

*Corporate Subjects: Reshaping Governance and Schooling through Corporatized Development in Liberia*

IRIS Summer Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award  
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In 2016, following the Ebola crisis, Liberia's Ministry of Education partnered with two social investment firms--Social Finance and Absolute Return for Kids--to usher in a new era of corporatized educational reforms and school provision known as the Liberian Educational Advancement Program (LEAP). This partnership attempts to align social and educational policy and development in Liberia with principles of market capitalism through the involvement of for-profit actors in educational provision and increased surveillance of labor (teachers) and consumers (students). LEAP, which is financed by corporate and private philanthropies, outsources the management of 192 public primary schools to seven largely for-profit corporate management chains or service providers, with the goal of expanding to all 2,619 public schools in Liberia, potentially making Liberia the first entirely privatized, or corporatized, national education system in the world. My dissertation research examines LEAP, as a form of corporatized development, investigating how the policy has been implemented and negotiated in Liberia, and how or in what ways it is reworking community understanding and engagement with educational practices and spaces, as well as their notions of the role and responsibility of the state and corporations in social development.

The IRIS Summer Graduate Summer Fieldwork Award (Summer 2019), allowed me to travel to Liberia to continue pre-liminary dissertation research on LEAP. The eight weeks were spent gathering LEAP and other educational development related documents from state officials/departments, local newspapers, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, and corporate school service providers themselves. Besides gathering such materials, I traveled to several LEAP schools spread across five counties to observe the school and its surroundings and meet with community members and teachers. By doing so I was able to get an up-close view of the changes at these schools under a new educational mandate/policy. Besides observations of basic school spaces, I met and was able to interview two dozen

teachers from a variety of school operators. These interviews provided a basic understanding of what was happening within the confines of these schools, including how teachers generally felt about the provider and LEAP itself. This summer I was able to expand my interviews beyond teachers and administration at LEAP schools, interviewing a handful of parents and a dozen civil society organizations and actors (watchdog groups, PTA organizations, etc.), and ministry officials. These interviews allowed for a wider understanding of LEAP, and how a variety of actors were negotiating and experiencing the reform. Given that previous preliminary research (summer 2018) found that several thousand students and teachers were removed from LEAP schools due to a variety of reasons (including classroom size restrictions, disputes with teachers, etc.), I extended my research this summer to neighboring non-LEAP schools to understand the larger impact of LEAP on the overall school ecology. I learned that, because LEAP schools are somewhat controversial within the community (due to the fact that they were formerly public schools given over to corporate management), teachers and communities members often build make-shift schools in other buildings in their communities, frequently naming these schools “the real community school X” (x-refers to name of town/community). In future research, I will examine not only the changing educational dynamics, but the community dynamics in and around LEAP.

Finally, a portion of my work this summer included gaining research clearances from the Ministry of Education to conduct future dissertation research (hopefully starting next year) and beginning to make institutional connections with Universities there. This summer I was able to receive institutional support from the Salvation Army Polytechnic in Monrovia. I also was able to gain institutional support from the African Methodist University, the largest private university in the country, for my future dissertation research.

Overall, I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to conduct this preliminary research via the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award. It provided an invaluable opportunity to further my dissertation research through both gathering data and materials and gaining research clearances and connections that will undoubtedly prove essential to conducting my prolonged dissertation study next year.