

Determinants of Students' Learning Outcomes on Academic Performance in Public Senior Secondary Schools in Gbarpolu County, Liberia

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000524>

Received: 12 August 2025; Accepted: 20 August 2025; Published: 19 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the determinants of students' learning outcomes on overall academic performance in public senior secondary schools in Gbarpolu County, Liberia. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The objectives were: teacher training, the availability of learning resources, institutional support, and the engagement of Parents-Teacher Associations (PTAs). A qualitative descriptive design was employed, with the principals, teachers, students, PTA leaders, and education officials from all seven senior public secondary schools serving as target. Stratified random, typical case, maximum variation, and census sampling techniques were used to select the study's participants. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations. The study employed thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti. The findings reveal that limited teacher training, lack of adequate learning resources, weak institutional oversight, and low parental engagement collectively impact students' performance negatively. The study recommends continual teacher training program, sufficient resource allocation, improved institutional monitoring, and proactive PTA involvement to enhance outcomes in rural Liberian schools.

Keywords: Teacher Training; Learning Resources; Institutional Support; PTA Engagement; Learning Outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Education forms the basis for national development, ensuring students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for socio-economic advancement (Edwards, 2015). Learning outcomes are the demonstration of expected knowledge students acquire in courses/subjects taught over a given period through evaluation. In Liberia, particularly in rural areas like Gbarpolu County, insufficient trained teachers, lack of learning materials, weak institutional framework, and low involvement of parents continue to hinder academic performance (Yele & Specioza, 2024). Using a comparative approach, studies in the Philippines, India, and South Africa shows that targeted teacher development, adequate resourcing, and strong community participation can significantly improve outcomes (Pacay, 2023; Priya & Sangeeta, 2024; Molaudzi & Adeyemo, 2022). This paper examines these determinants within the specific context of Gbarpolu County.

Background

Since the civil war, Liberia has undertaken diverse education initiatives with the intend of improving the standard of education within the country. However, not much improvement has been seen across the country. Schools in rural areas like Gbarpolu County are challenged with low budgetary allotment, poor learning infrastructure, and limited oversight from governing institutions. These conditions have led to poor teaching quality which continues to have learners performing below the require benchmark. National statistics repeatedly highlight low pass rates and gaps in foundational literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2024). Teachers in rural areas often rely on outdated books and methods due to limited professional development opportunities (Sherif, 2024), while schools face challenges due to inadequate textbooks, lack of laboratory equipment, and insufficient ICT tools (Mbogo et al., 2022). PTAs exist but are inactive due to undefined roles

and strategies for supporting schools (Bosco, 2021; Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014). These conditions set the stage for investigating how teacher training, resources, institutional support, and PTA engagement shape learning outcomes in the county.

Statement Of The Problem

Despite ongoing efforts to improve the country's educational sector, many public senior secondary schools in Liberia including Gbarpolu County continue to experience low performances in examination with massive failures in foundational competencies. (Sherif, 2024; (Mbogo et al., 2022) revealed unqualified and underpaid teachers, and inadequate resources; while (Yele & Specioza, 2024) reported, weak oversight and leadership; and (Bosco, 2021) highlighted inconsistent PTA engagement as causes. However, localized empirical evidence detailing how these factors interact in Gbarpolu remains limited, hence, constraining tailored interventions. This study addresses that gap.

Objectives Of The Study

1. Examine how teacher training influences students' learning outcomes in Gbarpolu County.
2. Assess the effect of learning resources on academic performance.
3. Explore the role of institutional support in shaping learning outcomes.
4. Evaluate the influence of PTA engagement on students' academic achievement.

Research Questions

1. How does teacher training affect students' learning outcomes?
2. In what ways do learning resources shape academic performance?
3. How does institutional support contribute to or hinder learning outcomes?
4. How does PTA engagement affect academic performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Training

Findings in consideration of the EU contexts show that consistent professional development improves pedagogical skills and students' learning outcomes (Gordon et al., 2009). In South Africa and Uganda, mandatory in-service training showed greater influence on students' performance than baseline teachers' cognitive ability, outlining the significance of persistent professional learning (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016). In Liberia's rural settings, many teachers report limited access to training, contributing to the usage of outdated methods (Sherif, 2024).

Learning Resources

Schools having access to sufficient learning materials and standardized infrastructures are essentially associated with improved performance. Schools with equipped libraries and laboratories showed higher students' participation and achievement (Bizimana & Orodho, 2014). The impact of ICT tools such as Google Classroom on students' academic performance in Nigerian educational system in this present age has enhanced both the teaching and learning process and makes it easy for the achievement of the teachers' set objectives (Tolorunleke et al., 2022). (Limited resources such as textbooks, under-equipped laboratories, ICT serve as major constraint for rural schools in Liberia (Mbogo et al., 2022).

Institutional Support

Effectiveness in leadership and persistent oversight improves learning outcomes. Schools in South Africa recorded positive learning outcomes through strong supervision and proper management of resources (Molaudzi & Adeyemo, 2022). In Liberia, weak monitoring systems and inadequate funding for operation undermined students' performances (Yele & Specioza, 2024).

PTA Engagement

Parental involvement improves attendance, discipline, and performance (Bosco, 2021; Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014). In Rwanda, improvement in students' performance were linked to active PTA support (Bosco, 2021). In Liberia, PTAs are inactive, and their roles are undefined, limiting their potential impact.

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design. Sixty participants, made up of principals, teachers, students, PTA leaders, and district/county education officers, were selected from all seven public senior secondary schools. The study used stratified random sampling (students), typical case (principals/schools), maximum variation (teachers and PTA leaders), and census (DEOs and CEO). Data Collection was done using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and structured observations. Audio recordings and notes were transcribed and coded; themes were developed inductively and organized using ATLAS.ti. Data was analyzed thematically.

Validity And Reliability

Validity was ensured through member checking. Member check proceeded right after each interview and focus group discussion allowing participants the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy and authenticity. Reliability was ensured through pre-testing of instruments for piloting using two schools in Bomi County (Neighboring Gbarpolu County).

Ethical Considerations

Permit was obtained from the County Education Office. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Information and participants identities were kept confidential and anonymous. Participation was voluntary.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Limited Teacher Training

Majority of the teachers recorded lack of professional development opportunities in recent years as a challenge. One teacher stated, *"We have not had any training in the past three years; we just use old methods."* Another added, *"When the curriculum changes, we only hear about it informally from colleagues; no one trains us officially."*

These statements buttress the regional and international report that labelled teachers' professional development significant for the maintenance of instructional quality (Gordon et al., 2009) and show gaps in rural Liberia which reveal many teachers lack continuous pedagogical support (Sherif, 2024).

Theme 2: Inadequate Learning Resources

Students and teachers highlighted resource unavailability as a recurrent concern. A student narrated, *"Sometimes five of us share one textbook."*

A science teacher remarked, *"Our laboratory is an empty room, we only teach the theory because there are no chemicals or equipment for experiments."*

Such report affirms findings from Rwanda and Nigeria where access to libraries, laboratories, and ICT relates positively to engagement and performance (Bizimana & Orodho, 2014) The persistence of these constraints in Gbarpolu aligns with reports of resource scarcity in rural Liberian schools (Mbogo et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Weak Institutional Support

School leaders reported systemic gaps in resourcing and supervision. One principal stated, *“The ministry sends instructions, but without funds or follow-up, it’s just paperwork.”*

A district education officer admitted, *“We want to visit schools regularly, but we do not receive transport or fuel.”*

These accounts align with literature linking leadership capacity and monitoring to student achievement (Molaudzi & Adeyemo, 2022) and support analyses that weak oversight hinders improvement efforts in Liberia (Yele & Specioza, 2024).

Theme 4: Low PTA Engagement

PTA chairpersons and members described limited parental participation. One leader observed, *“Parents feel school is the government’s responsibility, so they don’t see why they should attend meetings.”*

Another PTA leader shared, *“We raised funds for classroom repairs once, but attendance has dropped since then.”*

These responses align with studies showing that active PTA involvement improves attendance, discipline, and academic achievement (Bosco, 2021; Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014). The variability of PTA activity in Gbarpolu reflects broader challenges around role clarity and continual engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limited teacher training, inadequate learning resources, weak institutional support, and poor PTA engagement collectively hinders learning outcomes in Gbarpolu County’s public senior secondary schools. Mitigating these areas requires collaborative action: (1) implement compulsory professional development regularly in line with curriculum needs; (2) ensure provision and maintenance of textbooks, laboratories, and ICT equally across the country; (3) empower school leadership and set up operational funding with regular supervision; and (4) provide capacity-building programs to empower PTA for proper participation. Together, these strategies can lead to sustainable improvement in learning achievement.

Conflict Of Interest

The author states no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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