



Effectiveness of Accelerated Education Programmes From a Gender Equality Perspective in Rural Marginalized Settings: Evidence from Ghana and Sierra Leone

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TITLE: Effectiveness of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) from a Gender Equality Perspective: Evidence from Ghana and Sierra Leone

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Abstract

A multi country evaluation supported by the Global partnership for Education/Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE/KIX), undertaken between 2021 to 2024 revealed promising results regarding the success of accelerated education programmes (AEPs), especially in Ghana and Sierra Leone. The complementary programme model implemented in Northern Ghana by three NGOs (Ghana Institute of Linguistics, School for Life and AFRIKIDS) between 2013 and 2018, together enrolled over 25,000 children (50% boys and 50% girls) and transitioned over 80% to primary school at the end of the nine-month complimentary education programme. Similarly, the Sierra Leone government compressed AEP model implemented by Save the Children model, implemented between 2016 and 2020 in Sierra Leone jointly enrolled over 700 children, the majority of whom were girls registered an almost universal transition rate into Junior Secondary School (JSS) after the three-year speed programme.

The administration of the standard SEGRA tests to 280 transitioned AEP students in Sierra Leone into the formal school system, against their counterparts in the same Junior Secondary School class (273) who had only been exposed to education within the formal system, showed that performance level on word reading was similar among junior secondary school (JSS) AEP and Non-AEP beneficiaries. However, boys outperformed girls in word reading and the difference is significant ($p < 0.001$). In the case of reading and comprehension, performance level was even, for both AEP and Non-AEP groups. However, within each gender group, Non-AEPs performed better. The evaluation also found promising capacity to achieve foundation literacy, motivation to complete junior and senior high school and strong interest in achieving higher education aspirations. AEP is a prevention strategy against teenage pregnancy and reduces the practice of child marriage. An AEP female beneficiary interviewed in Port Loko district, in Sierra Leone said: *'I learnt that early sex is not good and that one should abstain from sex if you don't want to get pregnant*

The paper makes the following recommendations:

- African Governments should increase investments in AEPs as a viable pathway for achieving universal and relevant education, especially for girls and well designing policies for education providers to implement gender-responsive practices, as evidenced by the higher admission rates for girls.
- Education Innovators are encouraged to continue prioritising the admission of girls in CBE/AEPs to address socio-cultural barriers and gender inequalities and providing financial support to ensure a smooth transition and higher retention rates.

- Communities should engage with various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other entities, to support and advocate for girls' education.

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to synthesise and build on the evidence, findings, and recommendations from the multi-country GPE/KIX evaluation relating to the effectiveness of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) in Sierra Leone and Ghana from a gender equality perspective (Casely-Hayford et al, 2023a; 2023b). The paper applies the Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) approach to bring out the benefits of increasing access of girls to quality education through AEPs (IDRC, 2020).

Definition of some key concepts

Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs): The United Nations appointed Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) defines an AEP as: “A flexible, age-appropriate programme, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, OOSC and youth. This may include those who missed out on or had their education interrupted due to poverty marginalisation, conflict and crisis. The goal of AEP is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity.” It is important to note that alternative/ complementary/ girls-focused education programmes exist in many different forms and are known by many different names throughout the world (Randall, et al., 2020).

A GESI Approach: considers unequal power relations and inequalities experienced by individuals as a result of their social identities, including gender, location, (dis)ability, wealth, education, age, caste/ethnicity, faith/religion, race, sexuality etc.

The IDRC GESI Model: IDRC’s gender equality and social inclusion model considers five domains: the context of operation, selection of beneficiaries, participation, transition into the formal school system, and/or world of work, and outcomes including learning outcomes

The findings will enhance the scalability and sustainability of AEPs across West Africa, contributing to the broader goal of equitable basic education.

The Structure of the Paper

In particular, the IDRC GESI Framework was applied for measuring effectiveness of viable non-governmental education innovators in Ghana and Sierra Leone, providing second chance education to rural marginalised children in order to address gender inequalities in education. The paper is structured around the five domains of the **IDRC GESI model**, namely: 1) the context of operation, 2) selection of beneficiaries, 3) participation, 4) transition into the formal school system, and/or world of work, and 5) outcomes including learning outcomes. It ends with some conclusions and recommendations.

Context of Operation

According to the UNICEF (2014) Report on out-of-school children (OOSC) in West and Central Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of education exclusion, with more than one-third of the world’s OOSC (98 million) with the majority (53%) of them being girls. It is estimated that one-fifth of children between the ages of 6 and 11 in sub-Saharan Africa are out-of-school, one third aged 12 to 14 are out-of-school and about 60% of children between 15 and 17 are not in school. The trend in OOSC in Sierra Leone according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster survey (MICS, 2017), shows

that the number of children out-of-school increases with higher level of schooling. Whilst the share of children out-of-school at the primary level was recorded at about 18%, that for junior secondary school (JSS) was recorded at 19% and that for senior secondary school at 36%. The proportion of out-of-school children who are females is comparatively lower than that for males at the primary and JSS age categories. At the Senior/Upper Secondary School level, there are more females who are out-of-school (39.7%), compared to males (31.4%); The pattern of out of school children is similar in Ghana. Overall, 25% of upper secondary age children are out of school, compared to 7% at the lower secondary level and another 7% at the primary level (Ghana Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2017/18).

The out of school rates differ across various indicators such as gender, socio-economic status, and geographical location, with children in deprived communities facing the highest rates of educational exclusion. Economic deprivation is closely linked with disparities in access to education and learning achievement across SSA, as students from poor, rural households and urban informal settlements often confront hunger, stigma, internal exclusion, and other factors which negatively affect their learning experiences (UNICEF, 2019). Notable among the factors that contribute to the wide disparities in access to education between groups include rural-urban migration, long distance to school, inefficiency challenges, poverty, socio-cultural factors such as early marriages, and high opportunity cost of enrolling a child in school. Poverty and/or conflict, for example, have denied millions of older children and youth access to basic education, particularly in rural SSA (UNESCO, 2018). From a gender perspective, the relatively higher proportion of girls who are out of school is largely due to teenage pregnancy, and also because girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to enter informal marital unions.

In response to the high out-of-school numbers in rural SSA, education innovators have designed flexible, context-specific education programmes to extend education to children in underserved communities and reduce the high out-of-school rates (MBSSE, 2021; Stromquist, 2015; Lewin, K. M. 2015). In Ghana, for example, School for Life (SfL), Action Aid, World Education, Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT), Afrikids, and other education innovators have implemented flexible, age-appropriate accelerated education programs (AEPs) to fill critical gaps in the delivery of essential educational services, especially in deprived rural and extreme poverty zones (Associates for Change 2023).

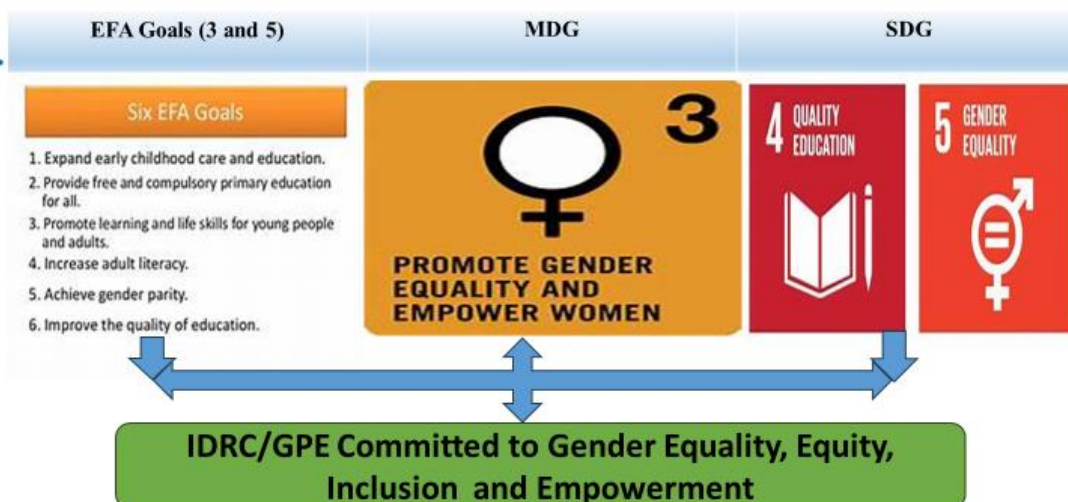
These programs target out-of-school, over-age children and youth who have been excluded from education or had their education interrupted due to economic deprivation, crisis and/or conflict. The government of Ghana has provided a policy environment to mainstream the contribution of civic actors by creating a separate agency (Complementary Education Agency) to coordinate activities of education innovators and support them to go to scale. In Sierra Leone Save the Children, offered an Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) in Pujehun district, a southern district in Sierra Leone within the period 2016-2020, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), through the Non-formal Education Directorate (NFED), provided accelerated learning programmes (ALP), from 2016-2020, to address the out of school situation as a result of the Ebola outbreak, whilst BRAC-SL offered a girls' focused programme (GFP) titled 'Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) Programmes' in several districts in Sierra Leone from 2012- to 2021.

With the exception of BRAC- SL, the other four innovators (AfriKIDS, GILLBT, School for Life (Ghana) and, SCI-SL) admitted both boys and girls, in the AEP programmes. An important component for AEP implementation is the community partnership and involvement component. Communities became active partners following intense sensitization to change perceptions regarding the importance of education. Some communities offered space to host AEP schools, while others instituted byelaws to motivate caretakers to release their sons, daughters and wards to attend classes and on time.

As part of the ongoing global effort towards addressing the out of school phenomenon, the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange/Global Partnership for Education (KIX/GPE) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) are supporting a comparative study of “Accelerated Education and Girls Focused Programs in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone”, which is being implemented by Associates for Change (AfC), Ghana, Dalan Development Consult, Sierra Leone and Centre for the Study of Economies of Africa (CSEA), Nigeria (Ofori Owusu & Yumkella 2022; Dalan Development Consultants, 2022). The multi-country KIX study focuses on vulnerable children and youth in rural, extreme poverty and fragile environments across West Africa. The overarching objective of the study is to increase access to learning for children who are out of school by generating knowledge to improve effectiveness of AEPs and girls’ focused models across West Africa and make a case for scalability and adaptability.

There has been much emphasis on improving girls’ educational status and attaining gender equality in education in international discourses, as seen in successive goals set at international conferences: Education for All (EFA) goals 2 and 5; Millennium Development Goal (MDG) goal 3; and Sustainable Development (SDG) GOAL 4 and 5. In the same vein, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is committed to gender equality, equity and inclusion in access to quality educational opportunities.

GLOBAL EMPHASIS ON IMPROVING GIRLS EDUCATIONAL STATUS FOR GENDER EQUALITY



Selection:

In Sierra Leone, Save the Children (SL) AEP targeted groups of children between the ages of 10 and 16 years. This target group comprised young mothers who had never attended school, students who had dropped out of school for various reasons, students who were receiving Koranic instruction, orphans, children who were already in employment and other vulnerable children. BRAC's ELA targeted vulnerable girls between the ages of 10-19 who were no longer at school, or who had never been to school, and were living in high poverty zones.

GILBT, Afrikids and School for life in Ghana targeted both boys and girls with priority given to more girls (about 51%) at latter part of the programme. The children either never attended schools or dropped out of school for various reason such as poverty, limited parental support, child labour and others. They were between the ages of 8 and 15 years. On the other hand, the Afrikids STAGE model trained girls and adult females to either go back to school or go into trade/ world of work in rural deprived or extremely deprived regions.

Participation in AEP/ GFP/ALP/CBE programmes

According to AEP beneficiaries the teaching/learning processes at the AEP were child-friendly, which favoured regular attendance and retention. A focus group discussion (FGD) session with male AEP beneficiaries in Sierra Leone, revealed that the facilitation style in the AEP classes was preferred to that of the formal school system. AEP facilitators were reported to be always on time and able to capture the attention of every learner in the class, using a mix of methods including songs and fun stories to encourage full participation.

The AEP facilitators teach us until we understand the subject matter. They will explain complex concepts by using cultural illustrations. In the normal school, the teacher will exit the classroom no sooner he/she gives notes. They have no time to explain complex concepts. They always assume that we know the concepts. Also, some teachers will beat us severely in class (Save the Children – SL AEP boys FGD, Pujehun District, Sierra Leone)

The AEP programme usually supplies us most of the learning materials like writing books, pens, pencils, bags, and shoes. The normal school does not supply us learning materials, but they will require us to come with learning materials to school. Some teachers will punish us if we cannot produce especially reading materials in class (AEP boys FGD, Pujehun).

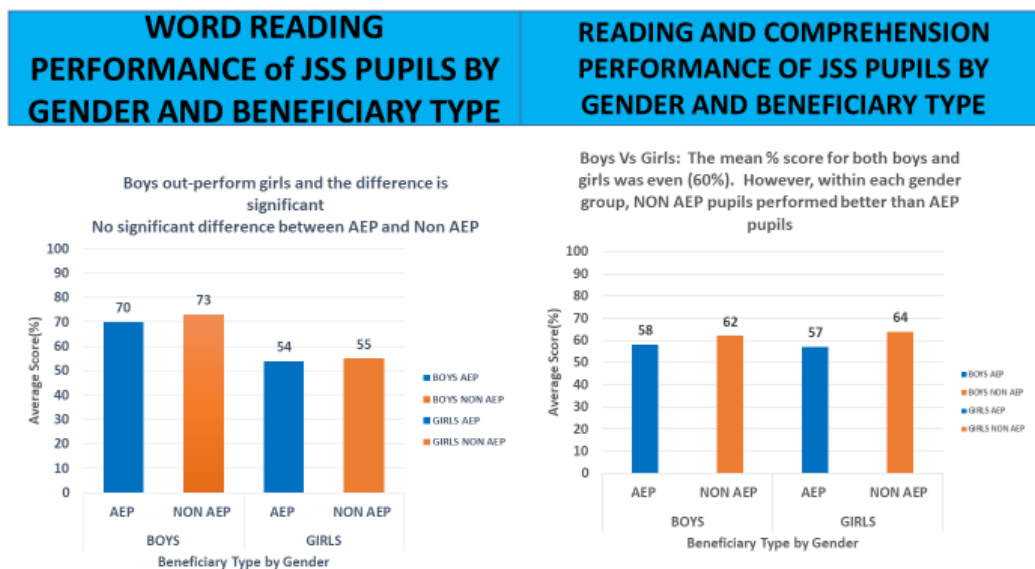
Transition

Transition rate of AEP beneficiaries enrolled in the Ghana AEP programmes into primary school was very high. Of the 16,657 beneficiaries reached by AfriKids CBE programme between 2013-2021, 15,258 (92%) transitioned into the formal primary school system. Save the children, Sierra Leone, enrolled 700 beneficiaries, between 2016 -2020. Of the 552 students who attempted the government sponsored National Primary School Examination (NPSE), 494 students (89%) passed the exams and transitioned into junior secondary school (JSS) level. The government of Sierra Leone

MBSSE/NFED programme which also focused on transitioning girls into formal school, consequently, transitioned 10,000 at all three levels, (upper primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary school), out of the 14,500, who had enrolled the ALP learning centres. The BRAC programme, Sierra Leone aimed at giving teenage girls a safe environment to improve their understanding of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and behaviour, enhance their access to income-generating activities (IGA) through training and financial support, and boost adolescent girls' engagement in family and societal decision-making processes. The girls also gained literacy and numeracy skills. Between 2012 and 2021, a total of 16,160 girls completed the programme and were empowered. Some of BRAC ELA beneficiaries, even transitioned into the formal school system.

Outcomes

Learning Outcome



This section compares the academic performance of (280) transitioned AEP students in Sierra Leone into the formal school system, with their counterparts in the same Junior Secondary School class (273) who had only been exposed to education within the formal system, using the SEGRA standard word reading and, reading and comprehension tests. Boys outperformed girls in word reading and the difference is significant ($p < 0.001$). Boys are more likely to perform better, because girls might be dedicating less time to reading, due to their involvement in household chores. In the case of reading and comprehension test, the mean score by gender was about even (60%), for both AEP and Non-AEP groups. However, within each gender group, Non-AEPs performed better.

Empowerment

Evidence obtained through engagement with AEP beneficiaries in group discussions, suggestive of emancipation as a result of exposure to the various AEP models are summarized under the following four themes.

- AEPs lead to break through for reading and writing
- AEPs stimulate resilience, confidence and empowerment
- AEPs strengthen economies
- AEP is a prevention strategy against teenage pregnancy and reduces child marriage

AEPs Lead to Breakthrough for Reading and Writing – Evidence gathered from AEP beneficiaries who had been exposed to the Ghana CBE models, brings out feelings of liberation, enthusiasm and confidence building among AEP beneficiaries for the new found skills and ability to read and write.

- *I now have confidence in myself to stay in school and complete, because I can now read and write well (AEP Female P6 student, Yendi district)*
- *I could not write my name but after the CBE programme, I can now write my name (AEP Female P6 student, Saboba district)*
- *I can now read small small ((AEP Female JHS , Talensi district)*
- *I learned how to read and now help my parents (AEP male JHS 2 student, Talensi district)*

AEPs stimulate resilience, confidence and empowerment – Evidence from Ghana and Sierra Leone The programmes also helped to build self-confidence for both girls and boys manifested in behaviours that reveal the extent of their empowerment. Group discussions expressed a desire to stay in school, were proud of their improved appearance when in public and in their ability to stand up for their rights in their communities.

- *I now have confidence in myself to stay in school and complete, because I can now read and write well (AEP Female P6 student, Yendi district, Ghana)*
- *We used to dress anyhow to school before, and put our books in rubbers to school, but now we dress well and have bags to put our books and shoes to wear (AEP Female JHS 1 , Tolon district, Ghana)*
- *The AEP facilitators enlightened me about my rights and responsibilities. I now have no fear to defend my rights if they are threatened or violated because I know what they are (AEP boys FGD, Pujehun District, Sierra Leone)*

AEPS strengthens economies- Evidence from Sierra Leone. The research followed up on AEP graduates in the world of work, to learn about their post AEP experiences and how the education and skills acquired from the AEP programmes, have impacted their lives. The responses from AEP/ALP/GFP beneficiaries reveal that the programmes empowered them to be self-sustaining. The combined effect of the

literacy and numeracy skills acquired, income generating skills learnt, personal and environmental hygiene, sexual and reproductive information gained, and financial literacy, were not only useful to beneficiaries but were also applied to assist other community members. The research has shown that with the intervention of AEP/ALP/GFP, girls could be liberated from socio-cultural shackles and earn income.

- *I learnt how to do business which really influenced my life. Any small amount of money I get hold of I put it into business and get profit out of it. (AEP girl beneficiary, Pujehun District)*
- *Right now, I have learnt how to make soap and out of it I survive with my family (BRAC ELA beneficiary, Port Loko)*
- *“The programme has benefitted me and my household because I am doing business in which I use the profit to assist my kids and husband by buying food stuff to cook for my family. It has benefitted my community because I normally assist my colleagues in counting their goods and money. The programme also taught me to tidy up my community from litters to avoid germs and outbreak” (BRAC ELA Beneficiary)*
- *“.....The most important thing that I have learnt from the program is soap making because I am doing that and selling the soap now to take care of myself and support my family.”(BRAC ELA BEN_ZB_Masineh WOW, Kambia).*

AEP is a prevention strategy against teenage pregnancy and reduces the practice of child marriage – Evidence from Sierra Leone. Dialogue with former AEP female graduates, revealed that girls gained renewed interest in education, following exposure to AEP programmes and began to challenge negative socio-cultural practices like early marriage and teenage pregnancy which previously hindered their access to school.

- *I learnt that early sex is not good and that one should abstain from sex if you don't want to get pregnant.” (BRAC ELA beneficiary -WOW-IC-F-DARESALAM-Kambia District – Sierra Leone AMTM6).*
- *“.....The teachers teach us how to prevent pregnancy.”(BRAC ELA Beneficiary -WOW-IC-F-DARESALAM-Kambia District, Sierra Leone)*
- *“Well in terms of early marriage, when a man came for me I told him that I want to go to school first and I want to learn book first, although I have gotten pregnant, I have given birth, I have learnt lessons, let me learn book first” (MBSSE SL AEP beneficiary)*
- *My community used to tell me that my daughter when you are 18 years you should get married, and I am seeing my colleagues are giving birth. So, since I joined this program I have seen that my focus should all be on education (MBSSE SL AEP beneficiary)*

Conclusion

It could be seen that accelerated education models (AEP/ALP/GFP) addressed the needs of out of school girls and boys by breaking through socio-cultural barriers, which is the major driver of exclusion from school, but more so for girls. Even though the AEP programmes evaluated in Ghana and the Save The Children programme evaluated in Sierra Leone, catered for both boys and girls, the admission process favoured girls over boys. BRAC ELA and MBSSE ALP, in Sierra Leone catered for girls only. The premium placed on girls' admission in the selection process is evidence that all of the education providers were gender responsive as they took positive steps to ensure gender equality and equity. Transition rate from AEPs into the formal school system is high. In the Ghana situation over 80% of AEP beneficiaries transitioned into primary school system Save the Children, Sierra Leone registered 89% pass rate for AEP pupils sponsored to take the National Primary School examination. All six models evaluated (3 in Ghana, 3 in Sierra Leone) were found to be offering transformative education, which resulted in a breakthrough for reading and writing, among both boys and girls. Although the standard of performance in reading among male AEP beneficiaries at Junior secondary school level was significantly higher than girls, performance trajectory for girls was approaching proficiency (AP) level. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy are key factors known to influencing progression within the secondary school system among girls. The evaluation found that AEPs is a promising pathway to interrupt the pattern of starting families at an early age. AEP's are making significant contribution to increase awareness about the risks and consequences of teenage pregnancy and early marriage, fuelling the desire among girls to prioritize education over early marriage. The findings reported in this paper presents enough evidence to attract Ghana and Sierra Leone governments uptake for policy support and adequate budget allocation to scale up CBEs/AEPS /ALP/GFP, as a viable and alternative pathway towards inclusive and equitable education for all to achieve universal education, especially in Africa.

Recommendations:

Government

- Government should increase investment to enhance the scalability and sustainability of CBE/AEP as a strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy and early marriage.
- Implement programs within CBE/AEPs that educate girls on their rights and provide them with the tools to prioritize education over early marriage.
- Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of AEPs to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvements and use the findings to inform policy decisions and ensure that AEPs are meeting the needs of out-of-school girls.
- Mainstream gender equality modules into AEP facilitator and teacher training curricula

- Ensure that all education providers implement gender-responsive practices, as evidenced by the higher admission rates for girls.

Education Innovators

Continue to prioritize the admission of girls in CBE/AEPs to address socio-cultural barriers and gender inequalities and providing financial support to ensure a smooth transition and higher retention rates.

Enhance support systems to facilitate the transition of AEP beneficiaries into the formal school system.

Address potential gender disparities in reading proficiency by focusing on improving the reading and writing skills of girls in CBE/AEPs to ensure they reach proficiency levels

- Improve recruitment drive for beneficiaries and facilitators/mentors, especially female facilitators

Community

- Engage with various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other entities, to support and advocate for girls' education.

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