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CHOOSING A SINGLE-SEX SCHOOL : ELITE CLONING MOTIVE OR QUEUE JUMPING AMBITION ?

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ABSTRACT

Headmasters and headmistresses, who are the direct managers of our secondary boarding Schools, each year go through stressful pressures from parents who besiege their offices seeking admission for their children. Those who manage single-sex secondary boarding schools, as observed, tend to undergo more of the pressures. This study shows that both elites and non-elites want these single-sex boarding schools for their children because the former see such schools as a means of socially reproducing themselves, while the latter see these schools as a means of upward social mobility through their children. The implications of the findings for educational management/policy are discussed.

Introduction

One area that has long deserved sociological research in Ghana is the quest for an explanation for the increased and increasing preference for single-sex schooling. The choice between single-sex and mixed-sex schooling has been left with the Ghanaian parent for decades. The special liking for single-sex schooling has also been with us for decades. In recent times, however, this

special liking has turned out to become an undue pressure on heads of senior secondary schools when admissions open for fresh students in January each year.

Not enough studies have been done to find out the class of people who typically choose single-sex or mixed-sex schools for their children and wards. Nor have enough studies been done to determine the factors that influence parents and guardians' decision to choose single-sex schools in particular (Lee and Marks, 1992). I argue that a two-tier reason explains the phenomenal increase in the preference for single-sex schooling. I argue that both elites and non-elites perceive schooling in general as a structure providing opportunities for status maintenance and status attainment. That is, whereas the elites perceive schooling as a structure providing opportunities for them to clone themselves socially, the non-elites on the other hand, perceive it as a means of upward social mobility through their children. In this regard, single-sex schooling is perceived by both elites and non-elites as the true opportunity structure.

Opare

Background

Western education made its debut in Ghana in the 16th century, but it did not really get established until the arrival of the Christian missionary societies in the 19th century. Even though the Christian mission schools got established through a lot of difficulty, eventually they were embraced and clamoured for by a large section of the community. A remarkable feature of these schools was their predominantly single-sex character.

Whereas the all-male schools among them were set up essentially to train pastors, catechists, teachers, professionals and other sections of the intelligentsia, the all-female ones were set up essentially to train worthy partners for the pastors, catechists, teachers and other gentlemen being educated in the all-male schools (Edwards and Tisdale, 1989). Hence the curricular emphasis of all-female mission schools, until recently, were literature, languages, cookery, dressmaking, home management and others (Masemann, 1974). In spite of their initial disparate curricular emphases, both all-male and all-female schools tended to, and still tend to be academically oriented.

Mixed-sex schooling became a common feature of the Ghanaian secondary school system when the colonial administration entered the field in the 1920's. Since then, mixed-sex schools have made useful contributions to the development of education in the country. In spite of their contributions,

however, these schools have not enjoyed as much prestige as their single-sex counterparts. Instead of their strong points, some weaknesses inherent in mixed-sex schooling have been highlighted. One such apparent weakness is that the mixed-sex school setting does not seem to provide a salutary academic environment for adolescents (Goodlad, 1984). The reason assigned is that when adolescent boys and girls meet together in the same school, there is usually the tendency for them to be distracted from academic work.

It is further argued that mixed-sex schooling is a means of socialising boys and girls into different roles in a gender-stratified society such as ours. In other words, boys are prepared for their roles in the world of the dominant class, whereas girls are prepared for their roles in the world of the silent dominated class. In spite of these alleged negative features and outcomes of mixed-sex schooling, it still has a large clientele.

Literature Review

Most of the research on single-sex and mixed-sex schooling usually deal with the relative advantages in single-sex schooling, particularly for females (Lee and Lockheed, 1990). There is paucity of research the world over, on who goes to a single-sex school or a mixed-sex school. In Ghana in particular, such studies are virtually non-existent. The few studies done elsewhere reveal, however, that single-sex schools tend to

Opare

recruit their students from among the elite (Marsh, 1989 ; Riordan, 1990).

Regarding why most parents prefer single-sex schools to mixed-sex schools, Lee and Bryck (1986) as well as Lee and Marks (1992) seem to suggest that many parents believe that single-sex schools have a more academic orientation, and that such schools have more protected environments. Hence they are perceived to be functioning as opportunity structures for status attainment. One other reason, according to Lee and Marks (1992) is that most single-sex schools have a strong religious orientation which minimises, if not rule out acts of indiscipline. They conclude that parents choose single-sex schools for their children and wards because of the safety and discipline in their religious environments. Such environments, they argue, offer guarantees of academic excellence, which in turn guarantees high chances of University admission.

With particular reference to females, single-sex schooling is said to be devoid of stereotyped patterns of gender relations which intimidate them in mixed-sex settings (Lee and Marks, 1992). Hence single-sex schooling is said to offer an equitable and sound education for females. Single-sex schooling therefore, is said to equip females with the ability to overcome the disadvantaging effects of

discrimination in a gender-stratified society (Lee and Marks, 1990).

The scanty literature thus suggests that different categories of parents send their children and wards to single-sex schools for essentially different reasons. Some parents do so because, as perceived, such schools offer guarantees of University entry, whereas others do so because of their religious and safe environments. I extend this literature by exploring the factors that influence parents and guardians in their choice of single-sex or mixed-sex Senior Secondary Schools for their children and wards. My point of departure, however, is that whereas previous researchers attribute choice of single-sex schools to conservative (religious) motives and educational opportunity motives, I try to attribute the tendency to social reproduction (elite cloning) and status attainment (social mobility) motives. I hypothesise that :

H_1 : The higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the more likely it is that they will choose a single-sex school for their child or ward.

This hypothesis is derived from the literature. According to the literature, most students in single-sex schools come from high-status backgrounds (Lee and Marks, 1992). Naturally then, elite parents will be more likely than non-elite parents to choose single-sex schools apparently because they have greater insight into what goes on in such schools.

Robert Merton (1965) theorises that an opportunity structure is required if social goals are to be achieved. Translated into concrete reality, the theory suggests that in every society there is the need for an opportunity structure to enable individuals and groups to achieve their goals. Two of such goals are social mobility and social reproduction. Thus single-sex schooling would appear to serve as an opportunity structure for individuals to either clone themselves socially, or to be upwardly mobile. Aware of the dynamics of society, the elite would consider single-sex schooling as the sure and meritocratic way to the realisation of their goal of social reproduction, whereas the non-elite would consider it as a sure means of jumping the queue. Accordingly, they would select single-sex schools for their children and wards. On the basis of these, I hypothesise that:

H_{2a} : The perceived promise of social reproduction through academic success will be predictive of parents' choice of single-sex schools for their children and wards.

H_{2b} : The perceived promise of upward social mobility through academic success will be predictive of parents' choice of single-sex schools for their children and wards.

Method

The Sample : Data for the study were collected between March and April 1996 from 614 parents with children or wards in senior secondary schools in a

Ghanaian municipality. The multi-stage sampling technique was employed. First, all the Senior Secondary Schools in the municipality were purposively included in the sample. At the next stage, classes from which individual students were to be selected in each school were selected through simple random sampling. Finally the students in the selected classes who were to be selected for the final sample were also selected through simple random sampling. In each of the mixed-sex schools, separate lists had to be compiled for boys and girls. Through this three-stage procedure, 304 students were selected from the single-sex schools, 158 males and 146 females. Three hundred and ten students were selected from the mixed-sex schools ; 152 males, and 158 females.

Instrument and Procedure

The sole data collection instrument was the questionnaire. Information sought through the questionnaire included items such as sex of the student and the level of education of the father or male guardian of the student. Other items sought information on reasons why the school the focal student was attending was chosen by the parents or guardians.

Towards the end of the first term of the 1996 academic year, questionnaires were distributed to the students randomly selected for onward submission to their parents or guardians. Seven hundred questionnaires were sent out. Out of this 614 (about 88 %) were returned.

Data and Measures

The dependent variable is choice or non-choice of a single-sex school, a dummy variable. Single-sex school was weighted 2, and mixed-sex school, 1. The independent variables are socio economic status of the family, perceived mobility opportunities through further education, and perceived opportunities for social reproduction through education. Finding appropriate questions to measure these two opportunity structure motives was quite difficult, because unless carefully framed, a question might turn out to be leading subjects to respond in a certain direction. To come around this problem a number of statements were drafted and shown to colleagues and graduate students to comment on. The question and statements below emerged as the most suitable measure of the two opportunity motives :

" What is your view regarding the following statements supposed to explain your choice of the school this child is attending ?"

1. Because we believe that only schools of that type offer the prospects for further education for the child..
2. Because we notice that most of the top people in our society are known to send their children to schools of that type.

The assumption underlying the second statement is that elite parents naturally arrive at this reason after a careful

observation that the established elite have the tendency of reproducing themselves socially through the education of their children in certain types of school. The response categories were recoded, so that, "very necessarily so", came to have a value of 4, "necessarily so," 3, "not necessarily so," 2, and "not at all necessarily so", 1. Father's education was used as proxy for the family's socioeconomic status. It was measured in number of years, and then recoded and categorised into 4, namely, no formal education, 1, less than secondary school education, 2, secondary school education or equivalent, 3, and the bachelor's degree and beyond, 4.

The control variables are the sex of the focal student, the fact that the school has boarding facilities, the fact that the school has no disciplinary problem, the fact that the school has a strong religious orientation and because of the school's gender composition. With the exception of the sex of the student, which is a dummy variable, male or female, all the control variables were measured on a 4-point scale.

Analysis and Results

Descriptive Analysis

An essential component of most data analyses is the determination of relationships between variables. One basic means to this end is cross- tabulation. Though it is unable to capture all the complex interrelationships among variables, cross-tabulations have the

advantage of yielding straightforward interpretable results (Bankston and Zhou, 1995). Against this background, cross-tabular analyses were done to determine the various relationships in the data.

The first of the cross-tabular analyses concerned the relationship between father's education and choice of school type. The results of that analysis show that among the fathers with children and wards in the single-Sex schools, most of them have secondary school education or beyond. Not so many of fathers with children and wards in the mixed-sex schools are so highly educated. This relationship between level of education and choice of a single-sex school is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 37.66$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). This relationship suggests that though a large section of the community tend to prefer single-sex schooling these days, the elite tend to do so more often than the non-elite do. This finding is thus consistent with previous findings (Jimenez and Lockheed, 1989; Lee and Bryck, 1986; and Lee and Lockheed, 1990).

Other cross-tabular analyses were done to determine the proportion of parents who agreed or disagreed with the statements suggesting the reasons why parents choose single-sex or mixed-sex schools for their children and wards. The results are shown in Table 1.

The results present an interesting picture. Opportunity seems to be a very important explanation for the choice of a school. Regarding "prospects for further education", the respondents were so overwhelmingly in agreement with the statement.

Parent with children in single-sex schools, however, seem to be more in agreement ($\chi^2 = 43.59$). This suggests that parents will choose a school for their children and wards after they have convinced themselves that the school has a strong academic orientation guaranteeing prospects for further education for their children.

We notice further that most parents tend to compare themselves with successful elites in their choice of schools for their children and wards. However, regarding "most respondents send their children there", the respondents were so overwhelmingly in agreement with the statement that there is no statistically significant difference between the two categories of parents. The tendency may suggest that elites, in their bid for social reproduction through education, tend to compare themselves with their like who have succeeded in reproducing themselves socially through education. Successful and established elites thus serve as reference groups for the burgeoning elite. The two elite groups also serve as reference groups to the non-elite.

Table 1
Percentage Distribution of Parents Agreeing with Statements Explaining
Choice of School Type

Statement	Parent 1	Parent 2	X ²
Prospects for further education	84 %	60 %	43.59 * *
Most prominent people send their children there	99 %	99.4 %	0.00
School has religious orientation	49 %	43 %	1.84
Because of the school's gender composition	70 %	54 %	17.80 * *
Because the school has no discipline problem	44 %	27 %	7.50
Because the school has boarding facilities	52 %	63 %	19.40 * *

Note : * * P < . 01

Parent 1 = parents with children in single-sex schools

Parent 2 = parents with children in mixed-sex schools

Table 2
Logistic Regression Coefficients of Variables Explaining Choice
of Single-Sex Schools

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	Beta	Beta
Father's education (SES)	.39 ** (.07)	.38 ** (.18)
Prominent people send their children there (social reproduction motive)	.37 ** (.09)	.36 ** (.10)
Opportunities for further education motive (social mobility motive)	.64 ** (.16)	.57 ** (.16)
No discipline problem		.15 (.10)
School's gender composition		.14 * (.07)
School's religious orientation		.08 (.11)
School's boarding facilities		.31 ** (.08)
Sex of Student		.03 (.19)
Constant	2.14	1.78
-2 Log Likelihood $\chi^2 = 743.15$		721.92
df = 3		df = 8

* P < .05 ** P < .01

Standard errors are in parenthesis

Multivariate Analysis

As indicated earlier, the dependent variable is a binary response, choice or non-choice of a single-sex school. Because the variable has a binary response, 1 or 2, logistic regression was employed for the data analysis. The multivariate analysis was done in two phases. The first phase involved a model designed to test the three hypotheses. The results of that analysis are presented in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, the data support the first hypothesis. That is, the higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the more likely it is that they will choose a single-sex school for their child(ren). Socioeconomic background is thus a predictor of the choice of a single-sex or a mixed-sex school. The two-tier hypothesis is also supported by the data. The belief that single-sex schools offer high prospects for further education, and the observation that prominent people in society tend to send their children and wards to single-sex schools, both explain parents' preference for such schools. Both of these results suggest that both elite and non-elite parents choose single-sex schools for their children and wards because of the promise that their social goals will be realised through the education of their children and wards in such schools.

The second model was designed to test the three hypotheses when factors identified in the literature are taken into

account. This phase of the analysis shows that even when these background factors are controlled for, socioeconomic status and opportunities for social self-cloning and social mobility are still important explanations for parents' special preference for single-sex schools.

Summary and Discussion

This study was designed to seek explanations for the increased preference of Ghanaian parents for single-sex secondary schools for their children and wards. All the three hypotheses are supported by the data. The results show that socio-economic status in most cases determines the type of school parents will choose for their child or ward. Thus we notice that higher-status parents tend to choose single-sex schools more than less high-status parents do. If single-sex schools and mixed-sex schools charge comparable fees, then something inherent in single-sex schooling may account for their relative popularity. That something is the opportunity for social reproduction and social mobility.

I theorise that the opportunity for either maintaining one's social status, or the opportunity to ascend into a higher social status are the most important explanations for the choice of a single-sex school. The reason is that those who have had the advantage of the "European school" have always sought to reproduce themselves socially. The non-elite, as well as the up-and-coming elite, seeing

Opare

the established elite as their reference groups, also have sought to raise their social status so as to come socially closer to the established elite. And as Merton (1965) theorised, an opportunity structure enabling groups and individuals to achieve their social goals must be available if the effects of the stratification system are to be mitigated. The desired opportunity structure is perceived to be provided in single-sex schooling. I conclude and emphasise therefore, that the elite choose single-sex schools for elite cloning purposes, whereas the non-elite choose these schools for social mobility purposes.

The outcome of this study has implications for educational policy. A relevant question is why some parents have to cross districts and even regions seeking admission for their children in single-sex schools. The obvious answer is that parents want good quality education, for their children. When we talk of good quality education, however, we do not have one item in mind ; good quality education means good teachers, good and adequate materials and facilities for effective teaching and learning, and a congenial atmosphere for education. It is obvious that whereas a few of the well established schools, most of them urban-based and single-sex, are endowed with these resources for education, the mass of younger less established schools cannot boast of even the barest minimum amounts of these resources. As long as the less

established schools continue to languish in apparent neglect, parents with educational aspirations for their children will continue to "invade" the "good schools" in January each year.

All this suggests that the resources for teaching and learning are not equitably distributed to the nation's schools. Thus as we talk so much of community schools these days, unless the state takes a more critical look at the distribution of the human and material resources for education in the schools countrywide, we cannot talk of equalisation of educational opportunity. We cannot talk of the democratisation of secondary education either.

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Opare

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