

Secondary Education Reforms and Partisan Politics in Sierra Leone: Implications for Students and Teachers

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fellow. Her research interests include education, youth, gender, peace and conflict, development, technology, and public policy in Africa. Christiana's dissertation is a comparative case study of the impact of the 2018 Free Quality School Education Program on the schooling experiences and future aspirations of secondary school students in Sierra Leone. Previously, she conducted policy research for EdTech Hub, UNESCO Dakar, and UNOPS Amman. She also worked as an assistant dean of undergraduate admission at William & Mary and as a senior resident assistant for the Mandela Washington Fellowship Program at the Presidential Precinct. Christiana was born in Sierra Leone and raised in Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda, and Bangladesh before immigrating to the United States to pursue higher education. She holds a B.A. in sociology from William & Mary and a M.S.Ed. in international educational development from the University of Pennsylvania.

Abstract

In recent years, African governments have tried to expand access to schooling for

the region's growing youth population by introducing tuition-free policies and other education reforms at the secondary school level. But political elites often design and implement policies that serve individual and party interests at the expense of teaching and learning needs of students and teachers. This article explores the implications of partisan politics on the schooling experiences of secondary school students and teachers in Sierra Leone. Drawing on policy document analysis and ethnographic data collection in three Government secondary schools in Freetown and Makeni, this study argues that divergent policies around school fees and the number of years required to complete senior secondary school introduced under Sierra Leone's two main opposition parties - the All People's Congress and the Sierra Leone People's Party - have reproduced inequalities through additional schooling costs and insufficient time to prepare for high stakes national examinations that marginalize under-resourced students.

Introduction

A lack of financing for secondary education in Africa has left critical gaps in quality schooling opportunities for youths in the region. The average primary school gross enrollment ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa is 99.75% compared to 43.21% for secondary school.¹ Over the last decade, African governments have introduced tuition-free policies and other education

reforms at the secondary level in an attempt to expand access to education for students who have completed primary school but have not yet acquired the qualifications to enroll in tertiary institutions.² Without careful monitoring and evaluation, political elites are likely to implement education policies that benefit individual and party interests over the teaching and learning needs of students and teachers.³

The influence of partisan politics on education planning in Africa has been well-documented by scholars and practitioners. A cross-national statistical analysis of Chinese aid in forty-four African countries found that birth regions of the current political leader are significantly more likely to receive education aid.⁴ Country case studies also demonstrate that political parties seek to acquire votes during elections by paying fees for national examinations⁵ or by introducing Universal Primary Education and abolishing school fees.^{6,7} However, these studies tend to focus on the impact of partisan politics at the primary school level.⁸ Furthermore, few studies have assessed the implications of partisan education policy planning for students and teachers.

This article uses a case study of Sierra Leone to demonstrate how partisan politics hamper long-term efforts to reform secondary education so that it benefits the most marginalized. Drawing on policy document analysis and ethnographic data collection in three Government secondary schools in Freetown and Makeni, this work argues that divergent policies around school fees and the number of years required to complete senior secondary school under Sierra Leone's two main opposition parties — the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) — have reproduced education inequalities through additional costs and insufficient time to prepare for high stakes national examinations that marginalize un-

der-resourced students. Patterns of partisan politics in education planning and their implications for students and teachers are important to analyze as Sierra Leone and several other African countries prepare for upcoming presidential elections in 2023.

Education and Politics in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a small country of roughly 7.8 million people bordered by Guinea and Liberia. The historical significance of Sierra Leone as an education hub in West Africa and its experience with civil war from 1991-2002, the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic all resulting in school closures for over 2.5 million students makes it an important case study of the politics of contemporary education reform in Africa.

Education provisions in the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord called for a number of reforms, most notably that “the Government shall provide free compulsory education for the first nine years of schooling (Basic Education) and shall endeavor to provide free schooling for a further three years.”⁹ However, nearly two decades after the end of the civil war, there have not been significant improvements in the education system, especially at the secondary school level. The secondary school gross enrollment ratio in Sierra Leone is 41.8% compared to a global average of 75.35%.¹⁰ Adolescent girls have been disproportionately affected by a broken education system resulting from crises amidst existing cultural norms, gender-based violence, and teenage pregnancies.¹¹ Despite valuable research on education in Sierra Leone, there remain important puzzles as to why educational outcomes are so poor, considering the extensive international investment and sustained effort to reform the education system.

This article seeks to explain why educational outcomes are so poor by considering

partisan politics between two main political parties in Sierra Leone: the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). While there have been several smaller political parties throughout Sierra Leone's post-independence period, the APC and the SLPP are the largest and most influential political parties with an enduring history of disagreement and violence over various issues.¹² This paper explores how contentious politics between the APC and the SLPP emerge in the education sector and asks two interrelated questions: 1) What are the major differences in postwar secondary education policies introduced under the APC and the SLPP? 2) How do these differences shape the schooling experiences for students and teachers in Sierra Leone?

Research Design and Methods

To answer these research questions, this study systematically reviewed two comprehensive national education reforms that were designed and implemented under the APC and the SLPP: the 2010 National Education Policy (NEP) and the 2018 Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Program. In addition, press releases, presidential and ministerial speeches, newspaper articles, and photographs relevant to these policies were reviewed. Documents were retrieved from Government and international organization websites, print newspapers were collected, Google and *LexisUni* database were used to search for online news articles, and *NVivo* qualitative software was used to code digital material.

Next, ethnographic data was collected from September 2020 through December 2021 as part of a larger study on the gendered impact of the FQSE. During this period, classroom and school observations were conducted in one co-educational Government secondary school in the capital city of Freetown and two single-sex Government secondary schools

in the town of Makeni located three hours north of the capital that have been approved for tuition free subsidies by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. These ethnographic observations were supplemented with 12 focus group discussions with students and over 90 informal and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, families, and policymakers in English and Krio. The combination of document analysis and ethnographic data collection allowed for a holistic and in-depth analysis of the implications of partisan politics on the experiences of students and teachers in Sierra Leone.

Policy Analysis and the Rhetoric Surrounding Education Reform

After the end of the civil war in 2002, both APC and SLPP promised to reconstruct the education system leading up to presidential elections in 2007, 2012, and 2018.^{13,14} The 2010 NEP under APC and the 2018 FQSE under SLPP are two comprehensive education reforms resulting from these campaign promises. In these policies, both parties acknowledge the negative effects of the civil war on the country's education system and view education as key to peacebuilding and economic growth.

But while the APC and SLPP share a commitment to increasing access to quality secondary education for youths in Sierra Leone outlined in the 2004 Education Act, they developed conflicting policies around school fees and the number of years required to complete senior secondary school. The NEP introduced tuition-free education only for primary and for girls entering junior secondary school.¹⁵ In 2018, the FQSE extended tuition-free education for pre-primary, primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary school students attending government and government-assisted institutions.¹⁶ This policy was met with criticism from the opposition, who

said that the government does not have the funds to support this project.¹⁷ The government, however, increased education spending from 11% to 21% of the national budget to support this reform, and the President Bio directly addressed his skeptics in his remarks of the launch of the FQSE on August 20, 2018:

“During the election campaign when I promised free quality education, my political opponents said it was never possible and described it as a political gimmick. My political opponents also said the promise was a political deception just to win votes and the cynics thought it was the usual election promise that quickly disappears after election results. In less than six months since I assumed Office as President, we are gathered here today to say free quality education is POSSIBLE.”¹⁸

Despite the FQSE being the flagship program of his administration, President Bio has refuted claims that this reform is motivated by partisan politics, stating that “this free quality education programme is for every Sierra Leonean. It is not for one region, one tribe, one political party.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the perception amongst some Sierra Leoneans interviewed by the author is that this reform favors those affiliated with the SLPP.

The number of years required to complete senior secondary school has also been a topic of contention between the two parties. During his first term as President, APC representative Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma implemented the 6-3-4-4 national system of education: six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school, four years of senior secondary school, and four years of college/university.²⁰ This change was stated to have been made to improve learning outcomes by providing senior secondary school students with an extra

year of schooling to prepare for their national exams. When SLPP regained power in 2018, President Bio removed the fourth year of senior secondary school, returning the schooling structure back to the 6-3-3-4 system, stating concerns about lack of classroom space and teaching capacity to support the additional year of secondary schooling. In addition, he explained that limiting the number of years required for senior secondary school would mitigate teenage pregnancy and early school leaving among girls who consider the number of years of schooling to be too many.²¹

The SLPP's return to the 6-3-3-4 schooling system has been met with criticism from APC opposition who warned that “the sudden change from 6-3-4-4 to 6-3-3-4 is not being done before an inquiry by thoughtful educators to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of both systems.”²² The current Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Dr. David Moinina Sengeh, has denied that education policy and planning under the Bio Administration have been influenced by party interests, stating that “when President Bio says Free Quality School Education isn't about politics, he means just that. Education cannot be politicized.”²³ However, in his keynote address at the launch of the FQSE on August 20, 2018, President Bio remarked, “I promised the pupils that there will be no more SS4 and today I have honored that promise,” which indicates the removal of the fourth year of senior secondary school was, in fact, politically motivated.²⁴

Partisan Politics in Education: Implications for Students and Teachers

Ethnographic research reveals that partisan politics in the education sector have important implications for students and teachers in Sierra Leone that coalesce around additional costs of tuition-free education and the high stakes of

national examinations. Since the introduction of the FQSE in 2018, enrollment across the country has increased, especially at the secondary school level. According to the 2020 Annual School Census, the enrollment in junior secondary for the 2019/2020 academic year increased by 3.5% and senior secondary increased by 5.4% from the previous school year.²⁵ However, schooling infrastructure and teaching capacity is not available to support this rapid increase in enrollment. The high teacher-student ratio presents many challenges for student learning, giving feedback on school assignments, and teacher classroom management. Overwhelmed teachers frequently turn to corporal punishment to manage student behavior in class and tend to focus on supporting the few high achieving students that they believe will do well on national examinations, leaving the learning needs of academically challenged students at the margins. In addition, some schools function under a double-shift system with separate sessions in the morning and the afternoon due to a lack of classroom capacity. Overcrowded classrooms also make it impossible to observe COVID-19 social distancing protocols.

Another challenge is that while the FQSE covers school fees, families are still responsible for providing uniforms, school supplies, transportation, and meals. Yet many families cannot afford these items. Teachers and administrators also expressed that the school subsidies per pupil provided by the Ministry of Education to Government schools are insufficient compared to the revenues that previously came from student tuition. To meet this financial gap, teachers and school administrators sell school supplies, uniforms, badges, practice examination questions, food, and other items to students, which are not affordable to all students. A fragmented education development plan between the APC and the SLPP Administrations on how to deliver

free education has led to unequal schooling opportunities for under-resourced students.

Unequal educational practices resulting from insufficient time to prepare for high stakes national examinations is another consequence of partisan politics in the education sector. There are three main national exams taken prior to tertiary education in Sierra Leone: the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) taken after class six to enter junior secondary school, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) after the completion of final year of junior secondary school, and the West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) after the completion of the final year of senior secondary school. In 2019, the national average pass rate for the NPSE was 72.8% compared to 49.9% on the BECE and 7.6% on the WASSCE.²⁶

Changes from the 6-3-3-4 system under SLPP to the 6-3-4-4 system under the APC back to the current 6-3-3-4 system under the SLPP has not helped to address low performance in secondary school examinations. Some students take additional lessons outside of normal schooling hours, which are conducted by teachers or other independent private instructors. Some students also participated in a practice called ‘camping’ where they spend the night at school with fellow classmates and their teachers for several days leading up to the exam revising past examination questions and covering additional content in the syllabus. On the surface, extra lessons and ‘camping’ seem to enhance learning, but the financial costs associated with these activities create unequal learning advantages for students and families who can afford these services while marginalizing their less-resourced students. This uneven distribution of learning opportunities has encouraged examination malpractices such as cheating and paying or taking bribes.²⁷ Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Committee has tried to address this problem by raiding

centers and homes where malpractice is taking place and establishing fines, but this has done very little to stop these practices.

When discussing issues of extra lessons, ‘camping’, and examination malpractices with secondary school students and teachers, many stated not having enough time to cover all the materials in the syllabus in preparation for national exams as the primary motivation for partaking in these activities. Limited time to prepare for national examinations was a major source of anxiety for students and teachers during the 2020-2021 academic year due to the delayed start of schooling resulting from COVID-19 school closures. Some students admitted that they participated in examination malpractices because they just simply did not know the academic content. In a discussion with one secondary school principal, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the removal of the SSS4 and stated that “the Government did it because they wanted to get votes from the pupils. In Sierra Leone, you have to be 18 to vote and many of the secondary school students are around that age. Many of them also do not want to go to school, so the Government did it to win their votes.”²⁸

Conclusion

This case study of Sierra Leone illustrates the impact of partisan politics on education sector planning and the implications competing policies have on teaching and learning. Over the past decade, the APC and SLPP have implemented conflicting designs in the 2010 NEP and the 2018 FQSE around school fees and the number of years required to complete senior secondary school. The lack of coordination between the two parties on these policy issues has led to teaching and learning costs as well as financial costs for students, their teachers, and their families. By shedding light into these challenges, I hope to foster closer monitoring and evaluation of

education policies during elections and party transitions in order to limit the propensity of political elites to implement education policies for individual and party interests at the expense of students and teachers.

Endnotes

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