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Free and Compulsory Basic Education: A Liberian Perspective

Authored by

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ABSTRACT

This article examines what Liberian schools teach students from the perspective of the free and compulsory basic education policy. Employing a cross-sectional qualitative research design, 60 education stakeholders took part in the study. The data were transcribed, collated, and reported. Findings showed compulsory education is seen from the lenses of accessibility and having parents compelled to send their children to school at all cost. It also established its non-commonality to pupils and identified National Curriculum as a main tool used to teach at school. Conclusions and recommendations are proffered to enhance the policy, considered ineffective and impractical.

Keywords: Free and compulsory basic education, Liberian perspective, policy, Liberia

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of Liberia recognizes the need for equal access to educational opportunities and facilities for all citizens to the extent of available resources (Liberian Constitution, 1986). This is because of the vital role assigned to the individual citizens to contribute to the social, economic and political well-being of Liberia. The Liberian government made consideration for free and compulsory primary education policy in 2001. It was meant to encourage increased enrollment of students at primary level aimed at promoting literacy and numeracy. The policy

was elevated from grades 7-9 in public schools in 2011 (New Education Reform Act, 2011). This means, Liberia now provides free education from grades 1-9 to ensure children, particularly those from impoverished families and communities have access to basic education. According to Waydon, Liu and Ketter (2016), the policy in the New Education Reform Act mainly emphasizes in addition to academic competency; pupils attainment of national literacy, and marketable skills through computer literacy and development.

One of the reasons for the introduction of free and compulsory education in Liberia is probably because the nation is signatory to a number of international treaties including Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). Article 26.1 of UDHR mandates its member states to guarantee everyone the right to free education for at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (Right to Education Project, 2014). It emphasized, however, that education offered must be of quality and relevance to the child. Ensuring this right is very pivotal as basic education is the foundation for lifelong learning (Education World-wide, 2000). Emphatically, the school environment is absolutely vital to developing a child's mind to become a productive citizen.

In Liberia, the education system is undergoing gradual reform to meet the needs of learners amidst series of challenges. Some of these challenges include inadequate budgetary support, weak systems and structures for effective delivery of education services, insufficient human and logistical capacities, the poor condition of education facilities, inadequate learning materials and supplies, too many students not achieving learning outcomes, a large number of out-of-school children and youth, and insufficient parental and community involvement in education (Ministry of Education Annual Report, 2015). Generally, these challenges are summed up into access, quality and governance. Arguably, these concepts are fundamental for promoting an implementable free and compulsory basic education. For instance, if access is impeded it would be difficult, perhaps impossible to implement any compulsory education policy.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to examine what Liberian schools teach students from the perspective of the free and compulsory basic education policy in Liberia. The purpose of this research is to examine the meaning ascribed to compulsory education. Its focus is on whether compulsory education is considered as being common to all pupils as well as what is being taught to everyone at school. In addition to a thorough scrutiny of the education sector, hearing from stakeholders (school administrators, teachers and parents), who are implementers of contents enshrined in the Curriculum, on this subject is very essential. The current Liberian National Curriculum was revised in 2011. The process involved a cross-section of stakeholders with a representation from MoE Curriculum Section staff, content specialists and representatives from various institutions including higher education and partners. Following the revision process, the validation of the Curriculum usually considers all stakeholders including school administrators, teachers and parents. The National Curriculum is used to holistically develop students to contribute to nation rebuilding, aimed at ensuring the achievement of the desired socio-economic progress. It is intended to enhance quality and relevant instruction and to enable Liberian students are adequately prepared to participate in the regional exams including

the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE).

The research seeks to answer the following core questions.

1. What meaning can you give to compulsory education in Liberia?
2. Is Liberia's compulsory education common to all pupils?, and
3. What is taught to everyone at school?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many countries in Africa have introduced free and compulsory education. Like Liberia, the right to basic education in other African countries is guaranteed in their respective Constitutions. For instance, Primary schooling in South Africa is compulsory for children aged 7 to 15 while an integrated approach to early childhood development aims to give all children between birth and school-going age the best start in life (http://www.unicef.org/southafrica/education_344.htm). Tanzania free primary education policy was introduced in 2001 to enroll all children from 7-13 year-olds, while Uganda free primary education policy was introduced in 1997 abolishing tuition fees for 6-12 year-olds. Free primary education was introduced in Zambia in 2002 for all pupils from grades 1-7 and Kenya also introduced its free primary education policy in 2003 thus dramatically increasing enrollments (Waydon, et., 2016). Free and compulsory education policy is critical considering the fact that many African nations are lagging behind when it comes to the provision of universal primary education for all.

ISSUES IN LIBERIA'S COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Access: It might seem easy to introduce no-school-fee policy for children to go to school with no direct cost to parents. But across Liberia, many students are constrained to walk long distances to school. In some rural areas school going age children do not have access to basic education due to unavailability of a learning facility, making free education policy unrealistic. Though there has been some improvement with about 1.5 million children in school (EMIS, 2014), there still remains a huge challenge in Liberia as about little over half a million children are reportedly out-of-school (UNICEF/UNESCO Out-of-School Report, 2012). As a consequence, the issue of access is one of the key problems hampering Liberia's quest to achieving Universal Primary Education.

Quality: Materu (2007) defines quality as "fitness for purpose" meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards. According to Gbollie and David (2014), Harvey and Green indicate that quality means different things to different individuals. In Liberia, quality is mostly judged based on the performance of students. Capitalizing on results from exams being administered by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), some education stakeholders believe students are receiving poor quality of education as the exam results showed continued decline in students' performance. In 2013, no candidate passed in the division one category, and of a total of 27,651 candidates who sat May/June, 2014 exams only 13,349 or 48.26% passed, respectively (Liberian Daily Observer/WAEC, 2014). WAEC 2016 results further showed a downward trend in students' academic performance. Inevitably, the provision of education is not enough; it must commensurate with the quality of teaching and learning in the schools as required by UDHR.

Governance: Compounding Liberia's education challenges is poor governance structure at central and decentralized levels. 34% of teachers are untrained, with large variations between counties. 70% of primary school teachers in Sinoe are un-trained. In total, nearly 13,000 teachers in Liberia have no teaching certificate. The majority of those that have been trained have only received pre-service training with no further refreshers or professional development (Ministry of Education: Getting to Best, 2015). Due to limited budgetary support, Education Officers are often unable to vigorously monitor and supervise the operation of schools in Liberia.

IMPLEMENTATION GAPS OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN LIBERIA

No doubts, the introduction of free and compulsory education policy is a laudable venture. Nandekar (2009) noted the need for Education Act is necessary to protect the quality of education and maintain its importance. Particularly the free education component is assisting some poor parents to send their children to school. But some hidden costs have long served as an impediment to children accessing education. The Education Cluster assessment of the effect of Ebola on the education system in Liberia in 351 schools in nine out of the 15 counties found that approximately 60% of children surveyed cited fees as the most common reason for not attending school. Because of the numerous challenges confronting the Liberian Education System, the compulsory education policy is not being enforced. The policy is still in the stage of promise yet to be fulfilled as evidenced by the huge disparity between enrollment and out-of-school. The limitation of public school facilities, especially in Montserrado and Margibi counties further shows government unpreparedness to make the policy a reality (Waydon, et., 2016). However, the challenge to enforce compulsory education policy is not unique to Liberia. According to Namaz & Tanveer (1975), every country that has compulsory education law has a problem of enforcement.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

Utilizing a cross-sectional qualitative research design, 60 participants took part in this study. They were drawn randomly from Montserrado and Margibi Counties. The samples included 20 school administrators, 20 teachers and 20 parents.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was developed based on the meaning ascribed to compulsory education in Liberia. Two general questions on whether compulsory education is considered as being common to all pupils and what is taught to everyone at school were asked. These two major questions gave rise to ten sub-questions to further investigate this construct.

Research Procedure

The Ministry of Education was consulted on the rationale and purpose of the study. **FREE Liberia** then requested for a letter of authorization, which was provided by the Ministry. The team also requested a directory of school administrators, who were contacted and interviewed. The administrators linked **FREE Liberia** with the parents through the Parent Teacher

Association, who were also contacted and interviewed. Participation was completely voluntary, though confidentiality was assured. Data collectors (*FREE Liberia staff*) participated in a one-day training on basic ethics of research and data collection techniques to enhance their skills to perform the task effectively. On the average, participants were interviewed and/or participated in focused group discussions within 30 to 45 minutes.

Data analysis

In order to determine what Liberian schools teach every student, highlights from focused group discussions and individual interviews conducted with school administrators, teachers and parents were transcribed, collated, and reported based on the general views expressed by respondents.

FINDINGS

Findings from Administrators and Teachers on the meaning ascribed to compulsory education in Liberia

According to administrators and teachers interviewed, education must be accessible to every child, and parents must be compelled to send their children to school at all cost. ‘As far as I know, Liberia does not have compulsory education because no parent is forced to send his/her child to school, it is still a matter of choice’, one administrator differed. In order for this to happen, violators of the policy must be arrested and made to comply. On the free aspect, some respondents noted that the policy is partially free for the public domain. They acknowledged the existence of hidden costs, which they think is undermining the implementation of the policy. Another dissenting view that emerged on the subject illustrates that Liberia’s free and compulsory education policy is undefined in terms of parents/guardians own roles and responsibilities.

Findings from Administrators and Teachers on Liberia’s compulsory education commonality to all pupils

100% of participants interviewed indicated that Liberia’s free and compulsory education policy is not common to all pupils because the policy is limited to public schools. Additionally, 80% of respondents interviewed said they hope to see children learn contents as stipulated in the National Curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education. The rest agreed for the teaching of the Curriculum contents, but said they must be integrated with career guidance, peace concepts and basic life skills to make learners more useful after completing basic education. ‘The current learning is ineffective in our school. The classes are overcrowded with limited seating capacity, thus making learning very difficult. But I would wish to see students learn literacy and numeracy in a conducive environment’, one administrator noted. On the issue of delivery, respondents unanimously agreed that compulsory education is provided at the same type of school, using the same curriculum and out of school children are the main target.

Findings from Administrators and Teachers on what is taught to everyone at school

The respondents disclosed that the National Curriculum is the main tool used to teach in Liberian schools. The Curriculum particularly focuses on the teaching of subjects such as English, Reading, Spelling, Writing, Science, Maths, Social Studies, etc. Some of the respondents also highlighted health & hygiene education as well as other extra-curricular activities such as sports to be at the center of contents taught to students at school.

According to their views, in the formal school setting students learn what is enshrined in the National Curriculum, which they believe endeavours to prepare them for future tasks. However, some respondents are of the opinion that many students graduate from high schools without the **requisite** skills apart from academics. Some of the skills include Computer Science, Agriculture Science, Hospitality, Home Economics, Entrepreneurship, Carpentry, Masonry, sewing, Hair Dressing, and Auto repair and Maintenance. Notwithstanding, they conceded that such skills are often acquired outside of formal grade schools. Whether Liberia's education system has international influence, more than 60% of the respondents think education in Liberia has some level of international influence. The respondents particularly pointed out that the introduction of the free and compulsory education policy in 2001 and 2011 was based on influence, which they observed is impractical in actuality.

As per specific components of compulsory teaching and recent trends or ongoing discussions, respondents identified literacy and numeracy as vital components. They unearthed that other alternative education programs such as USAID's Advancing Youth Project has components like Literacy, Numeracy, Life-Skills and Work Readiness' to promote learning for students, especially out of school children and youth. Regarding the recent or ongoing discussion, 85% of the participants said they are not aware of any discussions. Nevertheless, 15% of the respondents believe the Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Education's introduction of the public private partnership in the education system might be a new direction of the policy.

For content favoured and values taught, respondents' views were divided. Some indicated that the Curriculum must not be delivered to students partially. But others differed, preferring the teaching of literacy and numeracy to students. They were, however, in one accord on the teaching of values, identifying religious and moral education as a subject being taught to instill moral values into students. Besides, some respondents identified obedience, respect, timeliness, moral conduct and peace concepts as some other values they promote in their various schools. Hence, Faith-based private schools normally give priority to the teaching of religious and moral education inclusive of obedience and respect in their schools based on the institutions' core values.

More than 90% believed that there is no emphasis being devoted to the teaching of life-skills in Liberian schools. According to them, the normal lessons taught students at school are not integrated with life-skills. Even though education authorities are aware of the gap, one of the apparent challenges is because lack of trained teachers and necessary facilities to enable students to acquire such skills at school. For instance, majority of public and private schools in Liberia lack computer labs for students, thus making the teaching of computer science practically impossible. Consequently, students do not have the opportunity to learn life skills at school. 'We don't even have good facilities, no library and laboratory, least to talk about

computer lab; they don't learn anything like life-skills', one respondent stressed. In relation to the balance between local, national, regional and universal in what is taught, respondents expressed diverse views whether what is taught sets Liberian students on par with their colleagues the world over. Using Liberia's National Curriculum as a reference, some respondents said the Curriculum does not have any problem, but the main challenge is the lack of qualified teachers and enabling learning environment needed to effectively deliver contents to Liberian learners. Some reported that the Curriculum is overcrowded with unnecessary contents, some of which are above student levels, thus constraining students to learn more contents than required in comparison with regional and universal spectrums. Notwithstanding, some respondents think the Curriculum is limited because it does not align with the WAEC Syllabus, attributing it to the underperformance of students in WAEC exams. Moreover, they think the limitation is also as a result of lack of career pathway for students to begin pursuing their life-long dreams while in basic schools. Despite the reservations, respondents are hopeful that contents taught at school set out at national and local levels, or even at the level of individual schools, and students are capable of competing with their colleagues across the globe.

Findings from parents on their roles in terms of learning of their children under the compulsory education policy

About half of the number of parents interviewed acknowledged being aware of the free and compulsory education policy who stressed that their role is to send their children to school and provide basic needs including uniforms, books, feeding, and transportation. Some parents noted they are also ought to provide guidance and motivation for their children to go to school. Majority of the parents, however, intimated their role is mainly hindered by high unemployment rate, thus making it somewhat impossible for them to afford the hidden costs of education for their children.

DISCUSSION

This study unearthed that in order for free and compulsory education policy to be considered a reality, it must go beyond being a mere written policy. There must be appropriate mechanisms in place where students are capable of accessing a school environment and receiving quality education. However, the current barrage of challenges regarding access, quality and governance in the education system coupled with inability of some parents to cover other hidden costs has worsened the situation, making the policy dormant and ineffective. Consequently, many participants expressed disappointment over the implementation of the policy. The respondents did not ignore the fact that the policy has good intention, but said it must transcend from mere pronouncement to one that is realistic and implementable. In order to begin compelling parents to send their children to school at all cost, which the definition of compulsory education is tied to; schools must be accessible and parents must have opportunities that would enable them provide for hidden costs of education. Hidden costs including uniforms, footwear, and books, etc. seem to be a major factor impeding the implementation of free and compulsory education policy in Liberia.

Since the National Curriculum is essential in determining what is taught at school in Liberia there is a need for the integration of life-skills to add value to what students are learning. As a

responsibility bearer in educating its citizens, the Liberian government through MoE must take the lead in ensuring that students in public sector have life-skills, then private schools will begin follow suit. Despite the concerns articulated, respondents were hopeful that contents taught at school set Liberian students on par with their colleagues across the globe. This is an opportunity for Liberian schools to continuously enhance the quality of teaching and learning to make students more marketable in the society. As highlighted by Waydon, et al. (2016), evaluating the Liberian government free education policy is a worthy project and there is a need for free education. Education may not be free for all but severely impoverished school aged children could be targeted and sponsored in order to bring them to term with the rest of the kids who can afford. 'Amidst high poverty rate coupled with unemployment, it is not possible to implement the policy because the necessary mechanisms that can lead to such policy are not in place', one respondent highlighted. Such challenge can be addressed with continual political will in the interest of quality education for Liberian children.

CONCLUSION

Liberia's free and compulsory basic education policy is still in its infant stage. Its existence over the past two plus decades has not yet yielded dividends as anticipated. On the contrary, the policy has become burdensome for some schools as administrators are often compelled to enrol children even in the absence of learning space. While such huge number may be welcomed in the context of getting everyone in school, it may have serious implications for teaching and learning. Some classrooms are not spacious to accommodate the student population enrolled, which is further hampered by limited seating capacity and qualified teachers. As a consequence, Liberia Ministry of Education acknowledges said increased student enrolment but poor learning outcomes continue to persist (Ministry of Education: Getting to Best, 2015).

None commonality of Liberia's free and compulsory education to pupils as revealed by this study is because of its limitation to public schools. To bridge this limitation, government must step forward and take the challenge in working with some private schools to enable out-of-school children have access to basic education at limited or no cost to parents. The National Curriculum, which sets the basis for what is taught in school must endeavour to holistically prepare students for future tasks. This could enable them to complete basic education and prepare them for secondary education level. Plans are underway by the Ministry of Education under the George K. Werner administration to revisit the Liberian National Curriculum and make it more relevant to ensure the holistic development of Liberian learners. Additionally, MoE is initiating a consultation with West African Examinations Council (WAEC) on how its syllabus and the Liberian National Curriculum could be integrated. This is probably triggered by continual underperformance of students in the WAEC exams. WAEC exams currently constitute the only yardstick used for measuring students' performance nationally. The body is West Africa's foremost examining board established by law to determine the examinations required in the public interest in the English-speaking West African countries and to conduct the examinations and award certificate comparable to those of equivalent examining authorities internationally. Its mandate is to assist in the development of sound education; ensure that educational standards are maintain; and give the people of West

Africa a vision of the great potentials which lie beyond examinations. (<http://www.liberiawaec.org/history.html>).

The implementation of Liberia's free and compulsory education policy by Government through the Ministry of Education is being seriously challenged, thus making it prudent for the involvement of private schools. Having special arrangement with some private schools in selected locations with limited or no public school presence for MoE to provide slots for a certain number of children to attend school free of charge with sponsorship from government or through its subsidy scheme would be very meaningful. It is also important for government (MoE) and administrators to ensure the availability of extensions/annexes or new learning facilities to remedy the situation of overcrowdedness of classrooms, particularly in the urban areas as well as ensure the school environment is safe and child-friendly with motivated teachers, libraries and laboratories. Moving forward, it is difficult for the objectives of the policy to be actualized in the absence of enforcement mechanism. MoE must organize an inter-sectoral taskforce (all education stakeholders inclusive) to ensure adherence to the policy by parents. Emphasis should be placed on areas where newly constructed learning facilities are not utilized up to capacity. Additionally, continual efforts must be made by Government/MoE to increase access, quality and governance processes in the education sector. Moreover, there is a need for an active involvement of all stakeholders in the education sector including parents, school administrators, teachers, students, MoE and partners to enable Liberian education system become vibrant. Parents respect policies introduced by MoE and contribute towards achieving them. They should also work with PTAs to help improve the learning environment for their children. Finally, it is obvious that the Liberian Government has budgetary constraints, but education budget must annually be augmented to empower MoE to transcend from just paying Education staff to providing adequate funding for meaningful education programs that would promote quality teaching and learning in schools.

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