

Full Length Research Paper

Investigating the challenges facing effective implementation of free primary education in Bo District, Southern Sierra Leone

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This paper aims to examine the obstacles hindering the successful implementation of Free Primary teaching in Kakua chiefdom, Bo district, Southern Sierra Leone, focusing on the adequacy of funding and provision of educational resources to schools. The research employed a survey design with a cross-sectional approach, involving the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data from various respondents simultaneously. The target population consisted of 600 participants, including 20 school leaders, 575 teachers, and 5 education officers from the Bo district. The sample, comprising 120 responses, included one deputy director (DD), two zonal executives of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (ZESLTU), nine school leaders, and 108 teachers. The DD and ZESLTU executives were selected through purposive sampling, while school leaders and teachers were chosen through proportionate sampling. Interviews were scheduled with the Sierra Leone Teachers Union's zonal executives and DD. The results revealed that a majority of teachers reported overcrowded classrooms attributed to free primary education, aligning with findings from other research. The necessary number of classrooms exhibited variation, with an average deficit of 2 per school. Teachers reported inadequacies in classrooms, urinals, toilets, desks, and textbooks. However, other teaching and learning aids were generally rated as sufficient. This highlights a lack of resources in schools, potentially impeding the efforts of teachers and school administrators. Therefore, the study recommends that the government should allocate adequate funding, time, and resources to ensure the effective implementation of free primary school education without compromising quality.

Key words: Challenges, free primary education, Sierra Leone.

INTRODUCTION

At independence, Sierra Leone, with its seemingly unparalleled track record in education and a vibrant, productive bureaucracy, was rated as one of the success stories among new African states (Entwistle, 2015).

Fourah Bay College, established in 1829, made commendable strides in providing enviable quality education not only for Sierra Leoneans but also for other West Africans. Sierra Leone earned the moniker 'Athens

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of West Africa' due to its reputation for offering quality education on the African continent (Paracka, 2004). Sadly, forty-two years later, in 2003, Sierra Leone was rated as having one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. According to Cost (2006), a major policy shift occurred with the introduction of the 6334 in the education system. The government at that time, in an effort to further enhance education, implemented a Free Education Policy. The present government undertook an ambitious and commendable venture to provide education to an increased number of children. In alignment with the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit, which 'challenged' 189 countries worldwide to provide basic education for all by 2015, the Sierra Leone government designed several policies to enhance access to and quality of education in the country. One significant policy was the Education for All Action Plan (EFA).

Under the EFA Action Plan, the government initiated the provision of Universal Primary Education in September 2001. A key component of the EFA Action Plan was the elimination of primary school tuition fees, replaced by a fee subsidy of 2,000 Leones per pupil per term for the three terms. The EFA Action Plan also included the provision of teaching and learning materials. The primary objective of the policy was to ensure that all children from Class 1 to JSS 3 have 'unfettered' access to education regardless of their gender, social, cultural, or economic backgrounds.

Against the backdrop of ongoing challenges in the effective implementation of free primary education in the Bo district, this study was conceived with the aim of investigating the challenges facing the effective implementation of free primary education in Bo district, southern Sierra Leone.

Aims and objectives of the study

The research was carried out with the following aims and objectives in mind:

- (1) To determine the obstacles to the successful implementation of free primary education in Bo district
- (2) To determine the challenges facing effective implementation of free primary education in Bo district
- (3) To determine the adequacy of primary education funds allotted to the government-aided schools in the Bo district

METHODS

The study employed a survey design with a cross-sectional approach, involving the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data from various respondents. This research adopted a descriptive research design, which serves as a comprehensive plan, roadmap, and blueprint strategy of investigation conceived to obtain answers to research objectives; it is considered the core of any study (Kothari, 2004). This design was chosen because it

examines phenomena, events, and issues as they naturally occur (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). Its suitability lies in its ability to thoroughly explore the problem at hand, define it, clarify it, and gather pertinent information that can be beneficial to individuals in the education sector. Moreover, this design facilitates the generalization of results and is both easy to administer and record.

Study area

The study was conducted in Government Assisted Primary Schools located in Kakua chiefdom, Bo district, Southern region of Sierra Leone. Bo district stands as the second most populous district in Sierra Leone, following the Western Area Urban district. The city of Bo in the Kakua chiefdom, the second-largest city in Sierra Leone, serves as the capital and largest city of the district. Other major towns in the district include Baoma, Bumpeh, Serabu, Sumbuya, Baiima, and Yele. As of the 2015 census, the district's population is 547,201. Bo district shares borders with Kenema district to the east, Tonkolili district to the north, Moyamba district to the west, Bonthe district to the southwest, and Pujehun district to the south. Encompassing a total area of 5,473.6 km, Bo district comprises fifteen chiefdoms.

Singleton (1993) advises that the ideal setting for any study should be easily accessible to the researcher and should permit instant rapport with the informants. Bo district in the Southern region was chosen because it was within reach for the researcher. Additionally, reports from the Sierra Teachers Union Office in Bo indicated that primary schools were encountering challenges in the effective implementation of Free Primary Education in Bo district, Southern Sierra Leone. Obtaining empirical data regarding the difficulties facing the effective implementation of free primary education in the district would be crucial.

Target population

The population for this study comprises male and female primary school teachers, as well as school leaders in all 20 government assisted primary schools in Kakua chiefdom, Bo district. The Deputy Director and the four zonal executives of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) in the Kakua chiefdom were also included in the study. Therefore, the total population for the study consists of 600 subjects.

Sample size and sampling procedures

The sample size for this study was determined based on the recommendation of Amedeho (2002), who suggested that for descriptive studies, the sample size should fall within the range of 10 to 20% of the population. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) and Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) concur with Amedeho (2002) and further emphasize that a sample size ranging from 5 to 20% is ideal for representing the entire population. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) specifically recommend a minimum sample size of 20% for educational research when the target population is small (less than 1000 members).

In line with proportionate sampling, the researcher selected 120 participants from the 600 members of the target population, constituting 20% as per Amedeho's (2000) recommendation. The sample included 108 teachers and 9 school leaders, selected proportionately. Additionally, one Deputy Director of Education and two Zonal Executives of SLTU were purposively chosen. This sample size was deemed adequate for the investigation. Table 1 provides a summary of these details.

Objective 1: To determine the obstacles to the successful

Table 1. Matrix of sampling.

Item	Number	Size of sample
School leaders	20	9
Instructors	575	108
SLTU	4	2
DD	1	1
Total	600	120

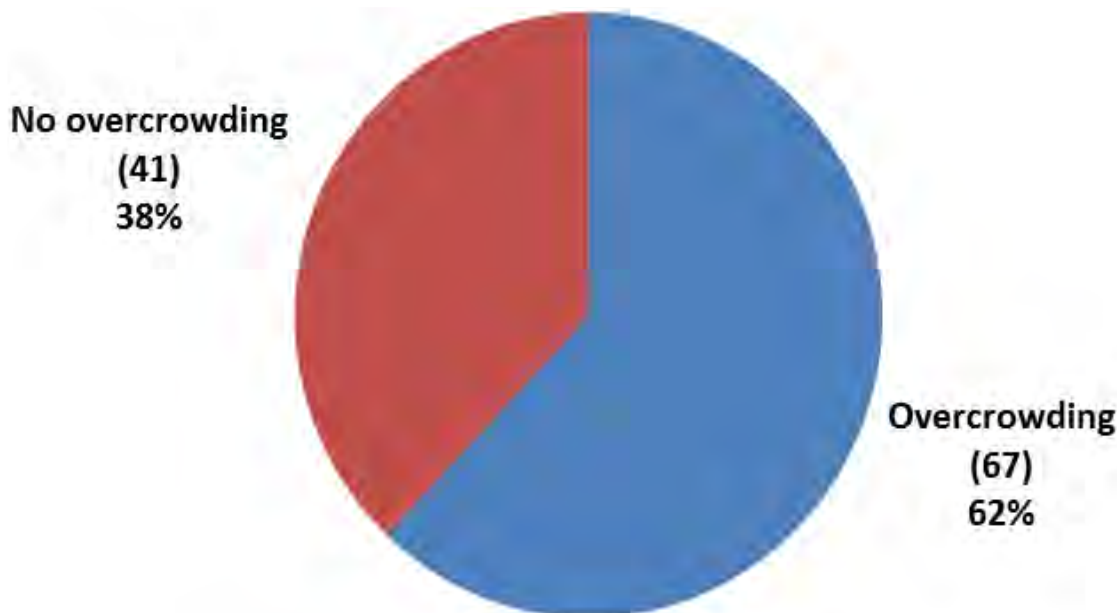


Figure 1. Overcrowding in classes as a result of FPE.

implementation of free primary education in Bo district.

Objective 2: To determine the challenges facing effective implementation of free primary education in Bo district

Objective 3: To determine the adequacy of primary education funds allotted to the government-aided schools in the Bo district.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics of respondents

The study collected demographic information from the respondents, including details on gender, work experience, and education levels. The research conducted in Kakua chiefdom, Bo district, Southern Region, Sierra Leone, focused on government-assisted primary schools, involving the participation of 108 teachers and 9 school leaders. The gender distribution among teachers was equal, with 50% being female and 50% male. Among school leaders, 44.4% were men, and 55.6% were women.

The investigation aimed to uncover the educational backgrounds of the teachers and school leaders. Figure 1

illustrates the percentage of teachers who reported overcrowded classrooms due to free primary education. Of the teachers surveyed, 62.0% indicated that their classes were overcrowded because of free primary education, while 38.0% reported that their classes were not overcrowded. This finding suggests that most schools experienced overcrowded classrooms, aligning with research from other sources. For instance, Moranga (2013) found that teachers in the majority of sub-Saharan African nations typically work in crowded, multi-grade classrooms (with 40 to 80 students per class). This overcrowding is primarily attributed to a significant increase in student enrollment in primary and secondary education. According to Moranga (2013), congestion, along with other issues, remains a prevalent challenge.

Table 2 illustrates that the required number of classrooms in each school varied from 10 to 22. However, the available number of classrooms ranged from 8 to 20. Across the nine schools, a total of 135 classrooms were needed, averaging 15 classrooms per school. Nevertheless, the schools had a total of 120 classrooms, averaging 13 classrooms per school,

Table 2. The number of classrooms that schools must have.

Institution	No. required	No. available	Unavailable
PS-1	16	14	2
PS-2	16	16	0
PS-3	19	16	0
PS-4	22	20	2
PS-5	12	12	0
PS-6	10	8	2
PS-7	12	12	0
PS-8	11	10	1
PS-9	17	12	5
Total sum	135	120	15
Average	15	13	2

Table 3. Instructor evaluations of sufficient resources.

Resources	Adequate no.	Percent	Inadequate no.	Percent
Tutorial room	53	49.1	55	50.9
Restrooms/Latrines	41	38.0	67	62.0
School desks	53	50.0	54	50.0
Course books	67	62.0	41	38.0
Resources for teaching and learning (charts, chalk, writing materials)	80	74.0	28	25.9

resulting in an average deficit of 2 classrooms per school. While three schools did not require additional classrooms, others needed up to five more. Proper utilization of facilities is crucial for schools to enhance learning opportunities for students, including spaces such as staff rooms and administrative offices.

In addition, Table 3 indicates that 50.9% of the teachers believed the classrooms were insufficient, while 49.1% considered them adequate. Regarding urinals and toilets, 38% of teachers rated them as adequate, while 62% deemed them inadequate. Desks received equal ratings of 50% adequate and 50% inadequate. For textbooks, 38% of teachers considered them inadequate, while 62% rated them as adequate. Other teaching and learning aids, such as writing paper, charts, and chalk, were considered adequate by the majority of teachers (74%), while 25.9% rated them as inadequate. This analysis reveals that classrooms and sanitary resources were reported as the most lacking resources in the schools, according to the teachers.

These resources may be insufficient, posing challenges for teachers and school administrators in effectively carrying out their duties. Gongera and Okoth (2013), highlight the increasing administrative difficulties faced by school leaders, including inadequately constructed buildings, a shortage of classrooms and equipment, a lack of proper school furniture, especially desks, poor or non-existent maintenance and repairs, overcrowded

classrooms, and inadequate communication infrastructure and supporting services, especially health services. A shortage of these resources could compromise the quality of primary education in the country. For example, inadequate classrooms may lead to overcrowding, creating an unfavorable learning environment.

Another potential challenge in the implementation of free primary education is related to the adequacy of textbooks. Consequently, data were collected from school leaders on the number of classrooms available and the number required for each school. According to Table 4, the average number of students attending the schools increased gradually from 465 in 2018 to 530 in 2019 and 546 in 2020. This indicates that the implementation of free basic education led to an improvement in school enrollment. While commendable, an issue could arise if there are no corresponding increases in crucial resources such as teachers and instructional materials.

As per the Deputy Director of Education for Kakua chiefdom, Bo district, the implementation of Free Primary Education (FPE) resulted in a notable 30% increase in student enrollment within the district. He pointed out that while an increase in enrollment meant greater access, it also had a detrimental effect on curriculum delivery and educational quality.

According to the Zonal Executives of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (ZESLTU), FPE equated to more

Table 4. Enrollment figures for the nine schools (2018 to 2020).

Institution	2020	2019	2018
PS-1	385	522	548
PS-2	705	812	837
PS-3	606	671	702
PS-4	540	540	540
PS-5	334	381	412
PS-6	286	334	372
PS-7	586	607	584
PS-8	313	365	340
PS-9	427	534	579
Average	465	530	546

Table 5. Obstacles related to finances of free primary education.

Obstacles encountered	No. of school leaders	Percent
Insufficient funding	9	100.0
Government funds for school fee subsidies were released later than expected	8	88.8
Before implementing FPE, the government did not take into account funding ongoing projects	7	77.7
Delays in recruitment/promotion of teachers	9	100.0

students, particularly.

The third research question examined the amount of money the government allocated for the successful implementation of free primary school education in Kakua chiefdom, Bo district. Globally, including Sierra Leone, government support is essential for the development of government-run schools. When queried about whether the funding provided to their schools met their needs, all school leaders provided negative responses, indicating that the funding fell short of their requirements. This information was gathered during the research.

Table 5 outlines the challenges school leaders face in securing government funding for free primary education. According to the table, all school leaders (100%) stated that the money allocated to their schools was insufficient.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that free primary education facilitated increased student attendance, contributing to equity in primary education. The primary objective of the study was to explore the challenges hindering the successful implementation of free primary education, particularly regarding the adequacy of physical infrastructure. The results revealed a deficit in school supplies and utilities due to the strain imposed by free primary education on the available classroom resources. Research on the required number of classrooms, for instance, exposed a general insufficiency of classrooms

per school.

The second objective was to investigate the difficulties in implementing free primary education concerning student enrollment and teacher workload. According to the study, the average number of students in schools steadily increased. However, there was an inadequate provision to meet this growing demand.

Recommendations

In light of the study's analysis, the researcher hopes to make the following recommendations:

- 1) The government should provide schools with adequate funding, time, and resources to ensure that free primary school education operates smoothly without compromising educational quality. The study found that the biggest obstacle to the successful implementation of free primary education in government-aided primary schools was a lack of sufficient funding and resources.
- 2) The study suggests that, in order to accommodate everyone entering the system, the government should construct more schools and hire more teachers for free primary education. Due to the lack of enough teachers on the government payroll, most teachers were teaching many lessons per week, compromising their effectiveness.
- 3) School leaders should enroll pupils according to the available resources and teachers to avoid overcrowding

schools and overworking teachers. The study revealed that most schools faced a shortage of classrooms, leading to overcrowded classes and placing a significant workload on teachers, potentially affecting their effectiveness.

4) School leaders should actively involve the surrounding community in school development programs and projects. Additionally, schools should initiate income-generating projects to supplement government funding.

5) The government should organize more capacity-building programs for both school leaders and teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and abilities to address emerging issues in the implementation of free primary education.

6) Ways of motivating school managers and teachers should be devised to compensate them for the extra workloads they are undertaking to manage their schools.

7) The directorate within the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) should have greater authority and access to resources to perform their duties as supervisors and monitors in schools more successfully. It is anticipated that their frequent visits to schools will be advantageous because, with their assistance, schools would be able to uphold the standards necessary for effective learning to occur.

8) The Teaching Service Commission (TSC) must be operationalized to handle the management of the teacher payroll, recruitment, and other associated issues.

9) The Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) must be seen advocating not only for the material benefits of the teachers but also for professional ethics.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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