

APPLYING FOCUS GROUPS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This is probably one leading academic paper you will write in this morning of your professorial career. It so academic but still very easy to read and digest. You have shown how focus group can provide helpful feedback for practitioners brave enough to hold them and to policy makers committed enough to read and implement their outcomes.

The clincher is that as an academic tool, you make it clear that the purpose of FGs is to create an environment that can provide feedback about various aspects of educational issues and how the respondents perceive such issues. You have also shown how the most valuable information comes far within the session as the group loosens up. So, why not give us something tangible on formulating your questions?

And please boldly point out some limitations of the research tool. Because, while your FG expertly revealed respondents' perceptions regarding a variety of aspects of girl child education in The Gambia, it definitely had some limitations and these limitations can vary, based on who is leading the session and how skillful the leader is in assuming a non-defensive posture so that a safe haven is created for honest feedback from the respondents. Another factor that could directly affect the outcome FGs derive, is the quality of the questions the leader asks.

I am happy you took the courage to do this but please find out - by silent probe - if this will have any consequences on you and on your work being that it is an intellectual property of Wilmington University and a deposit of the college library.

Overview

The study using Focus Groups in the West African nation of The Gambia was an experiential research, which provided viable data on girl child education processes, problems and prospects. This paper delineates the Focus Group process in exploring peoples' perceptions on issues of interest and concern to Gambians on girl child education. The 2007

study was conducted through the use of Focus Groups for data collection and collation, covering six educational regions in the Republic of The Gambia.

Why Focus Groups?

The author chose focus groups for the qualitative study because the interaction of different respondents/participants would usually provide a revealing source of data in respect of their adoption or rejection of the general notion on girl child education in The Gambia. From the lead questions through the probe questions and the subsequent prods, the author had organized and coded the focus groups content into four major themes: gender sensitivity, self-esteem, girl child education and women in leadership positions in The Gambia. The import of this section of the study is the changing attitude that emanated from group interaction.

The Focus Group Meeting Process

Recruitment of participants. The political divisions of The Gambia provided easy and accessible methodologies for participants' recruitment for the study. For the interviews, the Department of State for Education headquarters provided the complete chain of respondents while the school districts provided teachers for that level of interviews.

Focus Groups Distribution

Groups	Number of participants	Occupation	Gender M (male) F (female)	Total
Group I FGD	5 5	Parents Students	M & F M & F	10
Group II FGD	5 5	Parents Students	M & F M & F	10
Group III FGD	5 3	Parents Students	M & F M & F	8
Group IV FGD	5 3	Parents Students	M & F M & F	8
36 participants				

On the focus groups, 36 participants comprising of parents, students and teachers were conveniently sampled from tribal and language lines of The Gambia. This process made participants' recruitment easy and the discussions more manageable and administrable. The author made consultations with different stakeholders in education earlier before arriving The Gambia, which helped open doors with the required contacts before the African trip for the study. The prime point of liaison was the Department of State for Education in Banjul - capital of The Gambia, and the Department led the access to the participants in different school districts and regional communities.

Each focus discussion group met in a designated school in the early evening for approximately 1 hour. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. With Group I, an interpreter was employed. With Groups II, III and IV, the researcher facilitated the discussion in English with the assistance of a translator/interpreter. The focus group discussions were facilitated by the author in English with an assistant, recorded, and transcribed immediately after the meetings. The assistant was financially

compensated for her interpretations/translations and research support during the focus group discussions, transcriptions and research activities.

Focus Groups Confidentiality

All participants for the focus groups were identified with a numeric code or an alias or a pseudonym so as not to give away their identity. At all times, all tapes, field notes and any documents related to this study were kept in safe, locked places throughout the time of the research and will be stored for 3 years following the completion of the research.

Obtaining Consent for Focus Groups

Before the commencement of the meetings, focus group participants were presented with a letter/consent form, which explained the nature of the research/interviews and the rationale for the interview items. For the focus groups, the research assistant-cum-interpreter read the contents out to the selected respondents. Upon their show of understanding of the contents and acceptance, they signed the consent form, stating that they agreed to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded; the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded; and the use of anonymous quotes in publications. For those whose decision-making capacity was impaired and for those participants who could not make decisions, the researcher ensured that there was a standard provision and requirement that all participants met in order to be part of the project.

The focus groups were also informed that they could withdraw at any time from the interviews and discussions. All the interviewees and focus groups were not videotaped, and

some of the participants refused to be **taped** during the meetings. The researcher and his translator took notes throughout the interviews and discussions.

Focus Group Discussions Strategy

The focus group meetings discussed a series of issues concerning girl child education, and themes from the various discussions were gender sensitivity, self-esteem, girl child education, and women in leadership positions. The highlights of the themes were as follows:

GENDER SENSITIVITY. Excerpts from a focus group transcript to the lead question on gender sensitivity trace one respondent's changing opinions in response to the group interaction. This change is an underlying example from all sessions. This transcript provides the raw outcomes from the on-screen and off-screen dynamics:

NOTEPAD: (In response to a general discussion on gender issues, the first respondent is fairly dismissive as regards the subject's relevance.)

RESPONDENT 1: "I don't find it [gender] a problem. There are so many women in my community that we are used to how we are regarded by the men."

NOTEPAD: (As the group proceeds and participants discuss relationships and confidants in their homes, she acknowledges the following:)

RESP 1: "I would say that confiding in the men in my community (including my husband) makes me sometimes feel that I am a weaker person. And I feel that what they think have somehow got somebody second best because I'm a woman. I wouldn't want to give them any excuse wrong. So I would confide more in my fellow village women."

NOTEPAD: (Someone then asks whether her husband would confide in her and she replies "No" but adds:)

RESP 1: "I think if they did confide in you, it would be a sort of vindication of your important place in the family and that you were at that stage where you were worthy of being confided in."

NOTEPAD: (Sometime later she comments as regards her home life and family responsibilities.)

RESP 1: "I have a baby girl that I take with me while I go to farm while my three sons go to school. My baby bawls and screams when she watches her brother leave in their uniforms every morning. I feel, oh, this is awful. I get into the kitchen and shut the door. I try to make myself totally switch off. Then I find I haven't thought of the situation again. But somewhere in my mind I see my baby as me when she grows up."

NOTEPAD: (There is increasing rapport between respondents as all discuss aspects of the girl's role in the family. One respondent more than the others believes that it is not appropriate to treat the girl differently.)

RESP 1: "I am married to a polygamous family and one of my husband's other wives here will tell you that, as wives, all the time we have at home we share with our daughters. All the male children spend the time with their father, and this has always been the case."

NOTEPAD: (Participants then discuss further the domestic situations where there are only male children. RESP asserts that wives are completely shunned; this situation applies to several.)

RESP 1: "That's interesting. I definitely seek my sons' attention, but that does not guarantee that I get it, but I am used to it having lived like this growing up in my father's house. But I'm conscientious and I try very hard to do my best. And I don't see it as a personal thing."

NOTEPAD: (Finally participants are asked to think of anything they want to add.)

RESP 1: "I've been thinking again about my family, and I've just realized that when my sons are growing up, they automatically know to follow their father to the farm, to village meetings, and to all levels and hierarchies of events. There is no similar thing for the girl child, and so I suppose this must give them—the sons—the advantage they become used to when they are in school and the girls are not. After all, it is their right that they become 'all boys together,' with their father. So they feel more relaxed with their father than my daughter does, I think."

This illustration of off-screen coding, together with the researcher's notes, shows how the contributions from a participant RESP 1 become more reflexive in their nature as the focus group continued. Temporal sequencing in this instance was very important to record RESP 1's changing opinions within the overall context of the group discussions.

What is initially a dismissive attitude to gender issues in her family setting changes subtly to one of increasing awareness and finally to an acknowledgement that certain issues may even impinge on the girl child status in her country.

Changing attitudes such as these were documented for several respondents and proved to be key findings from the research. The group interaction was, in this instance, a particularly important factor, and during discussions, the participating mothers began to bond and relax their individual facade, exchanging stories of their domestic experiences.

After these interactive aspects had been annotated and coded for all respondents, the researcher was then able to continue the analysis on-screen using code and retrieve facilities to document themes such as responses on self-esteem, girl child education and women in leadership position.

Self-esteem. From the defined code on self-esteem, the researcher's exploration provides quite insightful outcomes. Aptly translated, after the concept has been well described and explained to them, two parents in one focus group session put their notion of self-esteem so succinctly: "You can't touch it, but it affects how you feel." The other says: "You can't see it, but it's there when you look at yourself in the mirror." While the first one interjects almost too quickly and in excitement: "You can't hear it, but it's there every time you talk about yourself."

These are just participants from one session. The collated data reveal quite a lot and are captured in this transcript. Both the mother and the daughter spoke out in regard to self-esteem in all the sessions. But again, the changing attitude that emanates from group interaction played a great part here.

NOTEPAD: (In response to a general discussion on self-esteem issues, this mother, RESP 2, started with denials, but her daughter, RESP 3, projects their domestic situation in ways that even their self-esteem was on trial.)

RESP 2: "It makes no difference to me if my five children were all girls. My neighbor with three daughters only does not seem to feel inferior because she has no son."

NOTEPAD: (When the group discussion on how important but mysterious self-esteem is with regard to women and childbearing and more so, male children, RESP 2 said:)

RESP 2: "My mother-in-law brings me her fatted harvest every year, which she says is in honor of my four sons. Does that mean she holds me in high esteem or my sons?"

NOTEPAD: (Her daughter, RESP 3, did not need permission to talk.)

RESP 3: "Like a special trophy for the most valuable player on The Gambian soccer team, mom, grandma's harvest gifts are your esteemed trophy for your important and most valuable accomplishments—bearing four sons."

NOTEPAD: (Someone then asks if her mother-in-law does the same for her husband's wife who has only one child, a girl, and she quickly says:)

RESP 2: "No, and that has always baffled me and I guess then that the attention my daughter here gets from her grandmother is a rub-off from her having four brothers."

NOTEPAD: (And her daughter, RESP 3, wastes no time to air an opinion:)

RESP 3: "We are 11 girls in my family, but we all don't feel the same. In my family, it is easy to see that the boys hold their head high and feel proud about themselves on how close they are to our father. They are not afraid to try new things and they believe a lot in themselves, even when they make mistakes."

NOTEPAD: (When the issue touched on the importance of self-esteem to any woman in The Gambia, RESP 3 again quickly interjects:)

RESP 3: "You mothers may not know it, but having good self-esteem is the ticket to making good choices. The more you think you're important, the less likely you are to follow the crowd if your friends are doing something dumb or dangerous."

NOTEPAD: (And the mother adds:)

RESP 2: "Say you have self-esteem; how does it help you as a female?"

NOTEPAD: (Again, RESP 3...)

RESP 3: "With self-esteem, I know that I am smart enough to make my own decisions. I value my safety, my feelings, and my health, of course, my whole self! Self-esteem helps me to know how to look to the future and prepare for it."

NOTEPAD: (Another woman asks if self-esteem is something she can get by staying at home as a good mother.)

RESP 2: "I think you can get self-esteem anywhere."

RESP 3: “As a child, I never saw myself in a good or bad way. I never thought I was great. Instead, it was the people around me that helped me develop self-esteem. I was encouraged. Yes, my family may have helped, but other people—like coaches, teammates, and classmates—helped boost my self-esteem. And for my brothers, my father helped them figure out how to do things and complimented all their good qualities.”

NOTEPAD: (On the vexed issue of incorrigible children who never seem to get it right no matter what, RESP 3 seems to have all the answers...)

RESP 3: “My dad believes in his sons, and so he encourages them to try again when something doesn't go right the first time. My brothers learn to see themselves in a positive way, to feel proud of what they've done, and to be confident that there's a lot more they can do.”

Knowledge sharing is an intricate part of focus groups. Most moms found out for the first time their daughter's self-esteem, though, has roots at home, and female teachers can play active roles in bolstering their egos.

Girl child education: Every member of the focus group showed great interest on the discussion of girl child education. This could be felt in the room from the way some of the focus group members nod their heads in support when a respondent states her perceptions or contributes ideas on the issue of girl child education. This was an indication that parents are beginning to realize that benefits of investing in girls far exceed the cost of not doing so. Armed with the knowledge of the cascading costs of intergenerational death of girls, illiterate families that translate into vicious cycles of family and community poverty, and endless conditions that make women and girls remain subservient in life, this EPP investigates the relationship between girl child education and national development in The Gambia.

Nothing would have captured the undercurrents of the issue of girl child education in The Gambia as this work has done because the respondents' views on girl child education, teacher training and school curriculum issues in The Gambia were rich in diversity, and they could be connected to the views of some of the individual interviews with the government officials and classroom teachers.

While the participants have their individual feelings and perceptions, the similarities of most of the opinions and inputs made coding for commonalities of themes easy. This thoroughly illustrative excerpt from a focus group session captures and puts into perspective the general climate on the girl child education in The Gambia and, of course, their opinions of what can be done to improve the enrollment and retention of girls in the school:

NOTEPAD: (In response to a general discussion on girl child education issue in The Gambia, the climate was that the status quo of girls *to be seen and not heard* reigns. True as that may sound from the beginning, attitudes swayed again when detailed discussions ensued. RESP 4 from the opening in this session in Banjul thinks there's no change from what it was in the 1980s.)

RESP 4: "Many of our daughters are forced to stay home and take care of children, the sick and the elderly. Our daughters are becoming more vulnerable as they are frequently faced with lack of economic opportunities."

NOTEPAD: (For most participants, there is a positive change in the girl child education. The campaign for girl child enrollment and retention in schools is gathering momentum all over the country, but it takes the contribution of another participant, RESP 5, to open wider the discussion arena.)

RESP 5: "Let's get this right, please. There are two forms of educating our children in this country—the formal Western education and the Koranic school system—and we, as

parents, have the right to choose where our daughters go depending on our orientation and being able to afford the tuition.”

NOTEPAD: (Another mother, RESP 6, is not happy...)

RESP 6: “Have you not heard that our daughters in the Koranic school system are getting frustrated about government’s introduction of the English language in the curriculum forcing our children learn in both Arabic and English? Initially, my daughters favored the Arabic language because it was easy to learn and because it forms the local dialect for Muslims. Learning in English becomes a challenge both to teachers and students.”

NOTEPAD: (On the issue of Koranic schools becoming more popular for educating the girl child because in The Gambia, RESP6 had something to say:)

RESP 6: “At the age of 8, your mother and father will try to write something on your chest in Arabic and pray. Once they do this, you start school. You are taught with the Koran about ablution, how to pray, and Islamic doctrines and about married life at that age level, and as you grow, you will learn more until your menstruation cycle and then a husband is found for you.”

NOTEBOOK: (RESP 8 quickly adds:)

RESP 8: “That means you’re now a graduate. The practice was prominent in the communities because there was no formal education. So, what you learn at the Dara or Koranic school is what you are going to teach your children and they live according to the teachings of Muhammad the prophet. The people believe the Arabic curriculum, which stresses moral obligations and respect to Islamic laws, is quite useful to modern girls.”

NOTEPAD: (But RESP 9 disagrees:)

RESP 9: “Girls who attend the Koranic schools cannot find paid jobs after graduation, and this is why, as a parent, I am urging my husband to embrace the formal and secular education system.”

NOTEPAD: (The not-too-popular theme of school fees was raised and a brief hush made the round in the room. A female sophomore student, RESP10, had the floor.)

RESP10: “I am delighted that the federal government is campaigning for girls to stay in school and there are scholarship awards for girls who attend the formal schools. Some teachers were in the village visiting our parents and convinced them to send us to school because education is vital. They gave them examples of top Gambian females in government and making money for their families due to the education they have. I think they accepted more when they learnt that government would pay our school fees.”

NOTEPAD: (RESP 11 was disappointed and angry:)

RESP 12: “It is ignorance on the part of some parents who embrace Western education. I will blame it on poverty, illiteracy and the dogmatic beliefs. Western education exposes our daughters so badly that they disrespect their religious and family values.”

NOTEPAD: (RESP 10 defends the new environment:)

RESP 10: “Teaching in our school has really improved my attitude, character and behavior because I now know many things I had not known before. The teachers inspire me to remain in school, and my family is proud of my education and the quality of child I have become.”

NOTEPAD: (The discussants would love to see a change in the school policy. RESP 7 shares her opinion:)

RESP 7: “It would be nice if the curriculum includes religious and vocational instructions, if the government improves the quality of teaching, instills discipline in our

schools, and mounts quality on the job training and incentives for teachers to attract indigenous female teachers to work in the school system.”

NOTEPAD: (The majority of the discussants also favor formal education taught in English and want it to be more academically and scientifically/technologically-driven. RESP 5 gradually sees the point of view of fellow participants:)

RESP 5: “Apart from the use of English at all levels, there should also be parental involvement in their girl child education. Schools should be close, eliminating the long walk to school, which discourages so many of our daughters.”

NOTEPAD: (When a new issue of The Gambian Vision 20/20 was introduced, all participants drew blanks. RESP 4 would ask:)

RESP 4: “What is Vision 2020? We do not know the meaning and, as such, we do not understand it. No, I am not familiar with the goals either. The government can give us a good vision by reconsidering the dual shift school days. This morning and afternoon school shifts do not give us much domestic help anymore. I think our daughters should be allowed to attend school only in the morning from 8:30 am to 3:00 p.m.”

Women in positions of leadership This was not the most popular theme to code. But the issue of women as leaders in The Gambia drew a couple of comments. The fact that Vice President Mrs. Isatou Njie Saidu of The Gambia is not only the first woman to control the office of the Vice President of The Gambia but that she is also the only woman to date to have achieved such heights in the entire sub-region makes this leadership theme most interesting.

Before Isatou Njie Saidu, there was Mother of 6 children, Speaker, House of Parliament Fatoumatta Jahumpa-Ceesay, Queen Yvonne Pryor of the Madingo, a Surinam-Dutch woman who was elected the Incarnated Lion King of the Mandingos because she was

considered to be a reincarnation of a 17th century king. She was recognized as the incarnation in 1991 and spent the next years going through various tests to prove that she actually was an incarnation.

NOTEPAD: (On how they feel about women leaders, the general feeling among rural Gambian women was nonchalance. But someone immediately remembers the Vice President and Speaker of the House of Parliament, and that became the main thrust of the discussion.)

RESP 11: “I see us women more as role models and mentors who empower people and encourage innovation even when our families don’t recognize us.”

NOTEPAD: (“But why is that so when the second and third highest power in the country is held by a woman?”)

RESP 12: “Most women are scared that a woman becomes a caste if she aspires to live in a man’s world. We just feel that she loses dignity and her place in society.”

NOTEPAD: (“If this is true, why do the women of The Gambia admire their Vice President, Isatou Njie Saidy, Speaker, House of Parliament Fatoumatta Jahumpa-Ceesay, and never seem to forget Queen Yvonne Pryor of the Mandingo?”)

RESP 12: “There’s the beauty is seeing your own gender shine even if she’s venturing in strange waters. Would I want to be a woman leader? Yes. Nevertheless, would I want to change my inheritance to get there? No!”

NOTEPAD: (“Would education make any difference?”)

RESP 11: “Education changes everything. Staying in school and becoming educated gives my daughter the chance to become a Vice President and a teacher in the future and, on the other hand, dropping out of school gives my girl 90% chance of living in poverty as an adult.”

NOTEPAD: (“What can she do as a mother?”)

RESP 11: “I am a strong believer in the link between children and their mothers. The connection is more than umbilical. If I help empower my daughter today to get a good education, I can assure you that she will transfer that empowerment to her children, families and whole communities. That is a gift I owe her and future generations—begin the virtuous cycle of empowerment.”

Analysis and Assessment of Focus Group Discussions

In analyzing the data collected through focus groups, the author found that the participants’ perceptions and stories on the girl child education, teacher training and school curriculum issues were rich in diversity and could be connected to the views of some of the individual interviews elicited in a separate process. While all of the discussants had their own feelings and perceptions, the similarities of many of the information or stories became evident as the author began coding and looking for commonalities in themes. Through their stories on education in The Gambia, the discussants or respondents gave insight into their perceptions on the girl child education and their opinions of what could be done to improve the enrollment and retention of girls in the school, teacher training, and other education-related areas in the country.

Analyzing Data From Focus Groups

Coding. Due to the pristine and traditional environments where the focus groups took place, the qualitative data differentiation involved the time honored colored highlighters. The researcher highlighted the original transcripts using a different color for each code. This approach was chosen in lieu of the cut and paste and the more modern and

technologically advanced computer software due to the nature of rural Gambia. The need to be as accurate as possible in analyzing and reporting the data became imperative.

Following the research goals as guides, the researcher highlighted every line, every paragraph, and every section falling under the relevant research themes. Along with the development of these was the assignment of working definitions to code. This helped to continuously challenge the definition throughout the transcribed data. When properties do not fit the transcript, new codes were developed while the rarely used codes were dismissed just as some categories were further broadened to accommodate the code that was jettisoned. Constant comparison ensured that the researcher matched the categories and codes of new transcripts with existing categories and codes in order to more fully develop the properties of the overarching categories for the individual codes. This process was ongoing until no new codes or categories emerged.

In analyzing this focus group data from this research, two separate coding analyses and interpretation activities took place. This involved working on-screen when dealing with transcript contents, categorizing participants' experiences with a particular topic and working off-screen when dealing with the interaction part of the focus groups. Typically, the art of condensing, organizing, and making meaning of focus group content was often the most time consuming and expensive part of the study.

Summary

Applying Focus Groups to this Africa based research has revealed that the interaction between participants is a key data resource for analysis and interpretation. The participants in this study enjoyed the time they spent talking about different issues concerning girl child education in The Gambia. They were encouraged to express their

different perceptions on a variety of issues on education, and they all came to one important consensus: Girl child education is vital to development and national growth of The Gambia.

Most of the interviewees and group participants continue to feel a sense of pride in what their girl children have accomplished while in school. Although they feel that there are areas where The Gambian government can improve in the education sector, they commended its efforts on mobilizing the citizens to participate in their development and growth.

Furthermore, the research respondents, having discussed in great details several issues affecting girl child, the teaching profession, policy issues and implementation, all through the interviews and focus group discussions, were optimistic and hopeful for policy change and a concrete implementation process. For the data analysis, the researcher employed the coding of responses, which helped to identify significant patterns and themes based on the responses to the structured interview questions and focus group discussions. They included the citizens' concern for continuity in girl child enrollment and retention, the absence of teacher incentives, lack of training and professional development opportunities, the scarcity of indigenous female teachers, the need to make the school curriculum girl friendly, and the influence of Madrassa/Islamic education.

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