

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND THE SOCIAL FACTOR
IN FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

Prof. D.R. Pugh

Faculty of Education, Department of Education
Foundation, University of Alberta, Canada

Summary

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In order to examine the influence of socio-economic factors on educational achievement the investigation was made at 3 levels: Fifth Year Elementary, Second Year Secondary, and Fifth Year Secondary pupils. The survey revealed a complex situation enjoining caution in associating school achievement with social class. Many lower class children (especially Moslems) were performing creditably at elementary level, and many upper class pupils in the senior secondary schools were achieving disappointing results.

Polygamy was a slightly adverse factor at secondary level. Family size was significant at elementary and junior secondary levels; and late entrance was significant at secondary school. School boarders seemed to be at an advantage. Irregular attendance among the poor affecting performance reflected a high incidence of sickness; irregular attendance among the advantaged pupils showed lack of commitment.

Report

In western society we are accustomed to relate school performance to social class and to assume that the difficulties of the lower class child increase as the educational ladder is climbed. Our assumptions concerning the influence of the socio-economic factors on educational achievement may or may not be valid in other societies than our own. To examine this question a modest investigation was made at three levels of the educational system in the city of Freetown, Sierra Leone. The survey population comprised 1,075 fifth year elementary, 682 second year secondary and 407 fifth year secondary pupils, just under half the number of children in the schools at each level.¹ The teachers were asked to place the pupils in five grades of

¹ The elementary sample comprised all the pupils attending Class Five in the municipal schools (as distinct from the denominational schools) of the city. At secondary level half of the schools were selected at random and their second year and fifth year pupils were investigated.

academic achievement, A to E, and information supplied by the pupils enabled them to be classified into five parental status groups.¹ Information was collected concerning language, birthplace, religion, family size, housing conditions, the incidence of polygamy, the age at which the pupil started school, and regularity of attendance. In a few cases a younger child was unable, and an older pupil unwilling, to give a particular item of information, and the possibility of some deliberately false answers - whether intended to please the questioner or to conceal the truth - must also be accepted. Nevertheless it was hoped that the study would be of some interest and value.

General Information

Of the 1,075 elementary school children, of whom 449 (41.77%) were girls, no less than 69.5% came barefoot to school. About one fifth of them had immigrated to Freetown from birthplaces in the interior, and most of these immigrants had come from the northern province, which is the most backward part of the country economically.

Krio, a pidgin which constitutes the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, was cited by 57.8% of the children as their vernacular, but altogether some 20 languages were represented in the survey population. The most popular tribal languages were the northern languages Temne and Limba spoken by 15% and 8% respectively. The principal southern language, Mende, was in third place alongside Kroo which is spoken by fishermen of Liberian origin in the western part of the city.

In the two secondary groups surveyed, the percentage of girls was 45.5% at second year level, and 47.9% of the senior secondary sample.² The great majority wore sandals which seem to be regarded as a necessary part of school equipment. A much greater proportion, almost half the total in each case, were immigrants into Freetown, many of them having come up specially to enjoy the educational amenities of the capital. The majority of these latter had come from the Mende speaking areas of the South where literacy is more widespread and the demand for secondary education greater. 28.8% of the second year sample and 29.1% of the senior secondary pupils were living in lodgings and just over 11% of each group were accommodated in school boarding houses.

1 Group One comprised the offspring of managerial and professional men with some form of higher education. Mothers within this group had usually completed secondary school and a few had higher education also. In Group Two, fathers had completed the five-year secondary school course and many mothers had also received some secondary education. The third group comprised those whose parents had both received some education and one of them, usually the father, had been to secondary school even if he had not completed the course. Parental employment, though modest, was usually secure. For Group Four the only qualification was that one parent had received at least some primary education, whereas children consigned to Group Five were those whose parents were both illiterate.

2 Single sex schools are the order of the day in Freetown, and of the schools in the survey, only the Secondary Technical School is co-educational.

Parental Status Groups

The division of the elementary school sample into parental status groups underlined the poverty and social disadvantage which is the lots of so many African children. Of the 1,075 children, only 5.2% could be placed in the top group whereas over 40% were in the lowest one. The junior secondary sample revealed a social stratification not vastly different but somewhat less acute. In 1969 fees, textbooks, and school uniform cost about £25 per annum - a considerable sum - but secondary education could scarcely be described as a middle class monopoly. Indeed nearly 54% of the junior secondary pupils were in the two bottom parental status groups (four and five) and only 6.3% were in Group One. Only at the senior secondary level was there a clear preponderance of higher status parents and a near elimination of pupils from illiterate homes.

Table 1 Parental Status Groups

	Group 1 (Highest) %	Group 2 %	Group 3 %	Group 4 %	Group 5 (Lowest) %	Total
Elementary School Sample (1075)	5.21	13.21	16.84	24.37	40.37	100
Second Year Secondary Sample (682)	6.33	18.33	21.55	21.11	32.68	100
Fifth Year Secondary Sample (407)	29.48	17.69	22.85	24.57	5.41	100

However, when this distribution was related to academic performance, the situation proved more complex than expected. At all three levels the teachers achieved a good distribution of grades though there was a slight tendency for the junior secondary teachers to be more generous or more optimistic than their colleagues. In the elementary school sample, evidence of association was readily forthcoming.

Table 2A Parental Status Groups and Academic Performance - Elementary School Level

Academic Grades	Group 1 n=56 %	Group 2 n=142 %	Group 3 n=181 %	Group 4 n=262 %	Group 5 n=484 %
Grades A + B	64.29	42.95	30.39	28.30	21.20
Grade C	28.57	34.51	37.01	36.94	34.33
Grades D + E	7.14	22.54	32.60	36.26	44.47
Total	100	100	100	100	100

However, it will be seen that 55.53% of Group Five and 63.74% of Group 4, which together formed two-thirds of the sample, were in the top three academic grades, and this gives some basis for hope. Among the junior secondary pupils the small Group One was again doing well with over 60% of its members in Grades A and B. But in the other four groups, though none of them could match this performance, there was no noticeable tendency for academic grades to decline in step with parental status, and indeed Group Five, the lowest group of all, had more people in Grades A and B than in the two lowest grades. At senior secondary level the expected correlation was simply not present at all and indeed it was the small group of lower class children who seemed to be doing the best.

Table 2B Parental Status Groups and Academic Performance - Senior Secondary Level

Academic Grades	Group 1 n=120 %	Group 2 n=72 %	Group 3 n=93 %	Group 4 n=100 %	Group 5 n=22 %
Grades A + B	30.84	25.0	25.81	27.0	54.54
Grade C	30.36	41.67	39.78	46.0	31.82
Grades D + E	38.90	33.33	34.41	17.0	13.64

It may be that many pupils survive at secondary schools because of their parent's ability and willingness to pay fees rather than because of any motivation they have themselves. On the other hand the small group of lower class children would not be kept in school at this level at great sacrifice to their families unless they were academically successful.

Religion

Just under half of the elementary school sample were Moslems, and over 80% of them belonged to status groups 4 and 5. Moslems tend to constitute the lowest social stratum in Freetown, many being illiterate migrants from the northern province. However, the school performance of these Moslem children was not conspicuously worse than that of the elementary school sample as a whole, and a highly creditable number of B and C grades was achieved.

Table 3 Academic Grades of Moslem Children -
Elementary School Sample

% of Moslems in each grade n=528	A 5.87	B 20.08	C 38.26	D 24.24	E 11.55	Total 100
% of total survey population in each grade n=1075	8.56	20.65	35.16	22.33	13.30	100

In recent years Moslems have been sending their children to school in increasing numbers and they have begun to found schools of their own. No one can fail to be aware that religion is a great source of assurance to disadvantaged Moslems and they do not feel inferior because they are poor. It may be that their children move more easily in the school situation than do the alienated youth of our western slums.

At junior secondary level Moslems formed a smaller segment of the survey population, only 24.67%. The great majority of these (87%) belonged to parental status groups 4 and 5, but again their academic performance conformed quite closely to that of the sample as a whole. At senior secondary level the percentage of Moslems was down to 18%, but nearly two thirds of them (62.9%) came from the highest parental status group and none at all from the lowest. Their academic performance was not distinguished, and indeed they helped to swell the number of high status pupils with low academic grades.¹ Apparently wealthy Moslems parents, like others of their class, were maintaining children at school without much concern for their academic progress. Of the Group One Moslems in this sample, only 42% were reported by their teachers as regular in attendance.

Polygamy²

In the elementary sample 326 children (30.37%) came from polygamous homes³ and not a single one of these could be placed in parental status group one. However, since 71% of them were Moslems⁴ their academic achievement was well up to the norm for the survey population as a whole. At junior secondary level the percentage of children from polygamous homes was down slightly to 26.5% and again there was a clear correlation with social class. In Group Five, the lowest parental status group, 57% of the fathers were polygamous; in Group Four, 30%; in Group three, 19.7%; in Group Two, 14.4% and in Group One, only 4.65%. Children

¹ Out of 10 Moslems in the lowest academic grade, 8 came from the highest parental status group.

² In this section, it would be reasonable to expect a few false answers from older pupils. Moreover some children were unable to answer because they had quite lost touch with their fathers.

³ 225 fathers had 2 wives, 58 had 3, and 43 had more than 3.

⁴ In spite of this the majority of Moslem fathers in the sample were still monogamous (56.5%).

from monogamous homes proved to have a slight superiority in that they had fewer pupils in grades D and E, but otherwise there was little to choose between the two groups. Moslems comprised 51.5% of the polygamous total.

At the senior secondary level, in spite of the higher parental status of the sample, children from polygamous homes still numbered 29.5% of the total, and 67% of them were from the highest parental status group and none at all from the lowest. The percentage of Moslems in the polygamous total was down to 43.5%.

Table 4 Polygamous Homes and Academic Performance -
Senior Secondary Level

	E	B	C	D	E	Total
Children from Polygamous homes 29.5%	% 6.07	% 26.96	% 26.96	% 30.45	% 9.56	N=389 100
Children from Monogamous homes 70.5%	11.36	19.05	43.59	19.78	6.22	100

These figures indicate an increased superiority of the monogamous group but again this was reflected in a larger percentage in Grade C and a smaller percentage in Grades D and E. In the top two grades the children from polygamous homes were holding their own.

Family Size

The average family size was 6.97 in the elementary school sample which included 134 children from families of eleven children and above, and 135 from families of 3 and under. There was a high proportion of lower class and Moslem children in the large-family group and a clear association existed between academic achievement and family size. Investigation of a further group of 124 pupils from families of 7 children revealed them much closer to the large-family group than to the small-family one. The adverse effects of size were clearly being felt.

At secondary level it was necessary to change the categories somewhat because of the smaller survey population. 151 junior secondary children from families of 4 children and under were compared with 163 children from families of 9 children and above. Again the small-family group was doing somewhat better at school though the large-family group was by no means disgraced. It had more pupils in the top two grades than in the bottom ones. In the senior secondary sample there were 96 pupils from families of 4 children and below and 91 from families of 9 children or more. It is noteworthy that in spite of the higher parental status of pupils at this level, there was no decline in the proportion of large families, though families of 11 children and over were much fewer. Small families tended now to belong to the lower social class and large families to the upper status levels.¹ A comparison between the small-family and large-family groups in respect of academic performance revealed a complex and interesting situation.

¹ 43.5% of the small-family group at this level came from status groups 4 and 5 whereas only 11% of the large-family group did so.

The large-family group had more of its members in the top two grades but the small-family group had fewer in Grades D and E. Perhaps the disadvantage of large family size was offset by higher parental status and the advantage of the smaller family unit was cancelled by lower social class.

Table 5 Family Size and Academic Performance

	Elementary School Sample		Senior Secondary School Sample	
	Large-Family	Small-Family	Large-Family	Small-Family
	n=135	n=134	n=96	n=91
	%	%	%	%
Grades A + B	24.62	35.56	41.76	30.21
Grade C	34.34	34.07	20.88	42.71
Grades	<u>41.04</u>	<u>30.37</u>	<u>37.36</u>	<u>27.08</u>
	100	100	100	100

Overcrowding

Family size alone does not necessarily give a clear indication of housing congestion and this problem was investigated separately. In the elementary sample 183 fortunate children (17.02%) were living in households of six persons or less, whereas at the other end of the scale there were 195 pupils (18.14%) living in households of twenty persons or more.¹ Some could scarcely be said to have a home but only a sleeping place, and the situation was particularly acute in the crowded east end of the city. Overcrowding on this scale was inevitably associated with low parental status but the expected correlation with academic performance could not be substantial. This was partly because the achievement of the advantaged group was frankly disappointing - 39% of them in Grades D and E and only 34% in Grades A and B - and partly because three-quarters of the disadvantaged group were Moslems, whose sound performance at elementary level we have noted before. It may be, of course, that elementary school pupils do not need facilities for private study to the same extent as older pupils with more homework to do. At both secondary levels overcrowding was mercifully less acute. 31% of the junior sample and 29.4% of their seniors were living in households of six persons or less, whereas households of twenty persons and over were the lot of only 8.75% and 5.6% respectively. However, considerable numbers lived in households of between 12 and 20 persons - 19.2% at the junior secondary level, 14.2% of the senior sample - but there was little evidence that this affected their academic performance. This may be connected with the enlightened policy of some schools in allowing private study on school premises after lessons have ended. There was, however, some evidence that at both secondary levels the small group of boarders, assured of regular meals and study facilities, were doing rather better than their fellows.

¹ There were 21 households with over 50 persons, and a further 28 with between 40 and 50 persons.

Table 6 Academic Performance of School Boarders

	Grades A + B %	Grade C %	Grades D + E %	Total
Boarders, junior secondary level	44.44	27.78	27.78	100
Junior Secondary Sample as whole	39.88	25.96	34.16	100
Boarders, senior secondary level n=47	48.55	22.88	28.57	100
Senior Secondary Sample as whole	31.21	38.82	29.97	100

Age to School

In Freetown, as elsewhere in the underdeveloped countries, there is usually a considerable age range within each class. The recognised age for starting school in Sierra Leone is five years, as in England, and it was found that 157 children (14.6%) out of the elementary school sample had started school three years late. Predictably only 4% of these late entrants came from the two highest parental status groups, and only 9% from families of under three children. But the late entrants were not academically backward in comparison with their classmates. Contrary to expectations, the drop out of over-age pupils did not materialise, for late entrants (3 years late) numbered 16.4% of the junior secondary sample and 14.4% of the senior sample. However, though these pupils conformed to the norm of their samples in most respects, their academic performance was below that of their fellows.

Table 7 Academic Performance of Late Entrants -
Junior Secondary Sample

	Grades A + B %	Grade C %	Grades D + E %	Total
Children who started school at age 5 and below. n=293 (42.96%)	39.93	30.72	29.35	100
Children who started school at age 6 or 7 n=277 (40.62%)	41.52	22.74	35.74	100
Children who started school at age 8 or over. n=122 (16.42%)	35.71	21.43	42.86	100

Attendance

The survey revealed a disturbing irregularity of attendance at all three levels. The percentage of pupils reported by the teachers as 'poor' or only 'moderate' in attendance was 37.2 in the elementary schools, 42.8 at junior secondary level and 37.75 of the senior secondary population. It was noticeable that some schools reported almost no attendance problem whereas others were clearly faced with a serious situation. Variation from one school to another was particularly noticeable at elementary level. But wherever it occurred, irregular attendance inevitably had a disastrous effect on academic performance.

Table 8 Regularity of Attendance and
Academic Performance - Junior Secondary Level

	Grades A + B %	Grade C %	Grades D + E %	Total N=682
Satisfactory Attendance (57.2%)	59.02	21.48	19.40	100
Unsatisfactory Attendance (42.8%)	19.67	28.12	52.21	100

In Freetown, as everywhere else in the world, absent pupils cannot learn.

Conclusion

The survey revealed a complex situation and enjoined some caution in associating school achievement with social class. Lower class children, especially Moslems, were performing creditably at elementary level and many upper class pupils in the senior secondary sample were achieving disappointing results. Polygamy was slightly an adverse factor at secondary level as it moved out of the shadow of Islam; school boarders appeared to be in an advantageous position; family size was significant at elementary and junior secondary level and late entrance began to be a factor in the secondary school. The high incidence of irregular attendance among the poor might perhaps merely reflect the high rate of sickness, but among advantaged pupils with adequate medical facilities and regular meals, it must surely indicate a lack of commitment. Whether a change in traditional school curricula would improve attitudes, and therefore performance, must be a matter for serious reflection.