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GENDER AND LITERARY LEARNING SPACES IN THE NIGER DELTA AREA OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education starts from the home through the process of socialization with society instituting educational learning spaces such as schools outside the home for specialized and broad-based knowledge. Schools have been affected by varying factors including gender with effects on learning, educational performances and well-being of students. The study was conducted to determine the factors affecting the well-being of male and female students in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The data were basically qualitative and includes focus group discussions (FGDs) and structured observations. Findings revealed that social class, residential locations, improved school infrastructures, and the nature of schools attended were major factors affecting female student well-being at school. Female students in a school with improved facilities and large number of urban-based students were as confident, competitive and communicative as their male student counterparts. The findings showed the importance of physical and social locations and nature of school attended on academic performances of students. Recommendations were made for the provision of adequate school facilities and human resources in all schools irrespective of location.

Keywords: Education; Learning Space; Gender; Rural; Drop-out

Introduction

Education of a child starts from the home through the process of socialization. The society also institute educational learning spaces such as schools outside the home for more specialized and broad-based knowledge especially necessary for modern times. Several factors have been known to affect learning and educational performances with accompanying gender dimensions which usually lead to drop-out in schools, ineffective teaching, poor learning and assimilation. According to EFA report (2012, p.1-2):

> Since 1999, the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria has increased from 7.4 to 10.5 million. The country is now home to the largest number of out-of-school children in the world and represents one in six out-of-school children globally. There are wide disparities depending on wealth, gender and where a child lives in the country. While almost all boys and girls from rich households in both rural and urban areas have been to school, 58% of girls from poor rural households have not had the chance to go to school. There are also disparities by region; 84% of the poorest girls' age 7-16years in the North-west region have never been to school, compared to only 18% of children in the South-east.

Looking at the situation of females globally, United Nations (2013, p.19) points out that:

> The historical and multiple forms of inequality against women and girls continue in both public and private settings. The discrimination and the barriers preventing women and girls from exercising their rights, accessing services and other opportunities, greatly increase their risks of experiencing violence. The norms, gender biases and discriminatory attitudes also often permeate the various sectors within government, whose public officials are likely to hold many of the same views as those in the society within which they live. Addressing gender inequality is therefore critical across sectors responsible for delivering justice, social, and health and security services to survivors and to those responsible for the education of boys and girls.

Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook and Hunt (2010) report that the number of children enrolled in schools has increased over time, yet a significant proportion of children who start primary school are dropping-out. There are many factors contributing to drop-out, some of which are associated with the individual, such as poor health or malnutrition and motivation. Others emerge

from children's household situations such as child labor and poverty. School level factors are also associated with increase pressure to drop-out such as teacher's absenteeism, school location and poor quality educational provision. The system of educational provision at the community level generates conditions that can affect the likelihood of children dropping-out from school. Therefore both demand and supply factors are embedded in cultural and contextual realities which make each circumstance different.

Hunt (2008) also reports that both statistical data and empirical research suggests that children from better off households are more likely to remain in school whilst those who are poorer are more likely never to have attended school or to drop-out once they are enrolled. Lewin (2008) also opines that often, drop-out is the result of a process rather than a single event; has more than one proximate cause and is fairly irreversible. According to NLII (2004) historically, the classroom has been the place where faculty and students come together for formal learning. The internet however has changed notions of place, time and space. Space now incorporates both the physical and the virtual. New methods of teaching and learning through improved understanding of cognition have emerged as well. Learning spaces are therefore defined as regularly scheduled, physical locations designed for face-to-face meetings of instructors and students. Examples include the lecture halls, seminar/discussion rooms, laboratories, studios etc. At the beginning of the century, basic learning skills included reading, writing and calculations, knowing was being able to remember and repeat. Today, knowing includes critical thought, persuasive expressions and the solution of complex problems. The paper examines socioeconomic factors affecting male and female students' learning/performances in rural secondary schools; rural-urban differences among students especially as it affects some parts of their behavior/well-being, and also the effects of school infrastructure on students' morale.

Methodology

Methodology for the study is basically qualitative and involves students in secondary schools from 5 rural communities in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria namely: Usugbenu, Ibore, Ebuddin, Usolo-emu and Illushi in Edo State, Nigeria. Multistage sampling technique was used in selecting the local government' areas (LGAs) and the study sites/communities and the selected LGAs are Esan Central and Esan Southeast. Rural communities with population of 3,000 but below 5,000 (according to the 1991 census which was the valid census when the study was conducted) were selected from rural Esanland (in Edo East Senatorial District).Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and structured observations were used to gather data. The students were equally drawn from the junior secondary school classes (JSS) [12-15 years] and the senior secondary school classes (SSS) [16-19 years]. Each group consisted of 9 males and 9 females randomly selected from JSS and SSS classes and separated by gender and class (JSS/SSS) basis. Altogether, 18 FGDs comprising 162 students (81 boys and 81 girls) were conducted on the basis of 4 FGDs per community. However, only 2 FGDs were conducted in Illushi community because the secondary school building was destroyed by storm and only very few students were in school. The FGDs sessions focus on health and water supply issues which can be safely said to cover subjects such as English Language, Integrated Science and Home-economics. These were subjects studied by all the students. Most importantly, the topic under discussion revolved around the student's homes and communities and not super-imposed in any way. Data was analyzed through manual content analysis.

Results

During the FGD sessions, observations showed that most of the girls were sullen, showing low self-esteem and almost incommunicado, irrespective of class. They tended to imitate each other in words and behavior. The situation at the sessions with the junior classes (female students from JSS classes) was worst. Structured observations after school hours in the communities' shows that the female students were more relaxed, communicative and playful at homes than at school, they were more confident, happier and expressed themselves freely. This is an indication that their homes were more conducive for them than the classroom/school. On the other hand male students tended to be confident and competed among themselves in a relaxed, playful and healthy way to display their knowledge concerning the subject matter.

However, the female students in the Government Model Secondary School in Usugbenu Community were confident. Most of the students in this school were urban-based. The girls were able

to compete robustly as their male counterparts and interact freely among themselves. The School is superior to that of other secondary schools in the study sites. Thus, it is evident that school learning spaces with poor infrastructure, located far from urban centers and with mainly rural-based students were more conducive and congenial for male students but not for most of the female students. Structured observation revealed that the females (as well as the males) were not in any way disorderly or antisocial. The fact that the students were well-mannered and orderly in school shows good disciplinary measures from home and at school. But the so-called disciplinary measures and appropriate behavior especially for females may have been carried too far. It is also likely that the female students were not encouraged in the class and in school environments. Differences were seen between students of rural schools with poor facilities and those with improved amenities and dominated by students from urban centers and also located not far from urban centers. This may be as a result of the fact that culture and specifically gender roles are likely to be held more strongly in rural areas than in urban centers.

Discussion

Rural areas remain the major reservoir of traditions/traditional roles which are usually defined through gender roles. In the rural schools studied, there were no visible audio-visual teaching aids and an inadequate number of teachers were also reported in one of the schools. Thus, social class, residential location, improved school infrastructures and the nature of schools attended are major factors affecting female students' well-being at school. The Social Democratic Theory by Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Wells (1961) points out that the best way to ensure equal opportunity, with every member of the society having an equal chance of becoming successful is through democracy. Inequalities in society can prevent equality of educational opportunities and secondly, reduce the effectiveness of education in promoting economic growth. Social class system in the society prevents the educational system from providing equal opportunities for all young people. Two main solutions were proposed; first, changing the educational system in order to provide all students with an equal opportunity to succeed and second, changing the class system by reducing the social inequalities which divide society. Inequality exists in the educational system as seen from the findings of the study. It seems that opportunities provided to students in the same country and in the same educational class differ in terms of school facilities. And besides, it is not only as a result of the function of the society through the decisions of it elected representatives but also determined by the low socio-economic status of parents which automatically and indirectly disempowered some students by virtue of their social class. This is because the better funded and more equipped secondary schools are not free of charge but expensive even though they are owned and funded by the government. Secondly, intelligent students who attended poorly equipped schools and from poor homes that could not afford all required school materials could also fail to compete effectively with their colleagues from expensive private schools with all required school materials. Thus, a situation of inequality and social stratification occurs indirectly and unintentionally thereby affecting mostly, poor students from poor rural areas with poorly equipped schools, lack of ICTs (Information Communication Technologies) and Mass Media. JISC (2006) further noted that learning is changing in the 21st century. Technologies such as interactive whiteboards, personal learning environments, wireless networks, and mobile devices, the internet, high quality digital learning resources and ability to access many of these from home and the workplace are altering the experience and aspirations of learners.
According to the UN (2013, p. 93) gender is defined as:

> The economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female in a particular point in time. It also refers to the socially constructed relationship between women and men and the attributes, behavior and activities to which each person is expected to adhere. Gender differences are determined and reinforced by cultural, historical, ethnic, religious and economic factors.

Aderinoye, Ojokheta and Olojede (2007) state that the education of Nigeria's nomadic populations via distance education and mobile learning methods can be seen as a positive step towards meaningful implementation of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) on equal access and brighter opportunities for all its citizen regardless of where they live. Mobile schools utilize collapsible classrooms that can be carried conveniently by pack animals. A typical mobile unit consists of 3 classrooms, each with spaces to serve 15 to 20 children and some are equipped with audio-visual teaching aids. The establishments of nomadic schools in Nigeria's nomadic states, however has failed

to produce desired results because of the non-integration of mobile learning technologies. The pastoral Fulani which forms a large part of the nomads are captive audience for radio and television programmes. They own radios which they carry along during herding. The literate world can therefore reach Fulani herdsmen without disrupting their nomadic life or means of livelihood. To improve literacy especially in the rural areas, the Nigerian Government has introduced radio and television educational programmes, supplied hardware such as radio, television and electric generators and also built viewing rooms for public use in these areas.

The school settings, availability of adequate infrastructure and classroom management styles is still very much important. As illustrated by Malcolm and Lippincott (2003, p. 14-15):

> While Classrooms can still be regarded as our core-learning spaces, it is obvious that a host of new factors and opportunities has dramatically changed this landscape. Indeed, so much is changing that we are forced to use a broader term like learning spaces which is now used to capture this wider range of venues for teaching and learning. Focusing just on classrooms is no longer an option. Another dimension of new learning spaces encompasses the support structures necessary for virtual learning spaces. These include ubiquitous connectivity on campus and importantly off-campus; learning management systems, and access to innovative software such as virtual environments.

In a study carried out in a rural area of Kwazulu-Natal, Muthukrishna and Kwela (2010) using t-test analysis, found that girls out-performed boys in a series of mathematics tests conducted in November, 2008 and between June and November 2009. However, the test conducted in November, 2009 showed a statistically significant difference in favour of females, $t(68) = 4.285$, $p<01$. However, the results of the t-test in the November 2009 test scores indicate that the difference between male and female students is not statistically significant, $t(70) = .943$, $p>.01$. Since there was no statistical difference; there is nothing in favour of female students. Content analysis from the study reveals that most of the girls believe that this was possible because the boys did not concentrate on their study/schoolwork but their focus was on being real Zulu boys, so they spend most of their time with older men and boys. Mensah (2007) in a study carried out on attitudes toward science among 496 junior secondary school male and female Students (JSS), in the Cape Coast Municipality of Central Region of Ghana found out that male students expressed positive attitudes to science in both JSS 1 and JSS 3. Students' attitudes and confidence were affected at all levels from elementary school to college. And that praise or blame for students' attitudes and confidence level cannot be placed at the door step of anyone. It is quite clear from the autobiographical accounts that an individual teacher has the opportunity to change students' perceptions about confidence in learning space or mathematics. It is also clear that students can carry attitudes over time and in the case of negative attitudes can make learning choices based solely on avoidance of a particular subject unless that attitude or confidence level is counteracted by a successful experience. It is the responsibility of educator at all levels to assess their practice in order to provide an environment that challenges and nurtures the learner, particularly as it relates to the study of science.

According to Abdullahi (2008), factors commonly identified as being responsible for the inequality between male and female enrollments in educational attainment include among others:

1) The school learning environment which disfavours female because of cultural expectations by teachers and learners and the setting up of different levels of academic expectations for male and female learners.
2) Primary socialization process which socialized males to be aggressive, assertive, domineering, explorative and engage in mentally challenging activities while females are socialized to be submissive, dependents and passive and also engage in mundane activities. Males therefore have educational advantage over females as a result of type of socialization.
3) Teaching methods that use comparative learning styles instead of cooperative learning styles.
4) Curriculum content which is mainly sexist.
5) Employment opportunity in school which tends to favour more males because of their educational advantages.

The study shows the relationship between variables such as learning, gender, location and infrastructure in schools. The behavior of the female students especially in the rural areas is drastically different from that of the male students as revealed by findings from the study and this is likely to have been influenced not only by classroom management styles but also by prevailing cultural constraints. Studies have shown differences in gender behavior and learning as well as rural-urban differentials but these have hardly been related to the nature and availability of infrastructure in schools.

Recommendations

Parents should attend to Parents Teachers Association (PTA) meetings regularly and be enlightened about the importance of ensuring that their children are studying and learning properly at school and also carrying out school work at home conveniently and regularly. Secondly, girl-child education is not only about enrollment but also about inculcating the right values, human rights, confidence and self-esteem. Thirdly, adequate school facilities as well as human resources such as adequate and qualified staff should be made available to all schools irrespective of locations to be able to meet the objectives and goals of the National Policy on Education (NPE). Fourthly, teachers should enable students to be creative; they should inspire learners and support them to develop their full potential. Teachers should work diligently to produce learners who are confident, adaptable, independent, and inspired to learn. Fifthly, teachers should be re-trained in learning skills necessary for relating effectively with both male and female students. In order, to stop gender biases, eliminate gender discrimination and ensure proper education and well-being of girls in schools and invariably ensure the development of the educational sector. Educational inequality in the provision of school infrastructure in the country should be eliminated; all citizens are entitled to equal opportunities without discrimination for a better society. As stated by the JISC: "Spaces are themselves agents of Change; Changed Spaces will change Practice" (JISC, 2006).

Mark Haysom also stated (in JISC, 2006)''I believe passionately that when you walk through the door of a place of learning, you should feel proud, uplifted, motivated....that should be our intent'' (Mark Haysom, Chief Executive of the Learning Skills Council (LSC) (pg.9).

Conclusion

Social class, residential/school location, improved school infrastructure and the nature of schools attended are major factors affecting female student well-being at school. This shows the effect of physical and social locations and the nature of schools attended on academic/educational performance and invariably future career prospect of students. As a result of the rural location of most secondary schools, it is likely that the parents assume that it is the teacher and school management that is responsible for the academic performance of the students. This factor coupled with the cultural impositions and domestic roles of females is very much likely to be responsible for the poor performance of female students. The differences noted among students especially females in schools with poor facilities, and students in schools with improved facilities show that improved facilities and classroom/learning space designs and availability of technology are critical to enhancing knowledge, confidence and competence.

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