

EDUCATION IN BO.

Bo town has been the centre for education for Sierra Leone, outside Freetown, since the early years of this century. Many schools, primary and secondary, were started by missions, most Roman Catholic, some Protestant, and some Muslim. Now the government has taken over and is aiming to provide free education throughout the country. There is, however, do little money available that only teachers' salaries are being paid and those are often late.

All schools are bare, even science laboratories in secondary schools having very equipment, so that most experiments are demonstrated by the teacher, not done by the students themselves.

Most primary schools have some benches, desks and a blackboard in each classroom and that is all. Many teachers buy their own chalk. All classes are overcrowded 50 or 60 children being quite usual. Classrooms are often divided from each other only by partitions in one long building.

Because of the conditions, practically all teaching has to be by rote, children learning in the official language: English, which is new to most of them when they start school. At home they speak their own tribal languages, mainly Mende in this area. (Krio, a language developed from English by the freed slaves at the end of 18th Century, is used generally for communication between people of different tribes)

Children start school at different ages depending on circumstances, their proximity to a school and the ability of their parents to provide books and pencils. Although education is free at primary level, nothing is provided. (In Bo town many traders, sell second-hand text books and exercise books at the side of the street alongside vegetables, bowls of rice, plastic shoes, etc., all spread out on mats or sacking.)

Whatever their age children start in Class I, the youngest being about 4+, although some may be 7 or 8 years old. At the end of each school year they will progress to the next class only if they pass the tests satisfactorily, up to Class VII. So at the top of the Primary School, Class VII may consist of children from 10+ to 15 years of age or even older, depending on the age they started and whether or not they have passed each year to the next class. These children then take the entrance exams in English and Mathematics, only being admitted to Secondary School if they reach a certain standard. I believe about 30% go on to Secondary School.

Most secondary schools in B o used to have boarding houses but many of these are now closing as pressure for more teaching accommodation builds up. (Bo Government School, 100% boarding, is the exception. It is the oldest established secondary school outside Freetown.)

It was surprising to find that most schools have a P.T.A., trying hard to support the schools, but money is scarce in most homes, so it's hard work. However, some buildings are being extended by teachers', parents' and students' efforts.

Secondary school education is very much like that in England, pupils progressing from 1st Form to 5th Form - only two schools in Bo having a 6th Form at present. Until recently students took English Boards' G.C.E. O and A level examinations (if parents could afford the entrance fees.) Recently, however, a West African examination board has been set up and it is hoped that more appropriate "set books" etc., will result. (This year "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe was one of these is in the African Writers Series available in this country and well worth reading.)

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On leaving Secondary School, students achieving A levels may go on to Sierra Leone University at Fourah Bay University College or at Njala University College which is not far from Bo. There are also several Teachers' Colleges which take students who have achieved O levels and train them for the Teachers Certificate or the Higher Teacher's Certificate. (Students with only a little secondary education and no GCE qualifications are able to obtain a Teacher's Elementary Certificate after two years training.)

Many primary teachers in -Sierra Leone will train for these certificates between periods of teaching lasting some years.

The career of one such teacher was as follows:

1952 - 1963	Primary school pupil for 11 years.
1963 - 1965	secondary School (for only 2 years age 18 - 20)
1965 - 1967	Two years at Catholic Training College: Obtained T.E.C. at age 22.
1967 - 1972	Taught in Primary School for 5 years.
1972 - 1975	Three years in Bo Training College: Obtained Teacher's Certificate.
1975 - 1977	Two years as Class Teacher in Primary School.
1977 - 1979	Two years as Senior Teacher in another Primary School.
1979 -	appointed Headteacher of another village primary school, at age 34.

Primary School teaching seems to be one field where men and women have equal opportunities and equal status. (I don't know if they earn equal salaries!)

In most Primary Schools the day starts at 8.00 a.m. or 8.30 a.m. and finishes at 2.00 p.m. with a short break at about 11.30 a.m. when market women on the compound sell fruit and snacks (eg. fried sweet potatoes) to the children. However, because of the demand for places, some buildings are used twice in the day with separate headteachers and staff for the two sessions. This is hard for the afternoon shift as they have to attend through the heat of the day and many of the children will have been working hard at home all morning.

These notes, made after our visit to Bo in October/November 1982, comprise a personal account. I hope they give a true picture but I am open to correction any point!

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