Title

Achievement Oriented: Developing Positive Academic Identities for Girl Students at an Urban School in Ghana

Abstract

The link between non-cognitive skills and achievement is well established. There is much less evidence on how these skills are developed and transmitted to students, especially as it relates to those who are non-male and attend schools in non-elite, non-western settings. Drawing on insights from girl students attending an urban school in Ghana, this paper demonstrates the role of school context in facilitating the development of non-cognitive skills, namely positive academic mindsets. More specifically, I argue that various aspects of the school's structure contribute to the development of, "achievement-oriented identities," - positive beliefs in one's own ability and the translation of those beliefs into realizable actions - among its girl students. These positive academic mindsets, or AOI's, become useful for navigating the gender specific barriers that the girl students face as they enable specific insights and tools critical for achievement within their particular socio-cultural environment. These findings have implications for future studies on the role of school contexts, and the identities they produce, for understandings of the relationship between gender, non-cognitive skills and educational achievement in developing societies.

Introduction

Increasingly, education studies emphasize the important role of non-cognitive skills on academic achievement (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Duckworth et al. 2007; Farkas, 2003; Heckman et al., 2006).[1] Focusing on the role of traits such as "grit" and "perseverance," or the development of social and cultural identities and ideologies, these studies demonstrate that such non-cognitive skills can contribute positively to the overall success of students (Bourdieu 1973; Coleman 1988; DiMaggio 1982; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lee and Shute 2010; Mare and Winship 1988; Marzano 2003; Ogbu 1985, 1989).[2]

One potential mechanism for the development of non-cognitive skills is the school context. In fact, Dweck, Walton, and Cohen (2011) work raises this very question as the authors' ask, "Is it something about [the students] or is it something about the school (2)." Interestingly, studies focusing primarily on students from disadvantaged - low social and economic status - backgrounds who attend elite schools show that educational settings might mediate the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on educational outcomes (Griffin and Alexander 1978; Ianni 1989; Raudenbush and Bryk 1986). Their research indicates that students are more likely to demonstrate non-cognitive skills if schools create environments that facilitate their

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[1] It is important to note that in this paper I consider non-cognitive skills as inclusive of any trait, quality, characteristic or factor that can contribute to academic achievement but is not commonly measured on standardized exams.

[2] Scholars acknowledge the false dichotomy associated with pitting the two against one another: "few aspects of human behavior are devoid of cognition (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman and Weel 2008, 974).

development. Nonetheless, there is no clear consensus on exactly how educational settings contribute to the development of non-cognitive skills. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there exist even less clarity on the applications of these findings on non-male students who are not from elite schools or developed countries (Dei 2011; Dweck, Walton and Cohen 2011).

Indeed, developing societies are often facing very different socio-cultural contexts, especially as it relates to gender. While the U.S is experiencing an increase in the number of girls attending school at all levels, girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example remain 50% less likely to finish primary school. Theoretically, the study of non-cognitive skills can reduce this disparity, yet we know very little about how one would expect these skills to translate to contexts where the gender gap is the exact opposite and/or gender takes on different meanings than that which is found in the U.S - where much of the research has been conducted. This suggests the need to contextualize, or rather localize, our understandings of how non-cognitive skills contribute to educational achievement.

To address these gaps, this paper utilizes original data collected over a two year period between 2009 and 2012 on the educational experiences of girls attending an urban school in Ghana. These data illustrate how non-cognitive skills can be instilled in girl students with a particular focus on the role of the school context. I demonstrate how various aspects of the school's structure - at the leadership level, in the classroom, and afterschool - contribute to the development of what I title, "Achievement-Oriented Identities," (AOI's), defined as positive beliefs in one's own ability and the translation of those beliefs into realizable actions. In this paper, I conceptualize these achievement oriented identities as as protective factors, or tools, that help girls succeed by thinking differently about the barriers before them.

The rest of the paper is divided into the following sections: The first section of the paper provides a brief review of the role of non-cognitive skills in studies on educational achievement. The next section examines how schools transmit non-cognitive skills through the construction of academic identities. This section is followed by a brief historical background on education in Ghana, the location of the field site used for the analysis. The next section describes the methodology used to conduct the study, the data that was collected and the findings that resulted. The paper finally concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings and additional considerations for future research.

The Importance of Including Non-Cognitive Skills in Studies on Educational Achievement

While scholars of educational achievement repeatedly show that both economic factors - i.e socioeconomic background, and socio-cultural factors - i.e parent's value for education, are significant drivers of student achievement (Blau and Duncan 1967; Davis-Kean 2005; Jencks 1972; Kerckhoff, Raudenbush, and Glennie 2001; Sewell and Hauser 1975), an interdisciplinary body of work demonstrates that non-cognitive skills can also contribute significantly to student achievement (Wolfe and Johnson 1995). For example, educational psychologists have shown that a student's grade point average (GPA) is a better predictor of life success than

more traditional measures such as IQ, primarily due to its relationship with a number of non-cognitive skills such as academic tenacity (Farkas 2003; Paris & Winograd 1990).

Similarly, a recent and well-known study of non-cognitive skills among ninety New York City pupils finds that those who thought intelligence was malleable, or rather had "growth mindsets," performed better academically, as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA), than those who thought intelligence was fixed (Dweck 2006). Similar studies show that students scoring high on measures of traits such as "grit," "perseverance" and "self-discipline" have on average better academic outcomes, also measured by GPA, when compared to those who score low on the above named traits (Bowen, Chingos, and Mcpherson 2009; Duckworth and Seligman, 2005; Walton and Cohen 2007).[3]

Using theories on cultural and social capital, sociologists have also demonstrated the value of non-cognitive skills. This work emphasizes the ways in which social and cultural capital learned early on from one's home and familial environment is rewarded by the educational institution through its grading and testing practices (for ex. See Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Dimaggio 1982, Dumais 2002). For instance, Bowles and Gintis (1976) demonstrate how schools instill skills and traits that produce "good citizens" for the workplace. Their work emphasizes how institutions reward students by constructing particular actions and skills as legitimate (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Collectively, the range of studies described above reveal that focusing on non-cognitive skills, whether related to academic tenacity, grit and/or social and cultural capital, provides a productive lens by which to examine and understand student achievement.

Identity as an Institutional Mechanism for Instilling Non-Cognitive Skills and Shaping Achievement

While the above studies provide clear evidence that non-cognitive skills contribute to educational achievement, it is less clear how these skills may be developed (Farrington et al 2012, Gutman and Schoon 2013). Fortunately, several studies suggest that these non-cognitive skills are malleable and thus can be transmitted to students (see for ex. Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). In this regard, one commonly proposed pathway is through the strategic use of the school context. While there are multiple experimental and intervention based methods, especially in psychology, that are discussed as potential strategies to be utilized by schools, this paper will focus on the ways in which school contribute to the construction of academic identities – a type of social identity.[4]

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[3] Relatedly, economists have found that non-cognitive skills are important for career and financial prospects (Carneiro and Heckman 2003; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, and Masterov 2006; Heckman and Rubinstein 2001, Moss and Tilly 1996). For instance, Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) find that students who took the GED scored similarly on measures of intelligence to those who did not have to. Yet, students who took the GED earned significantly less in earnings than those who had not. The authors attribute this difference to the non-cognitive skills that the non-GED students possessed.

[4] Generally, identity refers to one's perception of self and their perception of how others (society) see them (Stryker 1980). In this case I am examining identity as context-dependent rather than fixed.

Indeed, established works have offered a number of explanations for the various ways in which school context interacts with students to facilitate achievement with a particular focus on the formation of academic identities - a unique and potentially contradictory identity for some students (Boaler and Greeno 2000; Gibson 1997; Lave 1991; Martin 2000; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994; Ogbu 1989).[5] Most notably, studies that focus on minority students illustrate how they often have to take on multiple identities - personal and academic – in order to achieve at similar levels to their majority peers (Flores-Gonzalez 2002; Gibson 1988; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994; Warikoo 2005, Warikoo & Carter 2009).

For instance, Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva (1994) convincingly demonstrate how African-American and Latino youth are able to form academically oriented peer groups and strategies for managing the multiple identities they take on at home versus at school. They attribute the development of these identities, and the strategies they enable, to the school's ability to develop a critical consciousness among its students. This critical consciousness, or rather achievement ideology, enables students to "believe in their own efficacy and the power of schooling to change their lives." Yet, they also add that these students "do not adopt a romantic or naïve commitment to the achievement ideology (Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994, 97)," thereby acknowledging that students adopt these beliefs in context of the respective barriers they face. The emphasis by the authors' on the students' belief in self and the role of the school in evoking these beliefs, acts as a powerful example of how identity is constructed by schools and utilized among minority youth in order to achieve (for more ex. see Carter 2005).

While the educational setting is thought to be crucial for the development of these identities, scholars have primarily relied on evidence from comparisons of achievement among low and high achieving students at elite institutions (Duckworth and Seligman 2005; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly 2007) and/or that are in developed countries (Fuller and Clarke 1994). Yet, students at non-elite institutions in developing countries also have to learn to navigate straddling identities based on their gender and relative economic disadvantage. Still we know very little about how non-elite institutions in developing nations, where gender ideologies are often not as progressive, may contribute to the educational achievement of their students, especially girls. Ultimately then, there is also a need to understand how these identities translate outside of the domains in which they are typically studied.

Enabling Academic Success through Achievement Oriented Identities

Utilizing the results of a multi-year and multi-method research study conducted in Ghana, a Sub-Saharan West African country, my work seeks to fill these gaps. The paper focuses on the institutional arrangements – school leadership, after school peer networks and non-academic curricula of religious and moral education - that facilitate the development of what I call,

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[5] It is important to note that unlike psychological conceptions of identities as core and fixed, academic identities are considered to be personal, or rather social, identities and thus more context-dependent and institutionally sanctioned.

"achievement-oriented identities," among female students. Broadly, I use the term, achievement-oriented identities, to capture the ways in which the academic context contributes to the formation of positive beliefs - ways of thinking - and encourages the translation of those beliefs into realizable actions.

In particular, the concept is concerned with how the social structure of a school can influence student's identity and subsequent behavior (i.e Serpe and Stryker 1987; Stryker and Serpe 1982, 1994). In this regard, I conceive of the self as always interacting within a particular social structure (Stryker 1980). I demonstrate that the various components of schools, as institutions, culminate into a particular socializing structure that produces identities - multiple part of self - that are absorbed by the students who attend the school. I conceive of these identities as embodying a prism used by students for developing their worldview on, and strategies towards, achievement.

As stated by Stets and Burke (2012), "the overall self is organized into multiple parts (identities), each of which is tied to aspects of the social structure." One has an identity, an "internalized positional designation" (Stryker 1980, p. 60), for each of the different positions or role relationships the person holds in society. (7)" They go on to state that, "when one claims an identity in an interaction with others, there is an alternative identity claimed by another to which it is related (8)." As mentioned above, this type of identity claiming can especially be seen in established works on the achievement of minorities (Carter, Gibson 1988; Mehan et al 1994).

Just as Mehan et al. (1994) convincingly illustrate how African-American and Latino youth are able to form academically oriented peer groups and strategies for managing the multiple identities they take on at home versus at school. This type of identity sharing, from a gendered perspective, is particularly relevant for students examined. For example, religion may promote values such as hard work and belief in self, regardless of obstacles, but it is also often used to promote female submission and reconfirm gender stereotypes. Thus a successful student must know how to traverse the conflicting spaces between faith and achievement. In many developing nations, the same applies to public and private (home and school life) settings. Indeed, a girl student may want to promote herself as a "school-girl,"[6] in some cases she must balance that desire with the reality that these values may not be consistent with that which is respected at home. Thus, it may be in her best interest not to showcase this fact, when in front of family, if she wants to be able to continue to go to school. In addition, given the specific barrier poor girls face, which also makes them more prone to multiple out of school obligations, female students must learn how to be "master managers" in order to stay on par with their counterparts.

Each of the above examples highlight the need to understand that success of female students in the developing world as wrapped up in the ability to be strategic in one's navigation between two seemingly contradictory worlds. As a result, students who benefit from the

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[6] This simply refers to a girl enrolled in school usually symbolized by her feminine uniform.

internalization of these achievement identities also have to be quite skillful in balancing the conflicting messages that they promote. This study demonstrates that schools can play an important role in facilitating this by providing students with the tools critical for navigating this conflicting terrain through the establishment of AOI's.

AOI's are not reflective of any single trait, such as self-control, but a belief set around a positive view of life challenges and one's individual capacity to overcome. These identities encourage students to be aware of the barriers they face, while taking on an even higher belief in their ability to overcome them. Most important, I view the school context as the central source for providing students with the practical and emotional tools useful for doing this.

Accordingly, the school context is achievement oriented, as it relates to the culture of the institution, and this impresses upon students a positive academic identity. Evidence of this context is seen through the intentional actions and activities throughout the school. The contexts influence on its students is seen through what students profess is necessary to achieve and the proactive strategies they take on in response to their barriers. In this case, the AOI's become useful for navigating the gender specific barriers that female students face. They essentially act as protective tools for helping girls succeed.

The goal of the paper, then, is to provide a more nuanced view of the role of schools, especially as it relates to female students who live in a developing country context, in socializing positive academic identities useful for academic achievement. The next section will provide information on the developing country selected, Ghana, to conduct the research for this paper.

Educational History of Ghana and Barriers Facing Girls Today

Ghana acts as a compelling case to examine for developing richer explanations of educational achievement in the developing world due to its passage of progressive education policies, but its continued disparities in educational outcomes, particularly as it relates to gender.

In 1957, Ghana became the first African country, south of the Sahara, to gain independence from British colonial rule. Shortly after in 1961, Ghana again became the first African nation to provide universal education under its Education Act. These efforts, while progressive in theory, were unfortunately unrealized in practice. As the nation faced a number of political and financial challenges, a number of identifiable groups found themselves excluded from attaining education despite the promise of free education for all (Akyeampong 2009). When the new republic was established in 1992, an equal rights amendment was included in the constitution and established what came to be known as, Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE). It was only then that the number of girls attending school began to increase significantly.

Today, Ghana boasts near gender parity (.96) at the primary level with over 90% of the country attaining at least basic education.[7] Yet, as the education levels rise there are significant drops in enrollment, particularly among female students from low socio-economic backgrounds.[8] Financial abilities, and gendered responsibilities, play a significant role in students' ability to pass into higher levels of education.

In terms of finances, while public schools are technically free, schools often charge students fees for a number of services such as registration, books and supplies, thereby making government subsidized schools still relatively unaffordable for some. These fees increase at higher levels of education thus contributing to the increased dropout rate of girls.

As it relates to gender, once girls gain access to schools, they face a number of issues remaining enrolled. Remaining enrolled becomes challenging for girls because they often bears more responsibility in and out of the house than their male counterparts. For this reason, and a number of other gendered obligations, when parents are faced with the financial hardship and have to choose which of their children can stay in school, girls are still considered second to their male sibling/s. Nonetheless, even within the classroom girls face challenges unique to their gender. For example in the area of selecting an academic track for students, a number of teachers still hold partial views about their female students' capacity to perform in certain disciplines. Consequently, female students are funneled into the arts or home-sciences subjects even when they have the skill set to pursue traditionally male dominant subjects such as math (Assié-Lumumba 2006). Their lack of interest in their assigned academic track can lead them to lose interest in school, altogether.

Another, but more recent concern is that of male teachers and administrators' pursuing relationships with female students, and the increasing existence of what one expert called STG's - "sexually transmitted grades." The dilemma here is that even though an increasing number of girls are attending higher levels of school, they are also increasingly facing sexual harassment in the classroom. This may be the case because several teachers are still male (although this is slowly changing) and girls are often afraid to protest their male authority figures (Alderman & King 1998). It is clear then that girls and women are still operating in the context of patriarchal hierarchies and traditional norms despite recent developments in public policy (Stambach 2000). Thus, part of being able to achieve as a girl is not only about gaining access, but also recognizing the existence of these barriers and learning how to navigate around them. This fact makes the investigation of non-cognitive skills and gender in a developing country context all the more valuable for understandings of educational achievement.

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[7] This number changes significantly once we account for the rural areas and Northern Region of the country, albeit to a much smaller degree at the primary level than at any other level of education. For more information, see StatsGhana – Education Statistics at http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/edu_stats.html.

[8] See appendix, table 1, for more data on Ghana's educational landscape.

Scholarship in Ghana and Developing Societies on Non-Cognitive Skills and Achievement

Despite compelling reasons, very little scholarship explores the role of non-cognitive skills in educational achievement in Ghana. In one study conducted by Frempong in 2010, he finds that confidence levels, not the location or quality of the school students attend, explained the disparate outcomes in achievement between students from low and high education backgrounds in Ghana. He finds this to be especially the case among the female students sampled suggesting that confidence, a non-cognitive skill, was more critical for achievement than factors typically studied such as parental education level and/or school quality. The findings indicate that non-cognitive skills might show similar promise in Ghana as it does the U.S. Nonetheless, there are virtually no studies in Ghana to further support this.

Another study, not necessarily particular to girls, provide similarly compelling evidence for the value of non-cognitive skills and school context in developing societies, generally. In a working paper that examines non-cognitive skills among 2749 students from 39 schools across Chile, the authors find that short term tutoring for fourth graders raised language score and attitudes towards reading by between .15 and .20 standard deviations for students from low performing and poor schools (Cabezas, Cuesta, Gallego 2011).

Each of the above studies point to the potential importance of studying non-cognitives skills across different groups and contexts. Yet, these works still do not seriously contend, or rather engage, with gender, despite its continued importance for understandings of achievement. For instance, Fryes (2013) work on school-aged girls in Malawi illustrates the ways in which schools, development organizations and the media espouse a particular ideological rhetoric of a "brighter future" that encourages an inflated sense of one's chances of educational and life success in spite of the disadvantage these students face. Using a pragmatist approach, rather than a rational choice model, Frye explains this disconnect as attributable to a morality laden perspective in which girls evaluate themselves based on an imagined future self. The imagined future self is inherently based on tenets of morality in that it based on one's ability to be a virtuous woman. Nonetheless, these virtue based claims contribute to confident perceptions of self as able to succeed, regardless of one's social and economic background. This confident attitudes are critical for facilitating positive attitudes towards achievement.

Similarly, this paper describes the structural barriers impeding the educational advancement of girls in Ghana and the ability for the school context to play a critical role in enabling girls to achieve in spite of them. Yet, I depart from simply relying on the work of rhetoric and symbolic references to virtue. Instead, I argue that schools facilitate the adoption of non-cognitive skills that help girls succeed through its development and promotion of achievement oriented identities. I conceptualize achievement oriented identities as as protective factors or tools that help girls think and respond in proactive ways towards the challenges they face.

Methods

For this study, I conduct a targeted investigation of educational achievement among female students that attend a government subsidized school in the urban capital of Accra, Ghana. I call this school, Academy Prep Secondary School (APSS). APSS has 1000 + students and gender ratio of 60:40. It is a day school with over 80% of its students living within a 10-15 mile radius of the campus and nearly 75%% are from low income backgrounds - defined as earning $2 or less a day.

Data Collection, Model and Strategies for Analysis

Data

In year one, I interviewed organizational elites and educational administrators (n=33) and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with students (n=30), five of which were male. Each interview lasted at least thirty minutes. In the interviews I asked questions about the social and educational context of Ghana, as it relates especially to the challenges facing girls, and the specific strategies needed to overcome them. I also collected in-depth observational data on various activities of the school - i.e morning prayer, school government in order to better understand the culture of the school and how students operated within the environment.[9]

In year two, I returned to the school and conducted follow up interviews with about 2/3 of the same students. I asked many of the same questions. I also continued to collect observational data of the various activities before, during and after school. In addition, I was able to collect some data on the home lives of female students as well. I then returned to Ghana one year later and was able to follow up with 1/2 of the female students examined in year 2 and 3. For these students, I was able to closely follow their home lives and post-high school experiences as they prepared for their next steps.[10]

Model   **Figure 1**

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[9] Note that 20 % of interviews conducted in the larger project were with males (for the sake of comparison).
[10] Students were observed at least 3, and at most 8, hours a day.

Adopted version of
Farrington et al, 2012
and U.S Department of
Education, 2013

For the analysis, Farrington et al (2012) and the U.S Department of Education (2013) report provides a framework (which I adopt) for how non-cognitive factors affects academic performance and behavior within a classroom/school and larger sociocultural context that I utilize to organize my findings. As stated by Farrington et al (2012),

> "Any given school and classroom context will reflect a wide variety of variables affecting student motivation and opportunity to learn. For example, how supports are made available and to whom, grading structures and policies, available course tracks, the nature of academic tasks students are asked to do, the relationship among students peers and their orientation towards work."

For the purposes of this study, the critical part to take from this model is the link between school/classroom context and academic mindsets. The classroom and context box also includes student background characteristics - all of the issues a student brings to a learning situation. These characteristics are expected to affect every aspect of the model. Furthermore, classrooms consists of multiple individuals that also create peer effects. Last, both student background and peer effects operate within a larger socio-cultural context. Most important, the model also accounts for the fact that school context can facilitate the construction of protective factors against potential inhibitors, as a result of one's background, peer group or context, through interventions and/or alternative strategies. Collectively the above factors directly play into academic mindset and accordingly the behaviors and performance of the student.

Using this framework, I demonstrate how students from a particular socio-cultural context, a patriarchal one, and who have a specific type of background, a disadvantaged one - as defined by income and gender - develop positive academic mindsets and proactive strategies to navigate their educational experiences, that are facilitated in part by the school context. Accordingly, for the analysis of interviews and observations, I divide the data between

students beliefs about what it takes to achieve and the role of the school context in contributing to those perceptions and actions in response.

Coding and Interpretation of Data

In examining students beliefs about what it takes to achieve, I use deductive and inductive methods to identify general themes, patterns, and trends in the data collected (Lofland et al 2006, Miles and Huberman 1994). In particular, I look for contributors to *academic mindset* - attitudes or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work - through evidence of statements such as, "I belong in this community, I can succeed at this;" *effortful control* - the ability to delay gratification, exercise self discipline, self control, and manage emotions - through evidence of statements such as, " I exert the will to look beyond my short term concerns to longer term or higher order goals;" and *strategy* - the ability to define goals and plans, and enact and monitor them - through evidence of statement such as, " I know where I am, where I am going and how to get unstuck."

I present the results of process whereby I initially coded the data into a set of categories and then re-coded the data into expanded and more refined set of categories based on what students actually said. The terms, "discipline", "confidence" and "faith" were found to be the most reflective of the primary traits for which students viewed as critical for their achievement. In other words, discipline, confidence and faith were in direct conversation with positive academic mindsets, effortful control and strategy in the words of the students examined. Evidence of these qualities combined are what I view as embodying, *Achievement Oriented Identities*.

In examining the school's role, I looked for evidence of factors that either contribute positively or negatively to these identities. More specifically, I assessed the activities within the school i.e classroom that either affirmed, or not, these perception and how. This process resulted in the identification of school leadership, after school peer networks, and religious and moral education as important areas to focus on for understanding the ways in which school context interacts with students academic mindsets to produce achievement oriented identities.

To demonstrate this, the rest of this paper will use data referenced above to discuss the results of the investigation. I will start by discussing the social and ideological context facing students at APSS. I will then discuss how the socio-cultural context interacts with the personal backgrounds of the students before delving into the role of the school in mediating the social and individual effects through the promotion of a combination of skills, most notably, confidence, discipline and faith that together create a type of achievement oriented identity (AOI). All of the discussion will place an emphasis gendered challenges facing girl students and how these AOI's enabled girls to overcome them.

The Social, Individual and School Context Facing Girls at APSS

Socio-Cultural Context

As stated above, girls and women in Ghana operate in a particular type of environment, a patriarchal one, in which the expectations for men and women differ. In the words of one student at APSS, "in Ghana they think the office of the lady is the kitchen." Since schools are often microcosms for greater societal relations, it is no surprise that these same challenges related to gender are found at the school level as well. As one student states, " girls drop out because of pregnancies and other things." Certainly, the potential to get pregnant creates a concern particular to the girls in the school, as explained by another female student,

> "See he is a guy, he can't get pregnant but he can impregnate someone. Yet, still he can move around, but you are a lady if you should get pregnant before your marriage age in Ghana it is something else."

The quote is illustrative of female students perceptions of the unequal burden shared between girls and boys as it relates to the potential of consequences of getting pregnant after engaging in sex before one's "marriage age." While the boy "can move around," the girl is constrained by the pregnancy and the social norms tied to being "a lady." These clear gender biases are compounded by the poverty that these girls also experience in their neighborhood and consequently at their neighborhood schools

Background Characteristics of the Students

Indeed, a majority of the students that attend APSS are from similarly bad neighborhoods. One student, 17 years old, describes her home environment stating,

> "I grew up very young. Zungo, you have to work before you survive. People are not going to school and when they see you alone leaving in a uniform to school they tend to laugh at you…I wasn't brought up with a golden spoon in my mouth ...and my mother. A mother is supposed to be loving too. But I don't have that relationship with my mother. She said I resemble my dad and they broke up and so all of the hatred is on me …and my father …I no longer hear from him."

From the above response, it is clear that not only is the student from a challenging neighborhood, she also suffers from lack of support from the one whom she views should be the most "loving too." In addition, her father is not around thus she clearly does not have traditional structure of support. Other students echo these challenges in their familial life, as another female student states,

> "I grew up with my mother and father, but my father passed and money was tight…so I had to come and stay with my aunt. Ahhh, I really wouldn't describe her as a mother...I can't really talk to her like a mother. We don't

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really have that type of relationship. My auntie, she doesn't give me money to buy books."

As illustrated in this statement, the student acknowledges the constraints of her home environment as it relates to the lack of support she receives from her aunt for her education. It is clear to her that she does not have a traditional "mother"- like relationship with her aunt and this has a direct influence on her ability to get the resources she needs, such as books, in order to achieve. The above quotes are clear examples of the resource poor and non-traditional familial backgrounds girls at APSS come from. In fact, 45% of the students examined came from single parent homes and 75% from low income households.

The School Context and its Gendered Challenges

Similar to students that attend public schools across urban cities in the U.S, girls at APSS bring these challenges into school with them. Indeed, established literature in education has demonstrated the many ways in which the urban neighborhood context in the U.S contributes to the social disorganization of its schools (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Kozol 2012). The same applies in the context of Ghana, and in particular at the school examined in this study, which was historically located in one of Accra's poorest neighborhoods.

In describing the state of the school and its reputation, the assistant headmaster of APSS explains that,

> "Being surrounded by some settlements...the squatters, they pose difficulty for us...they open liquor shops, sell drugs. [APSS] is more or less a community school, we have a number of satellite communities surrounding us and we are a day school so those who cannot afford a boarding school send their kids to us."

Unsurprisingly, when asked to describe their perceptions of the school, many of the students responded negatively, as one student states, "I didn't like the school because of the bad perception I had of the school. People were like the kids were bad," or as another student exclaimed to me, "this is WASS, the most stubborn school in Ghana, the most notorious, the most in-disciplined [sic]." By describing the school as "stubborn," "notorious," and the school that parents send their kids when they cannot afford boarding school highlights that APSS is not a school one wants to attend if they have an alternative choice. It is equally unsurprising then that many of the students are from similarly poor neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, female students, in particular, face even more challenges once at school. As mentioned above, girls in Ghana have to contend with a number of pre-judgements that are made as a result of their gender. For instance in the selection of academic tracks and/or general misunderstanding of the value of higher education for their sex. APSS students had to confront these issues at almost every level of the school - in leadership, in the classroom, and during after school activities.

As literature on non-cognitive skills and achievement have demonstrated, traits such as academic tenacity, grit, perseverance, resilience and self-discipline can play a significant role in defeating the dismal circumstances that disadvantaged students tend to face (Duckworth and Seligman 2005; Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., and Kelly, D.R. 2007). Indeed, given students objective backgrounds – low SES, low parental support- they would greatly benefit from the adoption of non-cognitive skills.

The next section describes the different areas of the school where girls faced barriers. I then discuss the actions that the school pursues in reaction and how those practices contribute to female students beliefs about what it takes to achieve. In particular, I focus on the areas of the school structure - leadership, after school activities and peer networks, as well as the religious and moral education - that contribute to the development of positive academic identities, or rather AOI's. I show how these identities enable female students to overcome the social and economic barriers they face, thus facilitating their potential achievement.

How the Structure of the School Creates a Foundation for the Academic Achievement of Girls

On Leadership

There exists a plethora of research on the role of school leadership in shaping achievement among students (Hallinger & Heck 1996; Hanushek 1971; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005; Murnane 1981; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rosenholtz 1989). Several of these works convincingly demonstrate the ways in which school leaders, especially principals and teachers, can transform the achievement outcomes of their students, by specifically influencing school culture (Keal and Peterson, 1999). My data also shows the value of school leadership, in particular the headmistress, for the construction of positive academic identities for girl students who attended APSS.

At a school like APSS, where students do not want to attend because of, "the bad reputation of the school," it should be even more difficult to convince the poor students that attend the school of the value of performing well while there. Yet, the work of the newly-appointed headmistress, Mary, worked to reverse these perceptions.

Most important for this analysis is how Mary's approach to leadership influences her perceptions of girl students at APSS. As Mary observes,

> "Now what I notice about the females in this school…the girls in the school, they tend to be a bit timid. I think it has to do with their cultural background. But I have a different background where the male and female are given the same opportunities so I try to bring this to bear on my leadership."

In this description, Mary is referring to growing up in a household where she viewed her mother and father as providing equal opportunities for all of her siblings, both male and female. Ideologically then, in a context where it is not clear that students are coming from

that same background, she seeks to consciously translate those ideals to her leadership and thus the culture of the school.

It is important to note that she is the school's first female headmistress in the school's sixty year history. A position that comes with it fair share of challenges as headmistress Mary states, "here is a school that had been led by males for the past 60 years and you come in as a female like what can she bring to bear, but I made up my mind I was going to make it." She goes on to state,

> "When I came in, I faced a lot of challenges. When you talk about human challenges and to be the first woman, people are also looking at what does she have? But I tried to bring everybody on board so we can move forward...you see, it's all about your attitude, how you view things."

Headmistress Mary expresses not only the challenges she faces as the only women in the school's history, but also her desire to "move forward" by changing her attitudes towards them. In fact, she views her female status as opportune for engaging in this type of work, as she states, "since I am female it has given me an opportunity to mold the females in the school. I'll try to encourage them...make them feel like there is nothing like you being an inferior sex." The statement demonstrates how Mary seeks to makes it her responsibility to use her female status to encourage the girl students to remove perceptions of themselves as inferior due to their gender.

During my time at APSS, I witnessed Mary's actions align with her professed desires as she made a number of deliberate decisions aimed towards propelling the girls at the school; one of which resulted in the admission of 10% more females by the end of her third year thereby increasing the gender ratio to 60:40. Furthermore, inside and outside of her office, she constantly posted motivational sayings and messages meant to reflect the values she wanted to instill in her students. As it relates to girls, she posted a message on the school bulletin encouraging girls to, "Be a woman with attitude and a lady with class," and in her office stood a mug that she showed to each female student, including myself, that read, "Act like a lady, think like a man and work like a dog." These clearly gendered messages reflect Mary's views on the values she wanted to instill in her female students; that of being a "lady" with "class" but also one that has "attitude like a man." Mary described herself as needing to share these messages, because "I am the only female, the school is now 65 years, and its been headed by males," suggest that she felt her her very presence as a female in a male dominated space mattered.

It appears that students internalize these messages given their responses to the headmistress actions and behavior. As one female students states, "if you are a woman, and you're in that position, man hate to see women in that position so she has to be that way...so in working hours she has a tough face, but after that she is sweet." The quote demonstrates the student's' understanding of the gendered dimensions associated with the headmistress role

as both a woman and an administrator. It also reflects a clear subscription to the rhetoric being promoted on the flyers and other materials around campus.

Instilling confidence

Nonetheless, perhaps most telling of Mary's intentionality on the kind of girls she wanted to produce at APSS is reflected in her decision to encourage one student, Lydia, to be the school girls' prefect a year earlier. Despite her professed confidence now, Lydia admitted that when she was asked she did not want to participate because she was told not to get involved in leadership roles. More specifically, she states,

> "At first I did not believe in myself. From the house, I wasn't being encouraged. I remember even before I came to [APSS], they were telling me don't get into any leadership roles. 'It will be too stressful for you.'"

Yet, with the encouragement of the headmistress Lydia applies anyway and successfully becomes the head girls' prefect of the school. That same year, the headmistress intervenes again and changes the policy around the annual speech and prize-giving day by defying tradition and appointing the girls prefect to give the main speech rather than the boys' prefect. Lydia describe the experience as follows,

> "Usually it's the boys' prefect that gives the speech on annual prize-giving day. And this time around, I don't know what happened. The news came that this time around the girls' prefect has to do it. I started getting my things ready, I had to go through some coaching, see some of my teachers."

By taking these actions, not only is Headmistress Mary challenging Lydia to speak before the crowd, but also defying expectations of who should be able to. Moreover, she is giving her an opportunity to get the "coaching" to bring out her voice. These tactics play an invaluable role in Lydia's confidence and self-perception, thereafter as she states,

> "I was so nervous. All this time I said to myself, no one else is going to do it. You have to do it. So let's just get it done and do it all right. After I was done I had so much confidence, I felt like I could do anything…like oh there is nothing I can't do."

As illustrated in the above quote, the headmistress's deliberate decision to enable the girls' prefect to give the speech rather than the boys contributed a great deal to boosting Lydia's confidence to the extent that she felt she "could do anything." Consequently, a year later, Lydia, who at first described herself as not believing in herself , in response to the question of how girls fare compared to boys at her school states, "I compete with them and I beat them..[chuckles] well not necessarily 'beat,' but I perform better than they do." Further supported by the above quote, it is clear that the deliberate tactics and strategies played a

crucial role in the seemingly over confident attitudes and actions displayed by APSS students, despite their circumstances. As explained by Headmistress Mary,

> "Today she can stand in front of the school and give a speech without winking. That shows what the female leadership of this school has done**.** "Now you can look around and see that the girls rub shoulders with the guys...This confidence has grown to the extent that students are really excited whenever you throw a challenge to them."

These same feelings are shared by the assistant headmaster a year later as he recounts the story of Lydia and states, "Our girls have done well…they are rubbing shoulders with the boys…one girl is doing very well …her delivery presentation of a report was good, the people who saw her wanted her to come back."

Both quotes demonstrate how something as small as giving a school speech can have dramatic effects for female students' confidence and aspirations. Yet, they also acknowledge how Mary's "female leadership" allows for this to get done. Mary's attentiveness to the importance of being intentional about the tactics employed and her calculated consequences of these strategies are important for the achievement-oriented attitudes that ensued among her students thereafter.[11]

Note that I am using the term, "achievement-oriented," to describe the ways in which students confidently express their academic abilities despite their structural conditions. It is a way of capturing the identities that actions such as those of headmistress are helping to shape. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these identities were constantly being reinforced by other aspects of the school's culture, some of which were led by the school's leadership and some of which were enforced by other aspects of the institution such as the classroom.

Classroom and Ideological Pedagogy Around Religious and Moral Education

In the classrooms girls faced not only the issue of being underrepresented in the school, but especially within the STEM - science, technology engineering and mathematics - academic track. When female students were asked about the disparities that existed between the genders, one female student stated, "the boys, I don't know they just do better…I don't know why... you do the same thing as they are doing but you work harder." Another girl student actually considers the presence of males in her class to be discouraging. In particular she states,

> "Yes, this because anytime I am to learn, I hardly learn with any boy in my class. Sometimes when you want to learn that is when they begin to make

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[11] Furthermore, it appears that her efforts might have trickled down to the teachers given the highly positive responses on the survey to the question posed, "at my school I feel my teachers support me," as over 90% surveyed selected mostly or always.

> noise. I try to explain to them we are here for something but they don't get it that way."

These quotes are perhaps consistent with existing literature that demonstrates the ways in which the presence of males within the classroom, particularly in the STEM fields, act as distractions for female students. Indeed, the students questioned appear to be well aware that there are particular perceptions within the school about the abilities of girls versus boys, but they also acknowledge it should change, as one student states,

> "It's a perception that we girls have, we can do something but we can't be the best...even if we are going in for it we can't really match up to the guys and I think it has to be erased, it needs to be eliminated …"

Interestingly, I find that the school's emphasis on religious and moral education contributed to a perception that female students could achieve in spite of the barriers they face. Indeed, it is important to note that the creation of formal institutions of education across Ghana is largely a product of colonial Christian missionaries (Dei 2002). Thus, many of the religious activities rooted in these Christian schools, such as morning worship, have since been institutionalized in the practices of education itself in the present day (although many of these schools have no formal affiliation with Christian-like groups). In addition, most government subsidized schools still teach religion and moral education courses at the basic, junior and secondary school level. I show that these courses, and related activities, promote positive messaging around "belief" and "overcoming" and thus motivate students to actually hold these perceptions. In particular, they emphasize the importance of spirituality, specifically faith in God, for academic achievement and aspirations. Consequently, the existence of these religious-like activities such as the religion and moral education courses work to reinforce the achievement-oriented identities promoted through the school leadership and after school activities.

Instilling Faith

To start, every morning assembly I attended at APSS opened up in prayer. An example of a typical prayer said at these meetings is illustrated below:

> "Dear lord, we thank you for bringing us here safely. It wasn't for our strength, it wasn't for our might… it wasn't for our energy. You delivered us out of the hands of the evil one. We hand it over safely over to you today. We ask that you grant the new executives knowledge and power to carry this council far. Amen."

The fact the school day opened up in prayer, even though none of the schools I focused on were associated with any particular religion, is an important area to focus on for understanding the factors that contributed to the development of achievement oriented identities for students.

For instance, several of the motivational sayings posted on bulletin boards throughout campus were composed of messages such as the following:

> "Happiness keeps you sweet, trials keep you strong.
> Sorrow keeps you human, failure keeps you humble
> Success keeps you glowing, but only God keeps you going
> Let us thank the lord for making us feel so beautiful for ourselves and for each other – [Mary]"

> "When the prophetic grace is poured on you, even your mistakes will become ladders to your success – [Mary]"

The messaging above illustrates how the school used religion, or references to "God" and "Grace," as a means to encourage students to be unafraid of failure and mistakes. The signing of these messages by the headmistress, Mary, demonstrates the strategic use of the poster as a way to promote her values onto the students. And certainly, it appeared that those values translated as when students were asked, "what does it take be academically successful?" responses such as the one below were provided:

> "In order to be successful you have to be determined, just believe in yourself, you have to know who you are…you have to know those abilities… those talents that God has deposited in you…so that you can unearth them for the benefit of yourself and the benefit of the whole nation."

As illustrated by the quote, the student is connecting her abilities in school to that which God has "deposited." Statements such as this were common across all students examined. It was clear that invoking on God was at minimum normal. Thus even if a student is not religious – in terms of going to church or identifying in a strong way with a religion - the pervasiveness of religious messages still structures one's thoughts. This, I argue, is because the overarching doctrine, messages and languages promoted in the educational structure are rooted in "spiritual-like" activities such as morning worship before assembly, prayer before student government meetings, or religious and moral education courses which socializes students to think in a particular way about the role of spirituality in an academic context.

Perhaps most telling of this is the response of the school's female prefect when asked about her ability to afford college, as she states,

> "Each year I have to pay school fees and someone has to be there to pay and I won't say I am afraid of that. I have a faith that …Yes God is going to make a way. I figured out thinking and worrying won't solve any problem, so just have to pray to God and I also applied for scholarships."

The school prefect's statement demonstrates how students' experiences at APSS contribute to an increased sense of their abilities to overcome the odds against them because of their belief in the ability of, "God…to make a way." It is clear, then , that spirituality is contributing to the construction of their worldview. The work that spirituality is engaging in is likely what

proponents of non-cognitive skills promote and encourage. Schools draw on these already created notions of spirituality to instill educational values of achievement.

After School Activities and the Peer Achievement NETworks of Support they Produce

After school activities with peers make an invaluable contribution to the development of these achievement oriented identities. Certainly, a number of scholars who conduct work on motivations and achievement have acknowledged the value of after school activities such as student government or sports and the peer networks they produce (Covay and Carbonaro 2010; Lareau and Weininger 2003). These works lend evidence to the mediating effect of extra-curricular activities for the relationship between SES and achievement. Covay and Carbonaro (2010) describe extra-curricular activities as a "site where students can practice and develop their non-cognitive skills," indicating the valuable role after school activities can have for reinforcing these skills for students (42).

For example, in one study conducted by Hebert and Reiss (1999), successful students are compared to a similar group of high-ability students who do not achieve and they find no relationship "between socioeconomic level and achievement, between parental divorce and achievement, or between family size and achievement (Hebert et al 1999, 442)." The authors credit the academic success of these students to their ability to construct achievement-like cultures.

These achievement cultures, sometimes called an achievement ideology, circle, or referred to by Cordeiro and Carspecken (1993) as a "success facilitating interpretive scheme" act as a cultural framework in which students define success in terms of the dominant culture (Cordeiro and Carspecken 1993, 289). The literature views student as creating these schemes by developing networks with their teachers and peers, while involved with after school activities, in order to maintain a positive and successful environment around them. The culture these students have created for themselves encourages them to think differently about their future in spite of their background in ways similar to that of those who are not disadvantaged.

In the case of Ghana, I find after-school activities to play a similarly valuable role for reconfirming achievement by encouraging peer networks, or rather what I term, *Achievement Nets*. At APSS, although several students came from households where they were not being encouraged, they encourage and supported each other, thereby creating a peer network of support. This became important as one student states, "when I did not have money to buy all the books I needed, I could buy one and then trade it with a friend for the next book I need when I was done." By working together, students were able to fill in the holes that came with coming from a disadvantaged environment. After school groups such as the student government facilitated these connections. They also provided additional mechanisms for

reinforcing confidence and discipline, both skills critical for the construction of achievement oriented identities.

For example, at APSS the representation of girls in leadership roles in after school clubs and activities were also relatively low. The second year of the study, one of the girls interviewed named, Traci, became the first female student government vice president in 62 years. She described the role as "very very difficult," stating that "people expect you to speak when everyone's mouth is quiet."

Traci became vice president during a time when the school was especially pinched for resources. Yet, in her role she led a successful campaign to raise funds for the purchase of fifty new chairs so that "students could have a place to sit and learn." The headmistress described this same student as coming from a "real humble background." In other words, just like most of her peers, the odds were stacked against her and yet after having the opportunity to participate in the government, raising her concerns and have them be addressed, Traci described her and the group,"as proud of ourselves… to be the first group to give something back to the school."

She goes on to describe how her role becomes even more important for transforming gender relations at the school as she recalls,

> "I remember once the teacher was molesting one of the female students, I got close to him, he did not know that I was stabbing him in the back - I got together with my executives and we reported the teacher. The next thing we know he put in his resignation notice to leave the school before he got to know it was me."

When asked how she had the courage to report the incident, she described herself as, "not afraid of anything." She goes on to state that, "I have seen all that I have to see. I don't think I am afraid to face anyone or anything." In this instance, the student is describing her troubled background as a way to explain her courage in her current role as vice president. She states, "I don't want to be like everyone, I want to prove a point that there still can be someone good from the Zungo where no one thinks there can be. That's what I want to do, I want to prove a point." The student government, then, has provided a mechanism for her to translate the courage that derives from her environment into a successful campaign to end sexual violence in the school. The lessons taught through these after school activities - the ability to raise funds for the school and for those actions to be celebrated; in addition to the ability to report a teacher for a serious sexual offense and for that teacher to actually be held accountable, played an important role in encouraging female students to have confidence in their abilities. Thus, this acts as an example of how the school context can also shape identity by teaching students to effectively adapt traits from their home environment into their school environment.

The value of the confidence absorbed by Traci, thereafter, is perhaps most telling in her response to the discouragement she experiences from her mother as she states,

> "When I look at my mother say, 'you will not be able to finish SS, you will not be able to go to a university...'I say mom you are wrong, I will be able to finish SS, I will go to a university, I will work its like sit down look at me. She is throwing a challenge at me and I am also throwing one back that I can be better than she thinks I am."

And indeed, Traci does just that. Her senior year of H.S. she uses money earned from working part time to apply to college and is denied on her first try. She applies again the following year and is admitted into one of Ghana's top universities. Traci's experience with taking on challenges and achieving them in her leadership role at the school, in addition to the affirmation she received by the selection as vice president and the praise from the school leadership likely played an important role in mediating the lack of affirmation espoused by her mother. This confidence likely plays an important role in encouraging her to apply to college a second time even after being rejected.

Instilling Self- Discipline

After school activities were also critical for encouraging discipline through the increased responsibilities it required. Given the number of hours spent on housework a day - 2 to 5 hours – for female students at APSS, the ability to develop disciplined schedules was especially crucial for ensuring their academic success while at the school. Accordingly, one of the central traits explicitly emphasized by the school was that of self-discipline. In fact, signs related to self-discipline, not to be confused with zero tolerance or school based disciplined, common in the U.S, were regularly posted on the school's bulletin board. Below are a few typical examples:

> "I count him braver he who overcomes his desire than he who conquers his enemies, for the hardest victory is the victory over self"

> "People who waste time are the ones who fail to create an identity of their own"

> "Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments. Servants of Christ must be the masters of themselves"

Each message reflects the values espoused on students at APSS. The first one refers to the goal of self-control, the second refers to being disciplined about one's time and the last emphasizes discipline as a means to achieve the goals one sets for themselves. And indeed when asked about daily schedules, a typical response by girls at APSS was similar to that of one 17-year-old APSS student who described her routine in the following description below:

"Ok, I normally wake up around four a.m....yes four am. I do my quiet time, sweep the compound, I sweep the living room, take my bath, come to school. After school I fetch water, then sometimes prepare meals. After that I go to the shop, and I close around 10. When I come back there will be some dishes to wash. Study. So… I sleep around 11 30 or 12.

Interviewer: "And then you wake up at 4am?"

Interviewee: 'Yes.'(laughs)' Sure.'

The student's re-telling of her daily schedule highlights the discipline required for her to balance her home and school life resulting in barely over four hours of sleep a day. Established research on female school completion rates in Africa suggest that students like her become overwhelmed by their responsibilities and thus drop out (see for ex. Fuller, B., Singer, J. D., & Keiley, M. 1995).

This same girl, Lydia, faced the issue of her aunt not giving her money to buy books. Yet, when asked what she did in response, she stated, I save money myself. Let's say I have to board [a] car, I can save money by… if I have to board two, I'll board one and then walk." When asked if she saw any barriers to achieving her goals, she responded, "no, I don't get discouraged. If I want something done, I get it done."

Indeed, the quote demonstrates how, despite her challenges, Lydia is able to find proactive ways to overcome them and thus maintains confidence in her abilities. It is no surprise then that she went on to receive the highest level of distinction given to a student for their academic achievement and leadership.

As mentioned above, research demonstrates how students are often rewarded not only for their academic abilities but also other non-academic qualities such as self-control and good behavior (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Thus, traits like self-discipline can become a critical tool for enabling academic achievement. The positive messaging around self-control and discipline at APSS, and the actual disciplined schedule of students, demonstrates the ways in which the school might facilitate the promotion of non-cognitive skills within its students. These messages, together with the intentional practices of the school leadership and the peer networks that ensue, directly contribute to the development of confidence, faith, discipline and thus the construction of achievement oriented identities critical for academic success.

The Persistence of AOI's After High School

Once Lydia graduated, she took a break from school in order to work and save up money to apply to college. A year later, she was admitted into a top school in Ghana but could not afford to enroll. When asked how she felt about it she responded,

"You have some of your colleagues in school … they call you oh this and this is happening…and you feel so bad...because you haven't be able and you're still

> not to sure you will be going to school and you feel anxious…so I was trying to check on my application for the scholarship but nothing was happening, I was trying to look for other alternatives …other things I can do."

I then asked her the same question I asked the year before, "Do you see any barriers to achieving the goals you have set for yourself?" to which she responded, "I know next year someone will have to pay, I cannot say I am afraid of that…I don't have fear because I have faith." The quote demonstrates how Lydia continues, even a year after graduating, to profess a strong belief in her ability to find a way that is clearly influenced by her faith, in part because of, and in addition to, her experiences at APSS.

That same year, I asked the headmistress about Lydia and the challenges she was experiencing. She responded by stating, "here was a brilliant student and a girl as such… I told [her] you will go to school no matter what." Both Lydia and the headmistress statements showcase a similarly high level of confidence in Lydia's ability to be successful in overcoming the challenge she currently faces despite the fact that objectively does not have the resources to do so.

Another student, Traci, who like Lydia, did not have the resources but got into college, when asked how she felt, responded,

> "I am not that excited because I am going to school without the gadgets that I need... so psychologically I am down... so I have to just sort it out. But what really encourages me ...I am the only female from my mom and dad side…the first girl to go to college..."

Traci is aware of her disadvantaged social and economic position, but equally aware of why it is important for her to move forward regardless as "the first girl to go to college." This probably explains why after initially performing poorly on the college entry exam a year earlier she still has the tenacity to retake the exam until she is admitted.

Students' like her, who appear to objectively have none of the factors traditionally associated with achievement, in terms of resources or parental support, highlight how non-cognitive skills such as self-discipline might contribute to their ultimate achievement. I argue that it is the school, especially through its leadership, curriculum, after school activities and peer networks, that encourages students to develop these qualities.

Indeed, not all the students examined had the same outcomes, some went straight to college instead of waiting an entire year as the two students described above. Others waited an additional year (n=3) , joined the army (n=1) or changed their goals from traditional college to to teacher training schools (n=3). Nonetheless, the positive identities shaped at the school appeared to remain relatively intact. Statements such as, "when I say I'm doing something...I have to get to the highest point," and, "I am focused, I know what I am about I know what I

am here for," were still referenced indicating the ways in which these achievement oriented identities persisted.

Discussion

In the end, when these achievement-oriented identities are ingrained in students through education, by the time they graduate there are a few important items that act as important values in the long term. First, they develop a heightened belief that regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in they will "make it," and second, they have developed an ability to handle their personal affairs in very disciplined and proactive ways. Therefore, if these students do not have finances for books, they find something they can trade; if they do not have tuition, they save their bus money and walk; if they have to work for extra cash, they sell bread in the morning, go to school and then return back to work after. These students have found tactics that enable them to overcome the obstacles before them and this particular skill set in tandem with a true belief in self enables these students to be successful. Achievement-oriented identities are about a belief in self and also tactics to react and engage when faced with obstacles. This is what the school context has impressed upon these students.

Do these achievement orientations work for everyone?

Certainly, not all students were, or will be, equally receptive, if receptive at all, to these achievement-oriented identities. For instance, many of the relatively privileged students did not express the same level of conviction in their abilities as the poor students did. The lower levels of expression I observed among these students is perhaps due to the fact that the more privileged students simply did not need to do all of what poor people did to attend school every day. For instance, financially sound households tend to already have "house help" to take on domestic duties, thus students from these households do not have to worry about responsibilities typically allocated to the female by virtue of their privilege. It is also important to mention, that the privileged students appeared to be much more aware of the "pay-to-play economics" of the country.[12] Accordingly, more privileged students found it less urgent to do well in school, precisely because they did not see academic success in secondary school as the only way to enter college. In this regard, it could also be the case that disadvantaged students used the positive messaging and other tactics described in the paper as a crutch to not feel the need to compare themselves to their more advantaged counterparts.

Regardless, it appears that disadvantaged female students wanted to believe that as long as they believed in these achievement orientations that they could still be academically successful in spite of their disadvantage, while their more privileged counterparts had more flexibility to pick and choose what elements of the achievement orientations around them they found most suitable. While I cannot say which approach is most desirable, a clear central contribution of this it provides a sociological explanation for how schools contribute to the

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[12] In this case, I am using the term to describes corruption-facilitated achievement rather than merit-based.

development of these skills by explicitly de-alienating the ways in which they are translated in an everyday school setting.

Conclusion

Overall, in this paper I demonstrate the multiple ways in which schools can influence achievement of disadvantaged groups, with a particular focus on girls. More specifically, I show that achievement of disadvantaged girls are realized through the intentional decisions and actions of the school leadership, peer networks built from after school activities, and through the promotion of curriculums that encourage faith. Collectively, the above components work together to produce achievement oriented identities within its students; perceptions of self as able to overcome barriers and achieve any goals one sets for themselves, in addition to actual tactics to react to the barriers that they confront. In this case, these identities become powerful for enabling female students to navigate the challenges they face, many of which are gender specific.

This work has implications for future studies on the role of school contexts, and the identities they produce, for understandings of non-cognitive skills and educational achievement. In particular, the findings provide additional insights on questions related to how schools can mediate the effects of one's socio-cultural environments and individual background, through the facilitation of non-cognitive skills that promote identity building and strategy development, thereby enabling a mindset critical for achievement. Most important, it accounts for the specific gender related challenges that affect the implementation of policies and strategies made for improving educational outcomes of girls in developing contexts.

Ultimately, girls in sub-saharan Africa have a 50% probability of completing primary school. And yet obtaining education is closely linked to a number of positive outcomes - healthier children, longer life, low rates of teen pregnancy, lower rates of abuse. The research of non-cognitive skills provide evidence of the ability for schools to mediate the effects of the socio-cultural context that enables these educational disparities to persist. Accordingly, it is essential to continue to encourage research on these important issues, as it is critical for improving not only the experiences of girls, but also society, at large.

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