

Examining the Access, Quality, and Relevance Gaps in Liberia's Educational Policy Environment

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Abstract

In 2015, governments across the globe agreed upon development standards that should be realized by 2030 dubbed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Particularly, SDG-4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. Liberia, like other countries domesticated the SDGs and on the educational front, it aims to provide an educational system that promotes equitable access to quality and relevant education to all. The country's educational policy environment focuses on promoting the realisation of the SDG-4 goal. This includes Liberia's Education Reform Act 2011 that was aligned to educational objectives of equitable access to quality and relevant education. In spite of the presence of this policy environment, results seem detached from the expected reality. A number of policy gaps have been noted including limited funds to priority areas, high school dropouts, limited facilities, inappropriate curriculum, limited technological facilities and tools, inadequate trained teaching staff, and limited apprenticeship opportunities, among others. These have consequently affected equitable access to quality and relevant education in the country. In order to mitigate these policy gaps, it is recommended that 20 percent of the national expenditure be allocated and released to the education sector, the education curriculum should be reviewed to emphasise relevant skills, adequate support facilities and tools should be provided to all schools, teachers must be trained, and partnerships with stakeholders harnessed. These interventions are intended to promote an effective educational policy environment that will meet the policy intentions of the country.

KEYWORDS: Educational Policy, Policy Gaps, Equitable Access, Relevant Education, Education Production Function, Conflict Theory, Functionalism Theory

Introduction

Debates show that there is a renewed interest in educational policy analysis and an increasing demand for accountability of the policy resources and what they contribute to the wellbeing of societies (Binning & Browman, 2020). The interest also seems to prepare policy actors and researchers to appreciate educational systems and policies in order to use the knowledge generated to shape equitable opportunities for quality and relevant education for all. The current political and socioeconomic environment within which educational policies are formulated and implemented is dynamic and demanding yet, it should produce the outcomes expected. The global educational landscape has created expectations on policy systems and processes that should deliver the commitments on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially, the SDG-4 on education. The primary objective of SDG-4 is to ensure inclusive,

equitable, and quality education while also promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals (World Bank, 2020). Consequently, governments across the globe were challenged to domesticate the SDGs including SDG-4 in their national level policy frameworks. Many challenges, however, have been presented in the way policies are formulated and implemented at national level depicting both strengths and weaknesses in the style of planning and managing the processes (Menninen, 2018; European Union, 2020; Rowell, 2020). This explains why there have been concerns about the way educational policies are formulated and implemented to achieve the national and global aspirations of the educational sectors. Additionally, they underscore the dilemma some countries face in meeting their development goals. The central focus of domesticating SDGs like SDG-4 on education is to ensure that the educational policies strive to promote three core outcomes of education namely, accessibility, quality, and relevance of education (Binning & Browman, 2020; World Bank, 2020) in an equitable manner. UNESCO (2019) contends that seamless formulation and implementation of educational policies is integral to promoting an education that is equitable in terms of accessibility, quality, and relevance of learning to the communities served. This is in line with the view of Rowell (2020) who believes that effective formulation and implementation of educational policies leads to realization of the planned outcomes. However, as noted by Rowell (2020), and World Bank (2020), millions of children worldwide continue to be out of school while many of those who do complete primary education lack basic numeracy and literacy skills. Perhaps, as claimed by World Bank (2018), most of the learners especially in developing countries are enrolled in dysfunctional education systems. This appears to explain why the goal of providing universal access to quality, and relevant education remains unfulfilled. This could be partly due to the quality of educational policies formulated and implemented by those countries (ASER, 2019; Rowell, 2020; World Bank, 2020). The intent of analysing educational policy gaps in Liberia's education sector is to underscore why existing policies do not meet their planned objectives of ensuring equitable access to quality and relevant education. In addition, it aims at creating local competences to work with stakeholders to improve educational policy implementation and policy outcomes. This study is underpinned by the rationale that a few studies have delved deeper into analysing the input-output gaps in educational sectors in Africa in general and Liberia in particular. Galimaka (2008) explored policy gaps in universal primary education that contribute to school dropout in Uganda while Asamoah and Mackin (2015) examined the fetters of higher education in Sub Saharan Africa. Krzykawska and Zur (2020) analysed the factors hindering development of education in Africa. Meanwhile, Okorafor and Nnaji (2017) scrutinised the technical and vocational education in Nigeria. Additionally, Nalumenya, Rubinato, Kennedy, Catterson and Bakamwesiga (2023) identified gaps within the education system in Uganda with specific focus on sustainable water management in the future. In Liberia, Waydon, Ying and Ketter (2016) focused on free and compulsory primary education policy in Liberia examining the gap between promise and actual performance. Further, several official reports on Liberia's educational system also attempted to explore gaps in education with limited empirical and theoretical grounding such as the Ministry of Education Report (2018) on inclusive education, Ministry of Education (2020) on educational policy, and UNESCO (2022) about the educational sector analysis in Liberia. Moreover, these studies do not provide a clear compilation of the policy gaps across the education sector that fetter equitable access to quality and relevant education with plausible evidence based suggestions on how those gaps could be closed moving forward. The contribution of this study is a theory based empirical analysis of the educational policy gaps in Liberia's educational system and suggesting evidence based remedies to close the policy gaps and enhance the influence of the country's educational sector on meeting SDG-4 targets in time.

This study reports on a section of a doctoral thesis on “addressing the input-outcome gaps in educational policies case study of Liberia” (Wehye, 2023) and addresses the following key research question: What policy gaps are there in equitable access to quality and relevant education in Liberia? UNESCO (2020), and World Bank (2020) stress that the experience from the observed phenomena regarding failure of educational policies in many developing countries Liberia inclusive emphasises the urgent need for evidence based educational policies to support such sectors meet their global commitments mainly, achieving the SDG-4 target on equitable access to quality and relevant education. This would ensure countries develop physical, institutional, and human resource capabilities that will respond to their particular and peculiar development needs.

While the essence of an educational system is to promote access to equitable, quality and relevant education to society, Liberia at its formation as an independent state in 1847 appears to have inherited an unstable educational system founded on a weak and unsustainable institutional framework created by the protestant missionaries (USAID, 1987). The emphasis of the system then was mastery of the rudiments of reading, writing, numeracy, and an elementary knowledge of the English language that were preferred by the powerful colonization societies. Moreover, the system of education and its goals seemed to differ fundamentally from the practices and aspirations of the communities it intended to serve. The socioeconomic environment and religious values of the people indigenous to Liberia then who constituted about 95-97 percent of the country’s total population were not in tandem with the new education. Consequently, the outputs and outcomes of the educational system were divorced from their day-to-day livelihoods. Its growth was more identified with mere acquisition of information in books necessary to access a job than to radically change the society. The outputs and outcomes of education did not create the impact expected. However, policy shifts started to emerge around 1968 when it was realized that the education system of the country needed to promote development of the local communities (Caine, 1968). Educational projects supported by governmental groups from Asia, Europe, and the United States emerged across the country with a focus on promoting an education that reflected the interests of the Liberian communities. This was further supported by the coming on board of specialized agencies of the United Nations like UNICEF, WHO, FAO, ILO, and UNESCO, among others. The promulgation of the 1986 Constitution of Liberia and the passing of the 2001 Education Act seem to have set a new stage for the restructuring of the country’s education including the State taking the overall authority over all public schools and institutions of learning. Further, the education sector reforms of 2011 repealed the 2001 Education Act and aimed at improving the quality of education and reforming the education sector’s governance structure (Government of Liberia, 2011), which redirected the country’s educational trajectory to date.

Based on the educational sector reforms contained in the 2011 Education Reform Act, the country repositioned itself to promote equitable access to quality and relevant education in tandem with the SDG-4 goal on education. This was further buttressed by the 2018 Inclusive Education Policy; 2019 National School Health Policy for quality school-based health services; and 2019 National Career Guidance and Psychological Counselling Policy for Liberian Schools. As noted by Waydon et al. (2016) and supported by numerous official reports such as UNESCO (2020), World Bank (2020), and Republic of Liberia, Ministry of Education (2022), the educational reform policy and its supportive policies seem to be posting mixed results. Presently, in spite of the reforms aimed at enhancing equitable access to quality and relevant education, the implementation and enforcement of the reforms and their respective strategic plans seem to remain constrained (Republic of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). Educational sector reform goals

that should lead to the desired outputs and outcomes appear not fully achieved. In spite the efforts on enhancing decentralization of education governance, curriculum development, teacher training, infrastructure development, gender parity, quality of education, and access to education, the assessment of the performance of Education Reform Act of 2011 shows weak performance (Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). Community participation in education governance remains fragile, the quality of education as measured by literacy and numeracy levels is below standard with only 45.2 percent of primary students reaching minimum proficiency in reading and 38.3 percent in numeracy. Many students enrol after age 11 instead of 6 years limiting space for right age learners, and 19 percent of children aged 6-11 are out of school in a free for all education policy environment. Moreover, significant disparities in access to education between urban and rural areas are high, and there are lower completion rates in lower secondary level of 46 percent for boys and 42 percent for girls. Inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited access to learning materials continue to affect rural schools more than they affect the urban ones (UNICEF, 2018; USAID, 2020; World Bank, 2021; Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). The persistence of the aforementioned performance challenges in the Liberian educational sector, in spite of the seemingly intentional educational policies, brings us to our central research question: What policy gaps are there in the equitable access to quality and relevant education in Liberia?

Theoretical Framework

Educational Policy is concerned with the practical outcomes of educational policy alternatives and decisions in society. It analyses the nexus between educational policy decisions, educational actor practices, and their consequences – outputs, outcomes, and impact. The thrust of the policy focus is the salient debates and controversies within the educational policy environment from formulation through to implementation on the intended results (Ascher, 2017). These debates and controversies include the policy gaps along the policy formulation and implementation value chain. Educational policies may come with both intended and unintended policy outcomes and impact on the beneficiaries that need to be analysed and appropriate courses of action taken. Numerous studies have applied theories that analyse educational policy inputs and outcomes to identify and articulate the gaps and how to manage them. These include the production function, conflict theory, and functionalism theory (Kaseorg, 2017). This article provides a unique opportunity to combine these theories to explore the gaps in Liberia's education sector. While the production theory tries to establish the gap in the input-output and outcomes of policies at all levels, functionalism focuses on gaps in the primary values of education and the general society, while the conflict theory focuses on the socioeconomic gaps arising therefrom. During this analysis, these theories complemented one another in providing a holistic view of the educational policy landscape of Liberia's education.

Bowels (1970), as one of the pioneers of research on the application of production function in education asserts that educational production function relates to school and students input to a measure of school output. It is assumed that schooling through imparting behaviours, knowledge, and skills among learners as a consequence of attendance enhances out of school performance like in the labour market. Through a production function model, Bowels argues that school inputs in the development of an individual's productive capacity can be manifested in the educational outcomes in the market. More resources could mean better scholastic support and hence better cognitive, behavioural, and psychomotor abilities. In relation to educational policy analysis, Hanushek (2010), and Arshad (2010) argue that school expenditure

and student performance, teacher and learner ratio may explain students' learning outcomes. However, differences in learning due to learner capabilities are also noted (Kaseorg, 2017). The education system uses a variety of inputs to increase output at different levels of the system (Ntawiha, 2016). The inputs relate to direct resources used by the educational sector such as human resources including teachers, finance, textbooks, classroom blocks, and learners and outcomes include school performance and performance of the educational graduates in the society. Ntawiha (2016) indicates that inefficiency in the inputs to education leads to less outputs and outcomes. This argument is consistent with Bowels (1970) who asserts the existence of a direct relationship between school expenditure and student performance. As further suggested by Arshad (2016), teaching and learning effectiveness and class grades, attendance and academic achievement, the teacher learner ratio and learning as observable outcomes of education are related. Therefore, the lesser the input, the higher the probability for weaker outputs/outcomes. However, it is also noted that although resources can be available to all, it is also challenging to get similar outputs since children learn differently, possess different capabilities, and can therefore post varying learning outcomes. The existence of administrative issues that influence educational results affects the potency of applying the production function to education. These need to be addressed first before a relationship between educational inputs and outcomes could be traced more meaningfully. In this analysis, the production theory of education attempted to highlight how inputs of the educational system related to its outputs. It was assumed that the quantity and quality of the input the education sector receives and its transformational processes determine the outcomes the country experiences. It was presumed that any gaps at the input level are absorbed into the processes and reflected in the outputs and outcomes registered. In a cost sharing environment for instance, charging the poor higher fees could lead to fewer years at school and hence affect the literacy and numeracy levels and vice versa.

Meanwhile, as education is considered as a bridge in access to equal opportunities for all members of society regardless of their background factors, conflict theorists contest the belief that education reduces social inequality by providing equal opportunities (Pelke, 2020). Mishra (2013), and Pelke (2020) postulate that education perpetuates social inequality arising from class, gender, ethnic, and racial factors. It entrenches differences between the socially advantaged and those that are disadvantaged. It provides different platforms to learners which determine their access to social opportunities in future. Pelke (2020) asserts that education pushes people of lower class status into obedience thus keeping them economically disadvantaged while the rich and powerful continue to excel through economic and social conditions. When education becomes a social system for promoting social inequality while maintaining the influence of the dominant class (Mishra, 2013), it exhibits gaps between the inputs of education and its outcomes. This claim seems to support Mokhosi (2023) who contends that while educational policy should close disparities in access to resources between the rich and the poor or the rural and the urban, the social reality is different. Mokhosi (2023) notes that though the essence of a quintile system of ranking schools for funding intended to promote equity, it failed to establish a level of equitable access to education across the socioeconomic divide in South Africa. Instead of adopting feasible equalising strategies to bridge the funding gaps to educational facilities between the rich and poor neighbourhoods, the government tends to favour the rich at the expense of the poor thus exacerbating unequal access to quality and relevant education. It is noted that these differences occur during policy formulation and implementation and are practically reflected in the funding opportunities available to rich versus poor neighbourhoods or between rural and urban schools (Mokhosi, 2023). The gaps could also arise due to inadequate funding, limited teaching and learning materials, limited community participation, political interference, low quality of

teaching staff, weak policy formulation process (insufficient knowledge of the context, unclear and contradictory goals, low quality evidence, and absence of political and community backing), low level of political stability, weak enforcement of individual rights, and disproportionate access to economic resources in society (Mokhosi, 2023).

From another theoretical angle, functionalism theorists view education as a social institution, which promotes both the manifest and latent purposes of education (Arshad, 2010; Kaseorg, 2017). The central argument regarding educational policy from the perspective of the functionalist theorists is that while education is intended to play a positive role in society, which will be achieved when the policies focus on meeting the goals, the provision of education may also be inefficient. Education as an institution is deemed to serve the needs of society when it prepares children for their roles in society whether known or hidden (Asiimwe & Magunda, 2023). As noted from Arshad (2010), Kaseorg (2017), and Asiimwe and Magunda (2023), the manifest functions of education are primary to effective functioning of individuals and societies. They are roles that educational institutions must fulfil such as socialisation, social control, role allocation, transmission of culture, and change in innovation that schools must prepare children for later life. Meanwhile, the latent functions are unintended and hidden. These relate to activities such as forming social networks, engaging in groups, creating generational gaps, and restricting activities, among others. Functionalists suggest that effective education should be able to create outputs and outcomes that reflect the intended goals of education. The educational policy therefore aims at focusing on the creation of the knowledge, skills, and behaviour that are considered beneficial to society (Yokozeki, 1996). Gaps from emphasis on issues such as passing exams rather than mastery of social values and skills create a detachment between policy intentions and its outcomes. Further, public education can subdue aggressive and creative children into submissive adults who are less creative, unquestioning, and unimaginative workforce that is easily manipulated and exploited by the employers (Kaseorg, 2017). Segregation due to the perceived individual abilities in class may also create feelings of inferiority complex among those considered to be weak performers affecting their competences to succeed later in life. In such cases, therefore, the purchased inputs to schools such as class size, teacher experience, and teacher education may possess limited logical relationship to educational outcomes. In addition, teacher quality may not affect learner performance. The implication of the logical disconnections between the inputs and outcomes may suggest that the educational policies are prone to gaps along the value chain, which could make them not responsive to intended functional objectives of both learners and societies.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research design. It utilised literature review as a qualitative approach to collecting and analysing data from secondary sources (Creswell & Plano, 2018). The data were collected through document review which included a systematic examination of the official reports, academic papers, and policy documents related to educational policy value chain in Liberia. In total, 25 policy documents addressing issues related to the study phenomenon were systematically reviewed. This also included reviewing records for the other theoretical indicators, prescribed by literature on the policy outputs and outcomes observed; the review also concerned itself with whether the policies were intentional, and could relate to the desired policy outputs and outcomes (Hupe & Hill, 2016); or policies were unpredictable and did not relate to expected results. Specific concern was drawn to what were the interruptions to continuity between the policy intents and policy results specifically, equitable access to quality and relevant education. Enumerative analysis was utilised to derive the codes (Grbich, 2013).

Sections or statements that related to access, quality, and relevance of education were identified and assigned codes. The identified relevant content aided in framing the results and their logical flow.

Research Findings and Discussion

Specifically, the study identified three subthemes as access, quality and relevance gaps in the educational policy environment of the country. The researcher identified the key educational policies that presently guide the educational sector decisions of Liberia as well as the policy intentions and the gaps. In results presentation, a policy gap represents an interruption in continuity between the policy intent – policy objectives, and policy results – accessibility, quality, and relevance of education.

Table 1: Types of Policies, Promises, and Gaps

Educational Policies	Policy Intent	Policy Gaps
Education Reform Act 2011 and supplementary policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018 Inclusive Education Policy • 2019 National School Health Policy for quality school-based health services • 2019 National Career Guidance and Psychological Counselling Policy for Liberian Schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of quality education to every citizen at every educational level • Promote equal access to education opportunities for all, without discrimination • Promote public confidence in the educational system • Decentralize the education system • Promote and protect human rights in respect to access and opportunities for quality education • Reduce illiteracy • Promote gender equity and equality throughout the educational system • Produce citizens with the necessary skills for country development • Ensure adequate governance and management of the education sector. • Develop instructional materials that take into account students with disabilities • Improve teacher preparation and CPD on teaching students with disabilities 	<p><u>Access Gaps</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many districts do not have Early Child Education (ECE) • There is ineffective enforcement of standards • Tuitions fees remain high and prohibitive • Low enrolment at all levels • Low level of access to technology facilities for learning • Lack of feeding opportunities • Limited facilities for people with disabilities • Low level of access to electricity, water and sanitation facilities • Long distance to schools <p><u>Quality Gaps</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low spending on education • Limited funds for teacher training programme • Teacher training not done as planned • Shortage of qualified teachers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train school principals to include students with disabilities in schools • Include special education in school quality assessments and reporting • Improve data collection on students with disabilities and disability inclusiveness of the school environment • Include students with disabilities in school attendance interventions • Train counsellors in special education support • Provide a safe and healthy environment • Ensure skills and competencies for health and well-being are integrated in the national curriculum • Make sure students have access to basic preventative health and psychosocial services in schools • Empower students with gender-sensitive, age-appropriate skill-based health education and promote physical activity and sports in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher learner to teacher ratio • Lack of appropriate learning curricula and supplementary materials such as for ECE • Presence of overage students • Lack of a curriculum that prioritises skills development • Low access to technical and digital tools and skills <p><u>Relevance Gaps</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcrowded classrooms • Limited emphasis on relevance of education at all levels • Limited measures to incorporate technological awareness • Limited acquisition of necessary skills • Limited apprenticeship opportunities • Limited capacity for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programmes • Limited access to interne
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The findings as presented in Table 1 highlight the key educational policies of Liberia in the recent past as: the Education Reform Act 2011, the 2018 Inclusive Education Policy; the 2019 National School Health Policy for quality school-based health services; and the 2019 National Career Guidance and Psychological Counselling Policy for Liberian Schools. The overarching policy intent of these policies is ensuring that Liberia embraces an educational environment that promotes equitable access to quality and relevant education (Waydon et al, 2016; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). While the policy intervention especially, the Education Reform Act 2011 promises equitable access to education for all (Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022), the findings in Table 1 depict a number of discrepancies between the policy intention and its results. The study established that many districts in the country lack ECE facilities thus, many children miss out on ECE. Further, educational institutions at all levels including primary, lower secondary, upper secondary,

Technical and vocational Educational Training (TVET), and universities suffer multiple inadequacies in terms of low funding, infrastructure – limited number of classrooms and other buildings, limited access to utilities such as water and power, and basic facilities like internet and ICT tools. It is also noted that feeding opportunities are underfunded while learners still travel long distances to schools which moreover charge high tuition fees. Ineffective enforcement of standards to ensure children access schools and absence of supportive infrastructure for people living with disabilities were also persistent. The existence of the aforementioned leads to low enrolment, high rates of learner dropouts, disparities in access to education among rural and urban dwellers, poor and rich, and male against female. Overall, this results into low levels of completion of formal education and gross literacy rates in the country. As claimed by ASER (2019), Rowell (2020), World Bank (2020), the presence of the limitations to equitable access to education as observed in the Liberian context could be partly due to the quality of the educational policies formulated and implemented. This also seems to agree with an earlier assertion by Ascher (2017) who points out that controversies in policy environment create disparities between the policy goals and policy outputs and outcomes. From the educational production function theorists, conditions that create low school attendance lead to weak outcomes later in the labour market due to low levels of knowledge, skills, and behavioural competences (Bowels, 1970). This seems consistent with Ntawiha (2016) that educational policy inputs should be adequate to cause an increase in policy outcomes which appears not to be the case in Liberia. The conflict theorists posit that weak educational policy environment like the one obtaining in Liberia creates limited access to education and perpetuates social inequalities (Pelke, 2020). In agreement with Mokhosi (2023), the educational policy environment which does not promote equitable access to educational opportunities for all perpetuates social disparities that SDG-4 intends to eradicate by 2030. Ensuring quality education is one of the educational policy objectives of Liberia in relation to attaining the country's commitment to meeting the SDGs, notably, SDG-4. Though the educational policy reforms of 2011 predate the global development strategy enshrined in the SDGs, which came on board in 2015, the policy focus nonetheless expresses a desire to promote quality education for all (Waydon et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). It is plausible that these educational reforms led to demonstrable increases in gross enrolment in some sections of the country's educational levels especially, the secondary and tertiary education. However, challenges with numeracy, literacy, and writing competences remain prominent. More children than expected are not able to comprehend their age appropriate learning challenges. The ICT skills also remain weak while transition to higher levels demonstrates barriers to academic progress (UNESCO, 2020). The findings in Table 1 demonstrate that policy gaps to quality education in the country exist including: limited funds for teacher training programme leaving the sector with high levels of untrained staff; chronic shortage of qualified teachers; higher learner to teacher ratio especially, at ECE and primary education levels; mismatch between the taught curriculum and skill sets needed by the market; and limited learning materials appropriate for effective teaching and learning. Moreover, the study revealed that overage students continue to take up space for the age appropriate learners denying them opportunity; and low access to technical and digital tools and skills that would enhance digital learning and gain the necessary computing skills for the information age. These findings are consistent with the observed status of education in the country by (Waydon et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022) which is characterised by a weak quality of education in the country. Bowels (1970) claims that low resource allocation to the education sector limits the development of cognitive, behavioural, and psychomotor skills of learners. Hanushek (2010) and Arshad (2010) seem to agree with

the observations of UNESCO (2020), World Bank (2020) and Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education (2022) on the status of education that inadequate inputs including low funds, untrained teachers, limited learning materials, and an absence of key tools for learning new skills like ICT affects the quality of education in a country. Mokhosi (2023) in support of the effect of the policy gaps on meeting social needs notes that a mismatch between the resources allocated to the education sector and its resource needs exacerbates failure of education to transform society in the long-run. Further, as noted by Yokozaki (1996), Ntawiha (2016), and Kaseorg (2017), these policy gaps lead to a weak contribution of the education sector to the intended policy goals – both manifest and latent outcomes of education in society.

The findings in Table 1 demonstrate that Liberia suffers several policy gaps along the educational hierarchy in the country which has affected the relevance of education. Relevant education is one of the targets of the SDG-4 and Liberia has established enabling policy framework and supportive strategies to achieve that (Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). However, it is noted that classrooms are overcrowded which impedes learning against a policy action of building adequate classrooms to accommodate the growing number of students. In addition, the curriculum implemented does not strongly emphasise production of graduates with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that the society needs. Technological advancement requires ample access to technological tools including ICT facilities and internet which are in limited supply in the country. This gap affects research and development, and sharing of technical skills and products. Further, use of technology, a key skill needed in the 21 century labour market is low limiting integration of the Liberian labour force into the global labour market and technological transformation of the Liberian economy. Moreover, inadequate apprenticeship opportunities does not permit effective skills acquisition and development. Learners have no chance of practicing what they are taught in class as well as transferring it to the labour market. It is also noted that the country has a gap on building capacity for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programmes which affects the rate of technological advancement in the country. The primary purpose of education is its contribution to the development of society through the actions of the educated members. This is consistent with the theoretical postulations by the conflict theorists, education production function theorists and functionalism theorists (Kaseorg, 2017). The educational reform policy and the supplementary policies in Liberia aimed at harnessing this development as enshrined in the SDG-4 and the local development strategies (Waydon et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020; Government of Liberia, Ministry of Education, 2022). The status of the policy gaps does not permit the sector to be relevant to the society in terms of its graduates and overall effects vis-à-vis the needs of the society. Arshad (2010), and Kaseorg (2017) claim that the education exists to play two key functions namely the manifest and the latent. When there are policy gaps as noted in the Liberian context, the sector will not be in position to deliver on the two functions and, therefore, it will have lost its relevance to the society which is a core policy intention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Liberia has made strides to improve her educational sector by way of formulating and implementing enabling policies to guide decision-making and resource allocation to the education sector. These policies appear to be in line with the international development agenda as contained in the SDGs specifically, SDG-4 on education. The focus of the policy intentions on education is promotion of equitable access to quality and relevant education. It aims at ensuring that all school going children attend school without hurdles, it is of the right standard in terms of teaching and learning processes and skills development, and it also attempts to meet the needs of society both known and hidden. However, while the right intentions

seem to be in place, there are discrepancies between the policy intents and policy results due to gaps in the value chain that limit equitable access, quality, and relevance of education. Most noticeable of these gaps is low funding, untrained teachers who are also in limited supply, inadequate facilities, inappropriate curriculum, limited scholastic materials and facilities, limited focus on essential skills, and limited apprenticeship, among others. Consequently, a significant number of children still drop out of school, there are variations between the rural and urban education, teachers are fewer, the classrooms are limited, access to facilities remains a challenge, and the graduates lack necessary skills in science and technology needed in both the local and global labour market. These gaps are likely to leave the Liberian society not transformed by its educational sector.

It is recommended that the Liberian government should ensure that resources committed to the education sector are allocated and released to fund the priorities of the sector. This should include honouring its commitment to allocate 20 percent of national expenditure to education up from the current 13.8 percent to ensure resource adequacy to fund the planned programmes. In addition, the ministry of education should review the curriculum to emphasise knowledge, skills, and behavioural development that match the needs of the society. This should be supplemented by provision of appropriate learning materials and facilities such as text books, ICT tools, internet connectivity, and electricity to all schools. The planned teacher training in pedagogical skills and leadership should be activated and fast tracked to reduce the number of untrained teachers in service and to empower the qualified ones to handle the new curriculum. More deliberate efforts should be made to improve educational infrastructure including building more classrooms, science laboratories, and other structures needed. The structures should also be adjusted to accommodate learners with disabilities. The government should also foster partnerships with stakeholders, like bilateral and multilateral development partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for more funding opportunities, and the local communities to support educational institutions and promote efficient and effective school system.

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