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Comparing power spaces: the shaping of Ghana’s Education Strategic Plan

Emefa Takyi-Amoako*

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This article compares the power spaces occupied by both donors and the Ministry of Education in the formulation of Ghana’s Education Strategic Plan (ESP). It shows that the formulation of the ESP was more donor-led than Ministry-led due to the donor-initiated global policy frameworks also referred to as the non-negotiables. Consequently, donors and the Ministry were respectively positioned as the dominant and dominated. A comparison and analysis of their unequal positions illuminates some of the reasons why the principles of aid effectiveness in terms of ownership and partnership, which persistently drive donor–recipient interactions, remain rhetorical.

Keywords: power; donors; Ghana; Ministry of Education/Government of Ghana (MoE/GoG); Education Strategic Plan (ESP)

PART ONE

1. Introduction

Background

After the 1970s, Ghana, like most other African countries, became reliant mainly on external agencies and governments for assistance to improve their education sector, as a result of an economic crisis over the past two to three decades (Agyeman, Baku, and Gbadamosi 2000). To address the continuing crisis in the educational system, evident in the documented decline in academic standards, Ghana initiated several reforms. This was done in collaboration with major donors/lenders such as the World Bank, United Nations (UN) agencies, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) among others. Studies confirmed the frontline role played by these donors in the management and development of the education sector in Ghana, particularly in supporting its development budget (Agyeman, Baku, and Gbadamosi 2000).

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However, international aid delivery in developing countries and donor–recipient relationships have been plagued with numerous problems, including power inequalities that threaten to undermine aid effectiveness (Tandon 2008). Intriguingly, although power absolutely permeates aid relationships and the spaces within which the discourses of a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), globalisation and aid effectiveness are articulated, not enough attention is given to its dynamics and differential features. The use of buzzwords such as ‘partnership’, ‘ownership’ and ‘participation’, which are upheld as the bastion of these discourses, tends to mask the reality of unequal relations. These discourses are constructed in a way that both blurs and depoliticises the power dynamics in the relations between donor and recipient, lender and borrower, rich and poor (Takyi-Amoako 2008; Fraser 2005). For example, there is no doubt that the report on country-led aid coordination in Ghana by Harry Sawyer (1997), a former Minister of Education, has documented important historical facts about attempts at donor harmonisation in Ghana. However, the silence of his analysis over the power differentials that permeate donor–recipient interactions, which prompted the advocacy for country-led aid coordination in the first place, seems to render the report a sanitised version of the real story. A statement from a World Bank Education Sector Project (World Bank 2004) document is worth quoting:

*The capacity of the MEYS, the GES [Ghana Education Service] and other education organizations to formulate plans and strategies, to lead their implementation, and to coordinate the efforts of the donor community is weak . . . .* (World Bank 2004, 12, bold italics in the original)

Consequently, this article presents an analysis of the Ministry of Education (MoE)–donor interactions and their shaping of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) (2003) in Ghana. It examines the perceptions of key actors in the policy formulation process, including their views of the power systems inherent in these interactions. It argues that some of the primary findings of the study suggest that there was unequal power in the MoE–donor interactions during the formulation of the ESP, and that donors dominated the process by virtue of global policy frameworks. Comparing how power operates between donors and recipients in policy processes is timely because it will clarify some of the reasons why aid effectiveness discourses and initiatives with seemingly best intentions continue to remain at the level of rhetoric.

This article is divided into two main parts, which are further sub-divided into seven sections. Section 1.0 introduces and provides the background to the study. Section 1.1 describes the research methodology, and Section 1.2 defines the contexts of the ESP text influence and production. Section 2.0 outlines the reasons that triggered the ESP, and examines the global/international influences and trends in the ESP text production process, while Section 2.1 assesses the extent to which some national or MoE/Government of
Ghana (GoG) priorities contest with the donor agendas. Finally, Section 3.0 explores the wider literature in the light of the above findings, and then concludes with a summary of the overall analysis.

1.1. Research approach
The study from which this article emerged employed a qualitative research design and adopted the interpretative approach of investigating actions and behaviour that emerged from the MoE–donor agencies interactions and their shaping of the ESP in their natural setting. It employed the non-probability sampling, which is known as purposive, purposeful or criterion-based sampling (Merriam 1988; Robson 1993; Punch 1998). The nature of the research questions and the qualitative strategy required this sampling approach, as the objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the shaping of the ESP through the MoE–donor interactions. The MoE, DFID, USAID, the World Bank and UNICEF were identified and selected through purposive, snowball and theoretical sampling methods (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Robson 1993; Punch 1998).

The research participants included key actors from the MoE and donor agencies involved in educational aid delivery in Ghana in the past and present. Though the study’s focus was on a current phenomenon, the ESP (2003–2004), it was necessary to situate it in a historical context. Its formulation began in 2002 and, in principle, ended in 2003, although plans for the process were laid down by late 2001. Therefore, the MoE officials in Ghana who interacted with these selected donor agencies were identified and interviewed, as were individuals or groups who had worked or were working for them and were interested in the ESP in Ghana, and any other individuals who had been or were involved with the MoE–donor interactions with regards to the shaping of the ESP in Ghana. The main settings within which participant observation occurred, which included events organised around the ESP such as MoE–donor meetings, Education Sector Annual Review (ESAR) sessions and workshops, were also purposively sampled, as were documents that were connected to them. Data were generated through in-depth interviewing of officials of the MoE and donor agencies and other relevant actors participating in the world of MoE–donor relations, events both within and outside the MoE, as well as the reviewing of relevant documents.

Interviews with key actors dynamically involved in policy-making processes and the researcher’s participation in their world were meant to offer an in-depth understanding of the fine points of education policy formulation that were impossible to discover simply from documentary evidence. Like other researchers, I was interested in experiencing the ‘assumptive worlds’ of policy-making and consequently delved into the ideas, principles and culture of the key players who were active in setting the pace of the policy and whose decisions impacted on its development (Fitz and Halpin 1994, 33).
While analysis was largely data-led, existing theoretical notions and analytic frames of policy, power, globalisation and partnership in the literature were drawn upon and employed as lenses to interpret the primary findings.

Using some of the evidence from 53 interviews and over 100 documents and observations recorded in field notes, this article provides some of the findings to address the following research question:

- How is policy text (the ESP) shaped when national government (MoE/GoG) meets (selected) foreign donors?

This question explores how interactions between selected international donor organisations and the MoE shaped the ESP of Ghana. In the process, the power dynamics within these interactions are examined.

1.2. Contexts of policy: ESP text influence and production

This analysis concerns the contexts of policy influence and policy text production. It contends that global and international donor agendas permeate the contexts of Ghana’s policy, the ESP text influence and production. Although the ESP was seen as providing the MoE with a device to begin harmonising donor activities and assuming leadership in its interactions with donors, its formulation was donor-driven (Amoako 2009).

The ESP

The ESP was delivered mainly in two volumes, although sometimes it was regarded as three (GoG/MoE 2003). While the first offered a summary of education sector policies, strategies and targets for the period 2003 to 2015, the second, which represented the Work Programme, provided the ‘policy objectives in terms of targeted outcomes linked to timeframes and institutional responsibilities’ (HD 25 – ESP I: 5). It delineated the policy goals that supported the ESP. Its fulfilment was a crucial aspect of the policy implementation process. The ESP established the guidelines for implementation as part of its text. An Annual Educational Operational Plan (AESOP), the operational instrument by which the implementation of the ESP was achieved, was a three-year rolling plan, which matched particular strategies from the Work Programme against specific year and resources sub-sectorally. The AESOP was then aligned with the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF).

This article takes into account the notion of policy as a process, text, discourse and the different contexts within the policy cycle (Ball 1998, 1994). It is important to note that these contexts (of influence, production, practice, outcomes and political strategy) are not mutually exclusive, neither do they relate to each other in a linear fashion (Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992). All five
could happen simultaneously in the policy process. Policy analysis in this case considers the cyclical nature of the policy process. All vantage points in the cyclical process are regarded as being in a dialectic relationship. The mechanistic view of linearity in the policy process is therefore repudiated. The purpose here is to remember and emphasise constantly the complexities embedded in policy as a process. In this paper, the policy contexts, particularly the domains of ESP influence and text production, combining as a contested terrain are important. These domains are full of processes, agents of global/international and national/local agendas (multilateral/bilateral donor, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and MoE officials), global policies, policy elite (politicians, MoE officials, donor officials) and other interest groups (NGO officials, etc.) in a somewhat latent struggle, yet the analysis is restricted to the actions and ideas of the MoE officials at the headquarters level and officials of selected donor agencies, their global/national agendas, and involvement in the ESP formulation. Also, although the main focus of the study was on these two, the other domains such as the context of practice which had to do with policy implementation occasionally established its dialectic link to both, and this was sometimes expressed in the interviews and documents. This was also because the fieldwork for this study covered the period 2003–2004, when the ESP formulation was nearing completion and its implementation had just begun.

The contexts of the ESP text influence and production are perceived as symbiotically connected. Both are seen as sharing an uncomfortable link with each other, ‘[b]ecause while influence is often related to the articulation of narrow interests and dogmatic ideologies, policy texts are normally articulated in the language of general public good’ (Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992, 20). The analysis is restricted to the macro/national/MoE headquarters level, but it straddles the policy contexts of ESP text influence and production (and occasionally the context of practice) due to aspects of the policy production and influencing processes occurring at this macro level in the MoE–donor interactions. This is epitomised by the policy roles played by the MoE and donors at the headquarters level. The struggles that take place between the donors and MoE/GoG within these dialectic domains are portrayed.

Donors exercised power over the MoE and dominated the ESP shaping process within the contexts of ESP text influence and production, owing to a number of determinants: (1) institutional strength (donor financial leverage, donor knowledge authority, frailty of the MoE systems and capacity); (2) historical connections; and (3) donor-initiated global policy frameworks. However, this article focuses on only one, the donor-initiated global/international policy frameworks, and shows how they enable donors to dominate the ESP shaping process. These policy frameworks of Education for All (EFA) goals, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), CDF/Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) could be referred to as the non-negotiables
because they mandatorily and fundamentally predetermined the MoE–donor interactions and education policy priorities in Ghana. In examining the above argument in detail, the next section seeks to understand what triggered the formulation of the ESP, and explores the global influences.

PART TWO

2. Global/international influences and trends in the ESP text production

This section contends that the process of the ESP text production was influenced significantly by donor-initiated global/international policy frameworks, but it will also show that because there was the view that the MoE/GoG lacked a clear vision and had inadequate capacity, it was easier for donors to impose their vision, which was global. The data suggest that global policy agendas and trends currently flow into Ghana’s education policy domain, particularly into the contexts of ESP text influence and production, and donors represent the chief agents of these agendas in their interactions with the MoE. Donor pressure on the MoE led to the ESP text production, and the process provided an arena within which the MoE–donor interactions, dominated by donor agendas, influenced it. As an MoE official (2004) recounted, ‘... we had to come in line with the global initiatives that have been started – EFA, MDGs’. The data suggest that the EFA goals and MDGs (global initiatives) initiated by donors influenced the ESP significantly (HD 64 Annexes 1, 4 and 9; 65; 66; 101; ED6 11; 12).

Although there was the view that the ESP was meant to put the MoE/GoG in the lead position in the MoE–donor interactions, the data suggested that the ESP was prompted by the donors:

We had a lot of prompting from the DPs [Development Partners] even though we also realised that we needed a plan, but a lot of prompting also came from them during meetings, discussions etc. (MoE-GES official, 2003)

Donor pressure triggered the ESP formulation. At the time, because donors wanted a mechanism through which educational aid could be delivered, the ESP was constructed:

To some extent ESP development was prompted by donors (DFID especially) who wanted a substantive document against which aid could be provided and development measured. (Technical advisor, 2005)

It represented a mechanism that was rooted in the principles of the donors/lenders’ PRSPs, which was prescribed to countries that agreed to be classified as a Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) in order to qualify for debt relief towards the end of the 1990s and early part of the millennium. Ghana
was one such country and its donor macro policy prescription was the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS).

In addition to donors’ need for a framework through which aid could be delivered, effective planning of education was a reason for prompting the MoE to develop the ESP. A donor official (2004) asserted that, ‘we interact with the MoE/GoG to ensure that education is well planned’. He reported that on his arrival in Ghana many people told him how the MoE had a plan that was not being implemented. He saw the previous strategic plans of the MoE as ‘full of wish lists’, hence the demand for a more credible plan, the ESP.

**Global policy frameworks**

The ESP claimed to be subjected to international and global influences: ‘Ghana subscribes to the Education for All (EFA) principles and process and has developed a work programme that puts into effect the six goals arising from the *World Education Forum* in Dakar, April 2000 …’ (HD 25 – ESP I: 11). These six goals, as well as the two MDGs, are shown in Figure 1 below.

The ESP applies to the entire sector and its ‘… Work Programme contains the essential features of the EFA Work Programme, demonstrating that it is a mainstream component of sector development’ (HD 25 – ESP I: 11). The 10 policy goals of the ESP are organised along its four focus areas, most of which are steeped in the EFA goals and MDGs (see Table 1).

According to the report on the 2004 ESAR:

> The … GPRS … EFA … MDGs … informed the preparation of the ESP. The ESP contains strategies and activities designed to achieve the MDGs of Universal Primary Completion by 2015, and of gender parity in primary enrolment by 2005. (HD 94 – ESAR 2004: 3)

In addition, in ‘Ghana’s Proposal for Inclusion into the Education for All Fast Track Initiative’, this influence is formally proposed in the categorical statement: ‘EFA planning and implementation will be an integral and complementary part of the work of the Ministry of Education … over the period 2003–2015’ (ED 12 – Proposal for EFA/FTI 2004: 14). Donor-initiated global policy priorities, therefore, seemed to permeate the context of Ghana’s ESP influence and production. These international agendas were brought to bear on the ESP. While the ESP appears to advocate for the development of entire levels of a country’s education sector (HD 25 – ESP I: 7), primary/basic education level seemed to be emphasised more explicitly than the other levels. Great importance was therefore attached to Ghana’s basic education sub-sector by most donors in their interactions with the MoE. This was sometimes perceived as an instance of donor inflexibility as regards the MoE/GoG’s education priorities. As one MoE official (2003) said:

> It’s true that basic education is the government’s priority. Very often the donors tend to capitalise on this. They put too much emphasis on basic educa-
The Six EFA Dakar Goals

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.

4. Achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Millennium Development Goals

Goal 2. Achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE)

*Target 3.* Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women

*Target 4.* Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.

Figure 1. Global policy frameworks.

tion and tend to neglect the other levels of education, especially tertiary education.
A complete integration of the ideas and targets of the EFA into the ESP and presenting primary education as a priority for the sector was unequivocal. The strategies delineated in the proposal were central to the realisation of ‘primary Education for All in Ghana’ (ED 12 – Proposal for EFA/FTI 2004: 14) and are identified in the ESP for the attainment of the sector policy goals. Thus the ESP, which symbolised a plan for the entire education sector, was more biased towards primary education, which represented one of the global agendas of the donors. As will be seen in this article, a number of the interviews confirmed this global and international influence on the ESP. Consequently, interviewees confirmed that donors would ensure that whatever policy goals the MoE/GoG set or prioritised were often in line with those within their range of interests, which were mostly shaped by the EFA goals and MDGs.

According to the World Bank’s Education Sector Project (EdSeP) document, the MoE/GoG had always emerged with several visions for the education sector. For example, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), which had been integrated into the ESP, represented a constitutional obligation and had given the MoE a conscious knowledge of its short- and long-term basic educational goals for Ghana. Nonetheless, this consciousness failed to reinforce its capabilities to attain these goals, because the broad sectoral vision had not been operationalised and converted into discrete institutional and practicably manageable plans for the MoE and its agencies.

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<tr>
<th>THE 4 FOCUS AREAS</th>
<th>THE 10 POLICY GOALS</th>
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<td>1. Equitable Access to Education</td>
<td>• Pre-school education</td>
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<td>• Access and participation in education and training</td>
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<td>• Girls’ access to education</td>
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<td>2. Quality of Education</td>
<td>• Quality of teaching and learning for enhanced pupil/student achievement</td>
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<td>• Academic and research programmes</td>
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<td>• Health and environment in schools and institutions</td>
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<td>• Prevention and management of HIV/AIDS</td>
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<td>3. Educational Management</td>
<td>• Educational planning and management</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Science, Technology and TVET</td>
<td>• Technical and vocational education and training</td>
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divisions and units. Often the development of policies and plans occurred in an environment of inter- and intra-agency struggle for donor funds and, thus, lacked strategic direction. In addition, the document stated that since:

the Ministry has not selected its own priorities in an attempt to concentrate resources around them, since it has not insisted that donor organizations follow these priorities, and since DPs have their own agendas, the resulting plans do not represent a coherent set of activities. (HD 121; ED 11 – EdSeP 2004: 12)

Given that the MoE sometimes failed to delineate its own priorities, and was unable to demand that donors focused on them, it allowed donors to advocate their own programmes and interests. Routinely, the policy processes occurring amidst the MoE–donor interactions were incoherent and seemed more donor-led than MoE-led. There were indications that the MoE’s near inability to determine its own priorities and put its vision into effect made it difficult to harmonise donor activities so as to prevent donors from pursuing their own agendas:

The capacity of the MEYS, the GES and other education organizations to formulate plans and strategies, to lead their implementation, and to coordinate the efforts of the donor community is weak. (HD 121; ED 11 – EdSeP 2004: 12)

Both quotes above represent telling statements about how the MoE–donor interactions influenced education policy processes in Ghana, and shape the crux of the argument. The MoE’s frail capacity to independently fund its education sector and identify most of its own priorities, harmonise and control donor activities intensified the influence of international donor-led agendas in the ESP formulation process. This situation tended to determine the direction of the ESP process, its main priorities and goals, including the procedures and instruments that were employed in its production. Most of the interviewees acknowledged it one way or another. For example, one put it this way:

As far as policy formulation is concerned I’ll say that some of our policies agree now with global decisions. Normally, sometimes some of these initiatives come from external programmes – international global issues … They play a major role in policy formulation because, for example in education we have a number of DPs. Sometimes they drive us to certain policy areas or sometimes they take the driving seat as far as policy is concerned. Some of these issues are global issues and they have already had experience on these. So they help us move forward. They have been exposed to these issues in other countries … (MoE-GES official, 2003)

In the MoE–donor interactions, donors were perceived as occupying the lead position in influencing policy because of their global experiential advantage. Another MoE official (2003) also cited an instance:
For example, at the moment we are having this EFA – an international global policy. The idea is that ... because it’s a global initiative and programme, the DPs want to make sure that we meet the benchmarks that will drive this policy. Also, if you look at the area of girl-child education, it has been a concern for DPs as stakeholders driving the policies. Most girls have been deprived of their education. When it comes to quality of education ... There are a number of areas where the DPs seem to be in the driving seat.

Donors who represented agents of global/international agendas such as the EFA goals ensured that these influenced Ghana’s ESP. While the role of DFID seemed prominent in the ESP formulation process, a donor official from UNICEF maintained that he developed the terms of reference of the ESP. He also confirmed the technical support given by UNICEF, USAID, DFID and the World Bank and the fact that DFID hired a consultant. He maintained that the support from these donors for the Education Sector Review 2001–2002 (ESR) led to recommendations out of which the ESP was developed (Donor official, 2004). Indeed, the prominence of DFID’s role and the designing of the terms of reference of the ESP by a donor official, among others, probably indicated to a certain extent the dominant position the donors occupied in the development of the ESP, and which did not necessarily give a sense of the MoE leading the process. This implied that donors set the priorities although it was acknowledged that it was done in consultation with the MoE/GoG:

DPs set the priorities but of course we are always in consultation in meetings, discussions and workshops. But in some of these things, they push or set the pace ... (MoE-GES official, 2003)

It also suggests that donors pushed to influence Ghana’s ESP and determined its direction. This donor-led approach is vividly captured in the interview excerpt below in which the researcher asked the interviewee (an MoE/GoG official, 2003) to describe a scenario of how the MoE–donor consultations in meetings influenced the ESP:

I (Interviewee): One example is this girl-child issue. Throughout the discussion, you see that, for example, the MoE saw that girl-child education is not the main problem. It is the providing of access to education for everybody and then the DPs were very vociferous in their demand for a special place for girl-child education. They were adamant and they thought that it was necessary. As I said, because girl-child education has become a global issue, a global initiative they thought that Ghana should also accept that. They also said that if we do not accept to provide a special place for the girl-child we may lose some funding support from them. Because it appears they have a lot of money for girl-child education.

EA: So, does that mean Ghana itself does not really see girl-child education as a pressing issue...?
I: Yeah we see it but all I’m saying is, we didn’t know and then we realise and we see it, but then, the initiative sometimes can be coming from the DPs and not from ourselves ... So they take the initiative. Much of the initiative comes from them.

Indeed, during data collection the researcher observed this initial reluctance from officials (who, incidentally, were all men) in prioritising girl-child education in a workshop where education policies were being prioritised (FN,7 2003). Although some MoE officials recognised that girl-child education was important, they felt it did not warrant preferential attention because they believed its treatment as a priority could be equally realised in the general policy of universal access or access of the disadvantaged to education. Anyhow, donor insistence and the fear of financial loss that could result from not prioritising this girl-child policy, since donors threatened to withdraw funds, equally pressurised these MoE officials into isolating this policy goal as a priority. This suggests that the context of Ghana’s ESP influence was rife with global agendas, with donors typified as their agents.

So far this section has shown that global/international agendas significantly influenced the process of the ESP text production. However, the ESP was also influenced ‘by consultations with a wide variety of education practitioners and members of the public’, while several pre-existing documents (labelled as sector, national and regional but also influenced by the global agendas) shaped the ESP too (HD 25 – ESP I 2003: 7) (see Table 2).

The data suggest that not only did global/international influences and trends characterise the context of ESP influence, but they also determined to a certain extent the national influences, particularly at the macro policy level. Most of the existing documents of the MoE, which shaped the ESP, had already been influenced by the global policies. Consequently, as noted earlier, although the ESP represented the plan for the entire levels of the education sector, it was skewed towards primary/basic education because that was where the interests (MDGs/EFAs) of the major donors lay.

The EFA document was classified originally as a regional proposal in the ESP 2003–2015 document despite its global/international character, and seemed the only international document on the table. Nonetheless, its influence on the ESP and other documents outlined was significant (HD 64; 65; 66; 79). For example, a meeting of the MoE and donors on 26 September 2002 emphasised that the ESP would ‘use the EFA indicators as a basis for defining the national indicators and targets’ (HD 79: 3). Moreover, the GPRS and the MTEF, which largely influenced the ESP, could be regarded as global/international documents framed as national because they formed components of the macro policy framework prescribed for Ghana by the World Bank and supported by other international donors (multilateral and bilateral).
Ghana’s demonstration that its education goals were in line with the MDGs and EFA goals enabled them to qualify for the donor-endorsed Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) for basic education, which supposedly was to address some of its basic education sector financial gaps. These global policy goals appeared to assume a central position in the MoE–donor interactions. For instance, the MoE–donor interactions had to operate within a framework underscored by the MDGs and EFA goals in the World Bank’s and International Monetary Fund’s PRSPs or the GPRS, which implied that before any meaningful financial discussion and transfer of funds could occur between the MoE and donors, the former should show that they had embraced these terms of reference to the satisfaction of the latter (HD 64; 65; 66; 101; ED 11; 12). They even determined the reason why some donors may work together. A donor official (2004) acknowledged:

DFID is working more closely with the World Bank, because we are both committed to achieving the millennium development goals [MDGs].

Through these global policy frameworks the consent of the MoE/GoG, whether voluntary or involuntary, tended to be secured (HD 49). The New Partnerships for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), a socio-economic development strategy of the African Union (AU), albeit its African advocates, is also influenced by external agendas (HD 40). The education sector papers like the ESR were also influenced by the EFA and MDGs:

The recommendations of the ESR for example were so clear that . . . we had to look at the international targets set for us. We could not do things outside these conventions that we signed up to. (MoE-GES official, 2004)
However, they simultaneously highlighted some of the other Ghanaian policy priorities (e.g., secondary, technical/vocational and tertiary education) that were not prioritised in the global policies and often not approved by most donors (HD 57; 94).

Despite the assertion in some of the interviews suggesting that the MoE was leading or meant to lead the text production process, the argument continued to be made that MoE–donor interactions were certainly more donor-led than MoE/GoG-led. In a response to the question of whether the MoE/GoG was leading the ESP text production process in reality, an MoE official (2003) stressed that in his experience at the time, ‘[t]hat has not happened yet’. Donors, with the consent of the MoE, hired consultants to lead ESP text production processes (HD 64 Annexes 4 and 9; 65; 66). For example, a donor-hired international consultant with the technical expertise had to spearhead the ESP process. Another interviewee also observed that although the MoE Working Group (of selected directors of the MoE) established by the then Chief Director of the MoE was involved in developing the ESP, ‘... two Ghanaian consultants and one international consultant ... as leader of the group [were hired]’ (Technical advisor, 2005). An MoE official (2004) also observed that ‘The whole process was driven by the consultants engaged’. With the consultants leading the process, the working group:

... produced draft versions of the ESP which were finalized at a Ministry Workshop in 2003 – attended by the then Minister. The ESP was finally finalized at a more-embracing workshop held with donors (DPs – development partners) at Akosombo in 2003. (Technical advisor, 2005)

Apart from the donor-hired consultants leading the process, the manner in which the MoE/GoG consent for incorporating the international/donor agenda into the national ESP process was secured was illustrated, hence the assertion made earlier that the MoE had to aim at the international targets set for Ghana by donors, which prevented the MoE from operating outside of this global framework. The signing up to global policy agendas by the MoE/GoG was a way by which their consent was secured (HD 49).

Nevertheless, this particular ESP process was seen as an improved version of what had taken place in the past when the influence of the MoE–donor interactions even caused conflicts between the MoE and its agencies, particularly between the MoE and its policy implementing agency, Ghana Education Service (GES), during policy processes. According to an MoE official, donors like DFID tended to deal more directly with the GES and this created disunity between the MoE and the former, because it:

... wasn’t very clear who was making the policy and who was implementing but now I think the position is becoming clearer and clearer with the formulation of the strategic plan and programmes ... the Ministry officials are becoming more and more involved. (MoE-GES official, 2003)
The policy formulating MoE officials from a unit like the Policy, Budgeting, Monitoring and Evaluation (PBME) Unit are said to now be engaging more productively with donors such as DFID. This explained why, for example, a donor official from DFID was advocating that donors create and nurture the culture of stepping back, and reject the hands-on approach at the implementation level of education policies, which normally occurred when they worked directly with the GES. This, according to him, would redress the inequality in MoE–donor interactions. Yet donors continued to exercise more power in their interactions with the MoE and still tended to influence policy processes tremendously. This is due to the donor-initiated global policy framework within which the MoE was obliged to interact with donors if they were to qualify for donor financial assistance. This global policy framework coupled with other factors explored elsewhere represents the reason why the ESP shaping process was more donor-led than MoE-led (Amoako 2009; Takyi-Amoako 2010).

To sum up this section, the ESP largely emphasised the international agenda, which was Universal Primary Education (UPE), more than other MoE/GoG priorities and peculiarities such as secondary, technical/vocational and tertiary education (HD 57; 94; ED 32). For this reason, the ESP declared that, ‘in view of the GPRS and EFA initiative, the basic education sector, particularly primary schooling is a priority of the Ministry of Education’ (HD 25 – ESP I 2003: 44). This point did not, however, imply that UPE was irrelevant to Ghana, but it meant that the implementation of the ESP, an entire sector plan, was skewed towards primary education. This focus not only excluded at the time the urgent concern for the other sub-sectors of education, but also excluded junior secondary education, which formed part of the basic education sub-sector in Ghana, despite the promise to gradually incorporate it. In the process the international/global voices were magnified, and those of the national marginalised, despite some concessions. As a consequence, the interests of particular groups were served while others appeared to be excluded. Nevertheless, in contestation with donor-driven global policy agendas were the national priorities during the ESP process. This is discussed next.

2.1. National priorities in contest with donor agendas

Until now this article has demonstrated why the ESP formulation process was triggered and how it was dominated by donor-initiated global policy agendas. This section will show how the MoE/GoG national policy priorities were in contest with those of the narrow global policy interests of the donors.

The analysis of the data shows that officials from the MoE had doubts about donor priorities in a number of areas where national priorities were in contest with those of donor agencies. For example, secondary, techni-
cal/vocational and tertiary education clamoured for attention when the focus was on UPE through the publication of the ESR, the report of the President’s Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana and later the GoG white paper on education (HD 57; 64; 66; 70; FN 2004; ED 32). This section maintains that national (Ghanaian) priorities were in contest with the international donor priorities during the ESP production and influencing processes. These national priorities, though repudiated, struggled for recognition. The study also discovered that there had equally been instances of disapproval or lack of support from donors for some MoE/GoG priorities.

The domain of the ESP text production symbolised a space for warring and haggling. Although the internationally oriented priorities, the non-negotiables, seemed to hold more currency for the major donors involved in the MoE–donor interactions and, for that matter, to an extent, the recipients (MoE/GoG) who otherwise might find it difficult to access donor funds, there were other national/local priorities that were emphasised in the struggle to influence Ghana’s ESP production process during the MoE–donor interactions. The emphasis in the MoE/GoG white paper on education on the development of model secondary schools and increase in funding to tertiary education represented typical examples of MoE/GoG priorities, in which some major donors did not express an interest (FN 2004; HD 103; 23; 68; 69). The call from the MoE/GoG through the white paper to focus not on primary education alone but also on secondary and tertiary education not long after the donor-driven ESP was developed further showed how competing voices operated. This also illustrated attempts at mediating global/international and national-level influences in the policy process. Thus, while the donor-backed ESP, which was about the entire education sector but was biased towards primary education in implementation, was being implemented, the MoE/GoG was also stressing post-basic education in its white paper, to the consternation of some major donors. For instance, during the ESAR session, a reminder of the need to focus more on enrolment at the primary level than on expanding the tertiary or post-basic level by some donors generated a prompt response from some MoE officials (FN 2004; HD 103; 23; 68; 69). The latter stressed the importance of not developing education in a linear fashion and issued statements that emphasised the need to develop not only the primary but also the secondary and tertiary levels (HD 94; 103; FN 2004). This supported the argument made earlier that there had been instances when some MoE priorities failed to win the approval and support of some major donors. The influences of global policies and trends were being brought to bear on the ESP process, yet other national priorities were also being voiced. However, the data showed that, often, the MoE did not have the opportunity to negotiate effectively and put forward their priority because of donor conditions:
Donor influence on the ESP text production might have been achieved through factors (triggers, targets, conditionalities, undertakings, benchmarking) that engendered MoE conformity in these interactions, but the contexts of ESP influence and production together remained an arena of struggles (HD 64; 65; 66; 101; ED 11; 12). The effect of the MoE–donor interactions on policy was regarded by some interviewees as a two-edged sword. It was either positive or negative, as interviewees asserted. One interviewee metaphorically likened it to a war zone and a marketplace—a place of struggle and haggle. The data suggest that policy development is a contested area. The MoE–donor interactions created a nexus, which constituted a contested terrain within which the policy processes had been situated.

During these policy contestations donor priorities often triumphed over those of the MoE due to the global policy framework or the non-negotiables that infiltrate the national policy space. The prevailing economic conditions of Ghana seemed unfavourable within these contexts of ESP influence and production, which housed these struggles (HD 31; 47; 57; 64, etc.). According to one interviewee, the strength of a national economy determined how dependent national agents and institutions were on donors. He believed that ‘the MoE’s dependency on donors will be there for a long time, as long as our economy can’t support’ (MoE official, 2003). At the time of the ESP formulation the MoE/GoG appeared to be significantly dependent on donor funds. It was declared by a number of donor officials that donors possessed more influence than the MoE/GoG because the greater chunk of education funding for service delivery was provided by the former. As noted earlier, in order for the MoE/GoG to secure funding from donors, these global policy agendas had to be embraced in the policy process. Nonetheless, for the GoG to remain in power, the priorities of the electorate (funding secondary, technical/vocational and tertiary education), which could be regarded as national interests, had to be considered too. Most often the ability to balance these competing interests proved difficult for the MoE/GoG. However, the willingness of donors such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Spanish government, the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA) and the World Bank to help fund secondary, technical/vocational and tertiary education perhaps made it easier for the MoE/GoG to attempt the balancing act. Thus, the MoE/GoG was only able to realise its own additional priorities if donors were ready to support them.

Nevertheless, efforts by the MoE/GoG to generate alternative sources of funding were also enabling Ghana to realise their national policy priorities that were not compatible with the global ones. For instance, many interviewees reiterated the usefulness of GoG’s GETFund in this regard (Ghana...
Education Trust Fund (GETFUND) is a GoG fund that received 20 per cent of all VAT receipts. The fund is for bridging financing gaps in both pre-tertiary and tertiary education. Yet complaints from some donors to increase the allocation of GETFund resources to basic education led, for instance, to an increase from 6.8% to 22% in 2003 and a reduction in the proportion to tertiary education (revised from 56.2% to 45%) (HD 68; 69).

Furthermore, the policy struggles did not occur only in relation to determining policy priorities but also in relation to the process by which they were prioritised within this contested terrain. Some interviewees believed that the MDGs imposed too many priorities simultaneously in the ESP. While achieving the MDGs was considered to be important by the MoE, there was also the view that there needed to be a reprioritisation, whose main focus would ensure easy and universal access to quality education, teachers with requisite skills and support for the poor in their efforts to access education. In this reprioritisation process, health-related issues, although definitely important, should not be made the responsibility of the classroom teacher because it led to curriculum overload which inadvertently adversely affected the quality of education pupils obtained. Although the importance of pupils’ good health was acknowledged, the wisdom that led to making HIV/AIDS and health education primarily part of the classroom teacher’s portfolio was questioned. One interviewee asserted that, “[s]ome of the insistence on these things [by donors] is too much’. This is because it could lead to inefficiencies and lack of accountability. Another gave examples of many NGOs being offered money to undertake gender initiatives and HIV-AIDS projects, and how this led to scandals in which a number of NGOs sprung up and accessed the funds and then, disappeared with no accountability. (MoE-GES official, 2004).

Within this contested terrain of policy, it was believed by some MoE/GoG officials that productive collaboration between the MoE and other GoG ministries and departments could enable the MoE to interact more effectively with the donors. This would enable the formulation of policies that would tackle the supposed curriculum overload experienced by teachers.

The above examples largely suggest that within the contexts of the ESP influence and production, the MoE–donor interactions showed signs of struggle, fight and force. These foregrounded the view that these domains represented a contested space on an unlevel playing field. Another official referred to this as, ‘If you present a weaker bargaining pattern your partner will tend to bully you’ (MoE-GES official, 2004).

It could be argued that the ESP includes sections on other levels of education such as secondary as well as technical/vocational, which perhaps suggests the MoE’s attempt to control some of the education development agenda by holding on to some of its interests. However, these levels could largely be referred to as the notion of policy as ritual, which means that despite their inclusion in the ESP they were of little interest to the major

donors in education. This implies that they may appear in the policy text, but are elements of the policy that are resource-poor, meaning they have been allocated very little or no resources (Little 2008).

In concluding this section, the data suggest that on the cusp of the global and national, where donors and the MoE met to shape the ESP, donor-initiated global policy priorities triumphed more than the national priorities of the MoE, despite the contestations. Bilateral donors such as DFID and USAID appeared to occupy a significant position within the context of influence in Ghana’s ESP formulation process, and multilaterals such as the World Bank and UNICEF were equally prominently positioned in this policy cycle (HD 10; 49; 52; 54; 94; 98; 103; 108). They had secured this position not only by virtue of their financial clout but also by being the formulators, implementers and agents of global/international trends and policies in national education policy processes of Ghana. According to the data, the goals of Ghana’s ESP were formulated based on the MDGs and EFA goals as exemplified in the previous sections. Occasionally, if the policy priorities of the MoE were realised, it was because of donor support. However, there had been efforts by the MoE/GoG to secure alternative sources of finance to fund their unique priorities.

Despite the MoE/GoG’s attempts to influence the ESP and occasional assertion of its national priorities, the ESP process was largely driven by the donors. The donor group seemed more powerful than others in the process due to the non-negotiables that dominated the national policy space of the MoE.

3. Concluding remarks

The above findings suggest that the shaping of the ESP revealed national contexts of policy influence and production which integrated the global (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992; Ball 1994; Lingard and Ozga 2007). In other words, the process was located on the cusp of the global and national (Lingard 1996; Taylor et al. 1997; Vidovich 2001). This means it transcended a state-controlled perspective and reached into the international/global sphere, which in turn seemed to embed elements of the global in the national (Ball 1994; Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992; Ozga 1990; Apple 1989; Dale 1989). The global dimension of the ESP process was ensured and demonstrated by virtue of donor-initiated global policy frameworks. For example, as discussed, donors occupying the driving seat ensured that the MoE prioritised policy areas that were emphasised in global policy documents of PRSPs, EFA goals and MDGs, such as girl-child education and UPE. Donor agencies such as UNICEF, DFID and USAID, for instance, would only agree to provide funding if an educational programme was MDG-related. Findings further suggest that DFID and the World Bank were working closely together because both were committed to achieving the MDGs. Another
example was the World Bank and USAID focusing their funding on HIV/AIDS and health education. In the words of Dale (1999), ‘the locus of viability’, the body which determined the feasibility of the ESP, was not national but international. Thus, global/transnational policies such as the EFA, MDGs and PRSPs were recalibrated to produce the ESP. The global policy frameworks that guided the ESP shaping process, in other words the treasury of the non-negotiables within which the MoE was obliged to interact with donors, consolidated the global and consequently the dominance of the donors. These are frameworks also defined by other studies as an ‘international requirement’ (King 2007, 359) or as ‘requirements in the softer sense of “urgings” or pressures linked with promises of funding’ (Little 2008, 50). These urgings or pressures were exemplified in the promptings, conditionalities or undertakings that the MoE received from donors to shape the ESP, a mechanism for the delivery of educational aid. They represented global requirements and also reflected the form of power that donors exercised over the MoE. Through their identity as agents of globalisation processes, enacted through financial and technical assistance, pressure on and policy dialogue with the MoE, donors appeared to have led the designing of the ESP and guaranteed its globalised character. Hence, it could be stated that education policy frameworks prescribed to aid dependent countries like Ghana mirrored significantly the ‘globalisation agenda’ driven by donors (Jones and Coleman 2005, 38).

Therefore, this article challenges the assertion in Cornell’s (2007, 111) OECD study that ‘global programmes’ funding priorities correspond well with objectives set out in Ghana’s national plans and strategies’. On a superficial level this assertion might seem valid since the ESP emphasised UPE. UPE was a principal objective of Ghana’s EFA/FTI, a global programme that became active in 2004 and yielded its first tranche of $8 million in 2005 from the Catalytic Fund of donors (Cornell 2007). However, when one considers the finding that the ESP was more donor-led and biased towards the donor priority of UPE at the expense of the other levels of education, hence the emphasis on secondary and tertiary education by the MoE/GoG in the white paper published immediately after the ESP, then Cornell’s findings appear disputable. For example, the above analysis illustrated donors’ control of agenda setting and authority over the political agenda (Lukes 2005; Amoako 2009). It shows how both forms of power led donors to set the policy agenda and minimise certain national priorities such as secondary and tertiary education, a neglect that was met with indignation from a section of the MoE officials. A situation such as this is sometimes referred to as policy for and by a country (King 2007).

Thus, contrary to other perspectives (Cornell 2007), the present findings suggest that funds generated by the EFA/FTI, a global programme, may have led to a distortion of Ghana’s education priorities. Perhaps this was also because the notion of the ESP as policy as discourse, the way in which
language is employed to limit and shape perspectives, was at play (Ball 1994; Walford 2000). For instance, tertiary education as a policy priority was organised out of the ESP by some donors through their restricted funding focus on UPE (Lukes 2005). For example, during an education sector review in 2004 this represented a source of contestation (discussed earlier) when tertiary education was articulated as a policy priority and demanded to be regarded in the ESP as one of the educational priorities. Also, the relationship between the ESP and a global programme like the EFA/FTI might not exhibit any obvious conflict, yet their compatibility might not necessarily be a consensus between the MoE and donors. This situation echoes the play of power as three-dimensional or symbolic violence, which is a potent form of power that is less observable or hidden and prevents grievances by structuring thoughts and values through representation of issues (Bourdieu 1991; Lukes 2005). The distortion of the MoE priorities was put succinctly by a donor official (2003): ‘I think systems are being distorted by donors like ourselves, because we carry a lot more influence than the government... I think... mostly what we say carries much greater weight and we can influence policies, strategies’.

Although it is worth stating that the donor officials interviewed were themselves operating in a development assistance space where they had little power to renegotiate or set new agendas at the recipient country level, still significantly evident was the palpably unequal power that existed between them and the MoE officials in the formulation of the ESP. This power inequality seemed to be undermining the designated aid effectiveness goals and partnership principles. However, the question of how feasible it is for there to be a balance of power between donors and recipients, when it is clear that the latter continue to depend financially on the former, remains to be addressed. Indeed, the above findings indicating how global policies designed by donors interact with those of the national have significant implications for the aid effectiveness principles of ownership and partnership.

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Notes
1. The MoE was once called the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, hence the MEYS.
2. In employing snowballing, most of the respondents helped in identifying other relevant respondents, especially when it was difficult to identify relevant key people (Robson 1993). In the case of theoretical sampling, sampling was done on the basis of ideas that had established theoretical significance to the developing theory of MoE–donor interactions and their shaping of the ESP (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 177).
3. However, I must introduce a caveat that, despite the important position participant observation occupies in the study as a great facilitator of all processes in the field, the data generated through observation recorded in field notes were not as extensive as the interview and documentary data sets. This came about because while participation enabled me to sample relevant MoE–donor interactions and events, access was gained to only a few where minimal direct observation could occur. Nevertheless, the observations recorded in field notes consolidated the meaning of the interviews and documentary evidence. They also helped me in the characterisation of contexts of MoE-donor interactions and the nature of the interactions.

4. HD: Hard Document (an Appendix of the list of hard and electronic documents is available on request).

5. It has been argued that subsequent ESPs in Ghana appear to have less donor influence in terms of priorities and funding support.


7. FN: Field Notes.

References


