EXPLORING CONFLICTS OF WESTERN-STYLE EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA: A PEACE CORPS TEACHER’S SELF-STUDY IN A SIERRA LEONEAN VILLAGE

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by

Sean Stephens

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my former counter-part, and continual friend Samuel A. Koroma, in appreciation for his guidance, patience, and understanding as I navigated the village. Koroma was more than my colleague, but an ambassador to the place I called home for two and a half years. He guided me through the cultural intricacies of traditional Sierra Leonean politics, but also the proper etiquette of eating with your hands. Most importantly, he taught me that despite a person’s nationality or creed, they still smile. I am profoundly grateful for his friendship, and hope that someday our paths cross once more.
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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING CONFLICTS OF WESTERN-STYLE EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA: A PEACE CORPS TEACHER’S SELF-STUDY IN A SIERRA LEONEAN VILLAGE

by

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This self-study was conducted by a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in a junior high school in Northern Sierra Leone from 2012-2014. A chronicled body of research suggests that the expectations and goals of Sierra Leone’s western-styled education system do not correlate with the needs and realities of rural Sierra Leoneans. Conclusions from a longitudinal review of educational literature in Sierra Leone from the 18th century suggest that few studies have investigated the realities of western-styled education at the rural-classroom level, or from the perspective of the classroom teacher. The self-study presents data through a retrospective analysis of field journals, participant observation, surveys, and interviews, grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s social theories on habitus and the forms of capital. Results illustrate a highly contextual narrative exploring the transformation of a western educator’s educational beliefs, assumptions, and cultural
underpinnings, and how that transformation informed his teaching practice and understanding of the realities of western-styled education in rural Sierra Leone.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Republic of Sierra Leone, called Salone by its inhabitants, is a small West African country, approximately the size of South Carolina. Geographical neighbors include Liberia to the south, Guinea to the north, and it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The latest 2015 census approximated 5.8 million inhabitants in Sierra Leone. Although a small country, tribal ethnicity and linguistic diversity are vast. There are 16 identified ethnic groups in Salone, each with their own language and customs. English is the official language used in schools, administration, government, and media. The English-creole Krio, however, is the preferred language used throughout the country (Krio also refers to the Sierra Leone Krio peoples, one of the sixteen tribes of Sierra Leone). The CIA World Factbook estimates 95% of Sierra Leoneans speak Krio, unifying the ethnically and linguistically diverse tribes in country (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

From 1991 to 2002 Sierra Leone experienced a brutal civil war, displacing a large portion of civilians, which resulted in a significant population of uneducated youth. The effects of war had eroded political and economic development, along with creating an intellectual vacuum from diasporic emigration. International aid and humanitarian organizations responded to Sierra Leone with aid and support, including education. Education was seen as a substantive tool in the post-conflict environment helping in resolution and unification (Davies, 2004). The United Kingdom Department for
International Development (DFID) exemplified the international commitment to education in post-conflict countries. In the DFID’s education strategy for developing countries, they state:

Education can play an important part in the emergency response to conflict or fragility, in the long-term process of reconstruction and building stability and in promoting civil engagement and democracy. Empirical evidence links levels of distribution of education achievement to indicators of democracy, stability, and security. (DFID, 2010)

Despite the sustained international response to Sierra Leone’s war since the mid-90s, the country continues to rank in the lowest positions for development. According to the United Nations latest Human Development Index (HDI) Report (2013) – a summary analysis of a country’s life expectancy, access to knowledge, and standard of living – Sierra Leone ranked 177 out of 187 countries, placing in the “low human development category” (p. 2). Most revealing for this study is the UN’s analysis of schooling. UNESCO considers a low HDI rating for education 8.5 years of expected schooling. Sierra Leone’s expected years of completed education for a child is 7.3, with the mean years of schooling at 3.3 years (p. 3). That is, Sierra Leoneans 25 years or older have completed on average 3.3 years of school. These statistics shift when discussing rural and urban realities in Sierra Leone education.

To counteract the escalating problems of poverty and access to education in underperforming countries, international agencies like the DFID, UNESCO and the United Nations set specific educational goals for developing countries focusing on equity and access to schools. Education for All (EFA), a framework developed by UNESCO for regionally specific countries including Sub-Saharan Africa, outlines overarching goals for developing countries to achieve success in the globalized world (UNESCO, 2016). The
Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) drafted by the UN share a similar vision of globalized development through education for struggling countries (United Nations, General Assembly, 2000). What is common within these policies is education’s portrayal as “capable of making a positive change in societies affected by conflict, or at the very least, of bringing that society in equilibrium and maintaining it” (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 121). Education in this regard is seen as what Shepler (2003) writes, “a universally prescribed medicine” for any problem of youth. Education from the West’s perspective is a universal human right and a tool for development.

Following the war, nearly 40% of Sierra Leone’s GDP was from humanitarian assistance (World Bank, 2007). The majority of that foreign aid was directed toward primary education for meeting the goals set by international aid organizations like the DFID and UNESCO (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 127). It is important to note that foreign aid donations are both a gift, and a political maneuvering; influencing the way education is conducted in a country (p.121). The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, set conditions introducing wage ceilings and teacher caps as a condition of donation, limiting the number of teachers on government payroll, along with their salaries (p. 127). Although beyond the scope of this thesis, education in post-conflict countries is a complex political environment often manipulated by foreign aid donors and educational policymakers.

In lockstep with the EFA and MDG commitments, the Sierra Leone government requested United States Peace Corps (PC) to send junior high and high school math, science and English teachers to rural schools around Sierra Leone. In 2010, the Sierra Leone Peace Corps post re-opened after a sixteen-year hiatus due to the war from 1991 to
2002. Peace Corps Volunteer teachers (PCVs) were sent to the country for 27 months to teach students and help facilitate teacher training. Most PCVs were college educated at American universities and most had little experience teaching in formal classrooms. Ten weeks of training followed our arrival in country, which included teaching theory and practice that prepared teachers for the realities of education in Salone.

In 2012, I began my Peace Corps service as an English teacher in a small rural village, where I taught three classrooms varying in age and ability. The village was agriculturally focused, and for most, a first priority that came before school. Residents of the community spoke little, if not any English, and those born during the war had received either a truncated, or nonexistent school experience. Despite the lack of formal schooling, it was common for locals to speak three or four languages; English often being their last, reserved for the rare occasion speaking with Americans or Europeans.

The school environment depended on the seasonal rotation of crops, the amount of available staff, and the weather. Length of the school day was also dependent on a multitude of factors. However, when constructive teaching took place I found myself in the reinterpreted world of my own educational past. The classroom became an intersection of opposing cultural and political perspectives on goals, purposes, and directions of education that rendered me, at times, ineffective as a teacher. Students spoke English (or attempted to) and studied subjects that I studied in grade school. Teachers occupied classrooms in more or less the same capacity other teachers did in the United States. Despite the cosmetic similarities, I still felt uneasy about teaching in Sierra Leone due to the obvious cultural and linguistic differences. However, students attended
school to complete the national examination test, rather than learn critical thinking and language fluency.

I understood teaching and education as a liberating experience to think critically, and be a change agent that could reform the community climate. I also viewed teaching and education as a way to reduce teenage pregnancy and bring students’ families out of poverty, similar to the expectations of the EFA and MDG initiatives. My perspective and understanding of education before Peace Corps were shaped almost entirely by western constructs and experience, ignoring the fact that knowledge is a culturally constructed system (Bourdieu, 1977; Durkheim, 1982). It was my inability to reconcile my understanding with what I observed over the two years I came to know the village and school.

Statement of the Problem

The significance of my research is that it addresses a gap in the current understanding of education in developing post-conflict countries. Sierra Leone education is a unique amalgamation of British curriculum and structure with a West African value of knowledge and belief. Yet very little has been written about the intersection of western schooling and Sierra Leonean school cultures in the classroom.

Mitsuko Matsumoto’s case study *Expectations and Realities of Education in Post-conflict Sierra Leone* (2011) attempts to answer the question posed by Shepler (2003) – how successful are the EFA policies in Sierra Leone? And what does it look like on the ground level? Matsumoto’s approach is an ethnographic one, centered on extensive interviews with students in the education system. Her work is both rich and revealing in
the social perceptions of students toward education and schooling in Sierra Leone. Matsumoto highlighted the gap between student expectations for, and the goals of western-styled education as a developmental tool. Her work demonstrated that western-styled education in Sierra Leone was not achieving its intended goals.

Very few field studies have been done on the status of education in Sierra Leone at the classroom level. Among the few, Caroline Bledsoe’s (1992) work has been informative in discussing the role of western education in rural Sierra Leone. Her work came from a yearlong stay in a school in southern Sierra Leone, looking at the ways in which western education has been reinterpreted by Sierra Leoneans for their own uses. Conflicts that Bledsoe observed in schools, and Matsumoto unearthed from student interviews, were the same issues that I was experiencing as a Peace Corps teacher twenty years later.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the confluence of western-styled education in a West African country within the scope of the rural school classroom. The goals and values of western-styled education do not correlate to the needs and realities of rural Sierra Leone (Bledsoe, 1998; Matsumoto, 2011). Using my two-year Peace Corps experience recorded through participant observation and field notes, I will investigate my research question, which is: How did my background and position as a western teacher and Peace Corps volunteer shift my perceptions about teaching western-styled education in a rural Sierra Leonean village?
Theoretical Basis and Organization

I use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of capital and habitus to situate my understanding of education as an institutional and social organization within a body of people. Bourdieu’s ideas have been classified as structural theories, examining the social structures acting against unknowing individuals within a social system (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourgois, 2009). His theories on economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital provide a set of tools to begin discussing the intersections of culture, language, and power, and where education fits in the broader picture.

Bourdieu’s ideas of ‘habitus’ shed light on how social structural power affects the personal experiences and daily practices that “legitimize” social norms, and how a person’s unawareness of habitus – what Bourdieu terms “misrecognition” – perpetuates the reproduction of society. Phillipe Bourgois (2009) succinctly abridges Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. “Habitus refers to our deepest likes, dislikes, and personal disposition, including those of our preconscious body. It is grounded historically in the collective frameworks of culture and society, misrecognized as instinct, commonsense, or character, which becomes the basis for how we feel things and why we act” (Bourgois, 2009, p. 18). Habitus has large implications for education; specifically how western-styled schooling creates and reproduces capital and the relationship between students and habitus. It additionally provides a theoretical foundation for teachers teaching in different countries, specifically post-conflict countries, to begin thinking about their students’ life experiences shaped by culture and society. Shifting focus from student to society allows teachers and researchers to ask broader and more holistic questions about education’s role in shaping a country’s future.
Definition of Terms

**Krio**

The name for both the Krio people and the language they speak. The Krio language is also the country’s *lingua franca* – a common language spoken between speakers whose native languages are different (“Lingua franca,” 2013).

**United Nations Millennial Development Goals (MDG)**

A global partnership dedicated to combating extreme poverty through multiple dimensions; achieving universal primary education is one of eight goals set for 2015 (United Nations, General Assembly, 2000).

**Education for All (EFA)**

A global movement led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization dedicated to addressing the learning needs of any person seeking education. The EFA goals contribute to the MDGs in that both EFA and MDGs are set for completion in 2015 (UNESCO, 2016).

**Salone**

The name Sierra Leoneans use to refer to “Sierra Leone.”

**Junior Secondary School (JSS)**

The designation for Sierra Leone’s junior high school, equivalent to 7th, 8th, and 9th grades in the United States K-12 school system.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations in this study were concentrated during the data collection phase conducted in the village. The short life span of electronic equipment in Sierra Leone’s
humid climate, and the inconsistent access to electricity made recording equipment virtually impossible to use for interviews. I relied primarily on journals and reflections, field observations, and participatory notes. Isolation was another limitation of this study for a few reasons. My time spent in the village was often alone, left to my own ideas and conclusions. Triangulating other viewpoints and perspectives became difficult with language and culture barriers. On a macro scale, isolation made it difficult to put my experiences in context of broader educational issues occurring in the region and country. Every few months I would constructively discuss relevant issues with Peace Corps colleagues, however, I would have preferred more.

Another potential limitation of the study is finding holes in the data. The reflective journals recorded as much as I could write, however, much of what I experienced was not recorded. For most of my two years, I could not speak or comprehend the local language. Not until my language ability became functional did I start journaling locals’ thoughts. Including Sierra Leoneans ‘voice’ in the data sets will be limited. It was my intention to provide Sierra Leonean school teachers with the same survey as Peace Corps Volunteers, but after a pilot survey, I found language barriers would be a problem.

The qualitative nature of this study makes it difficult to generalize my findings for the research body. The subjective nature of this study, along with the specific location and village context minimalizes my scope of investigation.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This thesis attempts to elucidate the complex intersections between education, culture, and society in Sierra Leone. It is not my intention to seek an answer to a controlled problem, but rather observe a transformation that I – both the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ – made in my experience teaching English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone. A focus on the self, however, is not a call to egocentrism, but an acknowledgement of the subjective-objective nature of the world. Using available resources from the various academic disciplines, I have tried to create a historical, sociological, and educational context to situate my study of education in contemporary Sierra Leone. It would be an injustice to truncate the discussion of Sierra Leone peoples, and their conceptual understandings of their realities. Therefore, I have spent considerable time researching the foundational history of Freetown, while inextricably detailing early education. I chronologically compare Sierra Leone’s educational past with the present realities of the country, asking the question “What is education and its purposes in Sierra Leone?” through a historical, sociological, and educational lens.

In this literature review, I use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1980; 1986) theories of capital and habitus to situate my understanding of education as an institutional and social organization within a body of people. Bourdieu’s ideas have been classified as structural theories, examining the structures acting against unknowing individuals within a social system (Bourgois, 2009). Bourdieu (1986) argues that capitalistic countries have
focused solely on economic capital for an explanation of social systems, while neglecting noneconomic, immaterial, but nonetheless influential forms, which Bourdieu describes as social and cultural capital. These coexisting forms of capital shift between states, all of which are rooted in economic capital, yet are interdependent within the larger framework of society. His theories on capital provide a set of tools to begin discussing the intersections of culture, language, and power, and where education fits in the broader picture.

Bourdieu’s ideas of ‘habitus’ shed light on how social structural power affects the personal experiences and daily practices that “legitimize” social norms, and how a person’s unawareness of habitus – what Bourdieu terms “misrecognition” – influences the reproduction of society. Phillipe Bourgois (2009) succinctly abridges Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. “Habitus refers to our deepest likes, dislikes, and personal disposition, including those of our preconscious body. It is grounded historically in the collective frameworks of culture and society, misrecognized as instinct, commonsense, or character, which becomes the basis for how we feel things and why we act” (p. 18). The concept of habitus becomes especially informative when dealing with the role of education as an institutional tool for development. That is, how educational institutions create and reproduce capital and the relationship between students and habitus. It additionally provides a theoretical foundation for teachers teaching in different countries, specifically post-conflict countries, to begin thinking about their students’ life experiences shaped by culture and society. Shifting focus from student to society allows teachers and researchers to ask broader and more holistic questions about education’s role in shaping a country’s future.
Historical Background

The history of Sierra Leone requires some attention because of its unique narrative uncharacteristic to most West African countries. In terms of its development, the country has followed a relatively similar course of post-colonial British Commonwealth countries. It gained independence in 1961, and quickly fell into disorganization, political power grabbing, and corruption. Dependent on aid and rich in minerals and agriculture, Sierra Leone’s economic story is a common one in West Africa. However, the formation of the country is what sets it apart. Freetown, the present-day capital of Sierra Leone, was established in 1792 as a relocated home for ancestral people of African descent in England, returned slaves and soldiers from Nova Scotia, and mutinous slaves in Jamaica. Additionally, throughout the century’s illegal slave trade, slaves from re-captured slave ships around West Africa were settled in and around the Freetown peninsula. These people, along with the first settlers from North America and England became known as the Krio people of Sierra Leone with their own language – also called Krio – and culture (Opala, 2012).

The Sierra Leone settlement became a Crown colony in 1808, and the following year the British government granted substantial aid to education in Freetown. From 1792 to 1840 there was a dramatic increase of schools and teachers in the colony (Sumner, 1963). By 1840 there were 14 government schools and 28 mission schools, however all the schools in the colony were managed by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) (Corby, 1990). By the early 1850’s, the colonial administration turned over all control to CMS, leaving themselves administratively and financially disconnected from the sector. Not until the turn-of-the century did the colonial government resume control over
government school institutions. The reasons for this rekindled interest in education will be discussed later.

Schools – all under the jurisdiction of CMS – focused on literary, English grammar-based education, situated in content curriculum from 1840 England and surrounding Europe. The curriculum included Greek, Latin, English, Mathematics, and History, among other scholastic subjects. Vocational and technical subjects had little place in a system determined to “introduce civilization to the natives” (Sumner, 1963, pg. 6). Over the century, Freetown became known as the “Athens of West Africa,” a clear metaphoric comparison to the Western world’s ideal concept of pure knowledge and intellect. Prominent CMS Grammar School and the Annie Walsh Girls School founded in the 1840s were the first secondary schools in the colony, and highlighted Freetown as a pan-Africa academic center. The secondary schools served as intermediary institutions between pre-existing Christian schools and the cornerstone of Sierra Leone’s academic prestige, Fourah Bay College, founded in 1827 by CMS. The university served as a magnet for local and expatriate Krios and other West African elites from Ghana, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast pursuing careers as intellectuals and academics. Graduates of the university became lawyers, medical doctors, teachers and engineers, and served as Christian missionary liaisons and interpreters on the West Coast as well as in Freetown (Corby, 1990; Sumner, 1963). Expanded access to secondary and tertiary educational institutes created a new social class, occupied by predominantly Krio elites in Freetown. The key to success in the changing economic and political landscape in Sierra Leone was education, and Sierra Leoneans perceptions about Western schooling crystallized as more Africans climbed the educational ladder.
This new educated social class created the prestigious image of “Black Englishmen” (Shepler, 1998). The Black Englishman title emphasized the unique colonial social space that Krio occupied – western culture largely shaped societal economic and political realities for the Krio, yet they were still African.

The increased numbers of educated Krio created a literate middle class for colonial administrative and missionary middle management employment, which meant a sizable degree of social and political autonomy for educated Krio (Shepler, 1998). Educated Africans transitioned from hard labor to mid-level bureaucratic employment in comparatively high-standing jobs. Their visible educational and economic success underscored the importance of literary education in the colony at the expense of technical, vocational, and agricultural education – skills associated with manual labor – and created a powerful identity within Freetown’s colonial African community. D. L. Sumner’s (1963) work, *Education in Sierra Leone* illustrates this shift in economic realities and a burgeoning African elite, stating:

> Literacy was a class distinction and illiteracy the badge of serfdom. […] Whenever there was work to be done, the lightest burdens fell to the lot of Africans who could read and write, and the more menial labor had to be done by the illiterate Africans. (p. 6)

Africans at the top – the literate who had risen through the ranks of the colony’s educational institutes and missionaries – succeeded notably within the colonial social system. Their success transpired in unintended ways to colonial authorities with the understanding of their newfound power in the colonial landscape. Autonomy, for instance, gave educated Krio power to coerce and influence economic realities in the colony, most notably with mercantile trade between peripheral indigenous tribes and Krio merchants (Shepler, 1998). Shepler also mentions that some Krio were forging alliances
with interior chiefs to circumvent colonial taxation and authority. In addition, some Krio engaged in lucrative and successful maritime commerce, emulating visible European tradesmen along the coast. In the eyes of colonial authorities and the CMS, education was intended to produce obedient civilized “Englishmen.” However, according to colonial authorities, the Krio were using their education for divergent intentions, ungratefully abusing the “milk and honey of literacy, culture and religion of the missionary” (Sumner, 1963, p. 81).

The colonial administration’s and CMS’s “civilizing” campaign through education greatly misjudged the Krio’s understanding of success. The Krio were reinterpreting and reshaping the role of literary education for their social realities. Caroline Bledsoe (1992) provides insight into the Krio’s reinvention, writing “Schooling in early Sierra Leone placed considerable emphasis on the content of the knowledge taught, assuming that knowledge could affect behavior by virtue of the logic and persuasiveness of its content alone, regardless of the social context into which it was placed” (p. 189). The bedrock of the colonial administration’s cultural reform was literary school curriculum, and Africans found little importance in this. Instead, it was the opportunities available within the colonial system that Africans sought through schooling, and as Anderson (1970) writes, what “appeared most closely related to European power and prestige” (p. 7).

Over time, the colonial government started to worry if perhaps the Krio had too much influence and power. The undesired trajectory of the educated Africans put both the administration and European merchants trading in West Africa on the defensive. Toward the late 1800s, coinciding with racist undertones from England fueled by social Darwinist
literature and memoirs published by ex-colonial servants (see *Heart of Darkness*, 1990),
the positive perceptions of the educated African shifted toward distaste. Missionaries and
colonial officials alike expressed intolerance for black clergymen and administrators.
New strategies were devised to minimize the rise of educated Africans, including the
creation of new government schools outside the colony (Sumner, 1963).

In 1896 the British administration annexed the interior of what is now present-day
Sierra Leone, forming a protectorate – a territory diplomatically controlled under the
jurisdiction of the British Crown. Unlike other British protectorates controlled directly
from London, Sierra Leone’s protectorate was controlled through proxy using pre-
existing native structures of patrilineal chieftainship. Before colonial occupation, chiefs
were un-elected sovereign rulers of localities with unique languages, cultures, and
customs who dealt directly with colonial administrators. To improve bureaucratic
efficiency, colonial authorities established the Paramount Chieftaincy system, lumping
many chiefs in politically demarcated areas called “chiefdoms” under one native leader –
the Paramount Chief (Fanthrope, 2001, p. 379-380). The bifurcation of colony and
protectorate, and the smaller regional unit, chiefdoms, single-handedly amalgamated
distinct and diverse populations into solitary political entity under Paramount Chiefs, and
incorporated them into the realities of colonial authority (Kilson, 1966, p. 54). Although
protectorate and colony shared administrative oversight from the colony government, the
protectorate had little political representation and a marginalized constitution. Not until
1951 was colony and protectorate unified under one national constitution (Fanthrope
2001, p. 382). Prior to 1951, Freetown Krios had political monopoly and dominance in
national affairs. Political inequality between the protectorate and the Freetown colony
was not the only obvious dichotomy. Krios were well educated, and Freetown served as a symbol of western development and urban modernism – the Athens of West Africa. By 1900, 50% of children in the colony were going to primary school, compared to the protectorate where less than 900 children were enrolled out of an approximated population of 1,500,000 (Corby, 1990, p. 317). The protectorate was inversely rural, agrarian, and uneducated, and historically divided between sovereign tribal leaders (Shepler, 1998).

Anthropologist K. L. Little’s (1949) analysis of secret societies – social institutions that controlled tribes’ economic, political, and social life throughout the protectorate – provides an interesting perspective to the dichotomous nature of protectorate/colony. His ethnographic research uncovered a decline in secret societies’ social, political, and economic power due to younger members wanting to “emulate western standards,” which were finding traction because of increasing numbers of Mission schools in the protectorate. Another reason Little suggests, and perhaps the most important, was a drive for “social acceptance by westernized [Krio] of the Colony to whom native institutions and secret societies, in particular, ranked as symbols of primitiveness” (p. 212). The Krio were the African embodiment of western knowledge, especially literacy – a construct of Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital” discussed later in this chapter – standing in stark opposition to the illiterate, uneducated, and disenfranchised African protectorate tribesman. In fact, in Little’s description of secret society members, he uses the term “nonliterate man” to indicate secret society membership (p. 211). The weakening power of multi-generational secret societies exacerbated the divide between traditional protectorate tribes and the western styled Krios of the colony.
As mentioned above, the colonial government handed over all control of the colony’s schools to CMS in the mid-1800s. However, after the annexation of the protectorate in 1896, the government initiated regional government-school construction. The majority of these schools were constructed in the southern regions of the country. Northern regions occupied by the Temne and other Sierra Leonean tribes had been exposed to Islam and Koranic schools, or brought the religion with them from Guinea’s historic Islamic stronghold Fouta Jallon before the Christian missionary presence. These practicing tribes of the north were consequentially overlooked until later in the 1900’s. Among the government schools constructed early in the protectorate, the Bo School reached prominence for its high profile student body and political mission (Corby, 1990).

The Case Study of Bo School

The Bo School was a response to missionaries’ heavy emphasis on literary curriculum. Schools in the colony, argued British colonial officials, needed vocational and technical subjects, and the missionaries’ “analyse and compare” learning methods were not producing the desired effects (Corby, 1990, p. 320). Europeans who were influential in the colony also felt schools needed more “practical” subjects, however were “prompted by the desire to minimize the numbers of [African] people belonging to an educated middle class” (Corby, 1990, p. 317). Sir Leslie Probyn, the governor of Sierra Leone from 1904-1911, based his Bo School model on this very principle. Unlike the Krio, inhabitants in the protectorate were unaccustomed to the British economic and government model. Probyn saw this as an opportunity to groom future chiefs for rule within the British administration at the local chiefdom level (Corby, 1990). The intended goal of Bo School, along with other protectorate schools, was not founded on “civilizing”
students, but rather ensuring an effective transition from politically autonomous chiefdoms under paramount chiefs to centralized colonial rule in Freetown. This politically fueled motive for Bo School highlights the markedly divergent approaches taken in school planning in the colony and the protectorate. Using the Krio as a case study, the colonial government learned what not to do with local Africans and education. Probyn wanted a ruling class in the protectorate that was educated enough to be compliant with British authority, but not educated enough to be resistant like the Krio. Literary education meant an introduction into western life, and as learned from the Krio, denoted a prestigious shift from manual labor to civic duties. The colony needed workers to farm and sustain the colony, and the protectorate was the next available source of labor and capital.

The curriculum for Bo School reflected these needs, emphasizing better agricultural and technical methods. To insure that graduates of Bo School would not seek civic employment, Governor Probyn made a public statement announcing the government had no intention of employing them. Additionally, the school required students to wear traditional African garb, live in “villages,” and conduct instruction to empower and consolidate tribal heritage (Corby, 1990, p. 322). Curriculum and school culture was engineered specifically to mold Africans into British loyalists, while keeping them characteristically “African,” and more importantly, without the benefits of the British economy, prestige, and power.

Probyn’s mandate to exclude graduates of Bo School from civic service lasted only a decade (Corby, 1990). African critics perceived agricultural education as suppressing students’ opportunities for success in lucrative and financially beneficial
clerical positions. To further exacerbate the situation, it was common for technically trained graduates to not find employment, and the economic realities of farm life were unpredictable (a reality that is still felt today). The repeal of Pobyn’s mandate was “the beginning of an economy of symbolic capital, reflecting that already existing among the Krio” in the Freetown (Shepler, 1998, p. 9).

Attempts to teach vernacular in agricultural and technical schools also backfired for similar reasons. English was the language of government, and embodied a symbolic, prestigious capital for Sierra Leoneans with access to the colonial wage-labor market. Local languages such as Mende, Temne, and Limba had no economic capital, negative symbolic capital, and provided little additional benefits in the colonial economy. Like agricultural curriculum, local inhabitants viewed learned vernacular as an obstacle to obtaining administrative employment. When early schools in the protectorate mandated Mende as the language of instruction, parents protested by removing their children from school. Education authorities made genuine attempts to vocalize the benefits of vernacular instruction for the indigenous populations, however ceded to parents’ emphasis on English-speaking schools (Corby, 1990). Probyn’s Bo School model, similar to his predecessors in the colony, assumed that Africans in the protectorate would react predictably to inputs that guaranteed particular outputs. In their minds, education was a cut and paste knowledge system capable of creating desired results despite a vastly different cultural context and population.

Similar Realities in Contemporary Sierra Leone

This literature review expunges two assumptions that Bledsoe (1992) and Shepler (2003) separately address. First, this review dismisses the notion that tenets of
colonialism are “imposed” upon local peoples. Imposition implies a unilateral movement from the enacting colonizer to the passive colonized. Therefore, we must “recognize that local societies rarely accept alien technology or domination wholesale” (Bledsoe, 1992, p. 183). Western education, for example, was integrated into Sierra Leone’s social and political framework, forever changing the realities and landscapes of the country. As demonstrated above, this integration was not unilateral, although colonial authorities believed it could be. The creation of Bo School was an attempt to politically and culturally engineer future pro-colonial rulers using specific curriculum. However, parents, students and leaders reacted in unintended ways, reshaping and reinterpreting their situation to better align with the opportunities within the colonial economy. Local and regional communities set their own agendas for change, adapting external influences when necessary.

The second assumption that Bledsoe (1992) and Shepler (2003) address is the commonly used synonymy of “education” and “learning.” A distinction needs to be drawn between “education” and “learning” to better understand the complexity of Sierra Leone’s societies. Susan Shepler (2003) demonstrates the multiplicity of learning that occurs in Sierra Leone, and that “education” is one of the many ways learning occurs. Education is:

An institution, a set of practices and discourses, a site of strategic deployment and redeployment of cultural and social capital. Education happens in some sort of formal relationship and involves a social transformation. In other words, education occurs at special times and places where learning is recognized as something that transforms a person. Schooling is a Western institutional form of education, and in Western ideology is the privileged site of learning. (Shepler, 2003, p. 62)
Drawing from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Shepler (2003) notes that schools are dynamic, yet privileged and exclusive sites of “cultural and social capital.” She makes an important distinction, however, between “school” and “education”; “schooling” being a specific western-styled form of education. Secret societies, for instance, are a form of education, distributing social and cultural capital and emphasizing transformation of an individual. Yet, what is different between schooling and secret societies is how the produced cultural and social capital benefits the recipient. Valuable cultural capital, in this regard, was the acquisition of knowledge from the dominant colonial European culture embodied by Krios, legitimized through “academic qualification” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 250). Cultural capital derived from secret societies was losing value to younger generations in the protectorate after seeing the economic advantage that literary education provided in Freetown (Little, 1949). Western-styled schools were also responsible for creating and reinforcing “symbolic capital,” a conversion of cultural capital that upholds and perpetuates social status, prestige, and influence that the Krios wielded (Matsumoto, 2011). Western-styled schools, and more importantly the English language, created a powerful and exclusive symbolic identity for individual Sierra Leoneans with western credentials, increasing one’s educational market value in the employment field (Matsumoto, 2011).

Mitsuko Matsumoto’s (2011) work in post-conflict Sierra Leone addressed the question of the gap between the expectations and realities of education for a Sierra Leonean. Although the scope of her work dealt with education policy during and immediately after Sierra Leone’s civil war from 1991-2001, her research gave voice to Sierra Leonean students, both in and out of school, and prospective students looking to
find employment through western-styled government schools. Her findings showed that despite the state’s emphasis on vocational job training and employment, interviewed youth believed that western-styled education was necessary for success. Those with vocational certificates such as masonry expressed a need to “defend” their job through national and international qualification exams taken by students of higher education (p. 134). Matsumoto links this to schooling’s historical consolidation of symbolic capital. The representation of education as symbolic capital, or rather, the symbolic capital that was unknowingly produced in schools, created elitism and exclusion that was felt by a working class without qualification (p. 125). Her contemporary Bourdieuan reasoning can be superimposed on Sumner’s (1963) colonial history to help explain the then burgeoning gap between Krio and protectorate social groups.

Matsumoto’s (2011) analysis is grounded in the conversion of cultural capital — knowledge taught in school — to symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986) elucidates this point, noting cultural competence rendered from cultural capital, e.g. being literate in a society of illiterates, creates a “scarcity value in its position of distribution of cultural capital” (para. 10). Because of this scarcity value, cultural capital yields both economic and symbolic profits for those who have access to acquisition of legitimate knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). Krios in Freetown, for example, had historically, and arguably still have today, an unequal advantage accessing schools and obtaining employment. Educated youth in the protectorate were also finding new paths toward social prestige and power. Their exclusive access to academic qualifications reproduced younger Krio and transitioning protectorate youth with elitist bourgeois mentalities of literary schooling,
setting forth a reproduction and focusing of scarce cultural and symbolic capital in Sierra Leone (Sumner, 1963; Bourdieu, 1977).

Using this concept of “schooling,” Shepler (2003) juxtaposes it with “omnipresent learning” that occurs in Sierra Leonean social life (p. 62). Learning opportunities, argues Shepler, are vast and varied, ranging from apprenticeship to daily farming. For most children, learning how to work in the fields and kitchens is a central part of life in Sierra Leone – a form of cultural capital, however one that does not lucratively convert into economic capital. Children were expected to start contributing to the household at a very young age, learning by observing, participating, and trial and error. These learning opportunities constructed the routines and rituals of daily life, engendered social roles, and taught necessary skills for survival within the village. Content taught through these experiences directly and tangibly benefitted the individual and the community. Collective interests in Sierra Leone superimposed the individual’s. Corby (1990), for example, notes that Koranic schools, in comparison to Western schools incentivizing the individual, thrived because of the emphasis on family and community. Western-styled schools contrastingly emphasized the individual’s transformation, placing motivation, support, and knowledge on the singular student. Collectivist behaviors in the individualized western-style classroom, writes Damien Lee (2012), could be seen through the prolific nature of cheating. Blatant cheating during tests and examinations was understood as helping fellow students succeed in passing grades, not dishonestly gaining an advantage or unfairly supplementing unlearned knowledge (Lee, 2012, p. 5).

Little (1949) notes that the two most prominent secret societies: Poro (men’s society) and Sande (women’s society) were regarded as the “educational example of par
excellence,” within the protectorate before the colonial presence (Little, 1949, p. 200). In secret society instruction, knowledge was “given by the owner to the apprentice,” implying a transactional relationship in a collectivist gerontocratic system (Jędrej, 1976, p. 236). The nature of this transaction diverges steeply from the EFA mentality of western countries approach to educating youth (United Nations Millennial Development Goals) (UNESCO, 2000). Far from free, initiates had to earn, struggle, and toil for the chance to receive the secrets from society elders. The initiate’s payment manifested in physical beatings, submission, and humiliation, underlining the importance of how one learns compared to what one learns (Bledsoe, 1992, p. 190). The knowledge gained from the society was not the end goal for the initiate, but rather the social prestige and community solidarity available after completing initiation.

Society members shared camaraderie between other men or women, and such relationships “transcended all barriers of family, clan, tribe, and religion” a noteworthy social network in a country that was historically segregated along chieftain and tribal lines (Little, 1949, p. 202). These networks laid the bedrock of what Sierra Leonean’s call “sababu,” entering into a beneficial friendship with a socially influential and powerful stakeholder, normally for future employment (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 137). Without sababu, obtaining “good” employment became virtually impossible even with academic credentials (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 137). Institutions such as secret societies and alumni organizations like the prominent Bo School Old Bo Boys Association (OBBA) acted both as socializing entities and potential sources of obtaining sababu.

Catherine Bolten’s (2012) recent ethnographic work uncovered similar social patterns around sababu and influence mentors. She notes rural students preferred working
in towns, at the demise of village and rural life. Students were inclined to wait for clerical jobs that matched their expectations of employment with academic qualifications. The tendency of Sierra Leone youth to “chafe against the guidance and control of elders and demand incorporation into a meritocratic order of education, wages, and global engagement” was apparent in interviews with parents in the village (Bolten, 2012, p. 505). Students however were not circumventing or denying gerontocratic processes of achieving prestige and success. They were simply looking elsewhere for outlets to sababu, employment, and prestige that were historically found in the secret society and village. Additionally, both Bolten (2012) and Matsumotos’ (2011) ethnographic work in Sierra Leone detailed students disparaging manual labor in the villages as the work of primitive and illiterate people, similar to Sumner’s observations fifty years before. Like the beginnings of Bo School, students correlated success with literate government employment.

Caroline Bledsoe’s (1992) research looked at contemporary cultural perspectives of Sierra Leoneans toward education, illuminating many similar themes that D. L. Sumner’s (1963) historical survey and Bolten’s (2012) research uncovered. Among Bledsoe’s findings, she notes that “blessing” was central to a student’s success in modern educational institutes, not the acquisition of content – or knowledge (p. 182). Blessing is a core Koranic and Sierra Leonean belief that success is not the product of individual action, but of God’s support, or blessing channeled through the family, patrons, ancestors, or spirits. The nature of blessing is that it is controlled, and only accessed through specific social/spiritual hierarchies in the collective community body, similar to secret society initiation and the concept of sababu. Bledsoe notes that knowledge cannot
be learned, but earned through acquiring blessing, as encapsulated in the country’s common idiom, “No success without struggle” (p. 191). For a student’s learning to transpire, that is, acquire academic qualifications, the student must show appreciation and indebtedness to her supporters “through labor, remittances, and unquestioning loyalty” (Bledsoe, 1992, p. 192).

Historically, this was done in the village, but as Bolten posited, has been shifting toward urban centers. If a child were to circumvent this show of appreciation for blessing, accusations of evil deeds or witchcraft would be used to explain their success without navigating proper channels of blessing. It is not surprising that the social significance and processes of blessing correspond neatly with the significance and processes of secret societies. Showing loyalty toward elders and earning knowledge through pain and labor are cultural underpinnings of education that run through all social institutions. Bledsoe’s fieldwork underscores the educational fallacy that knowledge in the absence of cultural context has little transformative power that Sumner (1963) narrates, and Shepler (2003) emphasizes. She summarizes,

The content of knowledge cannot itself bring the rewards of education, because knowledge does not stand apart from social relations as a detached cultural package. Since blessings legitimate rights to certain domains of knowledge, how children learn – that is through earning blessing – is as important as what they actually learn. (Bledsoe, 1992, pg. 192)

The larger implications of blessing, along with instruction during secret society initiation, suggest that acquiring qualifications – cultural capital with scarcity value – is not a process of individualized Western-styled content instruction, but rather through sababu and intergenerational rituals expressing gratitude, subordination, and transaction between elders and novice. In this regard, Western-styled schools in Sierra Leone are
reinterpreted institutions far different from their predecessors in England, although they share the same curriculum and instruction. Academic pedagogy, seen from Bledsoe’s (1992) description is about acknowledging and honoring hierarchical social status rather than content acquisition. Shepler (2003) agrees, writing schools have “less to do with skills taught than with the articulation of a social system” (p. 63).

Conclusion

This literature review informs my understanding of teaching in a rural village in Sierra Leone as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and hopefully for others affiliated, or not, with Peace Corps education and teaching. Focusing not only on education, but also history and sociology, this literature review provides a multifaceted context that better situates the educational realities of rural village life in Sierra Leone. Bourdieu’s (1980; 1986) theories of capital and habitus as theoretical tools help make sense of the larger processes that weave Sierra Leonean society, culture, and education together. His theories also suggest that the educational issues identified in Sierra Leone are present and observable anywhere there are human social structures, implying the very nature of society is a distribution of power. In that regard, this literature review is both a micro-look at Sierra Leone’s educational history and contemporary realities, and also a generalizable macro-look at the larger implications of education on global crossroads.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A long-standing history of research shows that a confluence of educational styles, cultures and societies introduced through British colonialism has been at odds since the colonial presence in Freetown in the 18th century (Sumner, 1963; Anderson, 1970; Corby, 1990; Bledsoe, 1991; Shepler, 1998; Fanthrope, 2001; Shepler, 2003; Matsumoto, 2011; Bolten, 2012). Despite this longitudinal review of educational literature in Sierra Leone, few studies have been conducted in recent years about the realities of education at the classroom level, and how teachers fit into this complex schooling system. Using self-study, I seek to better understand my Peace Corps teaching experience as a foreign English teacher in a post-conflict, post-colonial English-speaking educational system.

The nature of this study, as with self-study, is inductive and ethnographic in methodological approach. Despite its’ name, “self-study is the focus of the study, not the methodology” (Schulte, 2009, p. 40). LaBoskey (2004), an advocate for self-study, notes its’ improvement-aimed objective through critical self-reflection using – often times, but not restricted to – qualitative methods. Self-study “seeks to determine whether or not our practice is consistent with our evolving ideals and theoretical perspectives” (p. 820). Unlike quantitative approaches to research, self-study is meant to “provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm or settle” through reflective practice (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). Self-study is not, however, an insulated look at our own practices as both participant and observer.
The methodology is openly collaborative, relying on context and a “variety of viewpoints” to better understand the problems under study (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 825). Input from colleagues (called “critical friends”), journals, and theory provide a process of “reframing,” which allows alternative outcomes to surface (p. 825). Within the reframing and reflexive process, “the input of critical friends and theory can push reflections past defensiveness into transformative learning” (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002). Not only does this produce richer, more contextual insights, they become generalizable to a wider audience of practitioners and researchers – a tenet of scholarship.

Design of Investigation

Data incorporated in this thesis was drawn from two years of Peace Corps service in rural Sierra Leone, West Africa. My research topic depended entirely on the location of service, which remained unknown until two months before departure. I lacked the necessary knowledge of Sierra Leone to formulate a concrete research question before leaving the United States. Very little had been written on the current educational conditions in Sierra Leone, and from condensed research attempts I found little recent scholarly work. My inadequate knowledge base before leaving the United States informed my open, inductive research approach. I knew that I wanted to focus on cultural beliefs of foreign teachers affecting pedagogy, however I was unsure how that would take form in a dynamic post-conflict country like Sierra Leone. I was, for all intents and purposes, “flying blind.”

Data was recorded in an extensive field journal describing experiences and reflections in school, village, and around Sierra Leone for the two years of my Peace Corps service. I intentionally used my journals for both personal and professional
recordings, portraying a more holistic picture of my experience as a teacher, volunteer, and community member. This interwoven personal and professional narrative is defended in an entry during my service:

   Wedding [professional with personal] better reflects my experience. My emotions. My transitions. The smell of tropical rains. The taste of palm oil. The handshake of a perennial farmer. It seems like the correct thing to do – a sensorial construction of the context. (Sean, Reflection, April 21, 2013)

Being conscious of gleaning details from personal and professional entries while coding is a more labor-intensive process, but I believe it expresses a more realistic picture of the fluidity of ‘work’ and ‘life’ in Sierra Leone.

The frequency of journaling varied depending on the school week, sickness, travel, and other obligations. I tried to journal at least twice a week. However some weeks have no entries, while others have more than two. The vast majority of journal entries were descriptive narratives in lockstep with the ethnographic tradition; however, some days were recorded in lyrical song or poetry. To ensure continuity, I began journaling before leaving the United States. I maintained a blog that was a series of polished observations from the month. What was recorded and blogged ranged from school culture to conversations with elders. Anything that I felt resonated or inspired me within the domain of school life and culture.

Data was additionally collected from an open-ended 4-question survey given to 50 Peace Corps volunteers located throughout Sierra Leone. Of the 50 surveys distributed, 13 were completed and returned. The decision to disseminate a survey was two-fold: to provide data about perceived roles and challenges as foreign teachers in Sierra Leone, and secondly, to triangulate themes I was experiencing in my village. Isolation in village was both an emotional obstacle, and a research obstacle. The survey
helped gather other volunteers’ experiences that would otherwise be unrecorded due to distance and difficulty of travel. The survey was developed from a refinement of questions that I found myself asking in the first year of service. I chose to distribute the survey at our one-year anniversary. My rationale for distribution halfway through service was based on volunteers’ culture and language familiarity and integration. After one year, volunteers have a better understanding of both their roles and responsibilities in their respective villages, and also a better understanding of Sierra Leone.

The restraints of rural village life largely dictated my choice of methods. Having little or no access to reliable electricity and internet made it difficult to use modern methods of data collection such as video recorders or computers. Tropical weather and humidity – unknown to me before departure – reduced the shelf life of most of my electronics to nine months, creating problems with data storage. Limited internet access also created problems with acquiring research journals and articles. With these limitations in mind, I settled on the conventional field notebook and journal. Pictures were taken, but rarely candidly.

Because of limited access to electricity and internet, the qualitative nature of my research topic, and my limited knowledge before departure, I decided to use the lesser-known but flexible research approach, self-study. Flexible, in that “researchers and practitioners use whatever methods will provide the needed evidence and context for understanding their practice” (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 240). In self-study, “researchers are both actors and spectators who act and think with regard to educational questions,” with the goal of improving the researcher’s practice so that they can better help their students (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 819-820). My research goals required me to use
myself as both researcher and participant, which align with self-study. It is my intention to use self-study to articulate my interpretations of my teaching practice in rural Sierra Leone, and improve the existing field of post-conflict education research on teaching.

Maintaining a high level of validity is a center point in the collection, analysis, and evaluation of data throughout the self-study research process. LaBoskey (2004) defines validity in self-study research as a “validation process based in trustworthiness,” as opposed to objective confirmation and settlement (p. 817). Feldman (2003) adds a valid self-study incorporates four characteristics that ensure research validity and generalization of results. Feldman’s first point advises the researcher to explicitly describe the collection and identification of data. In doing so, other researchers or practitioners can replicate similar studies. Secondly, a discussion of how the researcher constructed his or her representation of data, and what theoretical framework underpinned his or her analysis. Thirdly, the researcher needs to explore the multiple ways of representing and evaluating the data. The triangulation of data gives researchers a more critical perspective analyzing data, which renders a clearer picture for evaluation. And lastly, the researcher needs to present “evidence of the value of the changes” that occurred throughout the research process (Feldman, 2003). If the basis of self-study is to inform professional practice, then an effective self-study is one that articulates evidence of constructive change and transformation.

Sample Population

The participants in this study live in or around a small rural village located in Northwestern Sierra Leone in the heart of rural Temne country (the Temne are one of sixteen tribes that reside in Sierra Leone. Tribal identity often takes precedence over
Nationalistic citizenship. Identifying as “Temne” establishes one’s linguistic, socio-cultural, and religio-spiritual affiliations. For purposes of confidentiality, this village will be called Kakreugbah (pronounced ka-crewg-ba).

This village was assigned to me as my two-year Peace Corps placement. Kakreugbah is the chiefdom headquarters for the Paramount Chief, akin to a county office in the United States. Due to its provincial significance and privilege, it has the only rural junior high school in the chiefdom, despite having a small population of 1,200 people. Kakreugbah operates on a subsistence economy, deriving its money from cash crops like pepper and ochre, and a small network of skilled labors working in carpentry, blacksmithing, and motorcycle repair. Not only did Kakreugbah serve as a participant population to study education contextually, they were friends and family that embraced me graciously. The two years I spent living and working in Kakreugbah as a teacher, Peace Corps volunteer (PCV), and western stranger (opotho in the local language) gave me an intimate and subjective look at the political, economic, social, and cultural effects of western-styled schooling in a rural and traditional Sierra Leonean village.

School Population

Kakreugbah Junior Secondary School (KJSS) is a co-ed government agricultural school specializing in vocational skills for farming and animal husbandry. Like government and civics services, English is the official language of instruction in school. The staff ranged from three to eight teachers depending on the time of year and health of faculty. In addition to Peace Corps, Restless Development – a national Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) focusing on life skills and sexual reproductive health – worked in similar voluntary humanitarian capacities at KJSS. The Restless
Development volunteers were two college-aged Sierra Leoneans from Freetown and Mende country (the Mende are another Sierra Leonean tribe that were historically hostile with the Temne) with comparable levels of education to the teachers. Due to our similar program missions and ‘outsider’ identities, I gained a considerable amount of insight from their simultaneous emic and etic perspectives of Kakreugbah.

Classes and teachers were divided by content area, totaling twelve subjects. Mandatory subjects, called “core subjects” – English, Integrated Science, Social Studies, and Math – were given considerable attention. The eight other subjects were “electives,” however every student was required to take them. Unlike most middle and senior schools in the United States, students stay inside their own designated classrooms for the duration of the day. This is a necessity-based approach to school management. There are not enough classrooms for each teacher to get their own room. Teachers instead rotate classrooms based on a master subject schedule. The teacher rotation was a reality, but not a functional one. Having to rotate classrooms complicated the use of visual aids, models, books, or other teaching materials. A simple logistical problem like hanging a poster on a wall became increasingly complex without tape or adhesive – items that were expensive and difficult to find in Sierra Leone. This is one of many reasons why teaching styles in school were rigidly chalkboard-centric.

Classrooms and grades were divided into JSS1, JSS2, and JSS3, equivalent to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade in the American K-12 system. During my first year we had two JSS1 classrooms to accommodate the large enrollment of students coming from primary school. Due to more diligent screening and aptitude testing during my second year of teaching, fewer primary school students were admitted to JSS1, resulting in one JSS1
class. Despite the student totals, we rarely exceeded 100 students a day; the exception being test weeks. Table 1 and Table 2 show course title, teaching load, and student enrollment for the two years of service in Kakreugbah.

Table 1

Year 1 – 2012-2013 – Teacher Course Load and Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Total Weeks Taught</th>
<th>Grade: U.S. Equivalent</th>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Hours Taught per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 1 White</strong> – English Grammar</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 1 Blue</strong> – English Grammar</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 2</strong> – English Grammar &amp; Literature</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 3</strong> – English Grammar &amp; Literature</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sean, Journals, 2013

Table 2

Year 2 – 2013-2014 – Teacher Course Load and Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Total Weeks Taught</th>
<th>Grade: U.S. Equivalent</th>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Hours Taught per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>JSS 1</strong> – English Grammar</td>
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<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 2</strong> – English Grammar &amp; Literature</td>
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<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>JSS 3</strong> – English Grammar &amp; Literature</td>
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<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sean, Journals, 2014
Participants

The nature of self-study, according to LaBoskey (2004) is both “self-initiated and focused,” with the goal of improving our own professional practice “based upon a careful and thorough understanding of our settings” (p. 845). In that regard, I was my own participant, self-analyzing my assumptions, actions, and reactions within the context of rural Sierra Leone. The inhabitants of Kakreugbah also were indirect participants of this study, in that I never formally included them in the data-collection process, i.e. interviews and surveys, although they were intimately embedded in the data. To help triangulate observations and data I was collecting from my village, I informally interviewed and surveyed Peace Corps Volunteers from other villages, cities, and regions around Sierra Leone. My Peace Corps cohort provided invaluable input to help situate my school-related issues in the broader social context of the country. Lastly, students and staff of KJSS also participated substantially, but indirectly in the study, in that I never formally included them in the data-collection process. I had released a student-survey in the first few months of school, but students’ limited English language skills yielded unusable responses. The same went for the teaching staff. My command of the local language Temne, and national lingua franca Krio were not adequate early in my service to convey or transcribe survey and interview responses. Accredited translators were unavailable.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once my field notes, journal and surveys were compiled into one place I used grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to begin analysis. I selected Glaser and Strauss’ analysis procedure for its practical qualitative application and
strength in understanding social behavior. Self-study and grounded theory both encourage the development of theory to originate from the data, not from other available theories. The data is what informs the theoretical outcomes. As a result of grounded theory, I adopted Pierre Bourdieu’s (1980; 1986) theories on habitus and the forms of capital only after I returned to the United States upon completing Peace Corps. Post-service analysis of my journals revealed themes, which informed my exploration, and eventual inclusion of Bourdieu’s theories as my theoretical framework.

I used Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method of coding – open, axial, and selective – to retrospectively analyze my journals and surveys after Peace Corps. These types of coding illustrated by Glaser and Strauss are:

Open Coding - "The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61).

Axial Coding - "A set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences" (p. 96).

Selective Coding - "The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (p. 116).

The coding process is what allows the researcher to glean unifying or contrasting themes from the larger body of raw data, often in the form of journals or field notes. Further coding refines major themes and understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. Once major themes have been identified either before or after open coding, comparative axial coding can begin, revealing relationships between themes and phenomena.
For instance, Melissa Fleishman (2012) utilized constant comparison methods to analyze a collection of journals written during a prior study-abroad experience for themes of inclusion. Reading through journals using open coding, initial themes focusing on her philosophy of inclusion before and after her international experience started to emerge. Axial coding allowed her to refine and categorize these themes based on how and why inclusion influenced her performance abroad. Selective coding guided her to theorize relationships and generalizations between categorized themes, providing a rich and personalized analysis of inclusion. Her results could then inform her current understanding and beliefs about inclusion in higher education.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Framing the Results: Spheres of Habitus

Over the two years teaching and living in Kakreugbah I recorded my observations ranging from personal to professional. A retrospective analysis of the data uncovered themes and insights that at the time, I was unable to glean. It is my intention to shed light on the relatively understudied intersection of present day western-styled English education and rural Sierra Leonean culture at the classroom level through self-reflective personal narrative.

I observed KJSS school, the Kakreugbah community and myself as having distinct capacities to think, feel, and act in specific ways, which adheres to Bourdieu’s (1980) theory of habitus. I use the term “school culture” to refer to predominantly British customs and traditions embodied in western-styled schools around Sierra Leone (called Salone by its nationals). Rural Community culture refers to the characteristics of Kakreugbah village. A third sphere of this data analysis is the confluence of my white middle-class American background, colliding with the habitus of the western-styled school and rural local Sierra Leone. A teacher is the last actor of a state’s educational policy before finding its intended student audience. With this unique perspective as both a foreign teacher and as an actor of policy implementation, I directly participated in the collision of contrasting habitus. I use Bourdieu’s social theories to shed analytical light on these interactions, while also organizing and grounding observations and conclusions.
I recognize that nothing can ever be fully dichotomized (Bledsoe, 1992). School culture is not isolated within the Sierra Leonean school compound, just as the local community is not immune to the spread of Western interaction in the form of education. These two spheres – school culture and rural Sierra Leone culture – were pushed together without amalgamation, creating an educational identity, which exhibited unique characteristics of both (Sumner, 1963). At times, rural culture and school culture had overlapping commonalities, and at other times, irreconcilable differences that complicated my navigation as a foreign teacher in an English-speaking, western-styled school.

Divergence or collision of two or more spheres produced conflicts that I recorded and reflected upon as data. Once I began to thematize data, I created an organizational system using Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) axial and selective coding strategies. I categorized themes into one of three groups, labeled “conflict groups,” since data was generated from conflicts between spheres. The three conflict groups are labeled: Pedagogical conflicts, administrative conflicts, and community conflicts. Pedagogical conflicts, for example, categorized issues related to teaching and classroom instruction, generated from divergences or collisions of two or more spheres of habitus. Administrative conflicts, however, were more complex, involving all three spheres. These conflicts took shape when teachers’ goals and priorities misaligned with the school’s, and my own. Community conflicts were often the products of collisions between parents (Rural culture) and the school system (School culture). Themes grouped in community conflicts were also difficult to code, because I had limited initial knowledge about my village and its social and cosmological framework.
Initially, I understood my placement in Kakreugbah as exclusively teaching English to junior high school students. I was not prepared for the additional administrative work I would carry, or the international American identity that I would be describing, clarifying, and defending on a daily basis. Secondly, I saw myself as a change agent and exemplar of contemporary American education, inspired after reading John Dewey’s (1916) work on social change during a master’s teacher training course. I started “teaching to impart knowledge that liberated student thinking; to create change through the knowledge I taught” (Sean, Journal, June 6th, 2014). Not only was this my first time as a full-time classroom teacher, it was my first time on the African continent. Despite my graduate teacher training, classroom teaching in a post-conflict West African country was something for which graduate programs or teaching simulation could not prepare me.

Before Sierra Leone, I presumed teaching language in the United States followed a similar trajectory to Britain and Australia. Even in countries where English had a foreign presence, teaching and learning would correlate to the tenets of what I believed language education to be. That is, what “education” and “English” were: the political, economic, cultural and social functions of the education system and the English language. These assumptions, which at the time I misrecognized as universals, were born from inexperience and naivety. I never questioned the uses of English or an English education in the broader context of West African countries, post-conflict development, and humanitarian work. I never had to as an American and as a graduate student. I approached the education system and the English language in Sierra Leone as if it were my own, unaware of the cultural, political and cognitive assumptions embedded within its syntax (Thiongo, 1986; Thiongo, 2009; Wierzbicka, 2013).
I initially perceived politics surrounding education to be common across borders where English and western-styled education existed. Beginning Peace Corps service with this mindset, I surmised Sierra Leone education was in place to teach students how to be critical, logical, and civic citizens of a democratic society. What I failed to recognize until later in my service was the contrasting ways in which the Sierra Leonean educational system produced democratic citizens. Wedding democracy and education is not a new concept. John Dewey’s influential writings *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Experience and Education* (1938) shaped my understanding of education’s democratic, yet politically motivated goals while abroad. These ideas are reflected in California State University, Chico’s School of Education’s – my graduate department – mission statement: “We believe in the power of education to create a diverse, democratic, socially responsible society in which every student is valued” (School of Education, 2015). These words meant very little to me until confronted with conflicting and oppositional ideas about education and democracy in Sierra Leone.

I viewed myself as a change agent by helping students achieve their potential through curriculum and teaching, emblazoned by Peace Corps’ centricity on personal heroism through notable memoirs of past volunteers (Thomsen, 1969; Hessler, 2001; Holloway; 2006). The Millennial Development Goals (MDGs) also reinforced my belief in the power of education to reshape and develop a country in economic and political transition (UNESCO, 2000; Matsumoto, 2011). English education – a system, or habitus of thinking embodied by the western world – was my medium for disseminating knowledge that would transform students and teachers alike. Peace Corps and other humanitarian organizations stressed the strongly held belief that education is a key
feature of peacebuilding, technological development, and health reform (Bledsoe, 1992; Matsumoto, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). To say education is not a valuable asset to the peacebuilding agenda would be a wrongdoing. However, the posited developmental benefits of “education” from Peace Corps and UNICEF strengthened my position for drastic changes in Sierra Leone pedagogy, school culture, and administration for large-scale country transformation.

Pedagogical Conflicts

Primary and secondary schools had a single goal of achieving highly on the national exam students were expected to take at the end of academic track. The summative national exam that Kakreugbah was responsible for was Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Scoring highly on the exams meant increasing the notoriety and reputation of the school, and more importantly the prestige of administration and faculty. Teachers were valued and supported by the community if they produced results, and summative national testing was the only form of empirical evidence that supported this. To both teachers and students in Kakreugbah, the national exams were gatekeepers of social and symbolic capital, holding true to Matsumoto’s (2011) observation that educational qualification is an indicator of social status (p. 134). Without results, students and teachers would return to the undesirable agrarian fold of society, “sitting idle” (a Krio idiom meaning ‘unproductivity’ and ‘negligence’) for a new avenue to procure capital (p. 134).

Teaching to the national syllabus was reiterated many times as the most important aspect of teaching in Sierra Leone (Sean, Journals, 2012-2014; Survey Results, 2013). I felt naturally at odds with such a strict and literal reliance on a syllabus, regardless of the
limited curriculum and resources. Moreover, the junior secondary school (JSS) syllabus was designed by the West African Examination Council (WAEC), a product of colonial Britain representative of the five Anglophonic countries of West Africa: The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria. Although all five countries shared English as an official language, educational realities were, and still are incredibly disparate (Government of Sierra Leone, 2010). Students entered JSS with severely limited reading and writing skills, and a basic command of foundational arithmetic. But they were held to standards of symbolic colonial prestige set by literate, native English speakers in the United Kingdom, and reinforced by well-educated English-speaking Africans from Ghana and Nigeria. The syllabus was my first contact with the tensions generated from conflicting habitus. I carried with me the embodied values of the western educational system, and slammed against a compelling reality of rural West African society.

My pedagogical approach to teaching English diverged greatly from rote-memory, teach-to-the-test ideology of my Sierra Leonean counterparts. My pedagogy was in line with my graduate school training in communicative language teaching theory. Proponents of this language teaching approach (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995; Shrum & Glisan, 2010) suggested students learn to “use language to express their ideas and intent,” focusing more on coherent discourse rather than grammatical and linguistic competencies (Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 14). My goal as a Peace Corps language teacher was to instill a level of confidence in students’ communicative English abilities through modern methods of learning. Principally, I wanted students to become literate. I was consciously avoiding the “Atlas Complex,” (Lee & VanPatten, 2003) a
term describing a teacher whom provides all information for students to merely retain. This was a driving force behind my beliefs about student efficacy.

Throughout the two years of field notes, I emphasized critical thinking as the desired product of my teaching, convinced that learning English – being literate – would translate into *rational* thought. Three months into service in Kakreugbah I write, “Once [my students] realize, and I effectively teach, the beauty of writing and self-expression, I think these students will blossom into amazing, critical, and successful people down the road” (Sean, Reflections, Oct. 12th, 2012). My assumptions about the transformative power of literacy and education are clear in the early months in village. What is less explicit is my view that students were bereft of critical thinking to begin with, and were without linguistic and cultural outlets for self-expression and critical thought.

Of the thirteen Peace Corps volunteers surveyed in my study, eleven also said their primary goal was to teach critical thinking. They too observed schools dominated by rote-memorization and students unable to demonstrate fundamental numeracy and literacy skills. Caroline Bledsoe’s (1992) analysis of early education in Sierra Leone emphasizes similar aspirations held by English teaching missionaries in the late 1700s. Schools in early colonial Sierra Leone assumed that “knowledge could affect behavior by virtue of logic and persuasiveness of its content alone, regardless of the social context into which it was place” (p. 189). More than 200 years ago, moral certainties and reformist intentions of missionaries are strikingly identical to ideas found in my field notes and Journal, and supported by other volunteers’ responses. The goals of foreign teachers throughout Sierra Leone’s history have not fundamentally changed, staying true to reformist intentions brought about by education.
Three weeks before the opening of school I started preparing lesson plans with communicative language theory in mind. The theory was my yardstick for “excellent teaching,” written in my graduate portfolio’s teaching philosophy. I felt obligated to my students to produce the best and current lessons I could with the limited resources of Sierra Leone. Lesson activities focused on asking students to produce original, deductive answers contextualized from task-based language exercises. I scaled down the difficulty to the observable level of the class and encouraged students to work in groups to complete the task – methods that were actively encouraged in my graduate seminars back in California. At first, in conjunction with the insistence from local teachers that I review the eight parts of speech, I used a cued fill-in-the-blank writing exercise, encouraging students to use original vocabulary in contextually specific ways. The following example is a language activity I designed using communicative language goals.

- The girl runs to the _______ (place) to buy _______ (thing). After she buys _______ (thing) she goes back to _______ (place) where she came from.

I wanted students to comprehend the sentence’s semantic meaning and insert contextually appropriate nouns, regardless of grammatical noun structure or article agreement. What instead happened was students wrote sentences they had learned (memorized) the following year that used the same fill-in-the-blank question structure. One student’s response read:

- The girl runs to the the girl eats rice to buy the market. After she buys the boys play soccer she goes back to she is a girl where she came from.

I asked the student why he inserted these answers. He responded in a pensive tone, explaining that the only fill-in-the-blank answers in his Language Arts notebook were the ones he wrote in my assignment. This was a breakthrough in my understanding
of how students approach school curriculum, and also studying. A student’s notebook was the only material reference to the teacher’s singular dictation. What was written on the chalkboard – despite how incorrect or decontextualized it was – was then meticulously transferred to students’ notebooks and memorized. The absence of textbooks in classes put more weight on students to maintain and memorize their notebooks, and inflated teachers’ roles as omnipresent retainers of knowledge.

For example, I often heard my study-group students arguing at night about the inconsistencies between their notes. Punctuation was a common catalyst for dispute. Interestingly, students were not concerned if the punctuation was grammatically correct, but if the commas were in the exact place the teacher had placed them. These mistakes were often heavily penalized on tests, although the teacher’s initial notes were the source of the error. They were the product of Sierra Leone teachers’ emphasis on explicit instruction. After years of teacher-centric learning, students expected the instructor to provide the answers, show them the patterns, and highlight the formulas. There was little left for students to think creatively or originally about.

Students’ answers to my language exercises highlighted the obstacles that rote-memorization created for my approach to language learning, and also revelatory of Sierra Leoneans’ unquestioning respect for elders and teachers. Pedagogically, it was a clear indicator of the ground I would need to retrace to encourage task-based learning and critical thinking.

After the first month of school, I realized my goals for communicative teaching were unreasonable. I spent the remaining semester problematizing and refining curriculum to fit my understanding of “excellent communicative language teaching”
(Sean, Journal, August 7th, 2012). I could not abandon what my master’s teacher training had endorsed, and I still unknowingly upheld the notion that the English-speaking education system in Sierra Leone was an ideological mirror of the United States. I wrote a month later, “I want to get JSS II familiar with quickwrites and vocabulary tests on a weekly basis to give them tools to start thinking creatively. I don’t think enough encouragement for students to think independently or critically is found in other teacher’s classrooms” (Sean, Journal, October 1st, 2012). These initial teaching goals were in line with what I considered appropriate without addressing students’ needs and past educational experiences.

My master’s degree coursework taught me that the tenets of the communicative approach emphasized authentic speaking and listening, and were topically focused, thematic, and task-based (Shrum & Glisan, 2010; Nunan, 2004; Mishan, 2005). Working with grammar, according to this approach, was uniquely embedded in discourse practice, supplementing the production of language rather than defining it (Ellis, 2005; Shrum & Glisan, 2010). I failed to understand that this approach to language teaching favored in the United States required an initial, yet rudimentary command of the English language to move forward, which my students didn’t have. It also demanded students to be autonomous and flexible, willing to orally stumble through speaking and reading practice.

The reality in the village classroom was far from this suspended theory. Students replicated and memorized teacher’s notes verbatim, constructing long memorized passages of lessons that held no conceptual meaning. The words they recited and wrote were phonetic shells without a signified object.
“A country is established by its geographic and political boundaries,” a student regurgitated to me. When I asked him, “What are “boundaries?” he shrugged his shoulders indifferently, replying “Ar no no Mr. Stephens” (I don’t know). It didn’t matter what the word meant, because the importance rested in the act of memorizing it, and producing the exact duplicate on the BECE. Classroom culture also allowed little room for making mistakes. The high-pressure environment due to peer and teacher scrutiny dissuaded students from attempting answers in English that did not have a clear answer.

Students spoke three to four languages, but were illiterate in all of them, including their first language(s): Temne, Krio, or Limba (I restrain from using the term mother tongue and indigenous language because some Sierra Leoneans grow up in multilingual households, or have parents from two different tribes. Refer to Ferguson, 2010). Pedagogically, first language illiteracy was a noticeable set back because the preferred method of language instruction was what I call “rote-grammar.” Rote-grammar differs from the timeless grammar-translation method, because students have no literate foundation to anchor new grammar structures. Instead, students learn the definition of grammar and its parts, i.e. what are nouns, prefixes, and apostrophes? Students were learning about a foreign language system in a foreign language that no one in their linguistic environment spoke, read, or wrote. This was the antithesis of the communicative learning approach, and in result, left me in a vulnerable position as a teacher. My master’s training prepared me for teaching English in a developed country, open to the idea of innovative learning approaches, and in a classroom sourced with learning materials. The teaching realities in Sierra Leone, however, did not fit the parameters of my master’s training.
Sierra Leonean students not only struggled in language arts, but science, math, and social studies, which required complex English vocabulary and reading comprehension. Their lack of literacy, and therein ability to comprehend lesson concepts, forced students to find other means of passing tests. “Learning for a colonial child,” as Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) protested, “became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (p. 17). Some students relied on memory alone, able to recite pages of notes with clear pronunciation, yet having no understanding of what they were saying. Rote-memorized answers found results when teachers’ tests asked definition-based questions, statically occupying the “knowledge” level of Bloom’s Hierarchy of thinking (Bloom, 1956). This was in part why I felt responsible for teaching students critical thinking skills. It was illogical to me that students spend thirteen years in school memorizing abstract sounds and foreign ideas, which somehow equated “education.” I did not travel halfway around the world to continue rote-memory based education.

November 2012 marked three months at KJSS. I was observably frustrated with my students’ inability to comprehend simple communicative tasks (Sean, Journal, November 10th, 2012). In general, I blamed my students for their incomprehension and perceived indolent attitude toward school. A journal passage from a lesson I taught revealed dissipating patience with my students. “Damn it’s frustrating when kids won’t think more creatively! I give them the option to express who they are as people, to break away from the monotony of cooking, cleaning, and farming. To think for themselves” (Sean, Journal, November 14th, 2012). I was still grasping at the notion of “creative” transformation in my early stages of teaching. “Creativity,” semantically grounded in the western values of innovation and self-expression stood in stark contrast to rural village
life. Village life in my mind symbolized rigid tradition immune to change, to
transformation. Women cooked rice and sauce in the same procedural fashion as every
other woman. Men drank the same drink as every other man in the village. Lapa, the
ubiquitous cloth of Sierra Leone was wrapped around the waists of girls with the same
overhand knot. The rural culture nurtures homogeneity, finding solidarity and solitude in
collective uniformity. This is especially true after a war that shattered the identity of
Salone right down to the single family.

My scope of understanding the Sierra Leone classroom however, was limited to
only the school compound in the first few months. I lacked a developed perspective to
evaluate my teaching, or to understand the tensions generated from students, teachers,
and community. In light of this, I blamed the students – the first intimate contact with the
school habitus – for my inability to convey knowledge that I thought was both
rudimentary and necessary. In a highlighted margin from my lesson plans I wrote, “[The
students] don’t think for themselves. Simple quickwrites demand too much creative
thought and imagination for them. Need to work on this” (Sean, Journal Notes, October
27th, 2012). In retrospect, my students were indirect test subjects as I committed a
prolonged trial-and-error episode of teaching strategies, materials, and curriculum. I was
learning how to teach Sierra Leone students as they struggled to adapt to a new,
drastically different style of teaching. In this retrospective light, my pedagogical choices
formed dissonant student-teacher relationships early in my service, exacerbating tensions
between habitus.

My perceptions changed after spending a day working with my male students on a
local stakeholder’s farm. It was common to use the male student body as free farm labor
for chiefs and elders. I was in charge of managing the students in the farm. In the fields, however, I had no authoritative power. I had no knowledge of soils, crops, and seasons to validate my purpose as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I wrote in my journal afterward how perplexed I was about students’ language abilities.

I haven’t really ever observed my students outside of class. Working in the swamps, these kids are in their element. They know the land, and they have mastered their craft of the long hoe. As I watched them work I listened to the roll of consonants, the intonations and stresses of vowels; the language is beautiful. My students – these adept farm workers – who are often too shy to talk in class are now boisterous and full of life, animated and eloquent even (Sean, Journal, March 10th, 2013).

How could the school environment and English instruction render the most animated of students silent? The conversational energy that students radiated in the farm and town was what I wanted in the classroom. On a more critical level, my experience working with students in the swamps raised questions about the necessity of English and its purpose on a micro-rural scale. “Why am I here teaching these students a foreign language in an inaccessible part of Sierra Leone where farming is the primary source of income, and congruently successful in the absence of English” I asked myself (Sean, Journal, March 10th, 2013). Temne was their language, and it showed in their work ethic, their knowledge of farming, and in their idioms and proverbs. For a student, with all probability would reside, marry, parent, and die in the village, why learn a language with little application for daily life in an agrarian village? And more importantly for myself, why teach abstract grammar-concepts to students that use language in predominantly oral-only linguistic environments?

These questions coincided with reading African-languages proponent Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s potent piece titled *Something Torn and New: An African renaissance* (2009),
which had been given to me from a colleague Sierra Leone Peace Corps friend during the 2013 Easter break. To Thiong’o, the influence of imperial languages (the languages native to imperialistic countries: English, French, Portuguese, Japanese etc.) was much more than linguistic conventions, citing language as a hegemonic tool of colonial domination (Thiong’o, 2009; Phillipson, 1992). Thiong’o writes, “The head that carries memory is cut off from the body and either stored in the British Museum or buried upside down” (p. 6). His metaphoric picture paints English as a removable appendage of memory and knowledge that is forcibly sewn onto the collective African body. Thiongo’s ideas are not a far cry from Paulo Freire’s “Banking” concept, wherein students are empty repositories for teachers to empty knowledge (Freire, 1970). I mentioned my apprehensions to fellow Peace-Corps English teacher and friend Ben a month later. He synthesized my observations in one sentence: “English gives them chances in a system we created” (Sean, Journal, March 2013).

On re-examination, I chide myself for such a naive beginning to my teaching career. I misunderstood how students learn English, and more importantly, why they wanted to learn it. “Why do you go school, endure teachers beating you, and learn a foreign language,” I asked some of my local JSS III students in the fields one day. They responded, “to make money. To be a big man.” Language preference for my students was not based on expanding knowledge to think critically, but rather about economic opportunity (economic capital), social mobility (social capital), and prestige in a shifting gerontocratic society (symbolic capital). As they diminutively, yet collectively planted cassava tubers, their responses made more sense. Rural agricultural life was a road of
hardship and poverty, and the country’s capital Freetown, for all its potential dangers and pitfalls, looked much better than farming.

Figure 1

An example of the division between Western cultural capital and local cultural capital. I was teaching students about basic botany and agriculture for Integrated Science – a subject that Temne people have been practicing and perfecting for centuries. English provided little benefit to the daily life of a Temne farmer.

It was evident that students were not interested in speaking English the way I assumed they were. Like the students of 19th century protectorate schools, my students wanted access to the current wage-labor market through educational qualification. English was, and still is a gatekeeper to employment opportunity in the modernized sector of Sierra Leone, and the key was passing the BECE. Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is dependent upon linguistic capital as a product of cultural knowledge acquisition. English is a controlling form of capital in the Sierra Leonean wage-labor economy, which I failed to understand until later in my service, explicated by my PCV
colleague. School was the reproductive center of the western habitus. This understanding put me in a compromising dilemma as a language teacher and a Peace Corps volunteer. Teaching the BECE gave my students a fighting chance to pursue prestigious employment opportunity, yet language acquisition, critical thinking, and life skills – the reasons why I joined Peace Corps – would be marginalized.

Fellow Peace Corps Volunteer Ryan, a senior secondary math teacher at a prestigious urban technical high school fifteen miles south of Kakreugbah, understood and internalized the tension between perceived needs of the students to pass tests, and the pedagogical and curricular reforms he wanted to make as a Peace Corps teacher. His fundamental goal was for students to “at least consider another way of coming to a conclusion” (Ryan, Survey Results, 2013). He wrote however, “if I was too radical – that is, diverged too far from the syllabus, the students would not be open to the important ways in which learning was defined differently in my class” (Survey Results, 2013). He knew completing the syllabus translated into national test preparation – the one thing that mattered most for his students’ well being. Yet students lacked the necessary fundamental numerical skills to advance further in their studies. From his survey responses, Ryan was in the process of finding a balance between the two.

As a result of reading Ryan’s responses, I adopted his path, bridging basic literacy skills with the national syllabus’s test-specific content. Abridged curriculum grew out of my deepening understanding of the Temne language. I had set a personal goal to become conversationally fluent in the local language at the beginning of service. By the second year I had a basic command of the language and its syntax, which opened a door for my English teaching. English and Temne had surprisingly more in common grammatically
than I had previously thought. Both languages used subject and object pronouns, subject-verb-object typology, and progressive tense forms, all of which were part of the national syllabus for Language Arts. It was my intention to use Temne to teach English, and encourage students to write in both languages. Temne is still a predominantly oral language, which puts students behind when learning how to read and write a foreign language.

I started using more vocabulary from around the village. Other subjects like Business Studies and Home Economics used western-derived jargon ranging from technical: *secretarial, workflow, and macroeconomic* to culturally incompatible: *cousin, vacuum cleaner, and carpet* (all of which do not exist in the village milieu). Using vocabulary and Temne phrases that were uniquely a part of Kakreugbah village life, I encouraged student-driven learning that covered the syllabus.

As my knowledge of the Temne language and culture grew, so did the depth of my lesson plans. Vocabulary became a two-way learning process. I would spell ten Temne words that I had learned for the week, and students would spell the English equivalents that we had loosely translated together the week before. Using the International Phonetic Alaphabet, I would spell *A-k-u-m k-a-b-a-n-a-h,* and students would respond “*h-e-a-v-y r-a-i-n.*” Students formed their own understanding of English using concepts already understood in Temne, while strengthening basic phonic and literacy skills. This approach went deeper than literacy teaching however. Cooperative Temne/English instruction interwove habitus: School culture English and the students’ village experience. This was a step away from teaching English through school culture conundrums like using vacuum cleaners on dirt-floored huts (Sean, Reflections, 2014).
Teaching Temne in an English-only school system attempted to bring the school culture sphere and the community sphere closer together for student learning. On a methodological teaching level, it encouraged students to talk, share, and create using both written forms of English and Temne.

There was a problem with fusing English instruction with Temne, however. Government schools in Sierra Leone were mandated as English-only institutions, along with government, justice, law enforcement etc. The colonial shadow left an expected level of linguistic prestige in Sierra Leone’s institutional psyche. By using Temne in class, I flagrantly ignored the inherited institutional and historical dominance Sierra Leoneans placed on English. Students caught speaking vernacular (any language that was not English) without teacher permission were publically beaten, receiving a specific number of lashes with a bamboo cane to the lower back or bottom from multiple teachers. Depending on the frequency of use and brashness of the perpetrator, beatings could be quick, or a long, protracted event. Fortunately, students during my classes never received beatings, and I passively observed teachers flogging. Retrospectively, I wish I had been more oppositional about public flogging. Receiving a beating for vernacular infraction, in my mind, taught students to devalue their first languages, while elevating the prestige and symbolic capital of English (Sean, Reflections, 2015; Thiong’o, 1970).

Although I wrote two and half years worth of field notes, the topic of flogging received only one substantial journal entry. I dismissed the practice as “a piece of Sierra Leone that will fade from the inside” (Sean, Journal, May 2014). Where I instead took concern was the inconsistent language policy from primary to secondary schools that I believe caused vernacular infraction in the first place (May, 2014). Temne was the
unofficial language of instruction in primary school, exposing students to formal English for only a few minutes a day. However, for the handful of students who promoted to junior secondary school, the classroom became a foreign and punitive English-only environment. KJSS expectations for English-only instruction were high, but in reality, students left primary school with a below adequate command of English. “The level of students coming from primary school is appalling. Those who can form basic sentences relapse into Krio or Temne when they exhaust their limited vocabulary and grammar forms. The remaining majority sits quietly” (Sean, Journal, October 23, 2013).

According to language policy researcher Gibson Ferguson (2010), rural Sierra Leone was not alone in underperforming English primary schools. He noted similar pedagogical issues of local language dependency in early education working abrasively against the socio-economic prestige of English in junior secondary and senior secondary schools (p. 152).

My alternative teaching methods attempted to use students’ knowledge of Temne to teach English constructively, but constructive language teaching did not interest students and teachers. Ferguson (2010) writes, “Given the present economic order, English in Africa still leads to more attractive, better paying modern sector jobs,” but he omits how a student learns English. English-only instruction fortified by the national syllabus did not make pedagogical sense in the context of illiterate rural Sierra Leone (p. 155). “The ideas that I thought were correct were in fact very impractical in Salone. Communicative authentic education, discovery learning, self-expression; the methods of the States don’t blend with the system here” (Sean, Journal, February 10th, 2014). Socio-political interests shared among rural and urban parties marginalized educational
considerations such as dual-language instruction and basic literacy skills. The forms of capital were not accumulated through language fluency and production like my master’s teacher training had intended.

Administrative Conflicts

The overwhelmingly male Sierra Leonean faculty at my school and I held conflicting ideologies over the purposes of education and pedagogical choices. Beyond the intrinsic pull of travel and international experience, I had joined Peace Corps specifically to teach language. The altruistic, volunteer-aspect of service strengthened my belief that universal literacy and education was accomplished through moral dedication and commitment. I considered myself a “mentor unconcerned with salary; a positive role-model, allowing my students to find themselves” (Sean, Journal, July 17th, 2012). I speak for myself, however, as a Peace Corps volunteer who self-identified as an English educator. Other volunteers found themselves in Sierra Leone for many different reasons, just as not every Sierra Leone teacher taught for purely economic purposes. From my perspective as a Peace Corps teacher in rural Sierra Leone, the majority of teachers at KJSS contrastingly did teach for financial stability and social mobility.

The value of the collectivist extended family in rural Sierra Leone permeated the school staff environment, complicating my understanding of professional relationships and administrative efficiency. The terms “professional relationships” and “administrative efficiency” were never mentioned in Kakreugbah. They are values of the workplace that I carried with me from the United States, where work relationships follow different conventions than personal. In Kakreugbah, a professional workplace understood from an
American definition did not exist (Sean, Reflections, April 2015). In this regard, the structure of relationships between the village and school were seamless.

Figure 2

A picture taken of the KJSS Staff at the beginning of my second year of teaching (2013). Back left is Principal Pa Kamara. The man in the middle and the woman to the left were Sierra Leone youth volunteers with the international organization Restless Development. The remaining faculty comprised community teachers.

Our principal, Mr. Kamara was referred to as “Pa” by staff, an honorific title for a male elder in Sierra Leonean society. In return, we staff were often addressed as Pa Kamara’s “pikin dem,” or “children.” KJSS staff was much less a faculty than a family, parented under Pa Kamara’s gerontocracy. Teachers supported one another like siblings, using staff meetings as platforms for personal grievances mediated by Pa Kamara. Like the hierarchy of brothers in a family, I had a favorable position with our principal. This was primarily because of my position as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and consequentially my academic qualifications. The ubiquitous Bachelor of Arts degree in the United States
was a rare credential among Sierra Leone professionals. Academically, I was more
credentialed than my elder, Pa Kamara, yet I was 30 years younger.

In village affairs, age denoted wisdom, power, and prestige (Fyfe, 1962; Sumner,
1963; Bolten, 2012). In school however, western constructs of credentials, Bachelor’s
and master’s degrees supplanted age as a valid expression of authority and power.
Because of this, I had considerable influence in administrative decision-making, which
other teachers did not enjoy. This uncharacteristic differential in power, more
importantly, was the first sign of a conflicting habitus, which undercut the gerontocratic
kinship of the rural. My service goal of “specifically teaching English” had become
apportioned between the classroom and administrative work.

I pressed Pa Kamara for policy changes that directly affected teacher’s roles and
responsibilities in the first year of teaching. I was convinced that poor teacher conduct
debilitated student performance and academic success (Sean, Journal, January 18th,
2013). Reflecting on my the first year of teaching during the summer break, I wrote, “It
was the attitudes of teachers – the incompetence, selfishness and greed – that made my
blood boil. They are filling a financial void with a job they could care less about” (Sean,
Journal, September 23rd, 2013). These feelings were born from acutely divergent spheres.
Incompetence and greed were the antonyms of competence and generosity –
characteristics that I used to describe my rationale for serving in Peace Corps. Upon
reflection, the sharp criticism of the September 23rd entry reveals the intense pressure I
placed on teachers to metamorphose into better teachers. A better teacher was one that
embodied the moral and ethical values in line with my own (Sean, Reflections, 2015). I
was holding teachers to a standard established from the habitus I embodied, and used the prestige of Peace Corps and influence with Pa Kamara to enforce those changes.

Self-advocated changes in administrative policy stemmed from teacher behavior that I observed and worked alongside for the duration of my service. My resolve for administrative change came from the issues of money and compensation. Of the 138 journal entries written over my Peace Corps experience, 20 entries focused substantially on KJSS teaching faculty. 14 of the 20 entries describing faculty made reference to embezzlement, bribery, or corruption once or more. The following section takes a closer look into faculty, administration and the implications of transformative school policy targeting money.

Money Schemes

Various Sierra Leonean professionals would reiterate during my service, “School is a revolving door,” in regards to the low retention rates of teachers looking for better jobs in the limited wage-labor market. Matsumoto (2011) noted a similar phrase used by Sierra Leoneans, referring to “classroom teaching as a waiting room,” a launch pad to better, more prestigious jobs (p. 137). “Better jobs” according to my colleagues were in the mining and NGO sectors, paying upwards of $230 a month; a noticeable increase from the approximate $15 a month as a community teacher. The meager community teacher income was not enough to purchase one bag of rice ($17.50) – a bag of rice was a unit of commerce, considered the monthly staple of a family’s diet. Community teachers were essentially volunteers, poorly compensated from the community, and outside the jurisdiction of the principal. Their status, or lack of status with the government, distinguished a “community teacher” from a “schoolteacher,” although their
responsibilities and workload were equal. They taught in hopes that next academic year they “go get pin numba.” That is, they are placed on salaried payroll positions with the government. Due to policies enacted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Sierra Leone government salaried a proportionately small number of teachers per year, despite the large number of teachers trained and certified from teaching universities (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 127). Discussion of pin numbers and salaried positions consumed the majority of staff room discussion throughout my two years teaching.

The community teacher stipend was, as a community board member articulated, “a small encouragement” to keep teaching and applying for full-time employment (Sean, Journal, March 1st, 2013). “Small encouragements” did not put food on the table, but merely supplemented other forms of income. Most teachers found themselves working in the classroom in the morning, and the farms in the afternoon, with the exception of a few teachers selling market items or driving motorcycle taxis whenever possible. While in school, teachers used methods to alleviate financial stresses. These methods, what I referred to as “money schemes” in my Journal, were a way of increasing income during school hours (Sean, Journal, March 7th, 2013). Observed money schemes were as simple as requiring students to bring the equivalent of an American dollar every Friday under the ruse of “school fees,” to altering test scores for substantial sums of money. Teachers would only grade homework if paid for by the student. Arbitrary fines were levied on students for disruption, improper school uniform, or tardiness.

The most surreptitious method of supplementing teacher income was during tests. Printers and copiers were non-existent in rural schools so tests were written on chalkboards. Students would enter class with only a pen and a piece of paper, copying the
questions from the blackboard to the page. Teachers required students to use blank printer paper – paper that only teachers had access to – selling sheets for ten times the price. If students refused to purchase the specific paper, they would receive a heavy point deduction on their final score. This method of money collection, in addition to separate fees for grading and viewing the test results, supplemented teacher incomes in ways that I found unfair and non-meritocratic. Grades were dependent upon gifts and bribes, not evidence-based evaluation.

I had brashly used the term “exhortation” in staff meetings during my first year of teaching. I was appalled at the flagrant economic maltreatment of students who bore the heaviest burden for teachers’ limited incomes. Teaching in a system that not only put the student second, but alleviated bureaucratic issues using students’ pockets demoralized and deflated my goals as a Peace Corps Volunteer, change agent, and effective language teacher. It also created a widening void between me and the other staff. I vocally advocated for changes in teacher conduct, which was not well received. I wrote,

I am scared I’m burning bridges with some of the teachers. As if I’m usurping their influence and sway with Pa Kamara. I believe half the policies now in place are due to my presence in the school environment (Sean, Journal, January 15th, 2013)

It was easier for me, however, than colleagues to declare a hard stance on bribery and petty extortion when I received a consistent, above-average monthly stipend from Peace Corps (Sean, Reflections, 2015). I occupied a unique position as both an influential voice in school politics and as a community stakeholder as a ceremonial chief, yet went unbounded by the constraints of the rural habitus of Kakreugbah. I could default on my American proclivities, bounded by the western habitus when confronted with obstacles like bribery or extortion common among teachers. I had the economic security of the
United States government along with the social prestige of the West African village. The teachers at my school did not. They were required to navigate the shifting wage-labor market and the social obligations of the rural habitus simultaneously without institutional support. More importantly, the majority of my colleagues were bachelors. A bachelor had little workable capital in a polygamous community wherein arable land equated wealth and children were financial assets. Half of the KJSS staff found themselves in this position – a unique economic and symbolic crossroads between the western and rural habitus.

Sierra Leone’s dire employment and financial realities were representative of the realities facing KJSS community teachers. Stories of poverty, malnourishment, and unemployment were ubiquitous themes of local Kakreugbah narratives. My friend and colleague, Foday A. Bangura’s story was no different (his name has been changed for confidentially). Foday was a single Temne man from a large highway town south of Kakreugbah. He had no children and his only connection to the school was our principal – his genetic uncle – whom he referred to as “Pa.” He lived in a small room attached to a larger dirt brick house. Foday had a small cassava farm that was in walking distance to the village, but adjacent to the main road. This was undesirable because the road’s proximity made his harvest susceptible to grasshoppers and thieves. In addition, his farm’s higher topography prevented rice cultivation. Without access to watery swamps for transplanting, most elevated farms strayed away from growing the water-dependent crop. Having no land-holding kinship in Kakreugbah to inherit or purchase land from forced Foday to buy bags of rice instead of grow them. This was an expensive alternative when on a community teacher budget.
Foday taught various classes and subjects, and was known for accepting bribes from students, manipulating grades to pass students, and permitting cheating on tests. His actions were deliberate. My distilled field notes detailing Foday’s testimony at a staff meeting reveal some of his motivations. Monthly community teacher stipends were generated from a set percentage of the total collected school fees. From a community teacher’s perspective, it was advantageous to pass students, because a larger student population directly correlated to a larger stipend. This became especially pressing when teachers’ farms were under-producing like Foday’s. Additionally, according to Foday and other teachers, once a student left school because of failing grades, they would “sit down idle.” Sitting idle was a Krio term used to describe laziness and unproductivity; an offensive expression often directed at youth whom had left school. Idleness in Sierra Leone equated “evil business,” such as stealing, drug-use, or prostitution. By passing a student, Foday was rescuing them from ‘idly sitting down,’ despite their inadequate performance on assessments. These were not American teachers in American classrooms. They were Sierra Leonean men operating under very different cultural, social, and economic conditions that ebbed and flowed depending on which habitus they found themselves.

As my understanding of teacher realities, school policy, and cultural practices expanded, thoughts about my colleagues’ actions started to shift. What role do I find myself playing as a Peace Corps teacher in this faculty family, and as an influential voice in teachers’ immediate financial futures? How do I begin to retrace my moral spectrum – the embodied, misrecognized values constituting habitus? Especially when failing a student in school increased their chances of early marriage in the village, and dissuaded
parents to continue gambling on their children’s unknown and relatively expensive academic futures. I wrote, “What I saw my first year were greedy, corrupt men using a broken, unregulated system to extort money for personal benefit. My outlook has changed. What I see now is survival – adaptation to a system that has historically neglected teachers and students alike” (Sean, Journal, December 5th, 2013).

During the school break (equivalent to Summer break in the United States), my mother sent me a dated, but still relevant article about the cultural shifts in Sierra Leone due to western education. Caroline Bledsoe’s (1992) ethnographic work articulated many of the same socio-cultural phenomena I was experiencing in Kakreugbah. Her 14-month stay in a Sierra Leonean school was similar to my own experience, and made her narrative more palpable. It also expanded my conceptual scope to think critically about the first year of teaching in the context of a global Sierra Leone – the nation as a member of the global economy and conversation.

It marked my withdrawal against manipulative money practices as my understanding of the complexities of village life and various forms of capital-accumulation expanded. The tone in my Journal shifted notably at the beginning of the second school year. I wrote,

The teachers aren’t neglecting their civic responsibilities as educators, but rather responding to their circumstances. No salary. No resources. No incentives. Nothing. In that case, what are the civic responsibilities of a person who literally volunteers his or her time to a school when they could be farming or pursuing other money-making ventures? I teach because I can afford to take two years of my life to make a small amount of money and gain a handful of international experience. What is more honorable? The fact these teachers are working in a village that most Sierra Leonean teachers aren’t, or choose not to go to, calls into question the virtue and morality of my teaching purposes. (Sean, Journal, September 23rd, 2013)
For the first time, I started to question my moral intentions as a change agent in the localized context of Kakreugbah. It is surprising that the impetus for self-critique occur after I expanded my focus of educational issues to the national arena. I approached Kakreugbah and its teachers as a single village insulated from the country’s greater systematic problems. Not until I understood the village and its teachers in the larger socio-political network could I start to understand my role as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Bledsoe’s (1992) article not only conceptually expanded the scope of my research from Kakregubah to international Sierra Leone; it also uncovered a key cultural practice involving student-learning outcomes. Bledsoe reported students actively searching for what Sierra Leoneans called “blessing.” For a student’s learning to transpire, that is, acquire academic qualifications, students had to show appreciation and indebtedness to their supporters “through labor, remittances, and unquestioning loyalty,” and in return, gained their blessing (Bledsoe, 1992, p. 192). Gerontocratic social systems in KJSS and the village were built around this fundamental transaction of blessing. Among a student’s living and dead supporters (ancestral worship is a fundamental belief of West African cosmology; refer to Kopytoff, 1971), teachers were intimately involved.

I had misunderstood students paying bribes as the fraudulent invention of teachers, not as a cultural phenomenon financially benefitting teachers and students. My moral underpinnings, orientation toward improvement as a western educator, and position as a Peace Corps Volunteer blinded me from the influences of the rural and school culture spheres. Teacher behaviors that I attempted to change were triggered and validated by the rural habitus of Kakreugbah, and were carried out in school. I wrote in my journal that vocalizing perceived teacher transgressions during my first year “got me
nothing except frustration, a feeling of uselessness, and defeat” (Sean, Journal, Dec 5th, 2013). I was alienating myself not just from teaching colleagues, but also from a fundamental cultural practice that was integral to student success in school.

I found myself caught between my students and the Sierra Leonean faculty that operated on this principle of eldership gift giving in return for a teacher’s blessing. Only a handful of students possessed an adequate level of English, Math, Science, and Social studies to promote based on merit and performance alone. Yet, failing 85% of my students was out of the question for risk of encouraging student idleness. The administrative policies I advocated for – curbing money scheme – were in fact curbing student promotion and success. The reciprocity of grades for remittances was a symbiotic partnership.

I could not blame my teaching colleagues for their monetary pursuits, and could not blame students for paying them (Sean, Reflections, August, 2014). I wrote, “By removing myself from the inner sphere of school politics, I have more time and energy to dedicate toward my students” (Sean, Journal, December 5th, 2013). I made compromises such as promoting students that did not statistically pass, but came to school everyday; or advocating for girls who fell well below the passing mark, but showed promise in specific subjects. This was my way of making changes where I had influence; outside of the administrative position. Passing a student, I came to realize, had much more positive effect than remaining firm about student merit, or teacher ethics (Sean, Journal, April 25th, 2014). More importantly, working within the system of blessing, I was working within the realities of the rural and school spheres, not outside of them like my first year.
After two years, tensions generated from the ebb and flow of the three spheres became perceptible. They overlapped in clear ways, but were also divorced in others. English-only language instruction, classroom organization, and outdated European curriculum were just a few of the cosmetic differences between all three. A teacher supplementing wage-labor incomes through blessing, however, was an example of the unique overlap of rural and school culture spheres working in tandem against my own habitus. Misrecognized assumptions of habitus were only part of the equation. My administrative position and influence left me imperceptive to school sphere and rural sphere forces, exacerbating differences between faculty and myself.

Interestingly, my position as an administrator lasted because faculty and community members believed I was most capable of administrating based on my academic qualification and western background. Upon reflection, faculty and community perceptions about my ability to administer a Sierra Leonean school demonstrated the estranged ownership that Sierra Leoneans had with their educational system (Sean, Reflections, 2016). I discussed at the end of my service the divergent school and community spheres, writing

> When I am in the community, I’m 100% in tune with the social and cultural currents running against my own American ones. And I accept it. I acknowledge that I am a stranger, and highly inexperienced. But when I’m in school I reverse roles, and the teachers and principal view me as an expert comfortably in-sync with the classroom and students. Why? Are they under the impression this school and the knowledge it teaches is familiar to me?” (Sean, Journal, June 21st, 2014)

Yet this relatively new school was surrounded by hundreds of years of history, language, and tradition that I knew very little about. Was this detachment between community and school corroborative of Ngugi Wa Thiango’s metaphor of the replaced heads of local Africans with that of Black Englishmen?
Community Conflicts

Of the three emergent conflict areas during open and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), community conflicts were most perceptible (Sean, Reflections, 2015). To be expected, cosmetic cultural and linguistic differences unfamiliar from my own were abrasively discernable right off the plane. Overstimulation and initial culture shock produced convoluted notes and conjecture that made for entertaining retrospective reading later in service. Not until I arrived in Kakreugbah after three months of training did differences between school culture and rural culture became apparent. Once I began
to articulate relationships between the two spheres, I began to better triangulate where I stood as an American teacher and Peace Corps volunteer.

Parents and elders would tell me how students needed a “book education,” (called “book business” by locals) referring to the literate aspect of school, and how much Sierra Leone valued the educational opportunities for their children. Like the Mende parents of early 20th century British protectorate, parents today correctly perceived “book business” as opening economic doors into Sierra Leone’s wage-labor economy (Corby, 1990; Sean, Reflections, 2015). Yet, the positive comments from KJSS parents were not substantiated with tangible support in their children’s schooling (Sean, Journal, June 21st, 2014).

Parental inaction was not an isolated observation in Kakreugbah however. Six of the thirteen surveyed Peace Corps Volunteers noted discrepancies between what parents/community members said, and what they did (Survey Results, 2013). Volunteer John mentioned, “If you try to talk to [Sierra Leoneans] about school issues, everyone will tell you they agree with you, but will continue the same practices” (Survey Results, 2013). Another volunteer wrote Sierra Leoneans were quick to respond with answers they thought westerners wanted to hear, “repeating rhetoric of NGOs, international policies, and children’s rights acts” (Survey Results, 2013).

Repeating rhetoric, as I experienced, was heightened after national or international NGOs conducted behavior-change trainings in village (Sean, Journal, April 15th, 2014). Parroting the training’s key points back to NGO trainers was rewarded with desperately needed food or money, which I later viewed as analogous to my students “learning” English: parroting language for a mandatory qualification, rather than linguistic fluency and critical thinking (Sean, Journal, April 15th, 2014).
The survey responses authenticated my early journal writings in Kakreugbah, and strengthened my understanding that school and community were irrevocably polarized (Sean, Journal, March 21st, 2013). Hypocritical parent testimony and action made a tangible argument. After collecting survey responses, a Peace Corps Volunteer referred me to anthropologist Catherine Bolten’s (2012a.) work analyzing Sierra Leonean relationships. Early in her book she identified parent-hesitations about sending students to school in nearby Temne city, Makeni. Her insights brought a new socio-economic perspective to my analysis. She reported, “Education was an uncomfortable fit for Makeni residents because it required long-term sacrifices of both money and manpower that could otherwise be used in business to support families” (Bolten, 2012a., p. 43).

Bolten emphasized that a child’s value in manpower should not be overlooked. Their physical and economic contributions to the household were enormous, which were apprehensively sacrificed along with a relatively substantial amount of money for school-related fees. More secure forms of acquiring social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital were obtained through traditional avenues of rural society: secret societies, farming, marriage and small business (Sean, Journal, March 21st, 2013; Survey Responses, 2013).

In addition to families economic roots in the rural village, I believed parents’ inability to speak English was also responsible for their withdrawn behavior in school affairs (Sean, Journal, May 2014). Most of my students’ parents did not speak English, and were illiterate in the other 2-3 languages they spoke fluently. The fathers I talked with had a better command of Arabic than English because of the strong influence of the Islamic faith. The power and prestige that the Temne language gave parents in the village
did not translate into power and prestige in school. Parents and community members were fundamentally at odds with the school administration and environment, and it manifested in parent absenteeism (Sean, Reflections, 2015).

Peace Corps volunteer Ben noticed this problem also, but in result of a different catalyst. He wrote, “most parents observe their children’s level of education surpassing their own, which results in [parent] complacency” (Survey questions, 2013). Bolten (2012b.) also suggested rural students looking for access to capital turned to education, and in doing so, eroded the gerontocratic eldership parents held in village life.

The two disparate habitus of linguistic and cultural capital disenfranchised parents in the rural culture sphere from their children in the school culture sphere. Educational literature and life experience told me learning took place predominantly outside of the classroom (Dewey, 1938; Kheng, 2011). In the Kakreugbah home, however parents had no participatory or regulatory stake in their children’s school life. Reading report cards, for instance, was an unrealistic task for many. Those courageous enough would turn to me with questions during CTA meetings. Waving a child’s report card in the air, a mother would ask me, “What does this mean Mr. Stephens? Did she pass?” I attempted to explain her child’s strengths, skill set, and areas of improvement, but my explanations were quickly dismissed. Parents pointed to the numeric semester grade circled in red ink, prompting a simple answer: “pass, o no pass?!” These moments with parents only reaffirmed my concern that school was not intended to teach critical thinking and literacy, but to satisfy gatekeeping requirements for new wage-labor jobs (Sean, Journal, September 1st, 2013).
As stated above, secret societies generated forms of capital that parents valued and had access to through initiation, and they urged their children to do the same. The value of secret society initiation is still instrumental for the success of the individual in the village. Surveyed PCV John experienced the same cultural practice in his placement, writing, “Secret society initiations always come first before book business, and I think that is because people still truly believe that secret societies are more important than school” (Survey Results, 2013).

I had no qualms over students initiating into secret societies, until my students started missing long durations of school (Sean, Journal, November 14th, 2012). Secret society initiation and the government school year overlapped creating problems for all participating parties. Men’s secret society initiations were often short, however they could last for a few months to years. Women’s initiations were a protracted process, often taking weeks or months to complete the full cycle of ceremonies, rituals, and dances. This became problematic during test months where one of three summative tests determined the student’s passing grade for the year. Already at risk for failing school due to an array of setbacks, girls compounded their chances by starting initiation during the school semester. This community and school conflict took shape in the form my student, M’Balu.

M’balu was the top female student, and third overall in class standings in my JSS II class. She showed comparatively strong command of English, along with concepts in science, math, and social studies. She was the JSS II class prefect, and a regular member of a local NGO’s drama and youth club. She was, above all, dedicated to school. With a month left before the break, M’Balu told me she was leaving for an undisclosed amount
of time. I was not sure what this meant, as students left school regularly. I asked her mother later that evening about M’Balu’s departure, and explained to her the consequences that would accrue for her semester test scores and aggregated yearly grade. Her mother responded flately, “M’Balu get fo go na sacred bush,” the site of secret society initiation.

To complicate matters, M’Balu was Limba, a marginalized, but visible tribe found throughout Temne country. Her parents felt it necessary to send her to traditionally Limba country where proper Limba rituals could be performed. I knew if she left for secret society initiation, she would not be back for months, putting her behind in school, and forfeiting her scholarship with a national NGO. The day of departure I went to her parents’ hut, voiced my concern, listed off all the logical reasons for staying, and even offered to pay her next year’s school fees if they postponed the initiation until summer break. She left later that day and did not return until mid-break (Sean, Journal, March 19th, 2013).

My experience with M’Balu was the apex of my frustration with problems between school and community (Sean, Journals, March 21st, 2013). This was a collision of agents representing and advocating their separate habitus. At the time, I could not articulate why I felt so strongly about keeping M’Balu in school, just as I assume her parents could not articulate why they felt so strongly about initiation. I wrote in my journals the night of her departure,

[M’Balu’s parents] are dragging their genius daughter from school to the bush for lessons that promote status quo and gender inferiority. They have no idea how much potential she has. None. Wasted school fees, wasted academic year, wasted scholarship. Ahh!” (Sean, Journal, March 19th, 2013)
In retrospect, it is clear how certain I was that M’Balù’s future was in education, confirming my assumption that western-styled education was necessary for a Sierra Leone student’s success. From my perspective, she had left a schoolgirl, top of her class, and returned a failed 7th grader destined for another 7th grade year. I failed to understand and interpret the Sierra Leonean perspective: she left a girl and returned a woman, socially acculturated and marriage-ready. School was a gamble, but society initiation was not. It made sense parents prioritized education second when secret societies had such profound meaning and immediate capital in the rural habitus (Sean, Reflection, December, 2015).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

From 1991 to 2002 Sierra Leone’s civil war displaced a large portion of civilians, which resulted in a significant population of uneducated youth. The effects of war had eroded political and economic development, along with creating an intellectual vacuum from diasporic emigration. International and humanitarian organizations responded to Sierra Leone with aid policies and support, including educational outreach under the Education For All (EFA) initiative (UNESCO, 2016) and the Millennial Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, General Assembly, 2000). Education was seen as an effective remedy for post-conflict damage, helping to resolve and unify a war-torn country (Davies, 2004; Matsumoto, 2011). From Shepler’s (2003) perspective, education was “a universally prescribed medicine” for any problem with youth, administered as a fix-all solution (p. 61). After 14 years, the post-conflict designation for the country has slowly drifted toward self-sufficiency, but education is still a notably underperforming sector in Sierra Leone (United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

Peace Corps Sierra Leone reopened in 2010 by request of the Sierra Leonean government. My Peace Corps volunteer cohort departed the United States in 2012, and were assigned to teach math, science and English in secondary institutions around the country. Peace Corps was a small piece of the international EFA and Millennial Development Goal (MDG) campaign, designed to raise the standard of living in underperforming countries. I was assigned to a small village school, staffed by
approximately 6 teachers that serviced 130 students. It did not take long to experience fundamental social and pedagogical issues between students, school administration, Kakreugbah village, and myself. Ten months into my teaching service, prompted by my observations of conflicting spheres of habitus, I began to investigate literature on Sierra Leone’s complex relationship between education and the country’s socio-cultural traditions (Sumner, 1963; Corby, 1990; Bledsoe, 1992; Matsumoto, 2011; Bolten, 2012).

This self-study examined the conflicts between western-styled education and the cultural and social traditions of Sierra Leone from the classroom teacher’s perspective. Adhering to the tenets of self-study (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004), I used myself as the subject of research to better improve my teaching practice; scrutinizing both the context of Sierra Leone’s educational realities, and the influence of my position as an educational agent and Peace Corps volunteer. Results from the coding process elucidated cultural, administrative, and pedagogical obstacles I encountered and actively participated in as a teacher at Kakreugbah Junior Secondary School (KJSS). The retrospective nature of this study provided me with a country-specific body of findings that prepares me for more effective teaching experiences in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts.

This study’s use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) allowed the data to inform the research question. After approximately ten months spent recording and reviewing data during my Peace Corps service, literature discussing the conflicts between Sierra Leonean social institutions and western-styled education became relevant (Sumner, 1963; Corby, 1990; Bledsoe, 1992; Shepler, 2003; Matsumoto 2011; Bolten, 2012). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1980; 1983) theories on habitus and the forms of capital constructed
my theoretical framework only after I had returned from Sierra Leone. Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* is potent when discussing education because of its ability to analyze power in development and social change processes (Navarro, 2006).

The constant comparative coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) produced many interesting relationships between data. I observed the school, the community and myself as having distinct capacities to think, feel, and act in specific ways, in accordance with Bourdieu’s (1983) theory of habitus. I was not aware of how complex or deep the contradictions were between Sierra Leone’s daily culture and the western-styled school system. I attempted to transform students through a foreign system built on a scholastic meritocracy that was never fully accepted by my community. My perceived ownership and command of Sierra Leone’s English and school system was reinforced by the cosmetic similarities between American and Sierra Leone classrooms. That shifted as I reflected upon and analyzed the continual conflicts I encountered in the classroom and village.

Contemporary educators (at one time, myself included) and policy-makers in post-colonial countries still adhere to the transformative power of western “civilized” knowledge, transcribed into standardized school curriculum (Bledsoe, 1992). Through the analysis of my journals, I have to agree with Bledsoe. I believed early in my service that western-styled English education was enough to create social, technological, and economic development in Sierra Leone, regardless of social context and student background (Bledsoe, 1992; Matsumoto, 2011). Interestingly, the change-oriented ideas found in my field notes and journals, and supported by other volunteers’ responses are strikingly identical to the moral certainties and reformist intentions of 18th century
missionaries (Bledsoe, 1992, p. 189). The goals of foreign teachers throughout Sierra Leone’s history have not fundamentally changed, staying true to transformative intentions brought about by education. Despite my positive attitude, I subconsciously viewed Sierra Leone through a deficit lens, and in desperate need of radical change toward a form more akin to my own experience of schooling in Northern California. However, I now realize through critical self-reflection, the goals and realities of western education are shaped from the social and cultural contexts of school environment, community, and students. What constitutes knowledge is equally as important as how one accesses and controls it.

An analysis of my collective data suggests that I believed English education would translate into the critical thinking skills necessary to bring about social, economic, and behavior change. Upon reflection, I misunderstood how students in Sierra Leone learn English, and more importantly, why they wanted to learn English. Language preference for my students was not based on expanding knowledge to think critically, but rather about economic opportunity, social mobility, and prestige in a shifting gerontocratic society. Students growing up in the agrarian Sierra Leonean lifestyle lived in a subsistence economy, which put into context a student’s answer to my question, “Why go to school?” He, like many others, responded, “to find a job and make plenty of money.” Passing tests for academic qualification, not critical thinking and language fluency, translated into economic relief for Sierra Leonean families and students.

Students’ preference for passing tests rather than practicing language fluency and critical thinking greatly reoriented my teaching pedagogy. My Master’s in Teaching International Languages training advocated for communicative language approaches,
which did not fit my students’ English language abilities or goals. KJSS expectations for English-only instruction were high, but in reality, students left primary school with a below adequate command of English. I began using Temne to clarify and supplement English lessons in class, which provoked faculty reaction. From my understanding, however, interweaving Temne and grammar-oriented English goals resulted in higher student participation and student-directed learning, and brought the school sphere and the community sphere closer together. Compromising between communicative language approaches and rote-memorization methodology also satisfied both the perceived success of my students, and my self-efficacy as a teacher.

My administrative position resulted in unintended consequences for my students and colleagues. My influence with the school principal gave me power to expedite changes I considered necessary, such as improved teaching practices, disciplinary policies, and methods of assessment. However, I did so without understanding the full implications of my actions. My findings revealed that curbing teachers’ use of money schemes, for example, lowered students’ pass rates, and distanced me from staff. The intense pressure I placed on teachers to metamorphose into better teachers stemmed from my moral and ethical values embodied in habitus. I used the prestige of Peace Corps and influence with Principal Kamara to ineffectively imprint those values upon KJSS teachers.

Stakeholders and parents in Kakreugbah and other Peace Corps villages expressed the importance of school learning for their children’s success, yet no tangible parental support was observed. Through the exploration of literature (Little, 1949; Jedrej, 1976), I began to understand parents’ and community members’ apprehension toward the school’s
western-styled education. Predating colonial schools by hundreds of years, traditional secret societies were the social and cultural cornerstones in Temne communities that Kakreugbah parents prioritized and valued.

Despite the social and cultural importance the literature placed in secret societies, I found Kakreugbah’s societies irrelevant and distracting to my students’ schoolwork. Additionally, I understood parent investment in secret societies – and divestment in school – as a limiting factor in students’ educational success. After losing my best female student to secret society initiation, however, I began to reevaluate why parents placed so much importance in initiation rituals. Illiterate and non-English speaking parents were naturally disenfranchised from transcribed English knowledge and politics, which I misinterpreted as disinterest. It made sense that disenfranchised parents were distant from school affairs when secret societies created such profound meaning and capital in the rural habitus.

Recommendations

The nature of self-study research is to improve practice through reflective analysis of self. It seems inappropriate to make recommendations for future practitioners when the findings are deliberately individual. However, this self-study revealed lessons that could benefit new teachers, specifically education Peace Corps volunteers beginning to teach in places vastly different from their own. The qualitative findings in this self-study can also inform teachers making transitional shifts in location such as from rural to inner city, or shifts in student demographics, like a culturally homogenized population to a diverse one.

A substantial portion of my classroom experience in Kakreugbah was obstructed by frustration and conflict. I feel that I exploited KJSS students at the expense of my own
personal growth as an international English teacher. My students were test subjects as I experimented with radical pedagogical adjustments, administrative changes made from moral disagreements, and a disenfranchised parent population. These realizations were gleaned through retrospective analysis, but also informed by a review of literature on sociological theory, Sierra Leone educational history, and anthropological narrative after my Peace Corps service. In hindsight, I should have conducted this type of reading before leaving for Sierra Leone. Knowledge of well-documented anthropological insights such as blessing and secret society initiation could have prevented many divisive interactions between Sierra Leoneans and myself. Before leaving for another international teaching appointment, a review of country-specific literature on the social, cultural, and educational realities is requisite.

From an administrative standpoint, giving prospective teachers the opportunity to conduct an extensive review of literature on the country of employment, student population, and cultural and social underpinnings would provide a holistic reality of classroom teaching. Providing pragmatic educational theories also, such as Bourdieu’s (1980) habitus, would assist teachers in articulating their own unrecognized assumptions, teaching habits, and facts dismissed as “common-sense,” establishing a personal socio-cultural baseline to engage students, parents and community from different backgrounds. The long-term goal would be to proactively address socio-cultural and pedagogical conflicts, rather than aimlessly triage problems in the moment as I did early in my service.

My best teaching occurred when I attempted to bring all three spheres of influence into the classroom. Lessons and lesson concepts that seemed successful were
those, for example, that integrated language from the rural community sphere (Temne),
methods from the school sphere (memorization), and content from my background as an
educated American teacher (English grammar). When the three spheres of influence were
in resonance, teaching felt natural and fluid. This is not far from what Dewey (1938)
posed almost 80 years ago. Learning is the process of effectively connecting learners’
past experiences to new ones. Western-styled schooling at KJSS marginalized student
experiences from daily rural life at the expense of European curriculum, and severed
students’ linguistic experience from school entirely. Finding ways of identifying and
integrating all spheres of influence and experience in the classroom is a new goal to
improve my international teaching practice.

Concluding Remarks

Had I gone to Sierra Leone as a tourist with no pre-selected agenda, I would have
resembled more of a cultural sponge – absorbing what language, customs, and routines I
came into contact with, rather than myopically diagnosing educational issues that needed
changing. My position in Peace Corps preordained me a change agent, and labeled me a
humanitarian champion in the eyes of Sierra Leoneans. With such a rich history of Peace
Corps in Sierra Leone dating back to 1962, expectations on both my part and on host-
country nationals were historically cemented. I jumped head first into teaching with goals
generated from an altruistic, but naïve heart – a heart, perhaps unintentionally cultivated
by the progressive and change-oriented psyche of Peace Corps. Investigation through
self-study of one’s assumptions as a teacher are just as important as understanding the
implications of one’s position. During my service I did not consider the influence of my
position as a Peace Corps volunteer a factor for successful teaching, however self-
reflective analysis suggested something different.

The dual-nature of my Peace Corps teaching experience – simultaneously
completing graduate school while serving 27 months in Peace Corps – radically shifted
the way I thought about teaching, language, and travel. Education became politicized,
language became power, and travel became privilege as I unpacked a wide-breadth of
educational, sociological, and anthropological literature for this thesis. The Peace Corps
experience, consequently, provided an invaluable context to test my ideas and lessons
learned from my teacher training. What started as a trip to Sierra Leone to teach English,
evolved into a life lesson on human empathy. Teaching was only part of it. Concepts such
as friendship, individuality, and logic that I had previously considered universal, were in
fact not universals. What seemed embarrassingly logical to me was far removed from the
rationale mind of a Sierra Leonean. Individuality, for instance, clashed roughly with the
collective social fabric of Kakreugbah. Life lessons on empathy directly affected the way
I conducted myself as a teacher at the end of my service. As a teacher, I imparted more
than knowledge. I unknowingly transmitted embodied values and beliefs unique to my
American habitus. I taught without considering that my students entered school with
fundamentally different, yet equally relevant beliefs about education, English and
learning. If anything, exposing my deep-seated assumptions through this thesis has given
me greater self-awareness of my privilege as an American, an in doing so, made me a
more empathetic teacher.
REFERENCES
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Translated by Richard Nice. Retrieved from:


