

Questions in the answers to primary school educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to review current issues in pre- and primary school reform and to pose questions on the long-term implications of present day solutions. Such an exercise will open up discussion on the probable effects of educational policy decisions with a view to minimize negative effects brought on by new policies. Because data collection in Sierra Leone is embryonic and unreliable, it is difficult to be definitive in planning future reform in education based on available data. The civil war between 1989 and 1999 practically shut down the educational system. Some of the obvious steps taken to ameliorate the situation included mandatory compulsory primary education in 2004 and completing the construction of 500 new classroom buildings by 2008. School enrolment doubled between 2001 and 2005 and the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) was about 160 percent. It is important to join in a discussion of the long-term implications of short-term solutions to educational development in Sierra Leone. The paper is organized under the following headings: (1) The context of pre and primary school development; (2) Current education system; (3) Issues in pre-primary and primary education; (4) Government statements on education and jobs respectively; (5) Questioning as a way to improve education quality; (6) Discussion; and (7) Recommendation.

Key words: primary school reconstruction; education and development; primary school reform in Sierra Leone

Joel Spring (2007) stated that most national school systems share the prevailing goal of educating workers for global economic competition by matching the school curriculum and instruction to the perceived needs of the global workplace. He proposed, “education for happiness and longevity” as a call to arms to change educational policy. Spring advocates for teaching through student activism and ethical responsibility in order to protect the longevity and happiness of the world’s peoples. These are lofty goals in poor countries with high illiteracy rates, and where pressing problems such as hunger, illiteracy, malnutrition, and disease stultify the hope of abstract goals such as happiness. War, violence, and destruction also make it difficult to realistically plan for economic, social, and educational progress. Hasty and patchwork solutions to perceived problems can handicap progress. There is a need to think through primary school educational development in Sierra Leone through constant questioning and debate, rather than depending on instant band-aid solutions.

1. Background

The ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone was catastrophic with regard to educational development among

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others. It destroyed infrastructure, and alienated youth and children from family values and national culture. The population was decimated and a large number of people displaced. Random killings, rapes, and mutilation became commonplace in a horrific nightmare of lawlessness, fear, and rampant terror. About 70 percent of schools in Sierra Leone were destroyed or occupied by rebel forces during the war. Those, which were not occupied, were left in various states of destruction and disrepair. Rebels used school furniture as firewood during such occupations. School reconstruction and rehabilitation were the priorities after the war. Although over 500 schools were constructed and rehabilitated from 2001 to 2007, the efforts have not solved the problem of scarce classrooms for all the children of school going age expected by 2015 under Universal Primary Education (UPE).

2. Current educational system

Sierra Leone's current 6-3-3-4 educational system was adopted in 1993. It consists of 3 years of pre-primary school education, 6 years of primary school, 3 years of junior secondary school, 3 years of senior secondary School, and 4 years of tertiary education (see Table 1). National educational goals indicated a striving toward the eradication of illiteracy, free compulsory basic education at the primary and junior secondary levels, and free senior secondary education when feasible. It is estimated that gross enrolment ratio in primary schools is over 100 percent.

Table 1 Sierra Leone education structure

Official age	Class	
		Postgraduate degree
		Undergraduate degree
17	SSS 3	Senior secondary school
16	SSS 2	
15	SSS 1	
14	JSS 3	Junior secondary school
13	JSS 2	
12	JSS 1	
11	P6	Primary
10	P5	
9	P4	
8	P3	
7	P2	
6	P1	
5	Prep 3	Preprimary
4	Prep 2	
3	Prep 1	

Source: Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, New England.

One reason for this is that older children enrolled in school in droves take advantage of the government's free primary school initiative. However, it is estimated that 25 percent of children between the ages of 6-11 and 12-14 were still not in school and had never attended school in 2004. The Gross Completion Ratio (GCR) for primary school was 65 percent, and only about 50 percent complete the primary school cycle without repeating a grade. About 70 percent of those who complete primary school move on to junior primary, and about 37 percent of junior primary school graduates move on to senior secondary school. Tertiary education is open and available to a small

segment of students who want to attain tertiary education status.

3. Issues in pre- and primary education

3.1 Pre-primary education

The main objective of nursery school under the 6-3-3-4 system is to prepare children for primary school. Children between the ages of three and six are expected to acquire a formal or informal nursery education. This means that a curriculum for nursery school education should be available and that teachers and resources should be provided to support such enterprises. Pre-primary education is not considered a right in Sierra Leone; however, there are private schools in the capital, Freetown and other large cities. The Ministry of Education pays the salaries of nursery school teachers, and provides oversight through the Nursery Schools Association and the Inspectorate Division of the Ministry of Education.

What should be the content of the nursery school curriculum and the rationale for such content? What kinds of resources do nursery schools need? What should be the educational qualifications of nursery school teachers and nursery aides and who should provide the professional training for nursery school personnel? In what ways should nursery school administration cooperate with medical, psychological, and public health professionals? How should nursery schools be funded?

School readiness involves the development of four basic skills: recognize the letters of the alphabet, count to 20 or higher, write their names, and read, or pretend to read. Nursery school is also expected to further the socialization of the children and assist them to develop values and mores of the society in which they live. In a country with acute poverty, preparing children in nursery school is a huge challenge. There is no exact profile of what a child who is ready for school should know and be able to do.

However, children of professional and working class parents are more likely to have an edge in acquiring physical, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive skills faster than children of parents who are poor, illiterate, and unemployed. This means that latent achievement gaps tend to exist among children even at the nursery school level. If pre-primary school is supposed to prepare children for primary school, why is there no comprehensive plan to provide nursery school education to all children of nursery school age? If the answer to that is, “there is no money to do it”, why is there no attempt to look at alternative approaches to nursery education?

3.2 Primary education

Primary schooling in Sierra Leone under the 6-3-3-4 system should begin at the age of six and last until age twelve. Student-teacher ratio is 66:1. The stipulated government ratio is 40:1. The Ministry of Education controls the administration of primary schools. However, primary schools may be operated by private proprietors, businesses, non-governmental organizations, religious groups, local governments, or colleges and universities. What are the general goals of primary schooling?

The children are expected to be able to communicate competently and manipulate figures. The language of instructional communication in class 1, 2, and 3 is the children’s community language, while the language of instruction in classes 5 and 6 is English. The curriculum places heavy emphasis on knowledge about Sierra Leone and her relations with the world, and natural and social sciences in the upper primary grades. A National Primary School Examination (NPSE) graded by an autonomous external body, the West African Examination Council tests, the whole range of the students’ competence after completion of class 6. The results of this examination are presented to a principal of a Junior Secondary school together with the children’s continuous assessment report

card. What is the purpose of continuous assessment and what weight is assigned to the students' (NPSE) results before a decision is made to accept that student to junior secondary school?

Will these new classrooms have the basic resources for teachers such as chalk, textbooks, paper, and pencils? A large number of teachers were killed or left the country during the war years. There is still a shortage of teachers in all classrooms. Are there incentives to train unqualified teachers and to retain those who are qualified? Government spending on education and international assistance together constitutes about 20 percent of the national budget after the war. Is there transparency on how this money is spent? Are there efforts to cut mismanagement and fraud?

Between 2001/2002 and 2004/2005, primary school enrolment doubled. There were also increases in junior secondary school, senior secondary school, and tertiary education. Children who complete the primary school cycle take the National Primary School Examination (NPSE). The number of students who passed the NPSE in 2001 was 21,700. This number increased in 2005 to 55,800. The Education Ministry raised the passing score for the NPSE in 2005 to reduce the success rate of NPSE candidates, which stood before the restriction at a stable 80 percent. Is this a prudent decision? What does such action say about equal educational opportunity? What does it say about interfering in the development of self-esteem on those who failed because of the higher scores? What are the economic repercussions to parents who have to provide financially for their children to prepare again and retake the NPSE?

4. Access

Good progress has been made in increasing access to education in Sierra Leone. However, 25-30 percent of primary-school-aged children (more than 240,000) are still out of school. The millennium development challenge is to enroll these children in school and retain them until they complete the cycle by 2015 (Education for All: Universal Primary Education by 2015). In the Sierra Leone context, the goal is Universal Basic Education (UBE), which includes 6 years of primary school and 3 years of junior secondary school. It is more challenging and requires another forum for discussion.

5. Government statements on jobs and education

Sierra Leone successfully changed governments in 2007 after new elections. President, Ernest Koroma posted the following statements in his election website with regard to jobs and education respectively.

Statement on jobs: "Many of our children are currently faced with a bleak future due to limited training and fewer job opportunities. My administration will implement policies to provide training and encourage development that will increase employment and restore hope".

Statement on education: "Most of our schools are overcrowded with low quality education. Quality education is a key to the development of any nation. My government will make a solid investment in Sierra Leone's future by increasing educational opportunities for our children by providing affordable, quality education". What do these statements mean? The first verse of the Johnny Nash lyric states:

There are more questions than answers,
pictures in my mind that will not show,
there are more questions than answers,
and the more I find out the less I know,

yeah, the more I find out the less I know.

Asking questions intended to clarify the statements and to identify measurable elements would help one to understand a writer's intentions better. Journalists and students always reserve the right to ask follow-up questions related to the prior question. Haisch (2007) wrote, "Advances are made by answering questions. Discoveries are made by questioning answers".

(1) Answering questions: The following paragraphs attempt to show how ostensibly good answers to basic problems may contain ambiguities, which require further questions for clarity. Questioning is an art that requires some training and persistence. Negotiators, planners, and policy makers in developing countries such as Sierra Leone may be able to save their respective countries future grief if they ask pertinent questions. Here is an example of how the questioning process might devolve. A problem is presented, then a question, then an answer. Follow-up questions end the cycle.

(2) Problem: During the decade long civil war, schools were destroyed, damaged, and abandoned. Schooling came to a halt. Many educators, teachers, and educational professionals and paraprofessionals were killed, and others left the country.

(3) Question: What should be the priorities of the post conflict government to educational development?

(4) Answer: Rebuild and rehabilitate schools. Facilitate increased school enrolment generally, and that of girls in particular. Mandate Universal Free Primary Education (UPE). Rehire and retrain teachers. Decentralize the delivery of education.

(5) Questions to the answer: Will the new and renovated classrooms have sufficient desks, chairs, and school supplies for all children who are eligible to enroll in primary school? Would the buildings be accessible to disabled children in wheelchairs? Are there sufficient administrators and teachers to do the job efficiently? How much revenue will be lost to schools because of UPE? How would the money lost to schools because of UPE be refunded to schools? What kinds of knowledge should teachers in the post-conflict era have? What kinds of professional education and in-service should teachers have? How frequently should these be made available to teachers and administrators? Where will the money come from for teacher salaries and professional development? What will be a reasonable student-teacher ratio in the primary schools for effective teaching to take place? Where will the money come from for the maintenance of buildings and grounds?

6. Decentralization

(1) Problem: The central government controls and influences everything in the educational process from stipulating education policy to paying teachers. It is known that the central government is stretched with regard to available personnel, and expertise in various areas; some say that decentralization is the answer.

(2) Question: What is the government's policy toward decentralization?

(3) Answer: The decentralization of service delivery, which began in 2005/2006, transferred power to local district, city, or town councils to control and supervise primary and Junior Secondary schools.

(4) Questions to answer: Capacity building. What steps were taken to train administrative and supervisory personnel in these localities before decentralizing the delivery of primary education? What was the financial capacity of these entities to manage budgets, pay teacher salaries, provide textbooks and teaching materials, and rehabilitate and construct schools within their jurisdictions? What was the capability and commitment of the Ministry of Education to assist schools in localities that were financially strapped?

7. Discussion

The 2004 Education Act mandated that all children must complete basic education, which translates to 3 years of primary school and 3 years of junior primary school (JSS). School fees were supposedly abolished and Free Primary Education introduced in 2001. Additionally, free education for girls in junior secondary schools in the northern and eastern regions were mandated in 2004. Overall, school enrollments rapidly increased. However, the number of teachers was not increased and Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTR) reached 66:1 and 112 pupils per qualified teacher. What happens when free primary education is mandated without an increase in the number of teachers? There are still about 25 to 30 percent of children of primary school age (more than 240,000) who are currently out of school. What are the implications of this on school rehabilitation and reconstruction?

Asking questions helps to clarify issues, concepts, and ambiguities. It also assists policy makers to prepare to handle contingencies that may arise. Questioning is an integral part of the planning and learning processes. There may be more questions than answers in solving issues of educational reconstruction, especially in states transitioning from violent conflict to post conflict rehabilitation and construction. Those who write development plans and negotiate funding for development funds must be versed in the art of questioning so that they do not end up with more challenges when attempting to solve current problems.

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(Edited by Jean and Max)