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ABSTRACT
This is an executive position paper (EPP) which examined the place of the girl child in the realization of The Gambia’s Vision 20/20, as well as the need for quality training of teachers to achieve success in the public schools. Several issues concerning education policies and implementation in The Gambia as they relate to the problem of the study and reviews of the findings were discussed. The researcher also identified the implications of the research to national development as it concerns the girl child, the family, and The Gambian nation.

The author offers suggestions for improving the plan of realizing the goal of The Gambian national Vision 2020 in addition to highlighting strategies that the government of The Gambia can employ to improve girl child enrollment and retention and increase indigenous teacher training and recruitment, overall student achievement, among other recommendations. The limitations of the study were highlighted. The author hopes that the findings would help develop meaningful educational services and graduation of highly skilled/trained citizens of The Gambia.

BACKGROUND

Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today. - Malcolm X

This paper presentation is an outcome of my doctoral thesis project conducted during the 2006-2007 school year in the Republic of The Gambia. The paper will revisit the problem, discuss and review the findings, as well as the implications for national development (as it concerns family and the nation); provide an improvement plan for the march towards the national Vision 20/20 and identify strategies the government can use to improve girl child enrollment and retention, increase indigenous teacher recruitment and retention, among others.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

The idea that all children can learn and all parents are mandated to provide their children with opportunities to receive formal education in the least restrictive environment has taken firm root in many school systems in the developed world; unfortunately, this is not the case for many developing countries, like, The Gambia, where educational opportunities vary between the male and female child, with the latter being of particular challenge and worrisome for the future of this small West African nation.

The Contemporary Gambian society is undergoing systematic changes and public education policy reforms in response to the growing concerns for poverty alleviation, fight against ignorance and disease in the tourist nation. The Gambian leader, Alhaji Dr. Yahya Jammeh has seen education as key to economic and social development of his people; President Jammeh is collaborating with his people to expand and improve the education of the next generation of Gambian youths in fields necessary for continued development of the country.
“One of the major problems of girls' education is the quantitative task involved in bridging the gap between educational development of boys and girls,” writes Bhandari (1982, para. 2). “The provision of basic education is an important strategy for the attainment of the Jomtien goals (Third World Congress of Education International, Jomtien, Thailand, July 2001)—and indeed the Millennium Development Goals—of education for all by 2015 (Grey-Johnson, 2003, para. 5).

Faced with such tasks over the years, The Gambian government embarked recently on nationwide enlightenment campaigns, promoting girl child school enrollment, and awarded scholarships to girls who attend school. This role, increased female enrollment in the public schools (DOSE, 2004) thereby posing a challenge to teachers in the classroom who are mandated to provide the needed quality teaching learning process for student achievement.

Before embarking on my year-long study in Banjul, I chose a qualitative research design, using the case study and narrative inquiry methodologies as a means of facilitating the purpose of this study. The study was conducted through focus group discussions, interviewing educators and stakeholders in The Gambia with in-depth analysis of the findings. The following issues were addressed by the study:

- Girl child education and teacher training program concerns
- Citizens’ perceptions of the Gambian government’s efforts to reduce the low enrollment rate of girls of school age
- Factors that contribute to the dropout rate of Gambian girls from schools
- Implications of girl child education to the goals of Vision 2020/national economy.

Furthermore, my ultimate goal is to present a plan that will promote high quality girl child education (enrollment, retention and graduation), and an effective teacher training program that will empower teachers with knowledge skills for classroom instruction and student achievement. Such process will ensure that highly skilled and productive female graduates are available to take up positions in different public institutions and civil service.

REPORT OF THE FINDINGS

Although The Gambia education system has gone through some transformation in the past, there are still concerns and demands from stakeholders for relevant and quality education (DOSE, 2004). This research study which involved 48 participants (including the focus groups), chosen through Convenient sampling, identified gender gaps and needs of both teachers and the girl child in the schools, aside from enrollment and retention issues. There are also issues of teacher retention in the provincial communities; lack of indigenous teachers (especially females), working conditions, socio-cultural issues, ineffective classroom management practices, professional qualifications/school administration support/on-the-job training, low teaching standards and supervision.

IMPLICATIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The promotion of quality education is a responsibility of all – the family, government, institutions and other stakeholders. The Gambia’s 2004-2015 Education Policy document, presents significant poise of the government to pursue positive attainment of equitable education of her citizens. Since the inception of this policy in May 2004, several strategies have been applied by the Department of State for Education in the implementation process. This ranges from the nationwide campaigns to the construction of new schools in rural and urban Gambia, offering scholarships and learning incentives to girls of school age, and collaboration with non governmental organizations to promote both theoretical and practical approaches to human development and community growth through the commission of several literacy projects.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on the findings of this research, substantial policy changes at many levels are essential. Two major policy recommendations are proposed to the government in order to pursue positive attainment of equitable education of Gambian citizens and to achieve the national vision for the girl child by the year 2020:

ESTABLISH TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS.

Identify standards for quality teacher training and recruitment. Building on the gains of this research, it is safe to claim that achieving quality education in Gambian schools will require the training and recruitment of highly qualified teachers.

Provide effective teacher training and professional development for teachers to meet and maintain those standards. The Gambia with the teacher association should develop standards for teacher education. They should review teaching standards, professional development standards, certification, accreditation and quality training programs - pre-service orientation and in-service courses, with constant monitoring and updates on new teaching-learning resources and classroom strategies in the new millennium. Grey-Johnson (2003) and Ngambi (2002) had advocated for such efforts, which they view as a transformation strategy to quality education. The government should develop an assessment system that supports the teachers to meet those standards.

Improve the working conditions of current Gambian teachers. Throughout the study, teachers complained about the poor working conditions and lack of government support to boost their morale in the profession. Government should provide working incentives – competitive salaries, special allowance for teachers who work in rural areas, Teacher of the Year Award at every level of government – local, state, national levels.

The government should be sensitive to teachers’ needs and retention problems. Based on the findings of this research, all the teachers interviewed think that teacher attrition continues to be problematic for schools, which to them is particularly troubling, given the increasing demand for quality teachers (Kissel, Meyer & Liu, 2007). The first complaint is on poor salaries, and this is consistent with previous studies by Certo & Fox (2002) and Tye & O’Brien (2002), which revealed that salaries are among the reasons that teachers leave schools and teaching altogether.

Establish collaboration between the Department of State for Education with University of The Gambia to develop a quality teacher education program for future Gambian educators especially females. Government should make the teaching profession more attractive to indigenous males and females who are employed to work in urban and rural schools with such collaboration.

ADDRESS CURRICULUM, TEACHING PEDAGOGY & ASSESSMENT.

Develop educational learning standards for all students. Based on the findings the stakeholders in education have concerns for the school standards and curriculum, and this should be addressed by the two departments responsible for basic, secondary, research and higher education in the country. The Gambia needs to identify what all students know and need to know at all levels from Pre-K to grade 12. For example, if a child begins school at 8 and by the end of their first year of school what should they be able to demonstrate that they have learned in terms of reading, writing, science, math, social skills, among others.

Take the learning standards and curriculum and ensure they are gender balanced. Government has to look at the textbooks and contents; encourage local authors to write books: The policy makers should determine the goals for the girl child; evaluate the curriculum; harmonize the curriculum with the secular education; as well as look at The Gambia standards in education to guide them in such project.
Provide resources and materials for learning. There should be availability of gender balanced teaching and learning resources for the schools. Different kinds of materials and resources are required by teachers to aid in the teaching learning process and assessment. As part of government incentives, they can provide books to assist regular students or those with learning deficits in such areas like mathematics, language arts and the sciences, to receive tutorials.

Teachers need educational resources, such as writing and reading materials, computers, videos and projectors, science laboratory equipments, etc. The government should have standardized testing materials and practices, and encourage Gambian authors/textbook writers, editors and publishers to produce gender-friendly textbooks on all school subjects, which would match both national/international standards.

Islamic education or Madrassa teachers need the same work improvement conditions like the teachers in Western secular education system. There should be a gender-balanced curriculum, and the girls should receive the same education from both sources. The same conditions should exist for teachers in Madrassa schools like in Western education system.

Introduce parent education and civic projects in the rural communities. The government should utilize the services of Muslim leaders in the mosques and community to get Islamic parents to change their opinion about secular curriculum or western education.

Regulate tourism activities and tourist guide practices. The government should regulate the recreational and business activities around the tourism areas to ensure that girl child labor and servitude are not practiced within the industry.

THE IMPACT OF THIS STUDY
This study is conducted from personal knowledge and interest in The Gambia. With the permission of Wilmington University of Delaware, USA, and, when appropriate, these findings will be shared with The Gambia’s Secretary of State for Higher Education and Research, Mr. Crispin Grey-Johnson, whose authorship and writings on The Gambian education contributed in no small measure to the success of this study.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
Respondent’s views may not reflect the general perceptions of every person in The Gambia. The research population was limited to educators, minority teachers, school administrators and stakeholders in public education in The Gambia.

CONCLUSION
As a result of this study and in order to capitalize on the campaigns and subsequent achievements of the Gambian government on increasing girl child enrollment across the nation, policymakers and stakeholders must ensure the formulation of a feasible education policy, which is reflective of the goals of the nation’s Vision 2020. This should take into account the essence of education for capacity building and national development for both sexes.

Bibliography


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