



Investigating the Relationship of Corruption and Student Dropout in Private Schools in Monrovia, Liberia

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ABSTRACT: Corruption is an unprecedented ridiculing parasite that could cripple and deprive all sectors including the educational sector in a nation. This parasite has continued to undermine the educational development of schools in Liberia resulting to an increasing dropout of students. Therefore, this qualitative study investigates corruption and its relationship to student's dropout in private schools in Monrovia, Liberia. Three groups of participants were chosen for data collection across three selected schools in Monrovia using a semi-structured interview. The group participants were 1) principals, 2) teachers and 3) parents. The collected data was then qualitatively analysed using the Professional Accountability Model (Anderson, 2005). The findings show an inextricable relationship between corruption and school dropout caused by different factors. That is, from the participants' perspectives, the increasing rate of school dropout is as a result of the prevalence of corrupt practices in the schools. The result has implications for how education stakeholders in Liberia can reduce corruption, and as a result, minimize school dropout in order to achieve academic excellence.

Keywords: Corruption, Students, Dropout, Private Schools, Monrovia, Liberia

I. INTRODUCTION

Corruption has been considered as one of the unholy trinitities of contaminated money and illegal conduct (Hallak and Poission (2002). It has also been perceived as one of the bad practices in the world and the most critical acts by man, which controls and affects all aspects of the human community (Baker, 2005). Corrupt practices have been proven to be an attack and damage of social structures, including schools (Heyneman, 2004). This damage has resulted to a lot of school dropout among students in most countries, especially developing African countries (Baker, 2005; Gupta et al., 2001). In Liberia, for example, corrupt practices in the educational milieu have undermine the development and academic excellence of schools resulting to an increasing rate of school dropouts. Education is an important asset that enables an individual to be able to learn and acquire knowledge. This is real important factor in a human life because it teaches people how to make good decision. Globally, article 13 of the United Nation 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right gave every individual the right to education. In order to implement this covenant at the large scale in any country, the government as well as the citizen must be cognizance of the importance of education. To this end, the UN Education for All (EFA) was formed to handle this phenomenon. This UN body prescribes the quality of education and aid policy maker to guaranty quality education for all in the globe (UNESCO, 2003). The EFA also helps to improve the rate of literacy, school dropout and economic development in countries (Jan et. al., 2002). Although this EFA objectives have recorded some degree of

success in Liberia, however, the debilitating effect of corruption have had an enormous adverse effects on schools in Liberia, leading to an increasing high rate of school dropouts (Doe-Anderson 2005).

Looking at corrupt practices and its relationship with school dropouts within the educational system in Monrovia, Liberia (for example, teachers asking students for money to pass exams or get good grades) is considered normal (FIDH 2004; Doe-Anderson 2005). This malpractice has affected many private schools in Liberia resulting in high illiteracy rate in the country due to illegal fees demands from students undermining the rule of law in the educational system (Hope, 2010). The lack of responsibility and transparency procedure within the school system in Monrovia has created an unsecured and hostile environments for students (Fukuyama, 2004). This might be because of the lack of accountability in the school administration. Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between corruption and its resultant effect of school dropout in private schools in Liberia with the aim of delving into the perspectives of some key educational stakeholders (principals, teachers and parents) of what might be the causes of such a phenomenon. It is hoped that the findings of this study would share further insights and raise public awareness of this societal ill, its causes, effects and what might be a possible reform in curbing this problem in Liberia in particular, and other similar contexts in general.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on corruption and its relationship to school dropout has been identified as the root cause of the high rate of illiteracy in some developing countries, such as, Liberia and Sierra Leone (Hope, 2010). This section broadly operationalizes these two concepts: corruption and school dropout in order to establish the relationship that the former has with the later within the Liberian private school system.

2.1 Corruption in Liberia school system

Corruption is one of the major problems in most countries today (Chetwynd et al., 2003). Corruption has been clearly conceptualized as the systematic abuse of power by those who occupy positions of influence for their own personal benefit (Li et al., 2000; Hallak and Poisson, 2002). This practice has been evidenced to have a significant negative impact on the achievement of quality and equal education for all, for example, which is one of the fundamental human right (Gupta et al., 2001). It has been termed a bad practice to every nation in achieving equal education for all. However, the practice of it only suggest that the poor and vulnerable are excluded given that one of its practices in schools is the high demand of money from students to either gain admission to study or get a good grade in a subject.

Corruption is said to be one of the profane trinity of contaminated money and criminal activities (Baker, 2005). Taking the case of Liberia, the context of the present study, corruption in schools have resulted to an unfortunate, depressed and high illiterate rate since most of the vulnerable students who fall prey to such corrupt system or individuals (in this case, teachers or principles) are usually from poor financial backgrounds; their inability to meet with the demands of the stakeholders will lead to them being denied education. This has greatly increased the illiteracy rate in the society (Kaufmann et al., 1999; Gupta et al., 2001).

To provide some contextual background to aid the understanding of this phenomenon in this study, Liberia has had a long history of civil war that has negatively affected its educational sector. To support and ensures equal education for all, the government of Liberia approves a yearly budget for all schools through the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Education. The latter then disburses the money to all the schools through the District Education Offices to the principals (Li et al., 2000; Banerjee et al., 2012). With this government support, every child should be able to go to school regardless of financial backgrounds. However, for reasons such as teachers' or schools' greed for more money, the school stakeholders levy additional amounts on students which makes it difficult for their parents to cope with the fees raise; thus, the children have to dropout from school.

This reality shows the lack of transparency and accountability in the whole financial disbursement process from the Ministry of Finance to the schools. According to the educational sectors plan (2010-2020), at present, open communications and suitable documentation mechanism is not proper to bring out accountability and justification of transactions. Furthermore, the planning rule's pronouncement leads to improper execution in Liberia.

It would almost seem like every office that the money passes through a part of it is deducted. What finally gets to the schools thus seems insufficient to run the schools; so, each school also has to engage in other ways 'corrupt' or 'unauthorized by the government' to get money from the students and once the students cannot pay, they dropout from school, thereby defeating the government's goal of equal education for all.

To date, studies on corruption and its relationship to school dropout in Liberia is very scarce. A couple of such studies exist in public schools (Tanzi, 1997; Li et al., 2000; Dedze, 2005; Perkins 2006); however, to the best of our knowledge, non-exist for private schools. This makes the study of this phenomenon in private schools in Liberia's capital city, Monrovia, germane. Also, the aspect of corruption being used as a silent weapon by teachers and school administrators against students in an era where education is key and a fundamental human right for all makes this line of research worthwhile.

2.2 Student school-dropout

Students' school-dropout has been defined as a situation where students quit from school or from pursuing their education without completion (Jamil, 2010; Umoh, 1986). Bui (2011) further asserted that the term dropout also refers to children (in the lower or upper classes) who stop attending school during a school year. Malik (2000) further added that those who left school before finishing the required courses are considered to be dropouts. These definitions refer to all students who quitted school, with the exception of death. Students dropping out of school is creating serious problem in Liberia. As earlier discussed, this has led to high illiteracy rate in the country (Kaufmann et al., 1999; Gupta et al., 2001).

The school dropout rate is getting rampant in Monrovia, Liberia. Most of the students dropping from school are becoming 'zogos'. 'Zogo' is a Liberian expression describing certain bunch of youth on the street that smoke and hijack people's properties. The populations of 'zogos' are growing every day. Studies have shown that this increase population is usually those who could either not afford the amounts of money the school demands or could not afford money to pay teachers who sell grades to students to pass exams (Tanzi, 1997; Li et al., 2000; Dedze, 2005; Perkins 2006). With this corrupt practices that the students are confronted with in schools (both from the school administration and teachers), they are compelled to dropout from school with very little or no education acquired. This situation is indeed typical of the study context in this paper.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Over the years, several researchers believed that dropping out of school was a cumulative and dynamic process and that they had constructed theories in different isolated event and time (Tinto, 1975; Wehlage et al., 1989; Newmann et al., 1992). The dropout theories of these different researchers shared similar ideas that school disengagement and contextual factors influenced student involvement and dropping out. These researchers elaborated that student's involvement, emotional, behavioral and cognitive connection in learning and school activities declined once they transited from grade to grade in twelve-year public education.

The conceptual framework adopted for this study is Anderson's (2005) Professional Accountability Guidelines Model (see Figure 1). This model was chosen because, as a proposed way-out of this practices in Liberian private schools, it encourages teachers and every other educational stakeholders (e.g. school administration) to assemble integrity and provide good moral conducts to as they carry out their professional duty. Implementing the Professional Accountability Model in this context might help to reduce, if not eliminate

corrupt practices in schools for better quality education for all. In the selected schools in this study, both corruption and student's dropout and their relationship in private schools in Monrovia, Liberia are the research focus. To get insights into this phenomenon, the causes of corrupt practices in the school through different school stakeholders was considered vital.

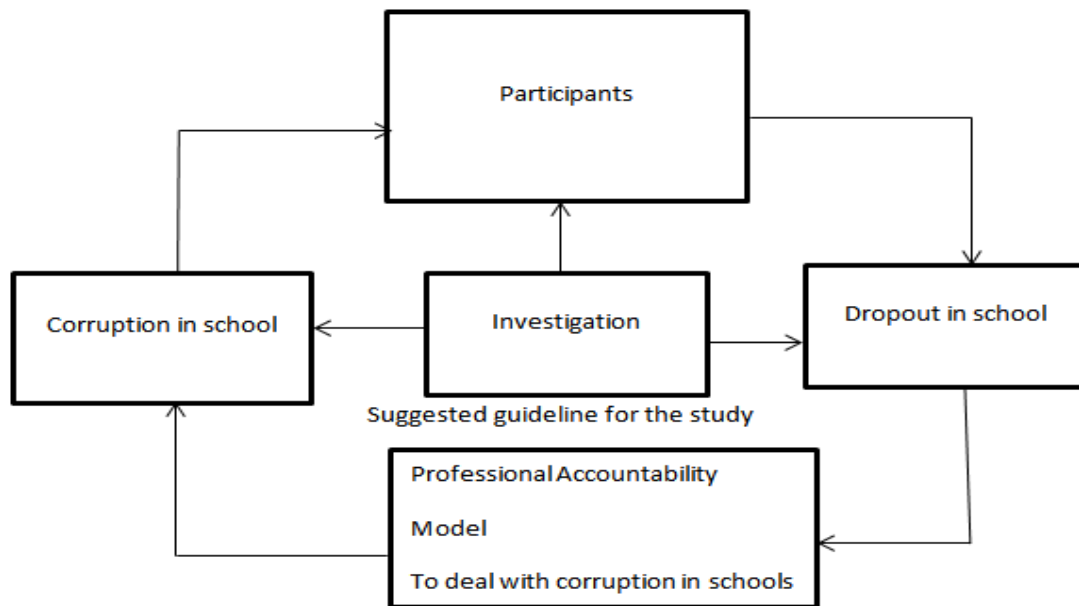


Fig 1: Conceptual frame work (Anderson, 2005)

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participant selection

The participants chosen for data collection in this study were 1) principals and 2) teachers of three private schools in Liberia, and 3) three parents of children across these schools. In order to gain the information needed to address the research objectives, "purposive sampling" (Cohen et al., 2014) was the main strategy used to choose the participants for this study. The participants were selected on the basis that they form the core administrative stakeholders in the smooth running of private institutions in Liberia. Also, they key positions can provide trusted insights into the investigated phenomenon.

4.2 Instruments and analytical procedure

Using a qualitative approach, a semi-structured interview was adopted for data collection in this study. This instrument is suitable in providing rich insights into people's views on particular issues (Creswell, 2007; Ambele and Watson Todd, 2018). Following ethical procedures, the participants for this study were individually contacted in their schools for consent approval to participate in the research. The participants were each interviewed on a day and time convenient for them. Each interview lasted for about an hour and was conducted in English. The interview sessions were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The audio recordings from the interviews were first recorded to evaluate the information and then saved in Microsoft word. Since the main focus of this study was the contents of the responses of the participants and not the manner in which they gave the information, there was no transcription of any prosodic features that occurred in the interviews. The interviews were transcribed closely and translated into English. After that, all transcriptions were read, re-read and checked intensively, line by line, through description. The researchers then started to define emerging themes or trends appropriate to the study by reading from beginning to end over and over again throughout the transcriptions. In this study, a 'bottom-up coding or inductive approach' technique in which coding arises from the information was adopted (Cresswell,

2007; Ambele and Watson Todd, 2018). The emerging themes were edited, reorganized and grouped together for consistency in separate sets of classifications as quickly as the coding was completed to show how they were interrelated. Some themes were structured into sub-theme classifications, discarding those irrelevant to the present research.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the qualitative results from the school principals, teachers, and students' parents across the three selected private schools in Monrovia, Liberia. The emerging themes from the data are discussed under two main sections; corruption and school dropout in order to establish the relationship between the two.

5.1 Corruption

This section discusses the results on the causes of corruption in the private schools in Monrovia and its relationship to students' dropout.

5.2 Low salary

Low salary is used to describe jobs for which or places in which workers are paid little. This theme focuses basically on teacher's salary. Generally, the teachers assert that teachers sometimes engage in such practices because they are not happy with their salary as in Excerpt 1. Other participants in the study also share a similar view (Principal 3; Teacher 2 and 3; Parents 2 and 3).

Excerpt 1

Talking about low salary... As a principal of this institution, I have been making all possible best to satisfy my co-workers with their salaries. It is a huge challenge.... students are dropping out of school every year... for example, the attendance this year is poor compared to the past years... the school fees is not enough to operate the school affairs and satisfy employees... for this reason, we actually experience some malpractices in the institution... we have also sacked several teachers for bad practices... but to be real, low salary is the most contributing factors in the existing of corruption in any school in our environment; because government does not support private schools in any way.

(Principal 1)

Hardjono and Tggeman, (2002) argue that low salary is a huge factor that contribute to corruption in education. As mentioned by Principal 1 in Excerpt 1, low salary is one of the many contributing factors that are greatly affecting the schools, leading to corrupt practices that further results to students dropping out of school. The little or no salary received by teachers cannot sustain monthly needs. For this reason, most teachers are involved in asking students for money to get good grade. Low salary in private schools is on the grounds that the private sector does not receive any monetary assistance from the government of Liberia (see Excerpt 2).

Expert 2

My brother! To be sincere, the government of Liberia through the Ministry of Education is not helping private schools in any way; as a result, our workers are involved in some malpractice in the school... I have been a principal for about 15 years now and the government does not support the private schools at all... this is one of the causes of schools been operating poorly. Some of the greedy employees will involve themselves in a bad practice.

(Principal 2)

Consequently, the school fees paid by parents/guardians are not sufficient to work/oversee both the schools and teachers' salary as mentioned in the data. Therefore, government intervention is important in private schools in Liberia where teachers have never been given high pay compared to public schools.

Studies have shown that teachers have not been able to receive satisfied salary to carry on professional duties in schools (Azfar, 2002; Chua, 1999). This makes them to engage in all kinds of corrupt practices like selling grades to students and demanding students to buy pamphlets produced by them at a very cost if they must pass their subject. The resultant effect is that students from poor backgrounds who cannot afford to pay do these things, for fear of failure or repeating the same class, drop out of school. It has been argued that low salaries attract only dishonest or incompetent employees which always result in inefficient and non-transparent corrupt administration (Abbink 2002). To avoid high dropout rate in private schools, the competent employees need to be satisfied with their monthly salary so as to deliver quality education to students.

5.3 Employment

Employment in school is another factor that influences corruption in private schools in Monrovia. Employment has to do with recruitment, admission and promotion in the school. Corruption takes place in every aspect of the employment chain which causes high risk of school dropouts in private schools as seen in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

Actually, the employment process in most private schools is not done in a proper way. It is done based on who knows who... for me, my former school that I was working, and many people that were working there was based on relationship between the proprietor and the employees... some graduated from agriculture department but were teaching "English Literature". I have experienced a lot of this situation... I actually do not blame them because there is no control on them... the government of Liberia through the Ministry of Education is not monitoring private schools at all...the question I always ask myself is how can a qualified employee who is qualified for a particular job be denied for close relationship... I have been in this teaching field for a decade now so I have experienced many bad practices as such.

(Teacher 3)

According to other participants in the study who share the same view (Principal 3; Teacher 2 and 3; Parents 2 and 3), the recruitment process is not done by those qualified for the position, rather it is based on who is in close relationship with the boss. The administrators prefer to employ family members or close relations even though not qualified (Wamegho, 2013: 73). These views indicate that teachers' promotion is not based on qualification but on relationship. It depends on who is pushing the file, giving great opportunities to the unqualified employees and depriving the qualified ones the opportunity to deliver good quality education to students. According to the participants, most private schools are poorly run by corrupt school administrators and by recruiting unqualified teachers through such corrupt means, the teachers themselves carry on with the same practice by selling marks to students. This has led to an increasing dropout of students. To avoid such favoritism in schools, the government needs to intervene in private schools as it is done in public schools. In Liberia or most developing countries like Sierra Leone, the employment system is not about who is qualified, rather it is about who has a relationship with the boss. Employment is also about who is pushing the file allowing those with the opportunity with no knowledge to occupy positions and depriving the qualified ones because he/she is not a family member, relation or he/she did not put something in the envelope as a token.

5.4 Teacher's greed

Greed is an intense and selfish desire of a person. The participants (Teacher 2 and 3; Parents 2 and 3; principal 1 and 3) reported that, as a result of greed, some teachers use their power to exploit money from students in school (see Excerpts 4).

Expert 4

To be realistic, teachers in some ways seem to be greedy in their professional career; they demand money from students... some time, when we attend the PTA meeting in the school, we try to bring some of these issues on board for discussion... the response from principal or member of the board indicates that they are not aware of teachers asking students for money... from that point, it is clearly understood that teachers are greedy in their professional career.

(Parent 1)

From this participant's perspective, most teachers expect over salary and since they are unable to get this from the school, they extort money from students. Most teachers' expectation is to gain from students since their salaries do not meet their needs. In Liberia, both public and private school teachers expect to exploit from students in a way of compensating. Over the years, it has been part of every student as a duty to compensate teachers after every exam or in the final exams. This kind of behavior had led to many dropouts in the country since students who cannot compensate will automatically fail, repeat the class or even be dismissed from school. This has contributed to the students not getting any good education because the students are not making any progress in both internal and external examinations; pass or fail, they will still have to pay for grades. According to Principal 1 and 3 "teachers demand money from students without the knowledge of the administrators". Principal 3 also added that "some cases have been raised in the school and the perpetrator was fired from his job". Teachers also make exams difficult for students to pass as a means of collecting money in exchange for grades. This corrupt action has led many students who are unable to pay for the grades to drop out of school and become street thieves.

To eradicate such practices in the school, the head of private schools (principals) and their co-workers need to implement the Educational Accountability process in the school. This model will allow teachers to deliver good and quality education to students in the absence of corruption. When this happens, teachers, staff, students, and parents will participate in this process to obtain the students' goal. Principals also need to monitor the school in all aspects. The parents need to play major roles in the child's education. Parent's participation in children's education is very important in every society. When parents fully participate by asking questions to their children about the on-goings in school, it will help reduce corrupt practices in schools.

5.5 Dropout

This section presents the participants perspectives on the causes of school dropout as a resultant effect of the on-going corrupt practices in school.

5.5.1 Parental income

From the participants' views, one of the causes prescribed by the respondents is parental income (see Excerpt 5). Parental income is a wage that parents receive monthly.

Expert 5

One of the possible causes of school dropout is unemployment of parents in the society. Most parents do not have a job to support their children in school. For this reason, you will find many dropout students on the street helping their parents to sell To get job in this country is not an easy task as a result, most of us cannot afford to pay for our children... the little or no money we manage to help our children, the school is always in a habit of coming up with illegal fees to children that making most parents lazy to continue their children education.

(Parent 3)

According to this participant, when teachers come up with all kinds of "illegal fees" the children are unable to pay. Given the low income rate of the parents to meet up with these illegal corrupt practices of teachers

exploiting students, the children are forced to dropout from school. They will escape from school to find work in order to support their family members and maybe pay for the school “illegal fees” (Boyle et al, 2002; Birdsoll et al, 2005). Similar views were expressed by other participants in the study (Parents 1 and 2; teacher 1 and 3; principal 1 and 3). This means that parents need to be more involved in their children’s school life (Pratibha & Abdul, 2014) as reported by Principal 1 in Excerpt 6.

Expert 6

Well! The different between Parental with education and parent with no education is that, Parents with education are more successful in helping their children to acquire good knowledge... and they are seeking all means for their children to acquire quality education while parents with low education influence huge drop out of school... they don’t know the important of education much... so maybe because parent with low education are more than parents with education, this could be the main causes of school dropout in our community.

(Principal 1)

VI. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, RECOMMENDATION.

The study had elaborated on corrupt practices in private schools in Monrovia, Liberia by looking at its cause from different educational stakeholders in order to understand and establish its relationship with the increasing rate of school dropouts in Liberia. The results of this research is very essential for the government of Liberia through the ministry of education and all private schools in that they can immediately take action so as to satisfy the citizen by providing quality education for all with those involve in corrupt practices sanctioned. The government of Liberia needs to provide financial assistance to private schools as it is given to public schools so that they can be able to properly pay their teachers and in return, teachers would desist from corrupt practices. In doing so, the teachers will be motivated and the students will now receive quality education in a manner that is not corrupt. The head of private schools (principal) also needs to run the school properly. They need to organize professional accountability procedure in order to provide good and quality education to students.

The following recommendations are also made in order to reduce corruption and student’s dropout in private schools in Liberia.

1. To increase teacher’s salary; when teachers or administrators are satisfied with the salary, corruption will be limited in private schools.
2. As head of institutions, the administrators need to run the school properly and take legal actions against any doers in the act of corruption.
3. The school needs to implement the accountability process in the school to allow every worker or student to be accountable for their action.
4. The government need to involve private schools in their budget in order to reduce corruption and decrees students’ dropout in the country.
5. Create awareness programs in order to educate students on the important of education.
6. Parents and community involvement in children’s education is very important.

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