Leapfrogging Inequality Strategies for Transformed Rural Education: A School District Case, Ghana

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Abstract

This case study of a Ghanaian rural school district uses a community-based participatory action research to engage with municipal officials, a rural community, and its local school participants to co-design culturally sustainable education strategies. The study triangulated community meeting discussion, interviews, field notes and document analysis to elicit grassroots policy approaches and community cultural capital driving rural education success. The study identified a strong correlation between community participation, educational improvement and reduction in inequality and poverty. The study found that policy interventions that remove financial and geographical barriers to education access, elicit community participation and improve rural livelihoods were effective strategies for improving education outcomes for Ghanaian rural communities. The study identified rich rural cultural capital facilitating education improvement which evident that the problem of rural education has more to do with marginalisation than being rural. The study argues that valuing rural spaces by thinking spatially and innovatively offers new possibilities to transform rural education. Therefore, rural education must be pursued as collective social good or socio-cultural process, entailing an endless interchange of shared aspirations, resources, and cultural capital for mutual survival. This approach must be ground-up, fuelled by community participation, decolonisation, culturally responsivity in designing and recovering contextually appropriate universal education and integrated development model for Ghana and Africa.

Keywords: *Ghana, rurality, educational inequality, leapfrogging strategies, community participation, transformed rural education*

Introduction

Ghana's government aspires to create just learning and sustainable local communities for national socioeconomic transformation. A whole school development approach was adopted to devolve the control of pre-tertiary education to the district, local community and school levels to deepen community participation for locally-relevant outcomes. Basic Education became the foundation tool to leapfrog inequality and poverty in the community (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020). A free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) was introduced in Ghanaian Basic Schools in 1995. This was extended to the Senior High School level in 2017 to advance equity and relevance to propel national transformation. Basic Education (BE) in Ghana is now a 2-6-3-3 system comprising of a 2- year Kindergarten, 6-year primary school, 3-year Junior High School and a 3-year Senior High School (Anlimachie, 2019).

The West African country has chalked up modest successes in expanding universal access to education since the introduction of the fCUBE in 1995 (UNESCO, 2015a). Notwithstanding, the formal British colony is still grappling with the twin conundrums of low education outcomes and rural-urban inequality in educational opportunities. Only one out of three of Ghanaian rural children were achieving success in BE by 2017 compared to two out of three urban children (Ministry of Education, 2018 a; b). Ghana Poverty Report (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020) revealed that 64.6 per cent of the rural population were poor across three broad areas of health, education and living standards, compared to 27 per cent of urban populations (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020). The Ghanaian context of rurality, therefore, has significant implications for education and development.

Studies (Anlimachie, 2016; Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011; Gaddah, et al., 2015; 2016) on rural communities in Ghana identified a strong link between remoteness and low educational outcomes. Anlimachie and Avoada (2020) identified that long travelling distance between students and schools in rural areas is associated with lower school enrolment, attendance, transition rates, and learning outcomes. Gaddah et al., (2015), also found that distance to school was the most compelling determinant of school enrolment in rural Ghana. In addition to these issues for students, inadequate social amenities in rural communities in Ghana induced difficulty in staffing rural schools with qualified teachers (Cobbold, 2006).

The twin conundrums of below-average education outcomes among marginalised groups, and rural-urban inequality in development opportunities are significant social justice problems visible in many countries across the globe (UNESCO, 2015b; 2020). This is a problem that ignites high national and transnational migration and its attendant challenges, placing a high demand on the education system to effectively prepare young people to meet local and global needs (Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2019; Winthrop, 2018). In Ghana, these problems are sharply defined. Statistically, when comparing educational outcomes and job prospects, rural children are twice worse off than their urban counterparts. Some 60 per cent of Ghanaian school-aged children (4-18 years) fail to achieve success in Basic Education. Two-thirds were children from rural communities (Ministry of Education, 2018b).

Therefore, our previous study (Amoako-Mensah et al., 2019) problematised these conundrums as the double jeopardy of rurality requiring leapfrogging education strategies. Therefore, this study, with an appreciative rural lens investigates leapfrogging strategies to educational inequalities for improved education outcomes for Ghanaian rural communities, and elsewhere with similar context. The key research questions under investigation are:

1. What is the nexus between educational outcomes, and inequality and poverty?

2. What leapfrogging strategies can best improve rural education outcomes to reduce the rural–urban inequality in socioeconomic development in Ghana?

Methodology

The study was framed as a critical grassroots policy and community-based study with collaborative participatory action research (McTaggart et al., 2017; Taylor, 1997) enveloped by Bourdieu's (1986) socio-cultural theories of 'habitus' and 'form of capital'. The critical grassroots policy strand triangulates rural-, equity- , place- based lenses to analyse relevant grassroots approaches to leapfrogging educational inequality, drawing inspirations from the works of Taylor (1997), Wallace and Boylan (2009), Guenther et. al., (2014) and Downes et al. (2021). Bourdieu's (1986) habitus conceptualisation focuses the study on how culture and place inform grassroots education policy. The forms of capital framed the study from an appreciative lens excavating alternative forms of capital possess the rural to improve education outcomes.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that each habitus endows individuals, families, and communities with some amount of knowledge, skills and resources for societal advancement. However, cultural capital is not equally distributed, creating inequality across social groups and geolocations. Therefore, there is a challenge for education to affirm all learners' cultural capital to pursue equity and relevance for social mobility. Achieving this begins with methodological approaches that immerse researchers and education practitioners into rural realities to bring rural cultural capital and success into mainstream education policy and practice (Anlimachie, 2019; Guenther et al., 2020).

The site was in Aunafo North municipality, one of the 260 local districts in Ghana, which also doubles as a school district. The district is predominantly rural and agrarian with ethnic diversity. A combination of cluster and purposive samplings was employed to select this rural district (Bryman, 2012). The study participants included local policy actors (three municipal officials), school participants (school principal, teachers, and students) and their school community (community leaders and members).

Anlimachie (2019) argued that the methodological approach to rural-based research in Ghana should focus on the concepts of culture and place, underpinned by qualitative strategies in tune with the Ghanaian oral traditional and collective extended family decision-making process. This study was part of a bigger ethnographically informed case study of a rural school, its community and school district's education case in Ghana (Bryman, 2012). The study methods triangulated community meeting discussion involving the three municipal officials–for education, health, and civic education– and one rural community and its local school participants. Semi-structured interviews with a school principal and community leaders, augmented by field notes from researchers' observations and informal discussions with participants were also deployed to document local cultural capital and education success. This was augmented by document data from district and national reports. A summative write-up was used to analyse the qualitative part of the document data tracking the central themes (Rapport, 2010) while the statistical data from the document were analysed quantitatively using computation displayed in tables. The qualitative data from the community meeting, interviews and field notes were thematically analysed using a grounded theory approach threading key sensitising concepts emerging inductively from systematic gathering and analysis of qualitative data, capturing key themes that highlighted the essence of experiences from participants. complemented by researchers' reflective observation and interpretation (Bowen, 2006; Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

Theoretical and Empirical Review

Marginalisation induced by history, power or politics, geolocation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and indigeneity as factors for educational inequality have attracted considerable research and policy attention since the 1992 adoption of the global Educational For All goals (Comber & Hill, 2000; Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2015b). From the geolocation point, studies in Australia from Baxter et al., (2011), and Guenther et al. (2019) illustrate that remote and regional geolocations show dramatically different levels of educational provision and outcomes when compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Advancing Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault's perspectives on power, Taylor (1997) argued that education inequality is a product of resistance, adaptation and accommodation creating differences in outcomes among different social groupings organised by gender, race, class, among others, shaping the relationship between knowledge and power and education outcomes. Taylor (1997) highlighted the role of language in policy discourse as critical in shaping education outcomes at the grassroots. The interpretation of the policy text changes as it transcends space, time, cultures and structures. Therefore, educational policy processes that engage with grassroots stakeholders elicit critical and true meanings of local education realities to pursue equitable and relevant outcomes (Taylor, 1997).

Taylor (1997) also advances a critical policy stance that policy process is "*an arena of struggle over meaning*" (p. 26) driven by the dominant discourse. The totality of voices, forces, interests, ideas, and perspectives, and language shape policy production, community participation and outcomes. If the policy discourse is hijacked by the dominant group, it will convey a narrow set of voices of the elites who control the resources, the media and academia, relegating the voiceless rural folks who live at the margins. Likewise, if community experiences and cultural capital do not find expression in the education process it creates a gap between school, community and national aspirations (Alemu et al., 2021).

Empirical research studies continue to offer varied, but mostly related strategies as amends to reduce educational inequality to improve education outcomes for historically marginalised groups. Winthrop (2018) and Istance et al. (2019) argued for leapfrogging education that embraces transformation and innovation to advance educational improvement for the marginalised communities. Proponents of rural lens and geographically responsive pedagogy call educators and policy makers to think spatially and value rural places to chart and transform rural education strategies (Comber, 2021; Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021; Gouwens & Henderson 2021). They thus argued for strategies that take account of local community context and leverage local cultural capital to advance equitable education for all (Baroutsis et al., 2019; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Comber, 2021; Comber & Hill, 2000; Comber & Woods, 2018; Downes et al., 2021; Hattam, et al., 2009). Community participation in education has been identified as key to improving education outcomes for low-income communities by bringing rural cultural capital and aspirations into the mainstream delineation of education outcomes (Guenther et al., 2019; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Yolanda Jiménez & Maike, 2018). A deeper understanding of rural-context specific strategies is needed globally, and in Ghana, to leapfrog educational inequality perpetuated against rural people to which this study seeks to contribute.

Findings

Successes

The historical data on education and development outcomes [2011-2019] on the district depicted low, but recently improving trends in the outcomes. The district data showed persistent problems of rural-urban, gender and socioeconomic inequality in education and development outcomes as detailed in our previous study (Amoako-Mensah et. al., 2019; Anlimachie and Avoada 2020). Instructively, the study identified some recent successes of steadily improving trend in education outcomes showing prospects for education to leapfrog socioeconomic inequality towards creating a sustainable district.

Table 1 shows that the Senior High School participation rate increased by 22% within two years following an introduction of a Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) in Ghana; evidence that more young people were transitioning into higher level of education than before 2017.

Table 1. *School Participation Rate [2017-2019], Asunafo North*

Level	2016-17	2018-19	Change in percentage points
Basic School	74.0%	86.0%	12.0
Senior High School	43.2%	65.0%	22.0

Source: Asunafo North Municipality, (2018, p.27) and authors' computation based on 2019 enrolment data collated from the Municipal Education Office, Asunafo North

Also, the study school district's Basic Certificate Examination (BECE) test results (Table 2) showed a reduction in the rural–urban Junior High Schools achievement gap between the 2015 and 2018 tests. Rural and urban Basic schools achieved parity in the minimum pass mark at the BECE required for Senior High School placement.

Table 2. *Closing Rural–Urban Performance Gap in the BECE, Asunafo North*

Performance	2015			2018		
	Urban %	Rural %	Gap [Urban-Rural]	Urban %	Rural %	Gap [Urban-Rural]
Students scoring the minimum pass mark required for Senior High School placement	72	54	18	92	92	0

Source. Author's analysis based on documented statistical [Excel] data collated from the Municipal Education Office, Asunafo North Municipality, Ghana.

Significantly, the 2018 BECE results showed improvement in girls' performance, seeing them outperforming their male counterparts by 1 percentage point (Table 3).

Table 3. *Closing the Gender Performance Gap at the BECE, Asunafo North*

Performance	2015			2018		
	Boys %	**Girls** %	**Gap [Boys - Girls]**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Gap [Boys-Girls]**
Students scoring the minimum pass mark required for Senior High School placement	58	46	12	90	91	-1

Source. Author's analysis based on documented statistical [Excel] data collated from the Municipal Education Office, Asunafo North Municipality, Ghana.

The overall analysis of Asunafo North's BECE achievement (Table 4) showed an improvement of 38 percentage points between 2011 and 2018/19. Girls' BECE achievement also improved by 45 percentage points. Rural school children's achievement increased by 18 percentage points for the same period.

Table 4. *Improvement in Educational Outcomes 2001-2019, Asunafo North*

Indicator	2011-15	2018/19	Percentage point improvement
Pass rate at the BECE (2011-208)	52%	90%	38
Rural performance at BECE (2015-2018) -pass mark	54%	92%	38
Senior High School Participation Rate	30%	65%	35
Girls' performance at the BECE (2011-2018)- pass mark	46%	91%	45
The gender gap at the BECE (2011-2018)	6%	+1%	7
The rural-urban gap at the BECE (2015-2018)-pass mark	18%	0%	18

Source. Authors' construction based on analysis of municipal document data collated from Municipal Education Office and extracted from relevant district reports

The improving education outcomes are also associated with a reduction in the poverty rate. A recent poverty and inequality analysis, Ghana Statistical Service (2020), identified that the Ahafo region [where the study school district is located] has:

> experienced a reduction in the incidence of multidimensional poverty by 11.2 percentage points, from 60.6% in 2011 to 49.4 % in 2017. This reduction is statistically significant at 5%. The figure implies that nearly a third of … [the] people in the region have experienced significant improvement in their living standards (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020, p.36).

The reduction in the poverty rate, which parallels the improving trends in educational outcomes corroborates several survey studies (Anlimachie, 2016; Cook et al., 2016; Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2015; Ghana Statistical Service, 2018) of the strong relationship between low educational outcomes, high poverty and low household investment in education in the rural areas of Ghana. According to the Ghana Living Standard and Poverty reports (Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2015; Ghana Statistical Service, 2018; Ghana Statistical Service, 2015; 2020) poverty and inequality decrease with increasing household educational attainment, household income invested into education, and level of household support to children school learning activity at home. This indicates that

investment in education offers the best pathway and opportunity cost for igniting faster socioeconomic transformation of Ghana. It also suggests that Ghanaian rural districts have the prospect to leapfrog inequality and poverty if the right investment is made into rural and girls' education improvement. This finding corroborates Yalley et al.'s (2021) finding of a strong nexus between investment in pre-tertiary education, economic growth, and poverty reduction in Ghana. The finding is also supported by Amoako-Mensah et al., (2019) and Anlimachie and Avoada (2020) that equity-based investment into in education improvement to bridge the rural–urban gap in educational outcomes in Ghana offers the immediate pathway to improve the country's development.

The modest success chalked up by this low-income school district brings into relevance rural lens theorists' (Comber, 2021; Gouwens & Henderson, 2021; Guenther et al., 2015, Wallace & Boylan, 1999; Zuckerman, 2019) central argument that, when researchers and educators move beyond a deficit preview of rurality, they can decipher and rethink new possibilities to transform education for social groups marginalised by history, geolocation and income to create a sustainable global future.

Leapfrogging Strategies

This section uses qualitative data to analyse the district policy drivers for the identified recently modest improvements in education in the district to inform relevant strategies to leapfrog educational and socio-economic inequalities.

Safety-net Interventions

The policy strategies driving the recent modest improvements were explored to identify leapfrogging strategies to educational inequality. First, the study identified safety-net interventions like the free education and school feeding programme, as well as the physical expansion of schools to rural and remote communities as responsive interventions contributing to the modest successes. The interview data elicited an explanation that,

> *The introduction of the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) in 2017 extended free education from Grade 1 to Grade 12. This together with the School Feeding Programme (SFP) have improved school participation rates, especially among children from rural and poor backgrounds who were the hardest hit by financial inaccessibility to education… The euphoria that greeted the extension of free education to the Senior High School level has invigorated community participation in school, improving accountability for learning outcomes (Municipal Education Officer)*

Also, the district document analysis and participants' voices identified child-centred policy interventions and aspirations (Table 5) as other key driving forces behind the improving trends in educational outcomes in the district. The district policy strategies aimed at removing financial, geographical and infrastructural barriers to promote equitable educational access. The free universal pre-tertiary school policy and its complementary equity-based interventions contributed to the improved school participation rates (Table 1). Therefore, strategies that address geolocation, gender and socioeconomic disparities in school access offer leapfrogging strategies for rural education improvement. The finding corroborates other studies (Anlimachie, 2016; Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Gaddah et al., 2015; 2016) on rural Ghana that found that removal of cost, reduction in the physical distance to school access correlated with improved school participation and attendance rates. However, while social safety net interventions, including free education, were responsive to the low-income population in the study district, they needed to be well-targeted and tailored to the needs of the rural children, who were most marginalised by geolocation and socioeconomic status.

Table 5: *Child-Centred Aspirations and Approaches, Asunafo North*

Child-related aspirations and approaches
1. Providing universal free quality, equitable and accessible basic education for all
2. Expand the School Feeding Programme to cover all children to increase school attendance and retention.
3. Eliminate the worst forms of child labour and abuse
4. Promote child protection, expand access to social protection services to vulnerable children and promote and family welfare systems
5. Promote full participation of persons with disabilities in education and development process
6. To empower households economically and leverage their knowledge and resourcefulness to support children's schooling
7. Improve access to primary healthcare and reproductive health to reduce unplanned teenage pregnancies that curtail girls' education
8. Improve access to potable water and sanitation and reduce water-related diseases and malaria that contribute to absenteeism

Source. Analysis of district and national document, and collated views of participants at the community meeting

Girls-lens Interventions

District document analysis identified other girls-lens programmes like the Complementary Basic Education Programme (CBEP) and the Girls Participatory Approach to Student Success (GPASS) as strategies driving girls' education improvement in the study district to leapfrog inequality. The CBEP was introduced to rope in school dropouts, the majority of whom were teenage mothers, back to school. Several girls had successfully transitioned back to school through the CBEP. Also, the GPASS has improved girls' participation in school by targeting poor girls from deprived districts with scholarships. These interventions contributed to the improvement in girls' school participation rate in the districts (Asunafo North Municipal Assembly, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2018b).

The community meeting also elicited culturally responsive reproductive health education drawing on the amalgam of scientific and indigenous knowledge as important to the improving of girls' school participation. The participating School Principal explained that:

> The school liaise with local leaders, the Municipal Health Office, the Civic Education Office and NGOs to organise public campaigns on girl child education, family planning, children nutrition, child labour and reproductive health in the community.

The School Principal further added,

> We [the school] are using reproductive health education to improve the wellbeing of our teenage students. Apart from teaching topics on adolescent and reproductive health in the syllabus, we also give special education o teenage girls on proper sanitary care and management of the menstrual cycle. We also invite municipal health officials and community elders to educate our students on reproductive health to help students to make informed life choices.

The above narration from the community meeting showed that culturally responsive sex education, public campaigns on the importance of girls' education were pertinent to girls' education improvement in the rural areas of the district. This finding resonates with other studies (Carter et al.,

2020; Fentiman et al., 1999) on girls' education in Ghana that improving girls' access to basic needs such as food, sanitary and reproductive health information was important to reduce unwanted pregnancies, school absenteeism and dropout. As a popular Ghanaian proverb, credited to Dr James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey (1875-1927), a Ghanaian educator, says: "*if you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a nation*". This suggests that strategies aimed at reducing girls' marginalisation in education offer leapfrogging strategies to uprooting structural inequality against women in a Ghanaian male-dominated society.

Grassroots-based Teacher Training and Recruitment

Improvement in the supply of trained teachers also emerged as another driver for the improvement in students' achievement at the BECE test in the district. The Municipal Education Officer explained in a follow-up discussion that,

> *A recent massification of pre-service teacher education in Ghana, made possible by distance education, improved the supply of professionally trained teachers in the municipality from 40% in 2016 to 58% in 2019. Now only fully qualified teachers are being recruited. Our policy is to replace non-professionally trained teachers with qualified staff. So, a 5-year moratorium was given to all non-graduate teachers to upgrade their qualifications through distance and sandwich university teacher education training programs (Field interview notes).*

Ghana upgraded its minimum teacher qualification from a 3-year post-secondary teacher certificate to a 3-year Diploma, and now to a 4-year Bachelor between 2000 and 2017. Since 2005, Ghana has deliberately embarked on massification of teacher education through a distance learning programme to augment the supply of trained teachers produced by the traditional Teachers' Colleges of Education. Universities responded by establishing several off-campus distance learning centres to carry teacher education to the doorsteps of the various districts. The training programme targets non-professionally trained [stop-gap] teachers and, also offers top-up bachelors to non-graduate teachers. The decentralises off-campus teacher training programme delivers face-to-face tuition on the weekends and during school vacation in rented Senior High Schools campuses. The programme is contributing to the improvement in the supply of graduate teachers in Basic Schools, especially the rural and remote schools which have a lower rate of retention of the professionally trained (Cobbold, 2006). This grassroots teacher training in Ghana was found to be geographically responsive in staffing rural schools with teachers versed in the local languages and culture, reducing the teachers–students cultural mismatch in an ethnically diverse Ghanaian society (Yevudey, 2017).

Community Participation Towards Culturally Responsive Education

The analysis also elevates community participation and the tapping into local cultural capital as locally effective pathways to reduce policy translation gaps, and bridge school–home cultural divide for school success. The community meeting elicited explanations that,

> *There has been a consensus on the need to change the colonial model of education in Ghana and tailor it to our local needs… The colonial-based education somewhat relegated learners' lifeworlds and did not allow learners to think critically and create their desired world in the classroom learning context. This made school learning burdensome to our learners (Municipal Education Officer).*

He explained further,

> *The changes [the new curriculum approaches] seek to place the child at the centre of teaching and learning. Students are seen as the initiators and owners of the learning process. With this new approach to learning in our schools, even parents or community members can be invited to*

teach certain cultural skills, including local dance and art, in the classroom. Teaching is no longer the preserve of the teachers … both teachers and community members are facilitators of children's learning in this new enterprise (Municipal Education Officer).

Also, the Municipal Health Officer opined that education is a shared responsibility,

Families have to do their part by ensuring that school learning continues even at the home. The children must have time for their books at home. Parents must ensure that children follow good daily routines that make them active and healthier and persistent learners. Families should ensure that children follow a regular sleep schedule to be refreshed for learning. Families must give children space and voice at home to participate in the decision-making process.

The Municipal Education Officer further added:

The community and the school are inseparable, hence the collaboration between the school, the local community and families is very important…. local communities are expected to take an active role in the running of the schools through the School Management Committees and the Parent-Teacher Associations.

Also, the Municipal Civic Education Officer highlighted the crucial role of family participation in education that,

The child has the right to free compulsory basic education. However, it is the responsibility of the family to ensure that the child enters and complete school. The 'compulsory' aspect places the responsibility on families to ensure that the child is in school until completion of at least Grade 12 or else you violate the country's constitution.

The policy move in the district was towards culturally responsiveness which provided the impetus for the recent improvements in education outcomes. The study district was becoming more conscious of the need to orient towards culturally responsive education drawing on community cultural capital. The new education approach in the district since 2017 has sought to connect learners to local culture, local environment, and community sustainability. The participating municipal officers saw the significance of the learners' home as an extension of the school. Community participation was embraced as an avenue to enact culturally responsive education. Democratic school and home environments by privileging children voices was accepted as key to creating inclusive learning and confident learners. There was a collaboration between the school and the home, igniting accountability for learning outcomes, and leveraging local cultural assets for school improvement. These facilitated a ground-up approach for educational improvement to addressing local and global learning needs. This finding corroborates growing research evidence on rural education and culturally responsive pedagogy (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011; Okurut-Ibore, 2015) that community participation was a strong predictor of school success as it leverages local resources and aligns local and national approaches and aspirations. As Okurut-Ibore's (2015) PhD study in Uganda found, community participation in the educational process was the most critical factor to achieving educational equity and relevance, balancing local needs, national aspirations and the global Sustainable Development Goals.

Tapping into Community Cultural Capital for Culturally Sustaining Schooling

In observing one rural community and its local school in the study school district, the study documented rich cultural capital facilitating school improvement. These examples of rural cultural capital (Table 6) signify that low-income communities have alternative forms of capital to their low-income status supporting school improvement. For example, in sharing her experience on the

community cultural facilitating school improvement, the school principal of the participating school had this to say:

> *The school was constructed by the community from its own resources. The community members provide communal labour. The men help in moulding and laying the bricks, while the females also fetch water for the mixing of the mortar. The artisans, including the masons and the carpenters in the community, provided free workmanship ... lunch is prepared and brought in by the women to the workers as part of their contribution to the project (Interview).*

A community elder also added that,

> *The school was only a primary school until 2016 when we mobilised our people to construct the JHS [Junior High School] block to reduce the risk involved in our children trekking 12 km each school day to attend JHS at the district capital...We levied all adult members' monies to construct the JHS block. We are happy to get this block for the JHS to start ... the first batch completed last year (2018) and almost all of them have transitioned to Senior High School (Community leader Interview).*

Also, speaking on the values that had ensured the community's resilience in supporting school improvement notwithstanding their low-income status, the community elder explained:

> *Respect and collectiveness are key to sustaining our community. So, respect for our leaders and for one another is paramount to us. We also live a communal life. All local mobilisation, such as imposing levies and calling communal labour for school development are pushed through the Odikro's (traditional chief) to gain greater legitimacy and elicit popular support due to the high reverence for the chieftaincy institution (Community leader interview*

The community cultural capital of respect, collectiveness, and communal labour have made the observed rural community resourceful in mobilising local resources for school improvement. This was aided by the ground-up whole school development approach of the district which devolves ownership and control of local public schools to the local communities. The district approach, which rides on community participation and taps into local cultural capital, has ignited higher aspirations and participation in education while improving the accountability for learning outcomes to drive education outcomes. This rural cultural capital if fully utilised and combined with school cultures and policy environment can enact locally sustainable and just strategies to leapfrog educational inequality, corroborating Alim and Paris (2017), and Harris et al. (2020). The rich rural cultural capital documented by this study suggests that the problem of rural education has more to do with marginalisation than merely being rural. Looking beyond the deficit, rural spaces offer possibility for transformed education if grassroots policy stakeholders will value rural spaces by thinking spatially and innovatively (Comber, 2021; Downes et al., 2021; Miller, 2008).

Improving Rural Livelihoods

The community meeting elicited a link between rural livelihood and education improvement. Participants mentioned that recent livelihood interventions by the district like a 'Planting for Food and Jobs Programme' introduced in 2017 was contributing to their livelihoods and, thus, their investment in education. The programme, which targets rural small-holding farmers with improved seeds, fertilisers, extension services and the ready market, was contributing to improving rural productivity. The farmers in the district who, in the immediate past, were producing food crops mostly to feed their families were now having surpluses for sale to raise additional income, aside from their seasonal income from cocoa production. This was contributing to the improvement of their income and their ability to provide their children with basic school needs. As found by survey

studies (Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2015; Ghana Statistical Service, 2018; Ghana Statistical Service, 2015; 2020) in Ghana, there is a correlation between family livelihood or income and support to children's education. This suggests investing in agrarian livelihoods is another strategy to leapfrog educational and socioeconomic inequality in rural communities in Ghana, just as the improvement in rural housing and social amenities.

Table 6: *Rural Cultural Capital as Resources for Education Improvement*

Community's cultural capital promoting children's wellbeing and learning
The community's: 1. social organisation is characterised by resilient social institutions, well-defined levels of authorities, roles, sanctions, succession and inheritance promoting inclusiveness, collectiveness and mobilisation for school improvement. 2. culture is washed with responsive practices that promote unity in diversity, respect, belongingness, caring promoting children's wellbeing and learning. 3. extended family compound household context offers children diverse learning opportunities and instructors
The community's: 1. rich natural environment, including forest resources, clay deposits among others, offers generative and explorative learning experiences for children. 2. social setting is endowed with rich activities and rituals, including religious activity, naming and marriage ceremonies, communal labour, local festivals and games and community meetings that also serve as a natural laboratory for children learning. 3. Children's play offers vast explorative learning opportunities that equip children with creative, oral, life, affective and moral skills, while making them critical thinkers, team players and healthy learners
The community: 1. perceived children as, cultural heritage, and the greatest family social and economic assets. 2. believes that children are born with inherent abilities, wisdom, knowledge and skills, as they are perceived as reincarnated ancestors 3. perceived children as the bridge between the dead, the living and future 1. has strong resentment and thus has enacted several taboos, aside from national laws, against child abuse 2. has a high belief in children's learning abilities and high expectations for children's learning success 3. perceived children as endowed with innate knowledge and skills, and thus are the masters of their learning that they must be freely allowed to explore and bring out the best in them via guided participatory learning. 4. child-centred learning approaches build children's learning confidence, allow children to take initiative and own their learning process

Source. Researcher's documented cultural capital from one observed rural community in the study district

Promoting Cost-effective Digital Learning

The field notes data from field observation and informal discussion with the research community identify flexible cheaper and accessible digital learning infrastructure as key to leapfrogging rural educational inequality. The field note data from researchers' observation and informal discussion identified poor Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure as a key factor inducing educational inequality against the rural folks in the study district. Some 25 per cent of the district population in rural and remote communities did not have access to electricity, let alone ICT infrastructure and the personal computers at home. Some 80 per cent of the district population owned mobile phones. But their uses were limited to voice calls and mobile money transactions, mostly excluding internet access due to weak connection and expensive mobile data. Children, therefore, had limited opportunities to access learning apps Also, most rural schools in the district lacked computers (Field notes). Notwithstanding the district and teachers were using improvised and innovative ways to bridge this digital learning gap.

In observing a Creative Arts lesson and teachers' lesson plan in one rural Basic School in the study district during the research team's field visit, the teacher instructors had planned to include playing videos of some famous examples of African music and dance, but the school had no audio-visual equipment. The teacher improvised by using his smartphone to show the planned content to students in turns, instead of using a computer, television, or a projector screen (Field notes). A post-fieldwork discussion with the school principal of the observed school elicited that the lack of ICT infrastructure denied the children the opportunity to take advantage of the online learning platforms rolled out by the Ministry of Education, Ghana, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The district was innovative in mitigating the impact of lack of ICT infrastructure on rural children' learning. First, the district relied on local radio FM stations airing from the district capital as major sources of education. The radio was the major medium of formal school learning during school closures occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many lessons sponsored by the Municipal Assembly were aired for the benefit of the rural children. The district had collaborated with the private sector to establish a Mobile Learning Van project. The Mobile ICT Van, stocked with computers and textbooks and ICT instructors, visits different rural schools in turn to give practical ICT lessons. The ICT Mobile Learning Van concept provided a geographically responsive strategy for rural schools without ICT resources. As found by Winthrop (2018), Istance et al. (2019) and Doorly (2020), ICT learning requires available, innovative, cheaper digital mobile learning tools for experiential learning opportunities. Increasing young people's use of technology creates vast learning spaces, both in and outside of school, linking rural to global learning opportunities to leapfrog inequality (Guenther et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The study identified a corrective relationship between community participation, improvements in rural and girls' education on one hand and reduction in inequality and poverty on the other. Therefore, increased investment in rural and girls' education, implicated with livelihood, and culturally responsive reproductive health and gender-lens interventions, supported by collaborative participatory community involvement offer an integrated approach to leapfrogging inequality and poverty in Ghana and elsewhere with similar context. The study found that low-income rural communities in the study district possess rich cultural capital as alternative to financial and intellectual capital facilitating education improvement. The study argues, therefore, that the low rural education outcomes, and the rural-urban inequality in educational outcomes had more to do with marginalising the rural than being rural. Therefore looking beyond the deficit of rural spaces by

valuing rural spaces, and thinking spatially and innovatively offer new possibility for grassroots policy stakeholders to collaboratively transform rural education. Therefore, education in Ghana and elsewhere with similar contexts must be pursued by grassroots stakeholders as a collective social good and socio-cultural process, entailing an endless interchange of shared aspirations, resources and cultural capital, using local evidence to inform national policy strategies. The ground-up approach scaffolded by community participation, decolonisation, and culturally responsivity can design and recover contextually appropriate universal education and an integrated development model for Ghana, Africa and the developing countries.

This study provides theoretical and empirical evidence that education and development policy in the study rural school district case, all of Ghana and elsewhere with similar context that:

- increased investment in rural and girls' education improvement offer leapfrogging strategies to socioeconomic inequality to creating sustainable rural communities worth living and not escaping from. Therefore, culturally and geographically responsive policies, with rural and decolonial lenses offer a contextually relevant ground-up approach to rebuild education that charts the path of social justice and meets rural, national and global needs.
- culturally responsive curriculum approach, grassroots teacher training and social safety-net interventions correlate positively with reduction in inequality and poverty. This suggests the need for equity-based interventions in education and development polices to leapfrog inequality.
- improvement in rural livelihoods offers a leapfrogging strategy scaffolding educational improvement to eliminate social inequality and poverty. Therefore, any intervention aimed at improving rural education must implicate sustainable livelihoods interventions, especially innovative agricultural and agri-business practices. Informal education, public campaigns and livelihood interventions are also needed to empower women to participate actively in the local development process.
- community participation in education mobilises local resources and cultural capital to enact culturally responsive and socially just schooling to improve rural educational outcomes. More invigorated community participation must be promoted to advance collective accountability for learning outcomes to improve efficiency and outcomes.

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