

CURRICULUM OFFERINGS AND ASPIRATIONS OF SCHOOL ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE OF SIERRA LEONE

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Abstract

This study was conceived to find out the relationship between curriculum offerings and the aspirations of school adolescent girls in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The government of Sierra Leone has since 1995 through policy statements emphasized that affirmative actions will be taken to ensure that girls are encouraged to do formerly male stereotyped occupations in the technical and scientific areas of study. 8% of the population of girls in the final year at the JSS level formed the sample population. Primary data was obtained through the use of questionnaires. The responses as analyzed showed that there is a mismatch between curriculum offerings and the aspirations of girls. Adolescent girls are still trapped into the traditional stereotyped subjects in school even as they are professing that they would like to newnew more technologically relevant subjects. It is important that the government and major stakeholders in the education of girls ensure that girls have better opportunities to pursue the professions that they would like to pursue by expanding the curriculum and by putting into place affirmative actions to ensure that aspirations match their current curriculum offerings.

Introduction

Thompson (1981) declares that formal education has been firmly entrenched as the most efficient, convenient and generally acceptable means both for training and for selecting its participants for mobility in the modern world. Indeed, the author noted that despite the criticisms levied against it, formal education continues to enjoy a position of prestige, popularity and acceptance. Conable (1988) opines that without education, development will not occur. For him, it is only an educated person that can command the skills necessary for sustainable economic growth and for a better quality of life. The current government policy, as set out in the New Education Policy (1995), and other policy documents, is concerned with ensuring that young people have high aspirations, not just educationally but in the wider sense, participating in subjects and occupations that were formerly regarded as the provinces of men.

Understanding what constitutes aspirations is the key to understanding how well a student will participate well in education. Gutman and Akerman. (2008) state that they change throughout childhood and beyond, shaped by the characteristics of young people and their families, peers, schools, and neighbourhoods as well as wider forces such as the labour market and historical context. Aspirations vary for different sections of the population both in terms of parents' educational and occupational goals for their children and the ambitions of the young people themselves.

Practical and attitudinal barriers to the formation of high aspirations are evident. Financial constraints may limit some groups' access to opportunities and enabling resources such as computers and private tuition. Equally, some individuals are limited by factors such as leaving school or becoming a parent at a young age. But attitudes are also important. Young people who believe they have the ability to achieve and who attribute their success to hard work, rather than luck, or fate tend to have higher aspirations than their peers.

In general, those who have, or whose parents have, high aspirations have better outcomes, even when taking into account individual and family factors, but this is not a universal effect. There are some groups for whom high aspirations do not lead to higher achievement. In particular, there is a gap between educational aspirations and academic achievement for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from some minority ethnic groups and a gap between occupational aspirations and career achievement for females.

Kelly and Elliot (1989) are convinced that to improve the quality of education offered to its participants' school based factors that impede on their success have to be addressed. Addressing issues such as the content and relevance of education are essential to enable young girls realize their aspirations and ambitions. Improved quality also demands gender-sensitive curricula to illuminate gender stereotypes that affect how girls and boys

are treated in the classroom and what subjects they study. This enables girls to obtain the most from their education and better equip them to transcend rigid gender norms that undermine their full potential. It may for instant, encourage them to consider a wider variety of jobs, including non-traditional ones

Smock (1981) notes that after 40 years of educational expansion girls' participation in Pakistan still show gender disparities. She opined that with the success in access into schools, demands for longer and better participation in school have increased, with the result that programmes and strategies should become tilted to better curriculum offerings and better performance rather than promoting more access.

The nature of the curriculum must reflect the aims and ideals of the education being imparted to girls. Tietjen (1991) has lamented that the curriculum provided for girls cause frustration and stereotype expectations. It is still assumed that girls will end up as wives and mothers and the school system end up becoming a strait-jacket into which a narrowly conceived range of activities must fit. Girls study Home Economics, Needlework and Commercial subjects. The curriculum offerings in schools still suffer from a grave lack of genuine educational diversity.

Despite the official open access policies, a "hidden agenda" or informal implemented curriculum ensures that the distribution of knowledge to the sexes is unequal. Braimah (1987) in her study of Nigerian elementary schools finds that gender typing begins early in the schooling process. She states that when girls begin their educational careers, their achievement levels, classroom participation and career expectations are quite similar to boys. (Poignant, 2006), supports this observation and states that teachers, textbooks and materials and increased years of schooling limit their expectations and reinforce girls' negative self-perception. At the secondary level, these differences are cemented. Male teachers themselves believe that girls are less competent than boys and girls' participation in schools suffer.

Researchers on girls' education agree that the curricula taught in schools are often irrelevant to girls' needs. Research shows that girls in general do less well in Mathematics and Science than boys, hold negative attitude towards the subjects and are less likely to pursue careers in these fields, (Poignant, 2006, Andam 1990, Tietjen 1991, 1986 and Braimah, 1987). Simply ensuring equal exposure to the same curricula offerings may not ensure equal learning opportunities for girls. Andam (1990) has demonstrated that heightened awareness among teachers and officials in Ghana's Ministry of Education; has led to activities to promote girls' participation in mathematics and science education. Through interaction of girls with female scientists and engineers, girls have indicated a heightened interest in the fields and the roles they can play in them, countering gender stereotypes. Wynd, S (1995) stresses that while the education of girls must be relevant, care must be taken not to make 'relevant' education become synonymous with inferior education and a curriculum limited to domestic sciences. Domestic science subjects are deemed as appropriate for the stereotyped future roles of women as mothers and wives. He went to contend that this limited view of girl-child focused curriculum has frustrated efforts to make girls perform better in technical and science subjects.

For Poignant (2006) making the curriculum more child-centered and gender-sensitive, and rooted in the life and environment of the community are important school factors. An insensitive school curriculum can prevent motivated children, especially girls, from participating well and contributes to absenteeism and poor classroom performance. Schools must offer a safe and secure learning environment where children can learn skills that protect them from violence, abuse and exploitation and offer a real alternative to child labour. With this interest promoted by governments, the document claims that there is a higher demand for education for parents and communities, and increased numbers of women are becoming active members of community education communities.

Despite the touted successes of good aspirations, the researcher is of the opinion that there has to be a match between aspirations and curriculum offerings if gender disparity especially at the secondary level of basic education is to be eradicated.

Methodology

This study was carried out using primary data to determine the extent to which adolescent girls' aspirations are being realized through the school curriculum offerings. It was conducted in the three districts of the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The Eastern Province is the furthest province from the capital Freetown and apart from the headquarters towns; the region is marked by its rural ness and its concentration on agriculture and mining. The principal sample group in this study was 8% of final year class of the Junior Secondary Schools (JSS 3) in and this amounted to seven hundred and two girls. Focused group discussions were also held with community leaders and other care givers on issues of girls' aspirations and curriculum offerings of the school.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

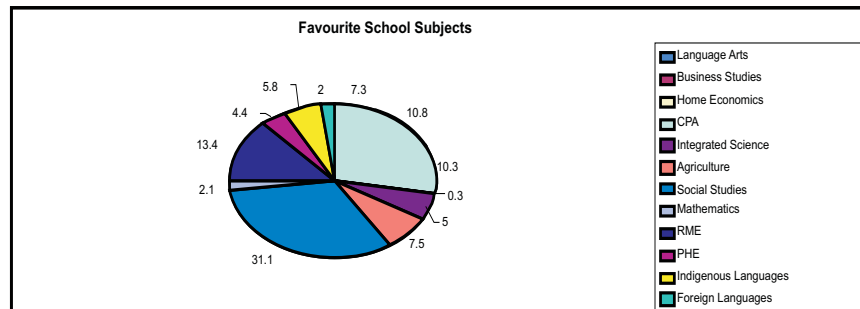


Fig. - 1 School Subjects Most Liked by Respondents

Figure 1 was designed to elicit information on answering the research question which was based on the aspirations of the girls to their future development. The table as analyzed above had data on a list of favourite subjects as preferred by the respondents. The first four by order of preference were Social Studies, R.M.E, Business Studies and Home Economics and their respective percentages were 31.1, 13.4, 10.8 and 10.3. Further in line of importance was Agriculture with 7.5%; Language Arts with a percentage of 7.3; Indigenous Languages and Integrated Science with 5.8 and 5.0% respectively. The least favourite subjects were P.H.E, Mathematics, Foreign Languages and C.P.A. with the following percentages respectively: 4.4, 2.1, 2.0 and .3. The subjects as analyzed brought out the contribution of the curriculum to the participation of girls in formal schools and brought out the importance of getting girls interested in subjects that were least favoured but that are important to the development of the nation. These subjects included Mathematics, Integrated Science, Foreign Languages and even Language Arts.

Only 2.1 percent of the respondents to the questionnaires list Mathematics as their favourite subject and approximately 5 percent pick Integrated Science as the subject they like best.

The Principals and staff of the various schools interviewed are not surprised as they state that Policy statements since 1995 that special provisions and strategies are to be put in place to promote girls' participation in the sciences and mathematics have not been put in place. There are only two girls' secondary schools in the region and both lack laboratories, language laboratories and workshops. No provision exists for enticing Science graduates to teach in the rural areas or in single girls' sex schools. Neither are there provisions for female role models in these fields to be actively involved in their education.

The table-1 presented a list of careers that the respondents would like to go into. The five most favourite occupations were banking, nursing, law; secretary ship and working in an NGO and these were their respective percentages: 22.2, 17.2, 16.4, 14.1 and 7.7. The next three careers in order of importance were medicine, accountancy, catering with the following percentages: 5.8, 3.4 and 3.1.

Table -1
Careers Most Liked by Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Banking	156	22.2	22.2	22.2
Nursing	121	17.2	17.2	39.4
Law	115	16.4	16.4	55.8
Secretary	99	14.1	14.1	69.9
NGO	54	7.7	7.7	77.6
Medicine	41	5.8	5.8	83.4
Accountancy	24	3.4	3.4	86.8
Catering	22	3.1	3.1	89.9
Politics	10	1.4	1.4	91.1

Five careers, politics, teaching, entertainment, housewifery, business and religion had a little above 1% with the following percentages respectively: 1.4, 1.3, 1.1, 1.1, 1.0, and 1.0. Six occupations had less than 1 % in their order of preferences. These were: journalism and sports with .9%; engineering with .6%; fashion designing and the forces with .3 %; and technician being last in the list with only .1%.

Table 1 was considered as important as it illuminated information that brought out the future aspirations of school girls. The choice of careers of these girls reflects the traditional and the newly assumed lucrative careers. The five most favourite occupations are banking, nursing, law, secretary ship and working in an NGO and these are their respective percentages: 22.2, 17.2, 16.4, 14.1 and 7.7. It is unfortunate that these girls do not like the teaching profession as it has a little above one percent preference and the two of the professions that are almost at the bottom are engineering and technical fields. These findings agree with the earlier reported findings of the subjects that they like and it continues to show that work has to be done to persuade girls to enter these fields that are being touted as important to the economy of the nation.

The nature of the curriculum must reflect the aims and ideals of the education being imparted to girls. The curriculum offerings in schools still suffer from a grave lack of genuine educational diversity as most girls still prefer subjects like Home Economics, Needlework and Commercial subjects. These two tables bring out the mismatch between present empowering of girls through curriculum offerings and their aspirations. Despite the touted policy emphasis on mathematics and science subjects, girls are still not interested in these subjects. For them to aspire to fulfil their ambitions, they have to show more interest in these subjects. Over time, as young people become more aware of the obstacles they face, they may lower their aspirations to meet their expectations, particularly when facing multiple barriers to success. Gregg P. et. al. (2011) reports on AUK study of disadvantaged young people, which stated that while 14 to 17-year-olds were optimistic about getting good, well-paid jobs, their aspirations dissipated as they faced the realities of low-paid, low-skilled jobs in their later teenage years. By the time these disadvantaged young people were 18 to 21 years old, their prospects of reaching their aspirations seemed remote because of lack of qualifications and other perceived barriers.

Stromquist (1989) insists that girls' persistence in school depends more than boys on; the quality and content of education offered. Female low achievers leave school in larger proportion than do boys in the lower grades. Female pupils' desire for success is closely linked with their interests and needs, and the teachers must identify these interests and relate them to the teaching methods, equipment and the physical working conditions of the school. Schools are not meeting the needs of the youngsters. Schools have a responsibility to their students, especially female students.

The findings of the research clearly showed that mismatch between aspirations and curriculum offerings continue to make science subjects and math unsought and unattractive. Aspirations help mitigate the effects of low socio-economic background. However, until curriculum offerings become attractive, it remains difficult to be unable to overcome the financial and social obstacles to achievement, particularly where multiple barriers in the schools exist, (Schoon, 2006).

Conclusions

There was little relationship seen between the aspirations of the girls as revealed in the careers they would like to aspire for and their preferences for school subjects. Banking was rated as the most popular career they would like to follow but Social Studies was the most popular subject. Subjects like Mathematics and Foreign Languages were the least liked subjects. Careers that were deemed not profitable like teaching garnered small percentages of interest. Despite slogans encouraging girls' entry into technical subjects, girls' interest in these careers was very low.

Programmes and strategies must be implemented to encourage girls into new subjects in the curriculum such as Technology and Basic Electricity. Also, affirmative actions must be taken to get girls interested in Mathematics and the Sciences. Girls' participation in Sciences and Mathematics can only be increased with a corresponding heightened awareness among teachers and officials of the affirmative activities promoting girls' participation in these curricula offerings. Teachers teaching these subjects must be given special allowances. Eliminating gender bias from textbooks and learning materials increases their quality and relevance to the lives of all children. Also, schools must be given state of the art facilities to encourage girls to concentrate more on their school work and perform better both in school and at public examinations. Academic and vocational counseling must be regularly done to ensure that girls not only perform well academically but that their future careers match curriculum offerings. The Ministry of Education has to be more serious in enticing and encouraging girls in schools to be the next generation of Sierra Leonean doctors, engineers and scientists. Sensitization exercises must be mounted to get parents and the girls themselves interested in matching their aspirations and outcomes.

May-Parker, (1984) and Holland (1989) have suggested that specially trained female counselors with proper understanding of adolescent girls are essential if the problem of low female participation in science and maths is to be minimized. Young girls need easy access to advice and guidance from these counsellors who can motivate them to reach their goals. Involvement in positive activities may also provide important socializing experiences that encourage high aspirations. Those working with parents, especially in disadvantaged areas, need to be aware that they can play a role in helping them develop these early aspirations and attitudes not only for their children, but for themselves. This will give them a sense of confidence and empowerment that they can help their children and persevere to overcome obstacles when things are not going well.

Finally, involvement in extracurricular activities in the sciences may enhance educational and occupational aspirations. Such activities can help to improve technical skills and non verbal reasoning and offer opportunities and mentorship that may raise aspirations in the sciences, technical and mathematical professions.

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