% in 2012 to 16.5% in 2021; thus, approximately 3,858 (16.5%) children within the age range of 6-11 years who are out of school in the district. The results revealed that a significant number of children enrolled in primary education in the district were not in the appropriate grade for their age, with a majority of them being either below or above the age range for primary education in Ghana, which is 6 to 11 years old. This finding confirms that of Akyeampong et al (2007) that because of late entry into schooling, Ghana's primary school population has a mean age of 7.5 years in primary one and a mean age of 13.3 years in primary six. These findings violate not only the fundamental right to education as enshrined in the 1992 constitution of Ghana but also global initiatives that strive for equitable and quality education for all.

Moreover, the findings revealed a fluctuating growth rate in admissions and

enrolments for both males and females from 2012 to 2021, with both males and females showing varying positive and negative growth rates. The gender parity index in terms of admissions into primary education ranges from 0.87 to 0.98, which is less than 1, indicating more representation of males than females over all the years from 2012 to 2021. However, the values were closer to 1.0, indicating that a significant number of females gained access to primary schools in the district. In addition, gender parity in terms of primary school enrolment over the years was less than 1.0, implying that more males are in primary schools than females. Nevertheless, the values consistently hovered around 1.0, indicating a relatively balanced representation of males and females in primary education enrolment. These findings align with the global goal of gender parity in primary education, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the significance of this parity as it reflects progress towards providing equitable primary education for boys and girls, in line with the broader international commitment to ensure educational access and participation for all children. The findings further underscore the positive impact of educational policies and initiatives by the government as well as the Bongo district aimed at promoting gender equality and inclusivity in the primary education system, contributing to the broader national and global agenda for educational development and gender equity (UNDP, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

To understand the effects of gender parity index on the appropriate age group for primary education thus 6-11 years old, the gross enrolment ratios were also used for the calculation of the index values. Although the GPI values range from 0.84 to 0.86 over the study period, with the values slightly favouring males, they are still quite close to the ideal gender parity value of 1.0, which underscores the commitment of the district to achieving gender parity in primary education for the appropriate age bracket. This indicates that although there may be a slightly higher enrolment rate for males within the 6-11 age bracket than for females, efforts to ensure equitable enrolment opportunities for both genders are commendable. However, continued efforts to narrow the gap further can contribute to the broader goal of inclusive and equitable education, ensuring that all children have access to primary education regardless of gender, thus fostering social and economic development (UNDP, 2023).

The findings further revealed that, generally, more males completed primary education than females in the district during the periods under review. However, as the years progressed, male and female completion rates declined, but the decline was more noticeable among females, resulting in a widening gender gap. This implies that males may have more robust support systems or fewer barriers to overcome when pursuing primary education than females, who may face specific barriers that hinder their ability to complete primary education. These findings align with existing literature on gender disparities in primary education, highlighting various factors facilitating these disparities, such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, early marriage, societal expectations, and inadequate resources for female students (Alua et al., 2022; Britwum et al., 2017; Mollé

& Chong, 2017; Ndivo et al., 2021; Suleman et al., 2015). Access to education goes beyond enrolment rates; it includes attendance, achievement, and progression and completion at the appropriate age (Lewin, 2009). Hence, these findings from the completion and transition rates in primary education warrant uncertainties in terms of responding to the international concerns of human right to education as evident in Article 26 (1) of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and the Education for All goals. Undoubtedly, to achieve target 4.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all school-aged children must access and complete primary and secondary education as well as achieve satisfactory learning outcomes (UIS, 2019), a target that has yet to be achieved adequately in the Bongo district. These findings stress a conclusion drawn by Lewin (2009) that even though there has been a significant rise in the enrolment of children in basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past two decades, a considerable number remain out of school because some do not enrol at all, and a majority of those who do enrol struggle to complete the education cycle.

Furthermore, the transition rate findings revealed that females generally recorded higher transition rates than males in all years except the 2013/2014 academic year. The implication is that more females are moving to succeeding educational levels than males, which contradicts the assumption that more males move to junior high school than females. Although it was found that more males were enrolled in primary education than females and had higher completion rates than females, females had higher transition rates than males in the district. Consequently, more female students progress to junior high school than male students, despite the advantage of male students having higher enrolment and completion rates in the district. In support of these findings, the data released by WAEC on the number of students who participated in the 2023 Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) recorded more females (300,391) than males (300,323). Similarly, in 2023, more females (235,370) participated in the West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) than males (211,834), as reported by the West African Examination Council (WAEC, 2023). These discrepancies suggest that males may face challenges as they progress through their education because there is a growing concern about boys' declining performance and engagement in education (OECD, 2019). In line with these findings, Muyaka et al (2023) argued that the traditional belief that the female child is marginalised in terms of educational access, even though this may be accurate in many settings, has led to a stereotype that has resulted in a biased focus and preferential attention to girls supported by their believed vulnerability. The findings corroborate that of Pike (2020), who stressed that a key outcome of women empowerment interventions has been geared towards eradicating discrimination against girls; hence, society appears to have abandoned the plight of boys in this process. It has been reported that boys have begun to lag behind girls in education. This supports Akyeampong et.'s analytical report. Al (2007) stated that at the JSS level, girls' attendance rates are higher than boys,

especially in urban areas. This calls for urgent attention, as research conducted by UNESCO (2020) suggests that ensuring a smooth transition from one educational level to another is crucial for male and female educational success.

There have been commendable efforts by the government and the district towards improving access to and participation in primary education in the Bongo District. These plans and initiatives generally support the important role that education plays in the country's socio-economic development (Appiah & Esia-Donkoh, 2018). However, practically, as evident in this study and in line with the existing literature, the efforts to ensure that all school-age children are enrolled and retained in schools have been heavily hindered by various systematic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Anangisy, 2020; Kapinga, 2017). Therefore, this situation limits the country's and district's progress towards achieving its commitments, intentions, and aspirations regarding access to and participation in basic education. Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, Rawls' (1999) social justice theory emphasises the importance of equal basic rights and the principles of equal opportunity. According to this perspective, education is considered a fundamental human right, and there is an advocacy for fairness and equality regarding access, participation, and achievement. In alignment with social justice theory, ensuring the right of school-age children to learn and reach their full potential is crucial for attaining Sustainable Development Goals 4.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it can be concluded that despite recognisable efforts by the country and district to widen access to education through free education policy, the education system has not yet absorbed all school-age children in the district due to several barriers. The results clearly show that most children in primary education were not in the appropriate age range for primary education, with significant numbers being either below or above the respective age range (6-11 years old). Another impediment is that some students drop out and do not complete the level due to various factors such as truancy, pregnancy, misbehaviour, low parental involvement in wards' education, poverty, loss of interest in education, and family-related issues like the death of parents or parental separation/divorce. This situation presents obstacles to national plans and conflicts with international commitments regarding the universal right to education. It was also documented that more males were enrolled and completed primary education than females; however, more females transitioned to junior high school in the district.

Therefore, based on the findings, for school-age children to have quality access to and participation in primary education, the study calls for deliberate and consented efforts and interventions by the government through the Ministry of Education to embark on community outreach programmes in Bongo district. These programmes aim to strengthen early childhood education and address the increasing trend of admitting pupils who are either below or above the appropriate age for primary education as well

as to address socio-cultural factors and any other factors that adversely affect the access and participation of children in primary education as per national and global intentions. The study further recommends the support of NGOs in providing the necessary infrastructure needs and school supplies such as TLMS, school uniforms, sandals, bicycles, and any other educational materials to enhance access and participation in primary education in the district. Finally, the Ghana Education Service should ensure adequate fund release for Bongo district education to support the successful implementation of policies in the district to improve access to and participation in primary education for school-going-age children in the district.

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