

Steps forward in gender equality: Equity outcomes of a school-based agricultural education teacher workshop in Liberia

D. Brett Milliken
Oregon State University
108 Strand Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-2661
brett.milliken@oregonstate.edu

Nick D. Console
Oregon State University
108 Strand Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-2661
nick.console@oregonstate.edu

Haley Q. Traini
Oregon State University
108 Strand Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-2661
haley.traini@oregonstate.edu

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Worldwide there are approximately 55 million school-aged girls who are not in school (Aikmen & Unterhalter, 2005) due to a variety of reasons including early marriage or economic distress (Yeboah, 2018). Moreover, girls in countries that experience conflict, such as Liberia, are more vulnerable to facing educational challenges (Aikmen & Unterhalter, 2005). After facing decades of civil war that has unpinned the education system, the Liberian Ministry of Education has sought to eliminate gender disparities in both primary and secondary education. Despite their efforts, gender parity has yet to be attained. (Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2008; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.; Yeboah, 2018). Tuwor and Sossu (2008) argue that gender parity challenges in West African countries largely exist due to patriarchal socio-cultural systems. Extending from this claim is the exhortation that access to education for women and girls is simply not enough; boys and men must also be a part of the conversation (Tuwor & Sossu, 2008; Yeboah, 2018).

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Gender Equity Framework (2008) highlights four dimensions of gender equality in education. Three of these seemed most pertinent to the context of this study; (1) *Equality of Access* includes opportunities for access and the retention of students, (2) *Equality in the Learning Process* speaks to equitable pedagogical practices and school environments, and (3) *Equality of Educational Outcomes* requires that outcomes of education not be determined by a student's gender or sex (USAID, 2008).

Purpose and Objectives

The goal of our evaluative study was to understand Liberian agricultural education teachers' knowledge of equity practices prior to and after participating in a gender equity workshop. Our guiding research objective for this study was to determine if male participants demonstrated an increased awareness of equitable strategies based on pre- and post-test responses.

Methodology

In 2020, staff and consultants from AgriCorps, a non-governmental organization, conducted their first agricultural teacher training program in Liberia. A total of 158 teachers (137 men) participated in a six-day training program which was repeated in four counties: Bong, Lofa, Montserrado, and Nimba. The training was the first of three designed to introduce Liberian agriculture teachers to the school-based agricultural education (SBAE) model, leadership development, and student-centered instructional strategies. Gender equity in SBAE was one lesson presented to the participants at the first training. The purpose of this lesson was to help participants identify how certain beliefs of gender roles may influence the effectiveness of SBAE, and, after learning about gender equity, commit to implementing equitable practices in their teaching. Participants were asked to identify three ways they could facilitate gender equity in their SBAE program through a single open-ended question on a pre- and post-test. To examine the open-ended responses, we used a blended coding method of inductive and deductive coding (Graebner et al., 2012). We also utilized the lesson plan as well as field notes written by the training facilitators during and after each of the four trainings to interpret and triangulate the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

The pre-test responses from 85 men resulted in inconsistent ideas about equitable practices in the SBAE classroom. The top three responses were *opportunities* (e.g., “making boys and girls to have equal rights”), *leadership* (e.g., “student leadership position should be evenly distributed”), and *participation* (e.g., “male and female participation in classroom”), accounting for 33% of the overall responses. The most prevalent answers from the 130 post-test responses encompassed three main equitable practices: *leadership* (e.g., “to allow both female and male to participate in school leadership”), *mixed-gender groupings* (e.g., “pair boys and girls in classroom discussion and participation”), and *opportunities* (e.g., “girls and boys should have the same opportunities to learn”). Sixty-six percent of the responses were focused on these three areas. We presumed that a non-response on the pre- and post-tests indicated that the participant did not know the answer. Additionally, two AgriCorps training facilitators recorded field notes on three separate occasions regarding the gender equity lesson. They observed that some participants showed early signs of a paradigm shift through honest conversation and discussion about gender biases; this was apparent when participants engaged with female students in 4-H leadership positions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, teachers demonstrated an increased awareness of equitable practices after participating in the workshop. It is important to consider that although the majority of participant responses reflected equitable practices, there were some responses that exposed bias that could be deemed inequitable (e.g., “girls are sometimes weaker than boys”). This may be due to the workshop design. Training facilitators noted that the format of the lesson approached gender from a deficit mindset as it encouraged participants to discuss limiting beliefs about gender prior to establishing the importance of equity. In addition, post-test responses were concentrated in two of the three aforementioned USAID Gender Equity Framework (2008) dimensions, *Equality in the Learning Process* and *Equality of Educational Outcomes*, thus leaving the *Equality of Access* dimension overwhelmingly unaddressed.

To this end, *Equality of Access* oriented discussions focusing on equitable strategies that address how teachers can increase enrollment, attendance, and retention of girls (USAID, 2008), specifically in SBAE programs, may be beneficial. We posit that a potential long-term result of adapting equitable strategies focusing on access will encourage more girls and women to pursue careers in agriculture, more specifically in agricultural education. Furthermore, observing how Liberian SBAE teachers move beyond awareness of equitable strategies to adopting equitable strategies in their teaching practice may provide insight into specific needs or strategies that should be addressed in future trainings.

We acknowledge that this training is part of a larger, ongoing AgriCorps program utilizing SBAE and student-centered teaching as a means to agricultural innovation, increased interests in agriculture careers, and ultimately improved economic outcomes for Liberians. Embedding conversations and practices about gender equity within the training is a part of a holistic approach. Through gender equity work by teachers, schools can become safe spaces for young women and girls (Aikmen & Unterhalter, 2005; Yeboah, 2018) and further including them in society will “contribute to the total socio-economic development of their countries in the region” (Tuwor and Sossu, 2008).

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