



School choice, gender and household characteristics: Evidence from a household survey in a poor area of Monrovia, Liberia



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ABSTRACT

This research set out to investigate how, in a post conflict area, parental preferences and household characteristics affect school choice. A multinomial logit is used to model the relationship between education preferences and the selection of schools for 1236 households in Monrovia, Liberia. There is a large statistically significant preference for community and faith based schools where the school being safe and close to home is important to parents. Government schools are favoured over other types by parents who state that affordability is a main preference. The more children in the family and the older the child the likelihood increases of attending a government school. Occupation and higher parental educational attainment are not significant characteristics in this school choice model.

1. Context

In 1822, Liberia was founded as a colony by the American Colonization Society (ACS) for former slaves, who were now free, and able to be repatriated to Africa. Freed slaves and freeborn African-Americans landed first in Liberia and many decided to settle amongst the indigenous population made up of 17 socio-cultural groups.¹ The colony became independent in 1847 being lead by the settler minority known as the Americo-Liberians (UNESCO, 2011a). The Americo-Liberians, set up a dualistic system dominated politically by the True Whig Party (TWP) (GoL, 2009). The Americo-Liberians built separate political, economic and social institutions in order to promote their own interests and domination (Ngaima, 2014). Monrovia became the focus for the development of services and infrastructure, thus the indigenous rural population failed to benefit resulting in a history of tensions (UNESCO, 2011a). The Americo-Liberians set up schools to cater for their own children, in order to perpetuate economic and political dominance (Lanier, 1961; Moran, 2006). Indigenous children attended poro (boy) and sande (girl) 'schools' which operated outside of the formal education system (Moran, 2006). This exclusion and marginalization in education only added to resentment fostering fragility (Eze & Saa, 2013).

Several attempts were made to reform the domination of the minority elite by two presidents, Tubman (1944–1971) and Tolbert (1971–1979). However the attempts were unsuccessful and finally resulted in riots and protests, culminating in a military coup, the assassination of Tolbert and military control by Samuel Doe, a member of the indigenous Krahn tribe. This ended 133 years of Americo-Liberian domination. However, what followed was much of the same, Doe setting up a government system to benefit his own ethnic group, which only represented 4% of the population (Paris, 2004). A fraudulent election designated Doe as the first president of Liberia's Second Republic (UNESCO, 2011a). In 1989 an invasion by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) from Côte

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¹ The different cultural groups included the Americo-Liberians and 16 indigenous groups: Bassa, Gbandi, Gio, Dei, Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Kuwaa, Loma, Ma, Madingo, Mende, and Vai.

d'Ivoire started a civil war lasting until 2003, all be it with attempts at peace agreements in 1996. The legacy of the civil war brought many challenges for the new female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who became President of Liberia in 2006. The challenges include the collapse of the economy as well as the destruction of physical infrastructure, institutions and basic services. A Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) was put in place 2008–2012. Priorities were given to security, the economy, governance and the rule of law and the delivery of basic services including education (GoL, 2008).

The civil war resulted in the destruction and disruption of the schooling system. It has been estimated that one third of government schools and one quarter of community schools were destroyed. Other schools were damaged through looting and demolition. Many teachers fled the fighting fearing for their own lives as well as their pupils; children were abducted from schools to be conscripted into the fighting forces (UNESCO, 2011b). According to the GoL (2008) 'the majority of Liberia's young people have spent more time engaged in war than in school' (p. 185).

Several government initiatives have been instigated to provide education for all children, focusing on the most disadvantaged, including the Liberian Primary Education Recovery Program (LPERP), the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy (iPRS), the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) and the Education Sector Plan (ESP). The 2001 Liberian Education Law prescribed that primary education be made compulsory and primary school fees abolished. According to UNESCO (2011a) owing to government failure to implement its strategies around school access, some household's expenditure reaches 24% for schooling. Why? Owing to the lack of government provision, parents turn to non-public schools, which include private proprietors, faith based mission, concession sponsored and community schools that are able to set their own fee structures (UNESCO, 2011a). Mission schools representing religious beliefs in Liberia (Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Islamic, Seventh Day Adventist, Assembly of God, and Inland Mission) are typically funded through tuition fees, however some receive support from church groups or religious non-government organizations (Siaplay & Werker, 2013). Independent private proprietor schools are run by individuals, funded by student fees, with the potential to make surpluses or profits (Johannessen, 2006). Community groups also run schools in Liberia and are typically not for profit (Tooley & Longfield, 2013).

The principal roots for fragility and the cause of conflict in Liberia have stemmed from the levels of poverty, inequality and unequal access to assets and opportunities (Herbert, 2014; Richards et al., 2005). The unequal access to basic services including education continues to call into question the 'legitimacy of the state itself' (UNESCO, 2011b, p.160 UNESCO, 2011b UNESCO, 2011b, p.160). According to UNESCO (2011a) there is a weakening of 'people's trust in the government's capacity and willingness to provide essential services' (p.35). In order for peace and stability to be maintained the gaps in education provision, which in turn lead to poor economic prospects for the uneducated and disadvantaged, need to be narrowed. This lack of educational opportunity could lead to resentment, instability, and the continued dearth of economic development (UNESCO, 2011a).

One third of Liberia's population has no education, 31% only primary and 36% secondary and tertiary education. Within Liberia there are great disparities regarding school enrolment rates. For example to the north of Monrovia, in Bomi county, the enrolment rate at primary level is estimated at 66%. However to the south of Monrovia in Grand Bassa county the primary enrolment rate is only 14%. Variations are also found at other schooling levels – junior high and senior secondary (UNESCO, 2011a). Disparities could be greater as country averages 'mask variations within counties, between urban and rural, and isolated areas' (UNESCO, 2011a, p. 35 UNESCO, 2011a UNESCO, 2011a, p. 35). Monrovia is situated in Montserrado county, where about one third of Liberians live with the greatest population density in the country of around 1500 people per square mile (LISGIS, 2009). According to the 2008 Census, around 61% of the Montserrado population is attending school compared to 35% living in Grand Bassa County. Owing to these disparities and the historical context in which Monrovia was developed as a capital and Doe as a community within that region, the findings reported in this study specifically relate to this context. Regarding religion, 40% are Christian, 40% practice traditional African religions and the remaining 20% are Muslim (UNDP, 2006). Monrovia is the capital city of Liberia located on the Atlantic Coast where more than 30% of the country's population lives.² In 2010 the literacy rate was reported at 60.8% and primary school completion rates were 59%.³ Life expectancy at birth is currently 60.21 years.⁴

2. School choice in developing countries

In many areas of the developing world poor parents are sending their children to a variety of school management types. Over the past few decades research has revealed that in many sub-Saharan African countries as well as in India, low fee private schools have become an option for poor parents (Alderman, Orazem, & Paterno, 2001; Dixon, 2013; Dixon, Humble, & Counihan, 2015; Härmä, 2015; Mehrotra & Pancharukhi, 2007; Ngware, Oketch, Ezech, & Mudege, 2009; Rose, 2009; Stanfield, 2015; Stern & Heyneman, 2013; Tooley, 2009; Tooley, Dixon, & Olaniyan, 2005; Walford & Srivastava, 2007). Parents in developing countries are making decisions and choices about where to educate their children.

There is a paucity of research around choice and schooling in developing contexts with little carried out in post conflict zones. One piece of research from Liberia considers the association between wealth and the likelihood of attending different school management types (Siaplay & Werker, 2013). Using secondary data from the Ministry of Education and the West African Examination Council the findings show that children from most income quintiles are able to access private and religious schools where standardized test results are stronger than government. Being richer and living in urban areas decreases the likelihood of attending a government school; the

² www.oxfam.org.uk/.

³ data.worldbank.org/indicators/SE.PRM.CMPT.ZS.

⁴ data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN/countries/LR?display=graph.

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