

## Curriculum Theories and Their Politics in Ghana's Pre-tertiary Education System

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**Abstract:** Ghana's educational reforms are mostly influenced or initiated by politicians. The concept of politics is a means to an end and not an end in itself. This is experienced as a result of the cascading effect of the power of the macro level of curriculum theory to its micro level. These results are a direct reflection of Ghana's political and governmental structure. In most cases, a program's curriculum becomes less adaptable the more it is portrayed as an official document outlining the results and demands that must be accomplished. The under-listed topics, however, form part of the politics of curriculum theory in Ghana's pre-tertiary educational system. A typical example is the duration of senior high school education. This paper provided enough evidence to espouse the role of politics in curriculum theory with a focus on the narrow and broad conception of politics. Similarly, it brings to bear the consequences of political power if left and checked coupled with some recommendations. The study uses a conceptual methodology aimed at developing and applying the politics of curriculum theory to the pre-tertiary education system in Ghana.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Politics, Theory, Curriculum Theory, Pre-tertiary Education

### INTRODUCTION

In recent times, curriculum and educational-related issues have attracted enormous attention and debates in both developing and developed countries the world over (Levin, 2007). This paper examines the politics in curriculum theory with a focus on Ghana. It is crucial to recognize that education is primarily a political endeavor (Apple, 2003). As a result, the sort of education and curriculum for learners in any given country/state is greatly influenced by the political philosophies the country/nation subscribed to. By advancing views that affect societal power structures, education also serves political objectives (Apple, 2003). It is crucial because political forces, the most powerful of which are associated with the government and are in charge of allocating the funding necessary to maintain a curriculum. Hence, when crafting curricula, it is imperative to incorporate political perspectives. Moreover, a stakeholder of the curriculum is likely to hold political and ideological opinions that will influence his/her decisions in respect of curriculum issues (Button, 2021).

The development of school curricula was based on class distinctions from the beginning, with a clear distinction between the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills taught in publicly funded elementary schools for the manual working class and more extensive mock-classical schooling in independent schools for those who could afford the fees (Wrigley, 2014). Also, it is educative for us to acknowledge that man and politics are inseparable (Aristotle, 1885) and as a result, all activities in connection to man are influenced greatly by politics. In light of this backdrop, this paper seeks to espouse the influence of politics in curriculum theories. It is, however, worth noting that the topic will be contextualized to the Ghanaian setting. The study uses a conceptual methodology aimed at developing and applying the politics of curriculum theory to the educational system in Ghana. Conceptual research, as opposed to empirical data-based study,

focuses on abstract concepts or theories to create new concepts or reinterpret those that already exist. To establish a theory on how politics affect curriculum theory in Ghana's pre-tertiary education system and the whims of political power if left unchecked, the concept of curriculum, curriculum theory, and politics are addressed in this study.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework for the paper is anchored on [Levin's \(2007\)](#) work on curriculum policy and the politics of what should be taught in schools; [Young et al. \(2007\)](#) publication titled "Understanding Canadian Schools"; and [Joseph's \(2015\)](#) "What Educators need to do to Survive", to examine the phenomenon under review. Similarly, a strong theoretical framework for the study of curriculum politics is also provided by [Lasswell's \(1958\)](#) analysis of politics. Moreover, examples and analogies from the setting are used to gain a better understanding of the topic under review.

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### The Concept Curriculum

The concept curriculum does not have a unitary definition. Thus, it is conceived differently by scholars and philosophers. An individual's conception of the curriculum is influenced greatly by his/her worldview. However, the world views underpinning the conception of the curriculum are categorized under three broad headings. Thus, the prescriptive conception, the descriptive conception and 'both' ([Glatthorn et al., 2019](#)).

The prescriptive conception of curriculum place emphasis on what ought to be done and in most cases conceived the curriculum as a plan. The descriptive curriculum on the other hand acknowledges what does take place in the educational setting. Moreover, a confluence of the two conceptions gives rise to an expatiated and comprehensive conception of the curriculum which is tagged as 'both' in the previous chapter.

- a. Prescriptive conception  
Curriculum can simply be explained to mean the *planned* interaction of pupils with instructional content, materials, resources, and processes for evaluating the attainment of educational objectives ([Indiana Department of Education, 2010](#)).
- b. Descriptive conception  
[Alonsabe \(2009\)](#) conceived curriculum as all the experiences made available to learners in a program of study.
- c. Both conceptions  
According to [Glatthorn et al. \(2019\)](#), "the curriculum is a set of plans made for guiding learning in the schools, usually represented in retrievable documents of several levels of generality, and the actualization of those plans in the classroom, as experienced by the learners and as recorded by an observer; those experiences take place in a learning environment that also influences what is learned" (p. 28).

The development of a curriculum is not as easy as it appears. A strong curriculum confronts the contradiction between consistency and change because it is a technical document that details educational material ([Coker, 2018](#)). In most cases, a program's curriculum becomes less adaptable the more it is portrayed as an official document outlining the results and demands that must be accomplished. This implies that a curriculum is an outcome of deliberate political fiddling. The decisions that go into choosing a program's structure, methods, and content are not made indifferently. These educational components are typically formed by the ideologies, power imbalances, mentalities, beliefs, and traditions of program administrators and designers ([Coker, 2018](#)). It is quite intriguing to note that, the rendition of the curriculum as espoused above is with recourse to the political orientation of the scholars. The subsequent sections of this paper will make obvious the manifestation of politics in curriculum theory and how it influences our world views of curriculum theory. However, it is worth noting that the curriculum in respect of this paper encapsulates all the processes in curriculum development and implementation. As a result, the

authors conceived a curriculum as all the activities concerning education be it in the school setting or outside.

### The Concept Theory

Etymologically, the term theory is asserted to be derived from the Greek word “theoria” explained literally to mean “wakefulness of mind” (Syomwene, 2020). It is important to note that the concept theory does not have a unitary definition. Scholars perceived it differently in respect of their worldviews. That notwithstanding, it is worth noting that the majority of the scholarly rendition of the concept seemed to perceive it as a description of a phenomenon and how its variables interact to explain or predict it (Thomas, 2017). On the contrary, scholars' opinions on what constitutes a theory, its function, and what distinguishes a good theory differ.

Gelso (2006) conceived theory as a combination of various concepts, including testability, integration, parsimony, clarity, comprehensiveness, and delimitation as well as the ability to describe and explain phenomena. Similarly, Gabriel (2008) conceived theory as a broad assertion of abstractions or concepts that claims explains, or anticipates correlations or connections between or among facts, within the bounds of crucial limiting assumptions that the theory explicitly declares. Moreover, Kerlinger & Lee (2000) provided a well-elucidated conception of theory, thus:

*A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, to explain and predict the phenomena.*

*This definition says three things: (1) a theory is a set of propositions consisting of defined and interrelated constructs, (2) a theory sets out the interrelations among a set of variables (constructs), and in so doing, presents a systematic view of the phenomena described by the variables, and (3) a theory explains phenomena; it does so by specifying which variables are related to which variables and how they are related, thus enabling the researcher to predict from certain variables to certain other variables.*

In cognizance, a theory can simply be explained to mean that which informs practice or gives meaning to action.

### The Concept Curriculum Theory

An attempt to provide a definition or explanation for the concept of curriculum theory proves onerous just like its composite parts (curriculum and theory). As a result, scholars and philosophers rendered it differently. Some conceived it to be cognate of the curriculum ideology, curriculum orientation or curriculum beliefs (Coskun Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). It is however worth noting here that the renditions provided by these scholars are informed greatly by their political perspectives or their worldviews. As a result, each scholar attempts to convince colleagues to concur with their conceptions. These pressures bring to bear the connection between politics and curriculum theory with respect to the definition of the concept theory.

In context, curriculum theory is conceived as a unique area of study with a distinct past, a challenging present, and an ambiguous future. Influences from several humanities and arts fields, as well as, to a lesser extent, the social sciences, are discernible in this special field (Pinar, 2004). Simply put, curriculum theory is the multidisciplinary study of the educational process with an emphasis on the historical, autobiographical, political, sexes, religious, post-modern, racial, and international components of the curriculum (Kridel, 2010). However, it is worth noting that not all multidisciplinary study of the education process is curriculum theory nor is every curriculum theory interdisciplinary (Pinar, 2004). Similarly, Coskun Yaşar & Aslan (2021) conceived curriculum theory as a systematic set of ideas that provide a conceptual understanding of curriculum-related phenomena or questions. Examples of these include; what is the curriculum? Who is it for? What should be taught? How should it be taught? Who should make curriculum decisions? An attempt to provide relevant solutions to these important questions calls for a theory (Null, 2016). Acknowledging the importance of curriculum theory Klein (1992) posited that the curriculum development process is deficient without curriculum theory.

## The Concept Politics

Politics is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Thus, it provides the means through which significant social policy decisions are made (Joseph, 2015). Similarly, Young et al. (2007) explained politics to mean that which provides a blueprint to society in the sharing of power, wealth, opportunities, status, privileges and other social resources. An individual's understanding of politics can be viewed from two perspectives. From a narrow or restrictive perspective, thus the conception of politics as governance or the activities of political parties. On the contrary, politics may be conceived from a broader perspective. Thus, conceiving politics as who gets what (Lasswell, 1958) or a conscious system of arrangements that promotes hegemony (Tinder, 2003). In cognizance and for this write-up, politics is explained to mean an attempt to or process of influencing the decisions and thoughts of others to work toward a common goal, entrust power to an individual/group or subscribe to a worldview or policy. Moreover, it is worth noting that the paper addresses all the varied conceptions of politics as espoused in this chapter and their influence on the curriculum theory of Ghana's pre-tertiary education.

## The Concept Of Pre-Tertiary Education

In simple terms, pre-tertiary education is explained to mean a kind of education learners are espoused to before or before tertiary education. Pre-tertiary education is a system of education that is designed to prepare and equip Ghanaian students with the requisite knowledge and experiences for their successful transition into tertiary (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015) educational institutions or for early entry into the world of work (Ministry of Education, 2018). Ghana's pre-tertiary education has been influenced by several political reforms and policies. In recent times, the structure of the system has been reviewed and as a result, senior high school has been acknowledged as a component of Ghanaian basic schools. Hence, the structure of the system has been partitioned into five key phases:

- a. Key Phase 1 [Foundation level comprising Kindergarten 1 & 2],
- b. Key Phase 2 [Lower primary level made up of B1 to B3],
- c. Key Phase 3 [Upper primary level of B4 to B6],
- d. Key Phase 4 [Junior high school level of B7 to B9], and
- e. Key Phase 5 [Senior high school level comprising SHS1- SHS3].

Source (Ministry of Education, 2018, p.5)

Figure 1 below is the diagrammatical illustration of the age range of the respective phases espoused above.

## Conceptualizing The Role of Politics in Curriculum Theory

The concept of curriculum theory or curriculum is well comprehended when viewed concerning contexts such as economic, social, academic and political. Any rendition of the curriculum without recourse to context is an absurdity (Cornbleth, 2013). Before the 1970s scholars in the field of curriculum studies, misconceived curriculum to be an apolitical entity. However, no scholar in recent times would make such a mistake. The influence of politics on education, curriculum and other related disciplines is commonplace for both curricularists and lay citizens (Pinnar et al., 1995). Deliberations over the type of curriculum, the content to include or exclude, the conflict between pedagogy and content, the friction between lay and expert opinion when making curriculum decisions, contention among educational institutions, and the demands of the students, government and employers regarding the need for graduates who are ready for the workforce to meet national and industry needs are all current topics in curriculum politics (Joseph, 2015). The under-listed topics, however, form part of the politics of curriculum theory in Ghana's pre-tertiary educational system.

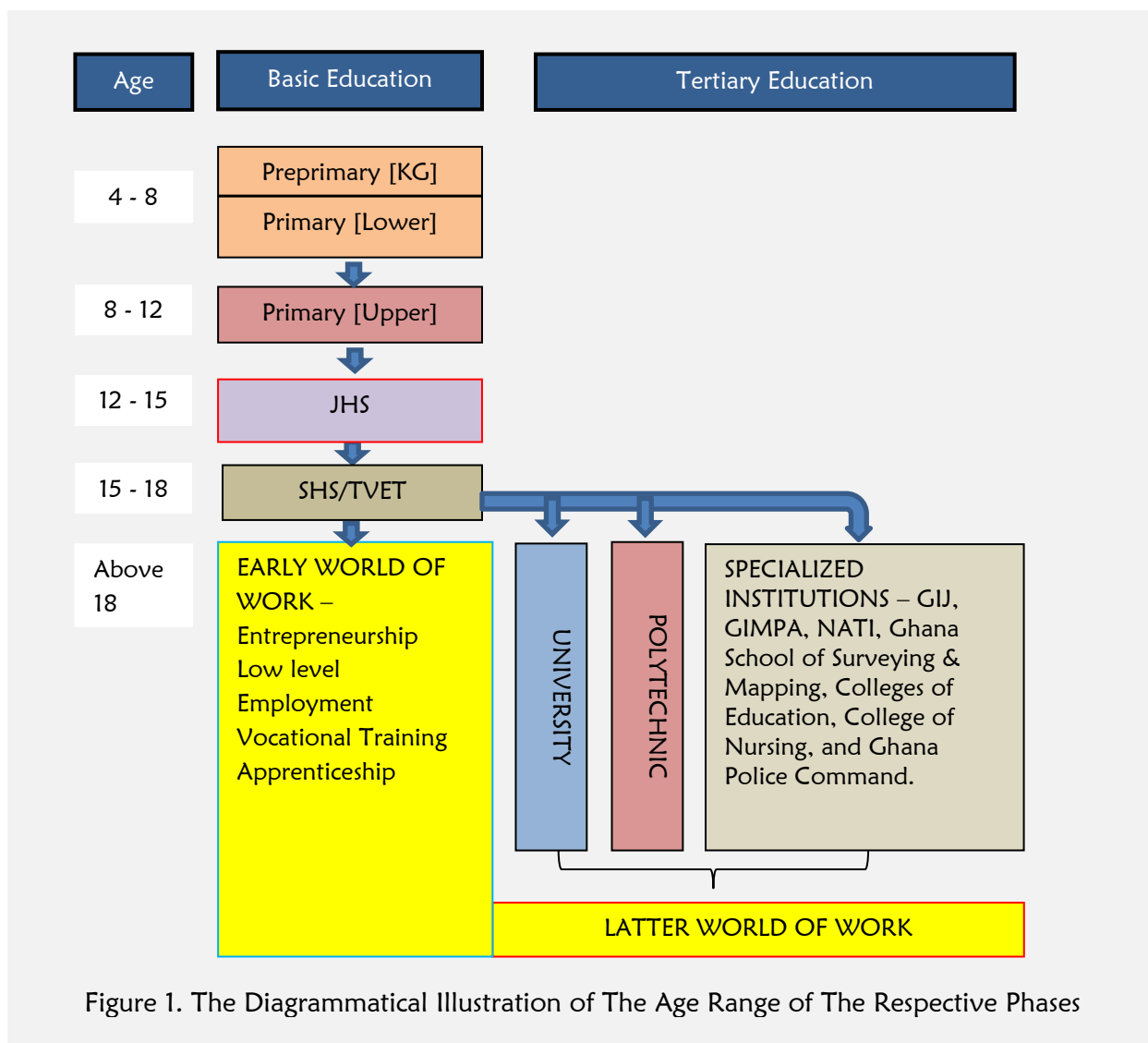


Figure 1. The Diagrammatical Illustration of The Age Range of The Respective Phases

*Conceptualizing Politics in Curriculum Theory from A Narrow Perspective*

From the narrow conception of politics, it is obvious that the success of any educational policy or system relies greatly on support and funding from political entities. As a result, politicians, the world over normally and mostly dedicate some portion of their manifestos to educational policies and programs they would execute when given the node. It is worth noting that Ghana’s political reforms are mostly influenced or initiated by politicians. A typical example is the duration of senior high school education. The duration of senior high school education was 4 years under the rule of Ignatius Kutu Acheampong (NRC). This duration was revised to 3-years under the rule of Jerry John Rawlings (PNDC). Subsequently, the 3-year duration was reviewed to 4 years under the rule of John Agyekum Kufuor (NPP). That notwithstanding, the 4-year duration was again revised to three years under the rule of John Evans Atta Mills (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016).

It is quite educative to note that the review of the senior high school duration as espoused in the above chapter and that of several other educational policies in Ghana does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, they are always influenced greatly by the theories the politician/reviewer subscribed to or their philosophical worldviews. Currently, the national curriculum for Ghanaian basic education is being innovated/changed as a result of the philosophies the current political administration subscribed to (Ministry of Education, 2018). The current administration emphasized the process of acquiring knowledge to that as the product of education. This philosophical orientation informs the transition from an

objective-based curriculum to a standards-based curriculum for Ghanaian pre-tertiary institutions. Aside from this innovation, the pre-tertiary education system experienced several educational reforms and policies which were informed by political ideologies (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Notably amongst them include Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's on 1951 Accelerated Development Plan of Education (ADPE) which placed emphasis on technical and vocational education and aimed at reshaping Ghana's educational system and the production of required manpower for Ghanaian industries and employment agencies (Boakye, 2019). The structure of pre-tertiary education under the Nkrumah regime was 6, 4 and 7. Thus 6 years for primary education, 4 years for middle school education and 7 years for secondary education. Thus, 5 years of preparation for the Ordinary Level Certificate and two years for the Advance Level Certificate. There was some flexibility in the structure of pre-tertiary education under the Nkrumah regime. Students were provided a choice of proceeding with secondary education or some form of technical education (Owusu et al., 2016). The political ideology of Nkrumah was the use of education as a tool to liberate Ghanaian citizens, bridge the chasm between the southern and northern territories of Ghana and as a tool to enhance peaceful coexistence among Ghanaians. A shred of obvious evidence in support of Nkrumah's political ideology was the absorption of school fees and feeding fees for northern secondary school students.

Similarly, the Supreme Military Council under the leadership of Ignatius Kutu Acheampong also expressed political interest in Ghana's educational system. They criticize the structure and nature of education as bequeathed by the previous administration. They conceived the 17-year duration of pre-tertiary to be expensive and time-consuming (Boakye, 2019). Moreover, they criticize the content of the curriculum to be more of grammar/theory than application. As a result, they implemented the 1974 educational reform to provide education that will appeal to the needs of Ghanaian citizens (Owusu et al., 2016). Consequently, the duration of pre-tertiary education was reduced to 13 years. Thus 6 years of primary, 3 years of junior secondary education and 4 years of senior secondary education (Boakye, 2019). Contra-wise, the duration for pre-tertiary education was again reviewed under J. J. Rawlings PNDC regime from the proposed 13 years by Acheampong to a 12-year duration. Thus, 6 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary education and 3 years of senior secondary education (Owusu et al., 2016). It is worth noting that the review by the J. J. Rawlings administration was informed by the implementation of the educational reform by Dr. Evans-Anfom. Another important component of this reform was the replacement of common entrance exams with the basic school certificate examination (Owusu et al., 2016). Also, he implemented Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) which was aimed at providing 9 years (Basic Education) free compulsory education to all Ghanaian children of school-going age.

The multi-party system and patron-client politics in Ghana create significantly stronger incentives to increase educational access than to increase educational quality. Poor educational outcomes have been caused by a widespread failure to increase accountability in the education sector, notably with the percentage of highly trained instructors who spend time on tasks. These results are a direct reflection of Ghana's political and governmental structure. As a result, the education sector has a history of politicization and a high degree of policy incoherence. Typically, governance structures are not well matched to the power dynamics that now exist across the educational system's many levels (Ampratwum et al., 2016). Similarly, Owusu et al. (2018) alluded to the fact that the control of Ghana's educational systems by politicians (partisan politics) contributes to educational retrogression in the country. They adduced evidence in support of their claim and reported political parties to be negligent of the educational policies, programmes and/or projects bequeathed to them by a successive administration. Contra-wise, they proposed an educational system

that will be autonomous from political interference in order to spur the development of the sector and Ghana at large.

Concerning the narrow perspective, it is obvious that politics/politicians play a major role in deciding what schools should teach, whom to teach and how to teach (Apple, 2003). Albeit the role of politics in curriculum theory this section of the write-up also made obvious the disadvantages of the excessive power assigned to politicians on the curriculum/education.

#### *Conceptualizing the role of politics in Ghana's curriculum from a broader perspective*

From a broader perspective, politics plays a major role at the micro level of curriculum theory in Ghana. Thus, at the classroom or school level. Headteachers no longer have a strong case to make about politics in the classroom/school (Ferlazzo, 2020). Politics and education are not impartial. A school is governed by administrators and laws. As alluded to in the previous section, it is commonplace that government has a strong say on who should teach, what to teach, whom to teach and where to teach. According to Ferlazzo (2020), politics is conceived as one's worldview and how it is influenced by society. Concurring with this rendition, life itself can be perceived as a political entity. In respect of this assertion, learners themselves are political instruments with varied needs, beliefs and backgrounds. In the Ghanaian classroom setting, they stand the chance of influencing the learning environment to be in consonant with their needs.

In a similar vein, the learning environment itself is political. Thus, a teacher's worldview or political perspective may inform what to teach and how to teach it (Ferlazzo, 2020). In our Ghanaian context, social science teachers that share in the ideology of the opposition majority turn to vilify the image of the ruling party in sensed political topics in the course of their instruction and most cases misinform learners about the state of affairs of the nation. Likewise, teachers that share in the ideology of a ruling government always try to cover up their wrongdoings and in so doing blow their good deeds out of proportion. Quite apart from these, teachers also exercise their political power in the decision of what to teach and how to teach it for understanding in the classroom setting. Also, the political ideologies of the teaching staff influence their choice of leaders in the school setting. The political power exercised by politicians in curriculum theory stands the chance of conflicting with the theories/ideologies teachers subscribe to. In the year 2019, Ghanaian teacher unions and some factions of Ghanaian citizenry teamed up against the inclusion of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education policy in the basic school curricula (Ngnenbe, 2019).

Moreover, politics influence the adoption of textbooks for various disciplines in the educational setting (Ferlazzo, 2020). This is experienced as a result of the cascading effect of the power of the macro level of curriculum theory to its micro level. With the power vested in the macro arm of curriculum theory, they influence what should go into the textbooks for all subjects and the fact that publishing companies/authors want to be in the business they are compelled to concur with whatever suggestion the macro unit proposes.

Additionally, learners in the early grade classrooms and subsequent grades are granted the opportunity to exercise political power when they are asked to decide on what they would like to learn. Consensus to what they should study is arrived at as a result of politics. In such situations, the vociferous in the classroom will influence the decision of colleagues to comply with his/her proposed topic or activity. This situation is one of the many ways in which learners exercise their political might in Ghanaian classrooms. Similarly, the selection of schools and courses at the secondary and tertiary levels are informed greatly by the political crescendos of the students and that of the school.

## CONCLUSION

This paper provided enough evidence to espouse the role of politics in curriculum theory. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the varied conceptions of politics (narrow and broad) and the impact of each on curriculum theory in Ghana. The expositions in this paper seem to align with Paulo Ferrer's ideology of education. Thus, he conceived education as a political instrument used by the ruling class to subvert the progress and development of the ruled. Contra-wise, he argued that education should be an instrument that will liberate the ruled and instill democracy in society (Ferlazzo, 2020). Likewise, the literature reviewed in this paper proclaimed curriculum theory to be a political tool that should be used with recourse to the needs of society in general and not to its segment. In cognizance of this assertion, the writers of this paper proclaimed that if education is a political instrument, then curriculum theory is the manual for its usage.

## RECOMMENDATION

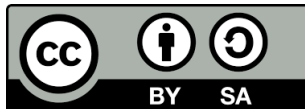
The Ministry of Education and government in general, legislators, and all parties involved in education should urgently take into account the advice of curricularists in programs for curriculum reform. A national document outlining reforms in educational policy must be created, along with the required legislative framework. The constitution must demand that the ruling parties put their interests aside and work for the sake of the country as a whole. Once more, it is advised that governments make sure that developed educational policies that need to be implemented are defined in monetary terms to avoid the typical scenario of insufficient funding that thwarts implementation attempts. Last but not least, the government should designate a budget to support the organization of yearly curriculum colloquia that will bring together key players to discuss issues about the curriculum theory and proffer recommendations to keep the curriculum in line with current trends and the needs of the Ghanaian society.

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