

Perpetuating a Vicious Cycle: The Causes and Effects of Poorly Educated Children in Sierra Leone

Rebecca O’Neill

Abstract

Sierra Leone is a developing country located in West Africa. Many people in Sierra Leone are living in poverty, partially due to poor education. This article discusses the reasons for poor attendance and low-quality schooling as well as the effects of poor education, such as low literacy rates in adults. Furthermore, this article discusses how poor education and its causes perpetuate the cycle of poverty. In this article, the current strategies for promoting education in Sierra Leone are critiqued and other options for improving education are discussed. In conclusion, poor education is both a cause and effect of poverty in Sierra Leone and the improvement of education could be used as a tool to help break the vicious cycle of poverty in Sierra Leone.

I. Introduction

Sierra Leone is a country in Western Africa whose economy relies mainly on mining, particularly diamonds and rutile.³ It is a developing country with potential for economic growth as well as positive developments in health and education. From 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone endured a violent and destructive civil war, causing over 50,000 deaths, a ruined infrastructure, about two million people displaced, and the devastation of many primary schools.⁴ Currently, the country has stabilized and made an effort to utilize their potential. However, about 70 percent of the Sierra Leone population still lives below the poverty line.⁵ In addition, many children are working instead of attending school and the schools that are open are dilapidated and lack supplies. These reasons, among others, contribute to the low quality education and low student attendance rates in Sierra Leone. Though education in Sierra Leone has improved since the end of the civil war, there are problems to be resolved.

³ Central Intelligence Agency (2013).

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency (2013).

⁵ UNICEF (2008).

This article discusses these unresolved problems and the reasons for them. First, the problem of low attendance and dropout rates will be examined, including investigating how poverty and Sierra Leonean culture affect these rates. Next, the problem of poor school quality will be explored, including how inadequate funds for schooling and increased enrollment affect the shortage of supplies, space, and teachers. In addition, this article will assess the effects of poor education on the population of Sierra Leone, such as how it affects employment rates, literacy rates, and poverty rates. Furthermore, the techniques and efforts currently in use to promote education will be analyzed and other ways to assuage poor education in Sierra Leone will be suggested. Overall, the article will discuss how poor education and its causes and effects perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty.

II. Brief Literature Review

Many primary research articles focus on the multitude of problems with the education in Sierra Leone, discussing why there are low enrollment and high dropout rates as well as how the education and education system has very low quality. However, none of the articles focused on the effects of poor education, as will be done in this article. The following three articles and reports discuss the reasons behind the low quality of education and the low attendance rates.

The article, “The Out-of-school Children of Sierra Leone” by UNICEF (2008), argues that the main reason for children not being in school is poverty, but other factors, such as living situations (presence of parents), location, gender, religion, cost, teen pregnancy, and early marriage, also influence the low enrollment and high dropout rates. In support of this argument, UNICEF found that 52 percent of out-of-school children were orphans. In addition, many children, 87 percent, choose income-generating work over school due to the widespread poverty, claiming they would “rather work and get paid than sit in school and be hungry” (UNICEF, 2008, p. 4). UNICEF also lists several recommendations to the government of Sierra Leone to address the problems with education, such as targeting poor families for help with school costs, creating and enforcing child labor laws, providing children with sexual and reproductive health information, and creating incentives to attend school, perhaps by providing a free meal. UNICEF (2008, p. 7) insists that “education breaks the vicious cycle of poverty. It is the powerful weapon that vulnerable and marginalized children have to change their future.”

A “Report on Basic Education in Sierra Leone” was prepared by The Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) (2006). This report argued that simply increasing access to basic education, without addressing any other issues, would be completely useless. In addition, The CGG asserted that there were many problems with education in Sierra Leone, such as ineptitude, low standards of teaching and learning environment, corruption, and poor monitoring and evaluating of the educational systems. However, the article also argued that improvements of all these problems wouldn’t increase attendance rates. Instead, only the access to free, basic, quality education would make education meaningful to the children of Sierra Leone. The CGG then went on to analyze the supposed changes in the quality of education to find that the class sizes were still too large, there were still large dropout and male-female ratios, there were still very little supplies and space, there were still school costs, and the teachers were still unqualified. The Campaign for Good Governance then recommended several actions that could appease such disappointments.

The article, “Problems behind Education for All (EFA): The case of Sierra Leone,” by Mikako Nishimuko (2007) argued that the quality of education has been compromised because of the large and rapid increase in the number of students enrolled in school in Sierra Leone. For example, the

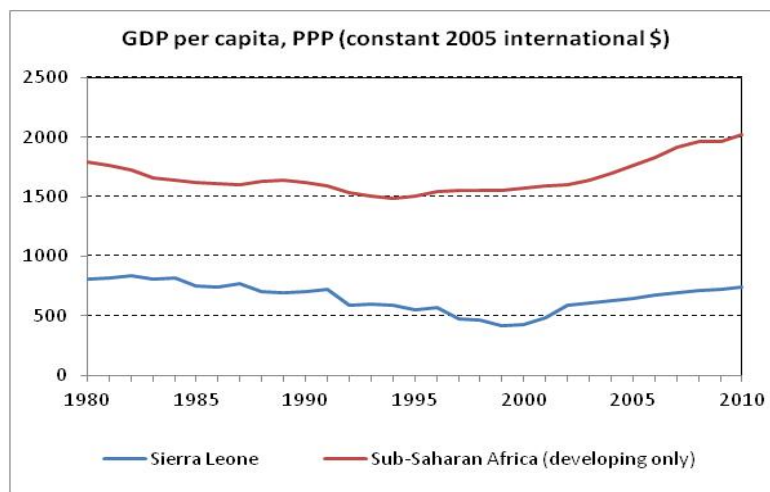
increase in students caused much higher teacher-pupil ratios as well as a greater lack of adequate materials and space. In addition, Nishimuko insists that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are absolutely necessary in order to supplement the government's efforts to increase the accessibility and quality of education in Sierra Leone.

III. Empirical Background

Sierra Leone is a low-income country in West Africa, with about two-thirds of the people relying on agriculture,⁶ a very vulnerable and inconsistent resource, especially in Africa. Sierra Leone has recently gained stability after a brutal 11-year civil war. While hard data on poverty is scarce for Sierra Leone, the available data available for 1990 and 2003 indicates that the percentage of the population living below PPP-\$1.25 a day had decreased from 62.8 percent to 53.4 percent. However, the percentage of the population living below PPP-\$2 a day has slightly increased from 75.0 percent in 1990 to 76.1 percent in 2003.⁷

As Figure 1 shows, Sierra Leone's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, expressed in constant 2005 international dollar, has been lower in 2010 than it was in 1980. It declined from \$812 in 1980 to nearly half (\$420) in 1999, after which it increased steadily to \$742 in 2010. Comparing Sierra Leone's GDP per capita with that of the average developing country in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) shows that it has been between half and two-thirds less in Sierra Leone.

Figure 1: GDP per capita in Sierra Leone and Developing SSA, 1980-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

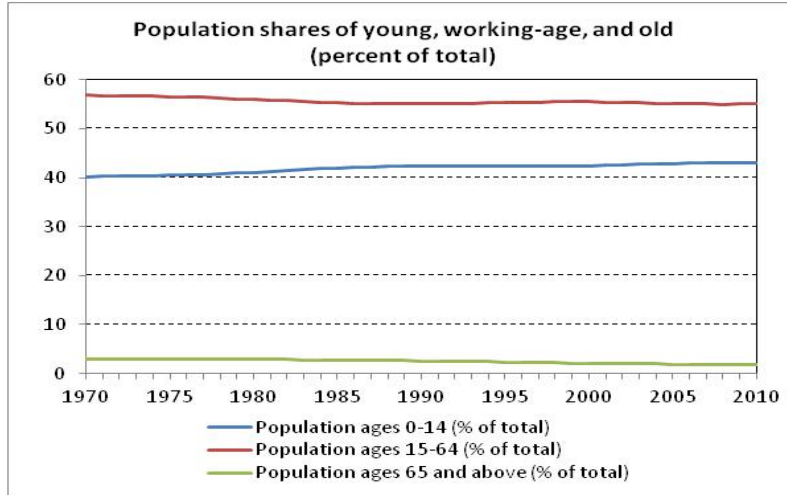
Currently, the majority of Sierra Leone's population is young, with slightly less than half (43 percent) of the population being children, aged 0 to 14. Slightly more than half (55 percent) of the population is aged between 15 and 64. The evolution of Sierra Leone's age structure is shown in Figure 2. The large percent of Sierra Leone's population being children contributes to a high

⁶ World Bank (2012).

⁷ World Bank (2012).

dependency ratio of 0.81. The demographic window of opportunity has just been opening for Sierra Leone in 2010.⁸

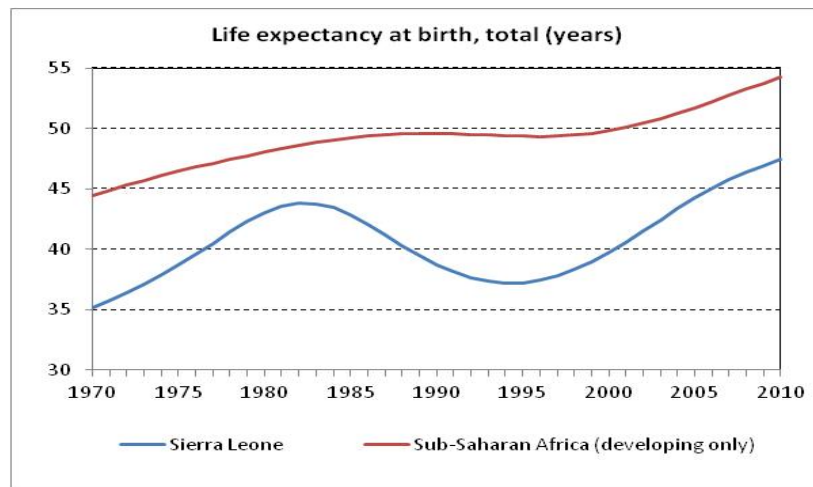
Figure 2: Age Structure of the Sierra Leonean Population



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Sierra Leone’s life expectancy is among the lowest in the world. An average person born in 2010 can expect to live slightly less than 48 years. As shown in Figure 3, this is about seven years less than an average person of developing SSA. Figure 2 also shows that most of the progress made in increasing life expectancy during the 1970s has been eliminated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic raging in Sierra Leone at least until 1995.

Figure 3: Life Expectancies for Sierra Leone and Sub-Saharan Africa

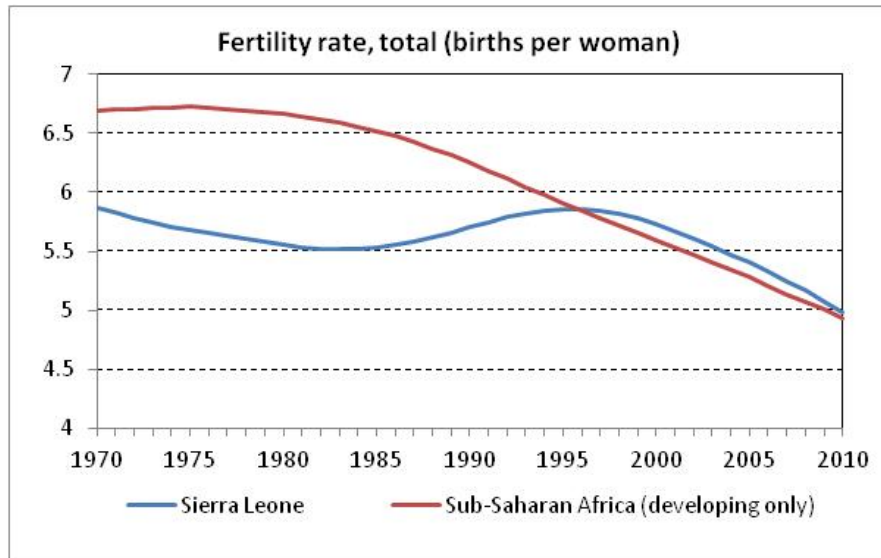


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

⁸ World Bank (2012).

Another reason for a majority of young people in Sierra Leone is the high fertility rate of about 5 children per woman. As shown in Figure 4, historically, fertility has been lower in Sierra Leone than the average developing country of SSA. However, due to the progress in SSA in decreasing fertility, SSA's fertility rates reached that of Sierra Leone in 1996, after which it remained slightly higher in Sierra Leone than in developing SSA.

Figure 4: Fertility Rates in Sierra Leone and Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

IV. Discussion

There are several causes and effects of poor education in Sierra Leone. The majority of the causes of poor education are a result of poverty, and the effects of poor education then create and perpetuate more poverty. The causes and the reasons behind these causes will be explored as well as the devastating effects. The causes for poor education include (1) low attendance rates and (2) poor quality of school systems, and (3) the effects of poor education including low literacy rates and poverty.

IV.1. Low Attendance Rates

Low attendance rates at school include enrollment, dropout, as well as daily attendance rates. Since the end of the civil war, the enrollment rates have significantly increased, but are still relatively poor. First, only about 6 percent of children attended pre-primary school in 2011,⁹ meaning very few children got the foundations for learning and education. On the contrary, as shown in Figure 5, the primary school enrollment rate is high for males but much lower for females. However, the completion rate for primary school is only about 71 percent for females and 76 percent for males.¹⁰

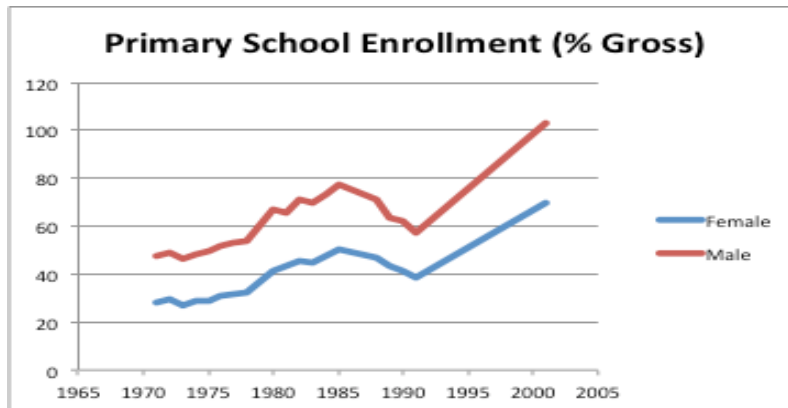
⁹ World Bank (2012).

¹⁰ World Bank (2012).

Secondary school enrollment (shown in Figure 6) is about one third of primary, and tertiary school enrollment (Figure 7) is just a few percent.

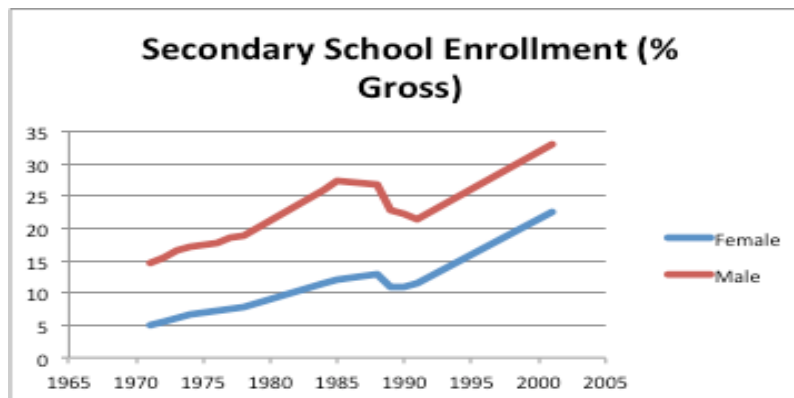
In addition, 16 percent of females and 15 percent of males must repeat primary school¹¹. These repeats and dropouts are a major problem because many children are not getting the basic skills for learning and education. Next, the enrollment rates for secondary school are drastically lower than for primary school, with only about one third of children enrolling as of 2001. This statistic shows that many children are only getting a very basic education and are not or cannot pursue further education. Similarly, the enrollment rates for tertiary education as of 2001 were around 1 percent for females and 3 percent for males. This is an extremely low rate of young people following up on their education and shows that, in Sierra Leone, education is not a major priority or of value to most people.

Figure 5: Primary School Enrollment in Sierra Leone



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

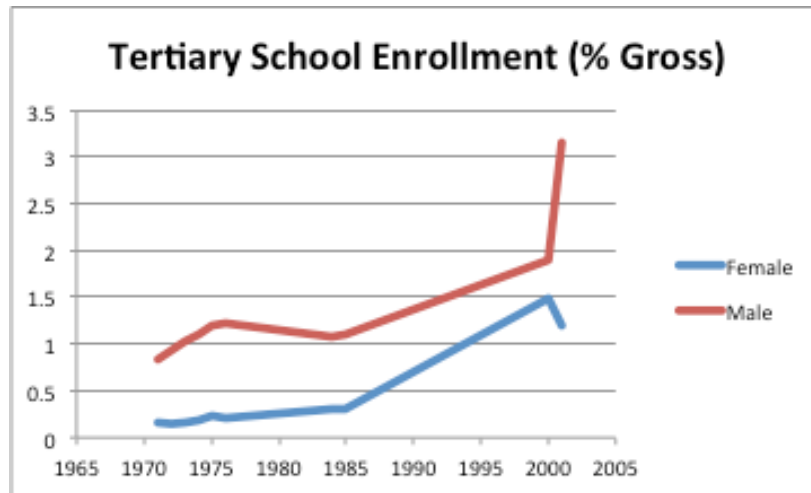
Figure 6: Secondary School Enrollment in Sierra Leone



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

¹¹ World Bank (2012).

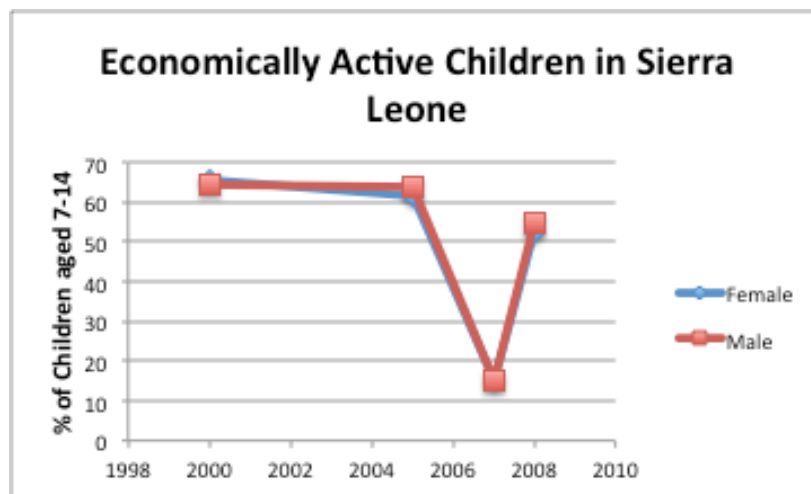
Figure 7: Tertiary School Enrollment in Sierra Leone



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

In Sierra Leone, many children drop out or do not attend school for several reasons. First, many children must work rather than attend school. For many families, children are seen as another source of income and are forced into manual labor at a young age.¹² In many situations, the children must either work or go hungry.¹³

Figure 8: Economically Active Children in Sierra Leone



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Similarly, many children cannot get an education because their families cannot pay for their schooling. In Sierra Leone, despite government action to reduce or eliminate costs associated with

¹² UNICEF (2008).

¹³ UNICEF (2008).

schooling, many schools still require monetary payment for services. This enduring cost is the main reason for children dropping out of school. Furthermore, 37 percent of the families that pay for their children to attend school say that they struggle to do so.¹⁴ Both of these reasons show that many children cannot attend school primarily due to poverty.

Another reason for low attendance rates in Sierra Leone, in addition to poverty, is teenage pregnancy and early marriage, much like in other parts of Africa. As of 2008, 34 percent of women between the ages of 15-19 had been pregnant or were pregnant at the time.¹⁵ Therefore, many young women are swooped into motherhood and out of school. Similarly, when a young girl enters marriage, often times she is no longer allowed to attend school and is restricted to household duties or work. Furthermore, the unmet need for contraception for married women between the ages of 15-49 in Sierra Leone is 27 percent, slightly higher than the average for Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ This number, however, doesn't include unwed women with an unmet need for contraception. Therefore, many women cannot prevent pregnancy in order to stay in school, contributing to the low attendance rates.

In addition to poverty and early marriage/pregnancy, living arrangements are another reason for poor attendance rates in Sierra Leone. In SSA, there is an overwhelming number of marginalized and invisible children, children without vaccinations, schooling, birth certificates, or homes, and Sierra Leone is no different, especially due to the civil war that displaced families, killed parents, and utilized child soldiers. These marginalized and invisible children are often homeless and cannot attend school due to a combination of the previously mentioned factors. Orphans are oftentimes part of the marginalized or invisible children.

In Sierra Leone, 52 percent of children who are out of school are orphans, proving that living arrangements and familial situations have a great impact on the ability of a child to get an education.¹⁷ In addition, one third of children who are out of school have 2 living parents, though in many of those cases the father is absent a majority of the time. Overall, children living with extended family or caretakers and children who are abused, exploited, or sexually harassed/exploited are much more likely to drop out or not attend school. Therefore, living arrangements can easily influence the role of education in a young person's life.

Low attendance rates are caused by poverty, early marriage/pregnancy, and living arrangements. Low attendance rates are a main contribution to why children in Sierra Leone do not get a good education. By not attending school, children miss out on most learning opportunities and never receive vital tools for learning, critical thinking, creativity, or problem solving.

IV.2. Poor Quality of School Systems

The poor quality of school systems encompasses the low quality of teachers, lack of supplies, lack of space, and low quality school buildings. All of these factors affect the learning environment of the children, who already have a difficult enough time attending school. Many of the inadequacies of the school systems stemmed from the rapid increase in enrollment of children after the end of the civil war.¹⁸ Though this increase was a positive development, it also created higher pupil to

¹⁴ UNICEF (2008).

¹⁵ World Bank (2012).

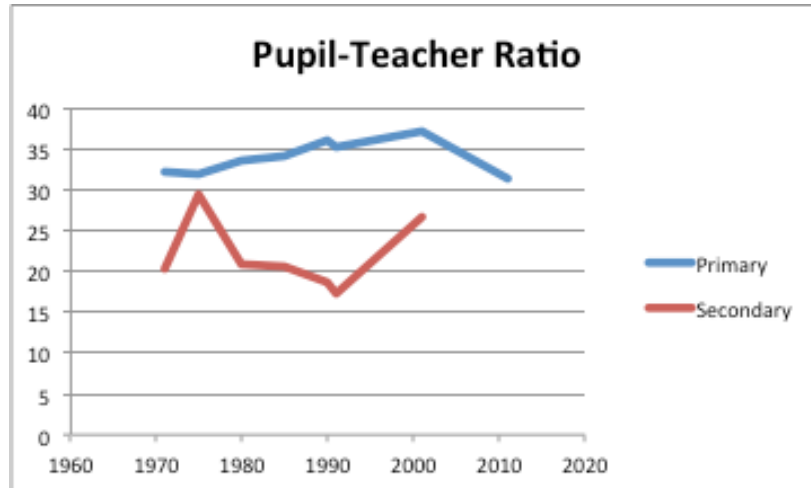
¹⁶ World Bank (2012).

¹⁷ UNICEF (2008).

¹⁸ Nishimuko (2007).

teacher ratios and supply and space shortages. The larger pupil to teacher ratio means that each student receives less personalized learning time with the teacher. One-on-one time with the teacher can often be a very important part of learning and understanding. Without as much one-on-one time, a student could fall behind or feel lost, hindering the learning of basic, essential skills. In addition, larger classes mean more distractions and make it harder for the teacher to teach, especially if the students are on all different learning levels.

Figure 9: Pupil to Teacher Ratios in Sierra Leone

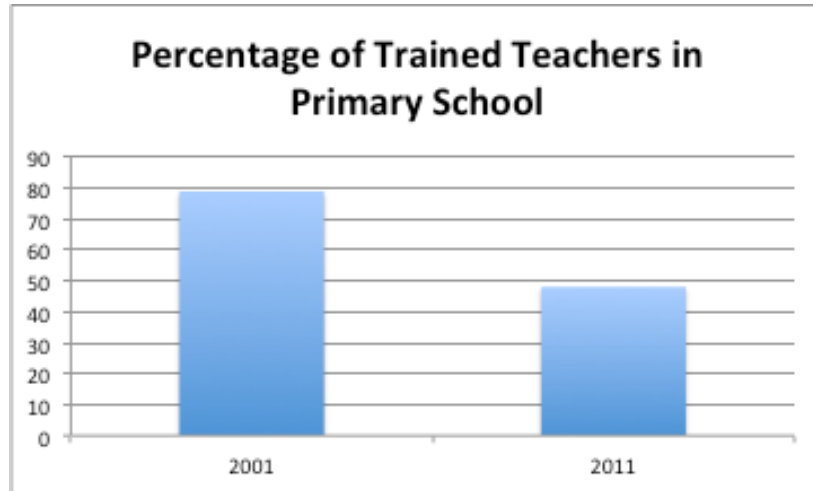


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Moreover, a large pupil to teacher ratio becomes even more detrimental when it is analyzed in conjunction with the fact that many teachers are not properly trained. The availability of teachers is so low that many school systems must resort to hiring unqualified people to teach. Untrained teachers further hinder learning in Sierra Leone. Untrained teachers may not be teaching correct material, they may not know how to handle large classrooms of children, and they may not know how to teach in different ways to accommodate different learning styles. If the teachers are native Sierra Leoneans, there is also a great chance that they did not complete primary school or attend secondary or tertiary school. Overall, teachers are trained for a reason and the use of untrained teachers hurts the quality of the education that the children and their families work so hard to acquire. As Figure 10 shows, the percentage of trained teachers has actually decreased drastically from 2001 to 2011 in Sierra Leone's primary schools.

Another major obstruction on the path towards education is the scarcity of supplies, such as paper, books, and writing utensils. Increases in the number of children enrolled in school and a stagnant amount of supplies result in deficiencies that have yet to be mitigated. Without textbooks and other writing materials, how can children learn to read or write? Having many students and one teacher, probably untrained, already creates a struggle to learn, and a lack of supplies is just adding to this struggle to learn. With so many factors pushing against them, it is easy to understand why children chose other paths. These children and their families must make huge efforts in order to keep the child in school, yet these children receive so little in return.

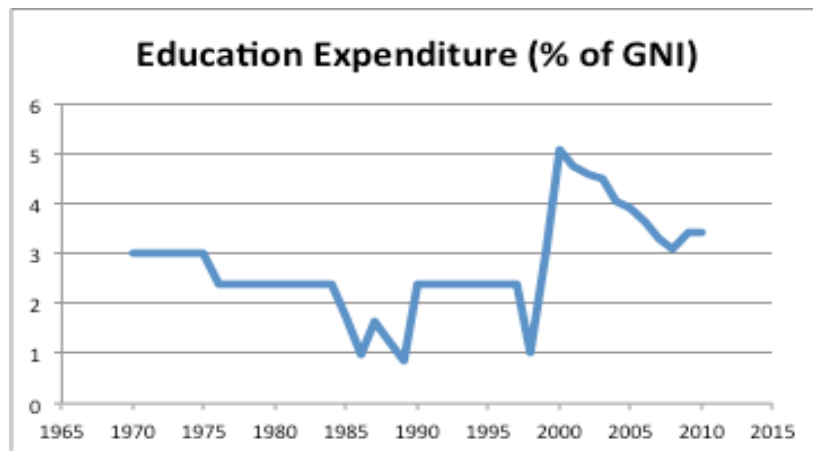
Figure 10: Percentage of Trained Teacher in Primary Schools



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Even with the children having to pay to go to school, it is still not enough to create higher quality schooling. Many of these inadequacies are a product of government failures, primarily government spending on education. After the government stabilized after the war, however, the government did build over 600 schools.¹⁹ This was a step in the right direction, but it was not enough to fix all of the problems in the school systems. The government does not spend enough money on education. As of 2012, the government was only spending slightly over 3 percent of Sierra Leone's gross national income (GNI) on education. Resource must be taken from another area and distributed into education in order to create higher quality schooling in Sierra Leone. Simply building more schools will not erase the problems with lack of supplies and trained teachers.

Figure 11: Education Expenditure in Sierra Leone



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

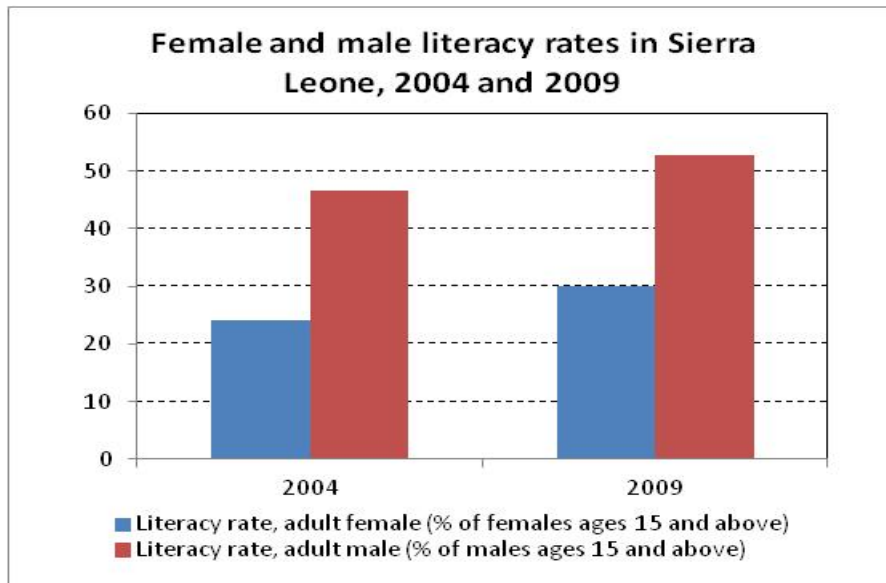
¹⁹ The Campaign for Good Governance (2006).

Inadequate government funding leads to supply shortages, untrained teachers, high pupil to teacher ratios, and the general low quality of the school systems. It is already hard enough for children to attend school to begin with. These inadequacies exacerbate the problems with education in Sierra Leone. Children cannot learn without the proper materials or teachers. Children also need better learning environments. With these inadequacies, the children who attend school are almost as disadvantaged as those who don't attend school. Therefore, the children who are able to attend are not learning as fast or as much as they should be. For this reason, the quality of education in Sierra Leone is extremely poor.

IV.3. Effects of Poor Education

There are multiple effects of poor education in Sierra Leone. First, the people of Sierra Leone do not learn basic skills, such as reading, writing, problem solving, math, and many other skills. Data for Sierra Leone's literacy rates are only available for 2004 and 2009. As shown in Figure 12, though they have increased during these five years, they are with only 30.1 percent of females over 15 being literate, and 52.7 percent of males over 15 being literate, still very low, and nearly 20 years below the average of SSA country for the same year.²⁰ Low literacy rates then perpetuate poverty and affect employment, as well.

Figure 12: Adult Literacy Rates in Sierra Leone, 2004 and 2009



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Illiterate adults are at a disadvantage if they have to interact with government or other types of businesses. They cannot read the government laws or newspapers and, therefore, they can be easily manipulated or taken advantage of. Furthermore, illiterate adults who cannot afford to send their children to school cannot even teach their children basic reading or writing, since they themselves cannot. This then perpetuates the cycle of uneducated people.

²⁰ World Bank (2012).

Another important effect of poor education is poverty. Without education, the young people of Sierra Leone cannot get higher level jobs. Instead, many people only have one option: manual labor, such as agriculture. This is not an ideal situation because agriculture and other such jobs are not waged or salaried like higher level jobs and can be negatively affected by weather, natural disasters, climate change, and other factors. In Sierra Leone in 2004, about 92 percent of people employed were working in vulnerable employment.²¹ This vulnerability creates more poverty.

However, if a child was well educated, he or she could find a higher level, and thereby more stable, job. This could lead to decreased poverty. The more children that are educated, the more that can get better jobs and contribute to businesses and government, perhaps creating urbanization and economic growth, as well. If these children were better educated and become involved in government, they could then use what they have learned to help other children get better educations and thereby decrease poverty on a larger scale. Essentially, education holds many possibilities for young children. However, the lack of education provides children with basically no way to help themselves escape poverty and dooms them to a life of hardship.

The effects of low quality education and uneducated children are overwhelming and widespread. Improving education can be a way to improve many other aspects of life in Sierra Leone, as well. The improvements must start with the children because they will carry it throughout their lives, passing those improvements on to their children. Children are our future and we must spend money now in order to educate them so they can create a more positive, healthy, sustainable future. If children do receive a better quality, more accessible education, then they can use education as a tool to help themselves and others to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

V. Conclusion

Overall, poor education is caused by low attendance rates and poor quality of school systems. Low attendance rates are caused by the need for children to work, too high of school costs, early marriage and pregnancy, and poor living arrangements. Poor quality of school systems is caused by supply shortages, high pupil to teacher ratios, and unqualified and untrained teachers. Poor quality education and uneducated children can lead to low literacy rates in adults and perpetuate poverty. However, education can be used as a tool to overcome the hardships of poverty and better education for all could be used to decrease the widespread poverty in Sierra Leone. In addition, improved education could lead to improvements in social equality, health, democracy and government, and citizen participation in economics.²²

Currently, there are several laws created by the government to try to mitigate the problems with low quality education. However, many of these laws are not being followed or enforced. Such efforts are not enough to solve the numerous problems associated with education in Sierra Leone. Similarly, simply building more schools assuages the lack of space. However, that is the only problem that was affected; the other problems are still present and detrimental to the educational system. Instead of trying to fix one problem at a time, the government must take a more holistic approach to target several factors at a time. In addition, the government must attack the problems at their roots, rather than their superficial fronts. In order to do so, the Sierra Leonean government

²¹ World Bank (2012).

²² Nishimuko (2007).

should work to create allies with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) so that they can supplement the government funds to help improve education.²³

Furthermore, the government must make a strong commitment to changing and improving the educational system. Some suggestions to improve education would be to help the poorest families with the schooling costs, enhance and strictly enforce child labor and child protection laws, to build schools in rural areas for greater accessibility, and to provide sexual and reproductive health information to prevent pregnancy or disease.²⁴ Also, it is very important for the government to create an incentive for children to go to school. The government must stress the importance of education and make it worth their while, such as by providing a free meal during class to encourage attendance.²⁵ Overall, education must be improved in order to provide children with a better chance at overcoming poverty and stopping the vicious cycle that has persisted in Sierra Leone for much too long.

References

- Central Intelligence Agency (2013). *The World Factbook* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency); as posted on the Central Intelligence Agency website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sl.html> (downloaded on March 24, 2013).
- Coinco, Emily; David Khatete; and Anna Obdura (2008). *The Out-of-school Children of Sierra Leone* (New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); *UNICEF, Sierra Leone*, (August)); available at http://www.globalpartnership.org/media/library/Final_Out_of_School_Study_Sierra_Leone_012009.pdf.
- Lawrence, Christian (2006). *Report on Basic Education in Sierra Leone* (Freetown, Sierra Leone: Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), (March)); available at: <http://www.slugg.org/index.html>.
- Nishimuko, Mikako (2007). Problems behind Education for All (EFA): The Case of Sierra Leone. *Educate*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 19-29.
- World Bank (2012). *World Development Indicators / Global Development Finance database* (Washington, DC: The World Bank); as posted on the World Bank website: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/> (downloaded on May 16, 2012).

²³ Nishimuko (2007).

²⁴ UNICEF (2008).

²⁵ UNICEF (2008).