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Perceptions, Attitudes and Institutional Factors that Influence Academic Performance of Visual Arts Students in Ghana's Senior High School Core Curriculum Subjects

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Abstract
Senior High School (SHS) students in Ghana are required to pass all core and elective curricula subjects in the West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) to qualify for higher education. Unfortunately, many Visual Arts students perform poorly or fail in English, Mathematics, Integrated Science and Social Studies, which constitute the SHS core curriculum subjects. To ascertain the factors that account for low performance of Visual Arts students in the WASSCE core subjects, this study employed interview, questionnaire and observation to gather qualitative and quantitative data from 20 core subject and 15 Visual Arts teachers, 5 heads of schools, 5 Heads of Visual Arts department and 50 Visual Arts students in five Senior High Schools (SHSs) in Ashanti Region. The findings revealed that some core subject teachers denigrate Visual Arts students as 'unintelligent', 'not serious' and 'difficult to teach' as compared to their peers in the Science, Business and allied elective SHS programmes; with some refusing responsibility in Visual Arts departments. Perceiving core subjects as 'theoretical' and 'difficult to learn', many Visual Arts students neglect the learning of core subjects and concentrate time and effort on elective Textiles, Ceramics and allied Visual Arts subjects. Invariably, many Visual Arts students make poor WASSCE grades in core subjects and miss participation in higher education. Active monitoring of teaching, attitudinal change and motivation could build the capacity of Visual Arts students to participate fully in the economic development of Ghana.
Keywords: Academic performance; Visual Arts; core curriculum; Senior High School; Ghana.

1. INTRODUCTION

Senior High School (SHS) education in Ghana is available to Junior High School (JHS) graduates who obtain good Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) results. Organised and graded by the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC), BECE results are expressed as aggregate scores of raw marks a candidate obtains in the subjects for which they write examinations, which include English, Mathematics and Integrated Science as core subjects (Dorleku, 2013). As shown in Table 1, a candidate who scores Grade A or Aggregate 1 in a subject shows excellent performance while one who makes Grade F or Aggregate 6, 7 8 or 9 has failed in that particular subject. Consequently, a candidate who scores Grade A in six subjects is credited with Aggregate 6 while a score of Grade E or Aggregate 5 in six subjects earns the candidate Aggregate 30. Table 1 shows details of the WAEC system of assessing BECE results.

Table 1: WAEC grading system

Marks	Grade	Equivalent Aggregate score	Interpretation
80 - 100%	A	1	Excellent
70 - 79%	B	2	Very Good
60 - 69%	C	3	Good
45 - 59%	D	4	Credit
35 - 44%	E	5	Pass
< - 34%	F	6-9	Fail

Source: Ministry of Education, 2007

Based on the WAEC grading system, only high performers who obtain BECE Aggregate 6-12 are eligible for consideration for admission to Senior High Schools and placement in the elective Business, General Arts, Science, Visual Arts and allied programmes of study. Like JHS education which culminates in BECE, achievement in Senior High School is measured by the WASSCE results, which qualifies them for higher education and the world of work (Hayford, 2007; Asihene, 2009; Dorleku, 2013).

Categorization of Senior High Schools

Senior High Schools in Ghana are graded into three categories as first, second and third class, depending on the level of educational resources available to the schools. First class schools are mainly located in urban areas, they are well-endowed and organized; they have more well trained and qualified teachers, better facilities and are recognized nationwide as good schools where students obtain excellent WASSCE grades that qualify them for higher education in Ghana's public universities (The President's Committee on Review of Educational Reforms in Ghana, 2002; Asihene, 2009; Siaw, 2009). Second class schools are relatively less endowed and perform marginally below the standard of first class schools. Although mostly located in peri-urban environments, these schools tend to receive JHS applicants with good BECE grades, with many of them generally performing well in WASSCE. Third class schools are predominantly located in rural communities, are poorly resourced and patronised mainly by applicants resident in those areas (Banson, 2010; Asihene, 2009; Siaw, 2009). Many parents therefore go to lengths to get their children placed in first class schools regardless of distance from their location (Asihene, 2009).

Categorization of Senior High Schools seems to have direct correlation with student performance in BECE, placement in the respective elective programmes of study, and invariably, achievement in WASSCE. This is explained by the BECE grade cut-off points the schools have specified for the respective programmes of study they offer; in this context, Business, General Arts, Science and Visual Arts (Asihene, 2009; Owusu-Afriyie, 2009; Siaw, 2009; Agbenatoe, 2011; Adinyira, 2012). With reference to the data in Table 1, the first class schools accept BECE Aggregate 6-10 for Science, 6-12 for Business, 6-12 for General Arts and 6-15 for Visual Arts whereas second class schools accept BECE Aggregates 8-15 for Science, 8-20 for Business, and 10-25 for Visual Arts and General Arts. In the case of third class schools, BECE Aggregate 8-15 go into Science, 10-20 for Business and General Arts, and 10-30 for Visual Arts (Asihene, 2009; Siaw, 2009).

Whether the low admissions criteria specified for Visual Arts is intended to compensate Junior High Schools which lacked specialist teachers to implement the Visual Arts component of the Basic Design and Technology curriculum (Agyenim-Boateng, 2011) is not clear. This notwithstanding, Evans-Solomon (2004), Asihene (2009) and Adinyira (2012) indicate that many applicants who make excellent BECE grades and make personal decisions to pursue Visual Arts are often diverted into Science which is believed to be 'the programme for brilliant students'. The worst scenario is where applicants whose grades fall below the acceptable grades for their preferred Business or General Arts programmes accept placement in Visual Arts just to be in their preferred school. Non-Visual Arts students who are good athletes could even be transferred from other schools to boost a school's sports team and end up in the Visual Arts department, making Visual Arts look like a programme fit only for low achievers (Evans-Solomon & Opoku-Asare, 2011). Some non-Visual Arts teachers therefore hide behind this façade and denigrate the programme and its students, with some even refusing teaching duties in the Visual Arts department (Asihene, 2009; Evans-Solomon & Opoku-Asare, 2011; Adinyira, 2012).

The repercussions of low performance in BECE for the educational development of Junior High School students make it very necessary for the schools to provide educational and career counselling to equip the students and their parents to make informed decisions in terms of schools and elective programmes of study in Senior High School *vis-à-vis* individual students' academic strengths and continuous assessment records (Quayson, 2006; Asihene, 2009; Agyenim-Boateng, 2011; Adinyira, 2012).

Table 2 shows the BECE grades of students

Elective Programme	**Category of School & BECE Aggregate score**				
	School A	**School B**	**School C**	**School D**	**School E**
Science	6-10	8-15	8-15	8-15	Not offered
Business	6-12	8-20	10-20	10-20	11-30
General Arts	6-12	10-25	10-20	10-20	11-30
Visual Arts	6-15	10-25	10-30	10-30	11-30

The Senior High School Core Curriculum

Academic performance of SHS students is measured through tests, class exercises and other ways for continuous assessment purposes in both the elective Business, General Arts, Science and Visual Arts subjects and in English, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies, which constitute the core curriculum. High academic performance in the core and elective curricula subjects is required of SHS students over the three-year period of SHS education. A student must make a cumulative score of WASSCE Aggregate 24 or better in the core and elective subjects to be considered for admission to higher education programmes. The following sections provide a summary of the significant content of English, Integrated Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies, as specified in the teaching syllabus for these subjects (Curriculum Research and Development Division of Ghana Education Service, 2008; Asihene, 2009).

English Language: The aim is to train the students to acquire basic communication skills in English language. The content includes reading, comprehension, summary, vocabulary, lexis and structure, listening, essay writing, literature, recognition of different aspects of English speech, and correct use of the language.

Social Studies: It provides citizenship education to help the students know how societal problems relating to the survival of the individual and society are dealt with and create awareness for the relevant skills needed for them to function effectively in their own society. Content includes self-identity; culture and national identity; socialization; socio-cultural practices; constitution and nation building; individual rights and responsibilities; science and technology; resource development and utilization; adolescent health and reproduction; entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

Integrated Science: The aim is to equip students with comprehensive scientific skills that will enable them to develop appreciation for the interaction of science, technology and society, and the benefits of science to the individual, the community and the environment. Content includes living and non-living things; the cell; matter; nutrition, respiration in living organisms; excretion; co-ordination of life processes; reproduction and growth; variation, inheritance and evolution; soils; scientific units and measurements; interaction in nature; land use and conservation; work, energy and power; technology and development.

Mathematics: It aims to train students to understand mathematical concepts and their abstract thinking, translating problems into mathematical language and solving them with related mathematical knowledge. Content includes number and numeration; algebraic processes; mensuration; plane geometry; trigonometry; statistics and probability; vectors and transformations in a plane.

The teaching and learning of these core curriculum subjects, which are the focus of this paper, is central to academic success and educational progression of SHS students in Ghana. Whatever exists in the educational process is meant for learning by the students in order for them to develop competence and identity in relation to other members of the learning environment (Montgomery et al., 2005; Forrester & Noel, 2009). It is therefore expected that teachers in secondary schools would provide effective teaching that creates a sense of community and belonging in the classroom, set high standards, act as positive role models, stimulate interest in the subjects they teach, and motivate their students to learn. It is also expected that teaching would enhance learning for all their students as they negotiate their way through life (Mangal, 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

Investigating the factors that influence academic performance of Visual Arts students in Ghana's Senior High School (SHS) core curriculum subjects required on-site observation of classroom teaching and learning activities with respect to English, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies in a purposive sample of five schools that offer Visual Arts in the Kumasi metropolis, Ashanti Region. This study also adopted interview and questionnaire administration to elicit qualitative and quantitative data from the 5 school Heads, 5 Heads of Visual Arts department, 20 Core Subject teachers (4 per school) and 15 Visual Arts teachers (3 per school), and a stratified sample of 50 SHS1, SHS2 and SHS3 Visual Arts students (N = 624). Additional data were sought from a random sample of 25 students in the Business, Science and General Arts departments in the five schools.

Three sets of questionnaire based on open-ended items (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2009) were personally administered to the 20 Core Subject teachers, 50 Visual Arts and 25 Science and Business students. The questionnaire sought data on admission criteria for Visual Arts education, qualification of core subject teachers, the quality of teaching they offer to Visual Arts students, and factors that either enhance or hinder high academic performance of Visual Arts students in the core subjects. The return rate for the 160 questionnaires administered in the five sampled schools was 98%; only two Visual Arts teachers failed to return theirs.

The five Heads of schools, 5 Heads of Visual Arts department and 15 Visual Arts teachers were also interviewed to validate the questionnaire responses. Data sourced focused on student admissions, qualification of teachers, quality of teaching, interpersonal relationships, and Visual Arts students' performance in the Core Subjects as compared with students in Science, Business and General Arts. The questionnaire had a return rate of 99.2%.
Additional data were sought through direct observation of 80 Core Subject lessons taught in the Visual Arts departments of the five schools Obtaining first-hand information on the attitude of the Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and English (core subjects) teachers towards Visual Arts students and that of the Visual Arts students towards the core subject teachers and the lessons they teach them.

The focus was teacher-student interactions, students' attitude to Core Subject teachers and *vice versa*; students' attitude and response to Core Subject lessons and class activities, and other inferential factors that were deemed to affect academic performance of Visual Arts students in the Core Subjects with respect to their peers in other elective programmes. The case study schools are identified only as Schools A, B, C, D and E for ethical reasons. All the lessons were personally observed and recorded while seated at the back of the classroom. Conflicting timetables in the respective schools however, limited much observation to the Science and Visual Arts departments in most cases. The circumstances however, offered opportunity to observe many other lessons in the various subjects taught at the three class levels to enable objective comparison of students' performance in the 'much respected' Science and 'least respected' Visual Arts departments (Adinyira, 2012).

Triangulation through a combination of interview, questionnaire administration and observation provided opportunity for collecting data from different sources to give a comprehensive description (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) of how teachers of English language, Mathematics, Integrated Science and Social Studies influence learning and achievement among Visual Arts students in the respective subjects.

3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As shown in Table 3, the schools in which the study was carried out had different characteristics. Although single sex and co-educational public and private Senior High Schools exist in Ghana, the Head of the closest boys' school that offers Visual Arts was not available to grant access although staff of the Visual Arts department were willing to participate in the study. Only one private SHS (third class category) was accessible for inclusion while the all-girls' school (1st class) and three co-educational public 2nd class schools constituted the convenience sample of schools which offer Visual Arts. The most significant characteristic of the schools was the variety of elective programmes offered and hence, the variety of creative, technical and vocational skills their students could acquire over the three-year period. The nature of the schools also provided opportunity to compare teaching and learning strategies and output in the core subjects in different departments across the schools. Table 3 details the characteristics of the study schools.

Name of School	Category	Type	Programmes offered
School A	Public First class	Girls only Day and Boarding	Science, Business, General Arts, Visual Arts
School B	Public; Faith based Second class	Co-educational Day and Boarding	Science, Business, General Arts, Visual Arts, Home Economics
School C	Public Second class	Co-educational Day only	Science, Business, General Arts, Visual Arts, Home Economics, Technical
School D	Public Second class	Co-educational Day and Boarding	Science, Business, General Arts, Visual Arts, Home Economics
School E	Private Third class	Co-educational Day and Boarding	General Arts, Visual Arts, Technical

Table 3: Sampled schools and programmes of study offered

Teaching and Learning of SHS Core Subjects

The following sections describe data deduced from the record of teaching and learning processes observed in the core subjects in the Visual Arts departments in particular, and a few lessons that were taught in the Science and Business departments across the five sampled schools. The focus was on ascertaining any variations in teacher professional practice, teacher-student relationships, classroom interactions and attitudes exhibited by teachers and students that impact on student performance in those subjects.

The teaching of Core Subjects

The teaching of the core subjects was based on the same syllabus and textbooks Ghana Education Service (GES) had supplied to Senior High Schools across the country to guide the specific core subjects. Each of the five schools had one English, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies teacher which ensured that the same teacher taught his or her specialized subject at all three class levels in the various elective programmes. This strategy is assumed to ensure equal access to the same content materials taught by the same teacher to all SH1, SH2 and SH3 students in the Business, General Arts, Science and Visual Arts departments respectively. As the interviews revealed, assigning same teachers to teach English, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies at all year levels is deemed to ensure the same level of curriculum delivery, irrespective of the elective programme of study. Besides, being taught the same curriculum content specified by the centralized syllabus for the respective core subjects by the same teachers would ensure equitable distribution of knowledge and skills among the students since all of them must write and pass the same internal and external examinations in the core subjects.

This principle assumes that no core subject teachers would have recourse to discriminate against any group of students they are assigned to teach and that being responsible for all SHS1, SHS2 or SHS3 Business, General Arts, Science and Visual Arts students would enable the teachers to build rapport and facilitate teacher-student co-operation to ensure successful management of student learning, effective record-keeping for continuous assessment purposes, and direct oversight of academic performance for all the students. The interviews and

classroom observation however, revealed varying teacher behaviour and rapport in the different departments, particularly with respect to Visual Arts departments in all the schools. Because many of the core subject teachers in the different schools exhibited discriminatory attitudes towards Visual Arts students and varying quality of teaching during instructional hours. The students complained of unprofessional conduct and attitude while some of the teachers also rush through the lessons which make it difficult for them to understand what is taught in the Core Subjects. As Kocchar (2004) posits, any negative teacher attitudes could cause poor student performance in the subjects those teachers handle.

Social Studies

Lessons in Social Studies were observed in all the five selected schools. It was realized that Social Studies demands extensive reading on the history and government policies, national issues and cultural practices. The classroom observation revealed that the students surveyed in the Science, General Arts, Business Studies and Visual Arts departments were not giving much study time to Social Studies, which was said to cover a wide range of topics. The students had much text to read and learn for each class session. They also have to research the topics the teachers deal with in class to ensure they are not left behind.

With respect to class participation as exhibited through the asking and answering of questions, the observation revealed that in all the schools, the Science students were not doing any better than the Visual Arts students as the teachers' perceived was the case. Official school records on the students' entry and past students' WASSCE grades that were made available for verification also did not show any significant variations in the performance of Science and Visual Arts students in the Core Subjects. It was however, observed that the Science students responded well to the teachers' cues for class discussions and also presented good written exercises as compared to the Visual Arts students.

Nonetheless, there was consensus among the Social Studies teachers that the Visual Arts students show more interest in their Elective subjects than Social Studies. The Form 2 teacher in School D believed that because Visual Arts involves much practical work, the students are not able to answer theory questions but instead of spending time reading their Social Studies 'notes', many of them fail to put in much effort to improve their performance. The School A teacher indicated that the Visual Arts students in his school see Social Studies as a difficult subject and because it involves much reading, the students show less interest in it. The School C teacher indicated that the Visual Arts students are neither "serious nor dull" but he believed that the students could perform better than they were currently doing; however, this depends on the particular teachers who teach them Social Studies. This means that some Core Subject teachers believe the Visual Arts students can improve their performance if they are given the right urge.

Mathematics

Lessons were observed in Mathematics in all five schools. It was realized in School A that both Visual Arts and Science students did well in the subject. In Schools B and C, the Visual Arts classes were not as good as their year mates in the Science. A perception that persists in the schools was that the Science students are better with numbers and calculations so they perform better in Mathematics than Visual Arts students who are used to practical manipulation of materials; the Science students are perceived to be more capable with class tests, discussions and class exercises that the teachers assign them during instructional hours. The idea is that the Science students were rated good in learning by the rote method which seems to be integrated in their programme with respect to the formulae they must learn and use to answer or solve problems in their subject areas.

As the Science students indicated, they had had to memorize facts and figures for a long time so they find it easy to commit whatever is taught them to memory so learning 'notes' and examples of Math problems that their teachers give them in class come easy to them. Besides, Science students are expected to do well in all respects so they only have to memorize the 'notes' and reproduce them as the teachers require them to. This makes the teachers believe that Science students are better academically than their peers in Visual Arts.

Another issue of much concern was that unlike Science and Math which involve much use of scientific formulae, the Visual Arts subjects include no formulae that must be memorized and employed to answer questions. Because they are not able to memorize their notes and reproduce them for class tests for example, as the teachers expect of them, the Math teachers believe the Science students are better students than those in Visual Arts. This apparent low performance of Visual Arts students in Math can therefore be attributed to their inability to memorize mathematical formulae that are required to solve problems that their teachers pose in the course of teaching their lessons. Being used to active, participatory learning and class exercises that require description

and narration of facts, the Visual Arts students indicated that they find rote memorization of Math formulae challenging; and although they make much effort in class, they are unable to reach their teachers' expectations.
In all the five schools, the Core Subject teachers indicated that the Junior High School (JHS) graduates who were admitted into the Science departments in the schools were admitted with better (Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) scores than the students that were admitted into the Visual Arts departments. The teachers rated the Science students more 'academically able' than their peers in the Visual Arts departments. The School D teachers indicated that the Visual Arts students were "not good" in Mathematics due to the students' lack of interest in the subject, poor participation in lessons, laziness and frequent absenteeism from Math classes. However, there were some Visual Arts students that the Math teachers considered to be 'good' or 'students of average performance' when compared with the Elective Science students. The other teachers claimed the Visual Arts students were spending too much time on their practical assignments which take much of the students' study time; implying that the Visual Arts subjects prevent them from spending enough time studying their Mathematics notes.

To the students, Math needs much concentration, constant working of examples, and putting the practising knowledge and skills that are taught them into practice while completing their assignments. There seems to be an apparent dissonance between what the Core Subject teachers perceive as 'trivia' and what the Visual Arts students view as critical to their self-worth and their educational career development. This conflict of interest could strain rapport between the teachers and students and jeopardize their potential for successful learning and achievement in school.

English Language
Lessons in English were observed at all class levels in all the five schools. It was realized that the English syllabus consists of neither calculations nor formulae that must be rehearsed in order to stay on top of the subject. It became evident that the Visual Arts students were quite good in the subject, with some of them performing on the same high scale as the students in the Science and Business programmes.

Basing their assessment on the students' end-of-term examination results, the teachers of English in Schools A and B said that Visual Arts students perform far below the Science students' standard although both groups were admitted on the merit of high BECE aggregate scores of 6-9. As high BECE performers, the teachers expected the Visual Arts students to earn high grades in all subjects like their peers in Science although this notion is not totally acceptable with respect to Kyriacou's (1995) assertion that people have individual differences in ability and competence and therefore differ in the way they learn different things.

The School C teachers of English also reported the performance of Visual Arts students as "not as encouraging" as their year groups in the other departments simply because more students in Visual Arts score very low marks in class exercises and assignments in English. In School D, the Science and Business students were rated "better than those in Visual Arts". The teachers in this school unanimously attributed low performance in English among Visual Arts students to concentration of much of their study time on the practical Elective Visual Arts assignments and very little time reading books to master the language and to also learn the English lesson notes they are given in class. This scenario reflects *inter alia*, in the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC) Chief Examiner's Reports for 2005-2009 (Osei-Mensah, 2012), which hammer on poor English Language skills as the basis of Visual Arts students' poor performance in WASSCE. The reports cite poor performance even in General Knowledge in Art, the core subject that all Visual Arts students study. The Chief Examiner's Reports attributed the students' problem to their inability to express their thoughts in good written English in order to answer the examination questions that are set on the theoretical content of both the elective Visual Arts and the core subjects, which adversely affect the students' overall achievement in school, the external examinations in their final year, and invariably, their potential for higher education.
As interviews with the students revealed, the Core Subjects are generally theoretical in nature and require memorization of facts in direct contrast to the significantly practical Visual Arts subjects, which have tangible outcomes that show students' achievement in school.
The impression created is that the students are visibly able to measure their academic efforts by their output of practical art works and therefore consider the Elective Subjects more important than the Core Subjects. This notion however, contradicts the students' erroneous perception that the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC) does not include marks earned in all the Core Subjects in computing the WASSCE grades so students do not have to bother much about 'non-scoring' subjects. Nonetheless, by neglecting or spending less time and effort learning the Core Subjects, the Visual Arts students are exposing themselves to failure in WASSCE, lost opportunities for higher education in polytechnics and universities, and career development in the Visual Arts.

Integrated Science

Lessons in Integrated Science were observed in all the five schools. The School A Visual Arts students were described by the subject teachers as "not serious" in Integrated Science, which causes them to perform abysmally poor when their examination results are compared with that of their peers on the Science and General Arts programmes. The Visual Arts students in School D were reported to perform "below the class average" during examinations and in some cases, their performance turned out to be very poor. The teachers explained further that the Visual Arts students perceive Integrated Science as a subject for Science students because it is a "difficult to learn" subject.

The teachers discredited the efforts of the Visual Arts students in their subject area because many of them choose to spend most of their time working on Elective practical exercises and apportion less time learning Integrated Science which embodies Physics, Chemistry and Biology. They emphasized the fact that Visual Arts students describe Integrated Science as a "broad" subject that needs much concentration and constant studying in order for any student to grasp the content, meaning and the relationship that exists between the subject matter of the distinct units of this composite subject. To the teachers, the problem of poor performance of Visual Arts students in Integrated Science was the fact that the students concentrate less study time to the subject even though the teachers said they do everything that any good teacher should do to make their students understand what is taught as well provide adequate guidance and examples that facilitate successful learning of subject matter to enable all students to pass their examinations.

Unfortunately, the teachers' responses to the questionnaire indicated that efforts made by the Integrated Science teachers in the classroom do not yield the needed results expected from the students on the Visual Arts programme. It is apparent that the students have no idea what the study of Integrated Science and obviously, the Core Subjects mean to their educational and career prospects. Perhaps the teachers of Integrated Science have not explained the significance their subject specialization to make the students understand the need for the subject or they are simply shirking their pastoral responsibility in response to the erroneous impression they hold about Visual Arts and its students.

Perceived Causes of Poor Students' Performance

Interestingly, some of the questionnaire responses incriminated some Core Subject teachers for not teaching the Visual Arts students the same way they teach students in the Science, Business and other Elective programmes. Their main reasons cited was the perception that Visual Arts students are slow learners who can be taught effectively only by adopting a slow process of teaching if each student's optimal level of understanding must be reached, particularly in Mathematics and Integrated Science. The idea that Visual Arts students are slow learners and not good enough to be taught to excel therefore colours the efforts of the many Visual Arts students who perform as well as their peers in the Elective Science programme. The implication is that some Core Subject teachers are oblivious of the fact that differences exist in the abilities and learning styles of students (Gardner, 1999 as cited in Agbenatoe, 2011); they also seem unaware of the implications of the theory of multiple intelligences (Giles et al, 2003), which admonishes teachers to teach to address individual students' educational needs (Dorleku, 2014; Opoku-Asare et al., 2014).

These questionnaire responses that implicate teachers for shortchanging Visual Arts students with ineffective teaching that causes them to lag behind their peers in the other Elective programmes suggest that the misconceptions that the teachers hold about Visual Arts, the capabilities of its students, and the significance of the Visual Arts as an academic programme worth pursuing seem to fuel antagonism against Visual Arts students. The fact that some students are admitted into SHS with weak BECE grades does not necessarily mean all Visual Arts students cannot work their way to high achievement. Although low performance seems to be the case for many Visual Arts students in second and third class Senior High Schools, there is evidence to suggest that many students pursuing Visual Arts are admitted into first class Senior High Schools as seen in the quality of students admitted into Schools A and B (BECE grades 6 – 9 and 6 – 10 respectively) on the same merit as students in the Science programme.

Empirical research indicates that it is common for BECE applicants who have weak passes in the respective subjects to be offered admission into Visual Arts simply to get a place in their preferred school or "offloaded" or compelled to get into the programme because their entry grades fell below the acceptable cut-off grades for their preferred programmes of study (Evans-Solomon, 2004; Quayson, 2006; Asihene, 2009; Siaw, 2009; Adinyira, 2012; Evans-Solomon & Opoku-Asare, 2011). The premise is that Visual Arts deals with manipulative skills that anyone found unsuitable for theoretical programmes can learn, which makes it seem like a 'frill' to the Senior High School programme or a 'not-so-serious' academic programme that is fit only for low achievers (Asihene, 2009; Owusu-Afriyie, 2009). The extent of disrespect even extends to high performance BECE applicants who opt for Visual Arts education and those who end up on the programme via the Computerized

School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) being persuaded or coerced by parents, guardians, and administrators to divert into Science (Adinyira, 2012) just as some parents went to great lengths to ensure their children were not placed in Visual Arts before the introduction of CSSPS (Asihene, 2009).

The fact that the benefits of Visual Arts education seem misunderstood or unknown even though Ghana's school curricula has a history of art education at all levels (Opoku-Asare et al., 2014) and many first and second class Senior High Schools are unable to achieve their admission quotas for the programme with high performance BECE applicants (Asihene, 2009) seem to create the impression that Visual Arts is only good for low achievers. This seems to be the bane of many Visual Arts students who may not be able to move beyond the SHS mainly because some core curriculum teachers gave them no opportunity to prove their worth over the three-year duration of secondary education. These students are more likely to divert into non-art oriented careers after graduation than their peers who were high BECE achievers who attended good schools where teachers encouraged their students to excel, no matter the elective programme they offered.

The questionnaire responses indicated that some Core Subject teachers exhibit their disdain for Visual Arts students through poor attitudes to teaching, reporting late or absenting themselves from class in the Visual Arts departments, and providing ineffective teaching, which impact negatively on the students' learning and their overall achievement in English, Math, Integrated Science and Social Studies. Moreover, many Visual Arts students suffer the psychological effects of unsavory comments such as "I knew you would not understand this", and stigmatization on account of their past record of poor performance in BECE (although not for all of them), and admission into a programme that is believed to offer refuge to weak performing students. Negative comments could hurt students' ego and cause them to perform poorly or relent in their effort to overcome the impression that they find the Core Subjects too difficult to learn and are therefore not intelligent enough to be taught anything. When unsavoury comments made about the Visual Arts students get to their peers in the other departments, those students could also make more obnoxious comments that could hurt them more and possibly result in quarrels and fights among the students.

With respect to attitudes, the questionnaire responses revealed that the Core Subject teachers generally get serious with the Visual Arts students when the students show serious intentions about their studies. This is where the Visual Arts students fall short of expectations as some of them do not take the Core Subjects very seriously. While some Core Subject teachers go to the extent of refusing teaching assignment to Visual Arts classes, peer pressure also influences some Visual Arts students to form bad habits such as skipping classes, paying little or no attention to the Core Subjects, and adopting fashionable lifestyles to cover up their academic weaknesses. The teachers' responses also revealed the perception that some Visual Arts students hold about the Core Subjects, which indicate that the Core curriculum is meant for Science and Business students, and that no Visual Arts student can ever score high marks like the Science and Business students. To the teachers, disinterest, non-involvement in lessons and laziness prevents many Visual Arts students, including some who were admitted with high BECE grades, from excelling in the Core Subjects.

Conclusions

The study makes it clear that some of the Senior High Schools admit students with poor BECE grades into the Visual Arts programmes. Some Core Subject teachers therefore hide behind this disadvantage in academic achievement at Junior High School, and the perceived lack of interest and the generally low academic aptitude among Visual Arts students to disregard the need to give professional help to Visual Arts students in particular, to improve their potentials by giving equal attention to all subjects. By varying their teaching methods when delivering instruction in the core Subjects, Ewing (2011) believes that teachers can teach to meet these seemingly weak students' needs and encourage them to excel.

The study has also revealed that some Visual Arts students are academically high achievers who obtained excellent grades in the Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) and were admitted into the schools on the same merit as the Science students. In spite of this good start, some of them perform poorly in the Core components of the SHS curriculum. This is likely due to individual students' approach to the programme, including the motivation and efforts of particular students, the rapport and attitude of the teachers who teach them the Core Subjects, and the school a student is enrolled in. This premise is that some BECE applicants are forced to offer Visual Arts against their academic interest (Quayson, 2006; Asihene, 2009; Siaw, 2009; Evans-Solomon & Opoku-Asare, 2011) and so they do not put much effort into what they do on the programme to enable them excel since the Core Subjects need regular reading and assignments in order to make the grade.

There is consensus that many Visual Arts students are not serious and they choose to spend less time and effort on the Core Subjects unlike the General Arts, Science and Business students, which places them at a clear disadvantage. Visual Arts students are also deprived of good teaching, counselling, discipline and motivation to induce them to learn what they are taught. As Hammond et al. (2001) posit, the social context created within the

classroom, the ways in which communication occurs, how teachers and students play their respective roles, and how opportunities for collaboration are structured combine to influence students' understanding and construction of knowledge.

What is needed is active collaboration between Core Subjects and Visual Arts teachers, and school administrators to counsel the students on how to apportion, manage and use their time profitably on all subjects comprising the Senior High School curriculum and to also understand the importance of the Core Subjects to their educational and career development, and future livelihood choices. This is what will encourage the students to study what is taught them so they would earn good grades in all subjects and get the opportunity to further their education in institutions of higher learning. It is important therefore that students on the Visual Arts programme be accorded equal opportunities like their peers in Science, Business, General Arts and the other departments because they have equal rights to good education as citizens of Ghana. Reorienting the Visual Arts students this way could help those who are placed in the department to develop interest in learning and thereby change their attitudes to the Core Curriculum.

As Montgomery et al. (2005) indicate, learning is both a process and an outcome in which necessary changes in the behaviour of the learner are brought about through experiences. In this respect, it is imperative that the Core Subject teachers adapt the benefits of the theory of multiple intelligences to teach to the Visual Arts students' strengths by engaging them in interactive lessons that meet their specific learning needs; this, as Amstrong (2009) asserts, leads to higher student achievement. Helping the students to achieve academically will ensure that the Visual Arts students get good jobs like their colleagues in the Science, Business and General Arts departments.

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