ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES
The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All

Global Thematic Consultation

ACCESS TO QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION IN RURAL SOCIETIES OF UGANDA

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Abstract

UNESCO (2002) refers to quality education as an improvement of all aspects of learning and ensuring excellence so that recognizable and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all learners especially literacy, numeracy and essential life skills such as appreciating and being able to accommodate others, that are necessary for responsible living. In an effort to fulfill the Universal Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the government of Uganda introduced free primary education in 1997. Enrolment in primary schools swelled from 2.9 million to 5.6 million and today it is about 8.3 million pupils. The dramatic increase was witnessed mainly in urban areas compared to the rural areas (MDG report for Uganda, 2010). Access to quality education, however, is still low and a number of children cannot read and write by the time they complete primary five. There is a problem of high dropout: close to 1.5 million pupils never make it to secondary schools every year. The graduates of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools particularly in rural areas do not perform well in the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) and end up in poor quality secondary schools in rural areas. The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying causes of unequal access to quality education in rural schools of Uganda despite the government’s efforts to provide quality education to all children of school-going age. There are many reasons for this poor access to quality education and “quality” schools including: poverty of parents, low value attached to education, lack of regular government monitoring and inspection of schools among others.

Key words: Unequal access, quality education, primary schools
INTRODUCTION

Education is a human right and all children are entitled to access to free quality compulsory primary education. All people have the right to receive education that equips them with the knowledge and skills for economic sufficiency, enables participation in civil society and an understanding of and respect for their own human rights and those of others (UNICEF, 2007). Education is historically and socially situated in a context made up of the social economic status of the community, cultural and religious factors and educational knowledge and supportive infrastructure. Parents, teachers, students and the overall policies of governments should be participants in the structure and operation of the education system in a country or state. Governments are held accountable for progressive realization of the right to quality education for all citizens. This is affirmed by UNICEF (2007) by clearly spelling out state obligations to provide access to education for all; ensure quality education for all and respect rights in the learning environment. The purpose of this paper is to identify features of commitment to the provision of quality education to all citizens of Uganda especially from rural districts of Uganda. Access to quality influence what students learn, how well they learn and what benefits they draw from their education.

Definition of quality education

Bernard (1999) as quoted by the UNESCO working paper (2000) defines quality education as “learning which strengthens the capacities of children to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes which creates for themselves and others, places of safety, security and healthy interaction. There are five dimensions of education quality; the learners, environment, context, processes and outcomes. This implies that education is a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context. This definition also takes into account the influence of global and international factors that propel the discussion of quality. However, National education and local educational contexts contribute to the definitions of quality to varying degrees in different countries. Quality of education change on new understanding of the nature of education of quality in education. Most definitions incorporate two fundamental perspectives;
1. Cognitive development is a primary objective of education with effectiveness of education measured against its success in achieving this objective.

2. Education ability to promote creative and emotion development; peace, citizenship and security, fosters equality and passes global and local cultural values down to future generations.

The provision of quality education demands attention to the context of the curriculum, the nature of the teaching and the quality of the learning environment. This research paper discusses its findings based on the dimensions of quality education as defined by UNICEF/UNESCO (2007) above.

**Context of Uganda Primary Education**

Uganda is a landlocked country straddling the equator between 4 degrees North and 1 degree South and stretching from 29 degrees East and 35 degrees East. The population of Uganda is estimated to be 30 million people of whom about 90% live in rural areas. The proportion of children aged 0 – 14 years is estimated at 48 percent almost half of the total population (UNFIP/Ug.Gov 2010). This population can be divided into three classes; peasants who are the majority of the working population 86%, workers 8%, and middle and upper class 2%. Poor peasants lacking most basic needs constitute the majority of the rural population. The peasants are composed of rural capitalists with substantial non land fixed assets, the middle and poor peasants with limited productive and non productive wealth and the landless labourers. Agricultural production is undertaken by the poor rather that the middle class and rich peasants. Uganda inherited a duo economy characterized by a modern industrialized sector in large urban centres and a rural underdeveloped poor sector. The poverty of the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants co-exists with the influence of a small minority of bureaucratic private businessmen, foreign agents of multinationals and politicians. Uganda depends heavily on aid which amounts to over 60% of government spending. The Uganda government has not been able to construct adequate numbers of primary schools and this task has been left to private sources like churches, parents and business people.
The government of Uganda, Ministry Of Education and Sports (2012) however made the following reforms to ensure that all children have access to quality education:

- In 1993 Primary Education Reform Programme (PERP) was created to improve, the quality and equity of primary Education, train teachers and strengthen capacity for education training and management.
- In 1997, Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) was developed. PEAP identified funding for priority programmes in the social sector that had a high impact on poverty alleviation. The plan integrated structures of investment programmes in the social sector that had a high impact on poverty alleviation. The plan integrated structures of investment programmes with district plans and budgets to address access to primary education.
- Continuous Assessment policy was adopted by Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) in relation to the primary education curriculum and the National Assessment of progress in Education (NAPE). These reforms were meant to provide useful pointers on the quality education.
- The government strengthened the training of teachers through the Primary Education Teacher Development Programme (PETDP) which mainly focused on the improvement of school governance and management among other things.

In an effort to fulfil the universal Millennium Development goals, the government of Uganda introduced free primary education in 1997 that was extended up to 4 children per family. The government took into consideration marginalized groups of the disabled and female children to be included in this figure. Enrolment in primary schools swelled from 2.9 million to 5.6 million and today stands at 8.3 million. The government of Uganda has succeeded in increasing enrolment of children especially in urban areas compared to the rural areas (MDG report 2010).

The government has also adopted other numerous quality imitative, policies and curricula reform like; introduction of thematic curriculum in 2007, which focuses on literacy, numeracy and life skills. Using local languages, revised upper primary curriculum setting management standards and the introduction of basic child friendly standards for schools through revised basic requirements (MDG report 2010).
Statement of the problem

The quality of education in the public (UPE) and some private rural schools is still low. The school infrastructure and educational teaching materials are skill inadequate and poor despite government investment in these schools. Some schools still have untrained teachers while the qualified teachers are not motivated enough to successfully implement the curriculum. This paper identifies and explains failure of rural schools to access quality education compared to urban schools in Uganda.

Purpose

The main purpose of this paper was to identify and explain the constraints and challenges faced by rural schools in their attempt to achieve quality education.

Objectives of the study

1. Establish the status of the infrastructure of schools in the rural districts.

2. Identify the availability of teaching and learning resources in rural schools.

3. Find out the nature and quality of rural pupils in rural schools.

4. Establish the constraints and challenges faced by the process of implementing the national primary curriculum.

Methodology

This study was carried out in two rural districts of Uganda as a case study. Kamuli and Kayunga districts were selected as representative of the rural district in Uganda The method used to
collect data was qualitative where an interview guide was developed for the face to face interactions with the district education officers, the inspectors of schools and teachers. I conducted these interviews myself in these two districts using a checklist. I observed the infrastructure in a few schools in each district. Both districts have poor roads and a number of schools are hard to reach. Both have towns which are small in area with less than 100,000 people. Both districts depend on subsistence agriculture including traditional animal husbandry with a small surplus to sell. Each district has one district education officer and four inspectors who participated in this study as well as four (4) classroom teachers. I did observation in a total of 10 schools, five each in both districts. This observation helped the researcher to confirm information from DEO’s regarding the remoteness, infrastructure in the schools, nature of pupils, competence of teachers and other useful data.

Findings and Discussions

The status of the schools infrastructure

The quality of the school facilities has an indirect effect on learning which is hard to measure in both districts, classroom structures are very poor. With the introduction of UPE programme in 1997 some classrooms have been built especially in schools recently taken over by government from communities which had initiated such schools. Today there are schools with 3 – 4 classrooms yet they have up to 7 classes. One district officer (A) said “seventy (70) percent of the schools in the district do not have adequate classrooms therefore classes are conducted under trees and if it rains to they run to the church or mosque for shelter”. The traditional religious based schools are worse since no repair is being done by government nor the parents or even the foundation bodies. Children in Mbale district were lamenting un-cemented classrooms (Kagoda, 2011). The newly built classrooms have desks and chairs but in the traditional schools some children sit on the floor. “In one school, there were no desks and chairs, the parents brought bricks and pieces of timber were built on top to act as a table and the pupils sat on the floor and wrote the PLE examinations (District A). There are no teachers’ houses and schools cannot find houses to rent in some rural remote schools. Such learning environment doesn’t motivate the children as well as the teachers.
Teacher Competency

Qualified teachers (Grade 3) are not attracted to such remote areas without adequate facilities. In both districts the inspectors of schools reported that untrained and unqualified teachers as well as teachers with fake documents are attracted to such schools. Competence of teachers as mentioned above is questionable. High quality teachers tend to remain in urban schools with urban amenities like piped water, electricity relatively better housing. Schools with access to communication lives like roads, mobile phone network have better teachers some with high qualifications of diploma or degree in primary education. “There is generally academic weakness among teachers in rural schools. They cannot read and write English fluently. There is no reading culture among rural teachers, the newspapers are not available and too expensive for them. Reading materials are absent in rural schools. Teachers who are weak are not allowed to teach in urban schools” (District B). This kind of teacher finds it difficult to interpret and implementing the curriculum books is too difficult for them. “Using textbooks and teaching aids is cumbersome for most teachers therefore they use simple approaches methods of teaching” (District A). Similarly one inspector in district B said “Teachers are not practical, they talk and chalk in the class, they lack a variety of teaching methods”. He added on; There is no electricity in most rural schools in the two districts therefore they do not use audio visual materials like TV video tapes, they are not creative or make teaching material like art and crafts”. (District A). This also means teachers cannot prepare lesson plan and schemes of work at night.

The educational background of teachers before they join teacher training colleges is a big contribution to the poor performance of teachers in Uganda. A decade ago O- level candidates with a minimum of four passes were admitted to teacher training colleges. These teachers with poor passes in subject content are not likely to perform well in theory and practices good pedagogic approaches. Teacher commitment to their work is another issue with rural teachers. In both districts teachers face housing and transportation obstacles therefore they arrive at school late or do not go to school at all. One inspector said “The citrus farm where a rural school was renting rooms for the teachers has given them notice to vacate their house. With no
teachers the school is likely to close!” (District B). In district A, the chairman district service commission said “The head teachers are absent from their schools on pretext that they are in the DEO’s office. This gives the teachers chance to be absent from school as well. The situation is bad because nobody supervises and monitors the teachers in rural schools. The head teachers arrive at 10:00 am. And departs at 2.00 p.m. The teachers also leave the school immediately. Teachers are also frequently absent because they do not expect DEO’s officers to visit such remote schools. This means time devoted to classroom teaching leave alone co-curricular activities is minimal making pupil achievement levels very low. District inspector in district A commented “Absenteeism of head teachers and teachers doesn’t inspire/motivate pupils who lack other role models in these remote areas”. The fact that there are no refresher courses or workshops, there is total lack of teacher professional development. However where NGOs like Plan International, UNICEF to name a few operate, they sometimes organize in-service workshops, thereby teachers gain something to improve their professional practices.

**Instructional Materials**

Tumwebaze (2012) lamented that “we are all aware that government has to buy books for schools every year. But currently, it only buys them once in five years (pg8). This was confirmed by both district education officers in the sample districts. To make the situation worse, some schools have neither libraries nor alternative space to keep school books. The books in such cases are kept in the head teachers office or home.

**Quality of students in rural schools**

The quality of children lives before beginning formal education greatly influences the kind of learners they will be; their healthy, early childhood experiences and home support (UNICEF Report 2000; Phillips 1995, Munoz 2007). Physically and psychologically as well as adequate nutrition is critical for normal brain development of children at an early age. In rural schools of Uganda children are likely not to have educated parents and this confirmed by inspectors interviewed. In district A one said “Parents have little to feed on therefore they have nothing to pack for their children. They go to school hungry and if they take any food it is stale food; left over food for previous dinner.”. Another one added “They have no breakfast and walk long
distances to school 3 – 6 kms (Inspector District B) A coalition of civil society actors started the campaign early this year arguing that providing an education on a rumbling stomach cannot result in meaningful (Mwalimu Team, 2012).

For such children, in large classes of 60 – 100, schooling is not exciting and teachers find it difficult to motivate them. However, to some pupils school is better than home; it is an escape from home chores of cooking, looking for firewood, selling alcohol, digging etc. Children get the opportunity to play with others, share stories with their friends if asked what they want to do in future, they say they want to become lawyers, doctors etc but there are no career guidance programmes for them and no role models in rural villages. The majority of rural children have no access to T.V. the only reading material at home is the Bible or Quran.

Absenteeism is another feature of rural children and there are various causes for this. For the girl child especially in upper primary menstruation is described by Barenzi (2012) as “A bloody barrier to give education” they miss school for 3 -5 days a month because they have no sanitary towels. Girls miss school in case of sickness in the home, and other domestic choices. Boys also miss school on market days because they have to help at their parents stalls. Such children drop out of school with encouragement of their parents, girls go to marry. For boys being near the lake, go fishing or get involved in petty trading.

Parents

According to Monoz (2007) and Purewed (2001) parents have a responsibility to contribute to the learning of their children. However where parents especially mothers are illiterate the likelihood of their children realising their rights to education is slightly diminished. They go on to say illiteracy dis-empowers people from giving the right information with regard to nutrition, health, production of goods. It also inhibits regular school attendance and better performance at school. Parents in the two districts therefore feel they have nothing to say or do regarding the running of primary schools “some are not interested in what goes on in schools” some send their children to school without exercise books and pencils. In district A the inspectors argued that “parents are very poor, they survive on an income below the poverty line. Secondly since parents do not pay any money for their children tuition they feel they have no stake in
education. The majority do not have dreams for their children, they have no time to talk to them and do not read their reports”. With this very low interest in their children’s education, the drop out rate is high.

**The School Management Committees and education quality.**

The School Management Committees in primary schools have the responsibility of monitoring teaching and learning, monitor availability of school facilities like water and sanitation. Locally they are the owners of the schools they manage. *According to government policy, they do not need to have any specialized education, but interest in the school. This is purely voluntary work and no academic calibre required. If they are not well oriented do not know what they are supposed to do in schools* (district offices A and B). Some members of the committee are primary seven drop out or no education at all. They are selected by the foundation body, politicians, alumni of the school and parents. *“Since they are illiterate and not oriented they do not contribute positively to the running of the schools under their care”* (District A) These committee members have failed to persuade parents to provide lunch for their children at school instead they mobilize parents to rise up against head teachers who ask parents food for their children. The truth is these management committees apart from monitoring funds sent by the government to their school, they contribute nothing to the academic side of the school.

**The District Education offices**

The quality of administrative support and leadership is another critical element in school processes both for students and teachers. In decentralized governments at district level sources of income is limited, therefore they have no capacity to fund inspection of schools. District B has 235 government schools but are not sure of the number of private schools. District B has 167 government schools and more than 200 private primary schools. District A has neither government vehicles nor motor bikes to use in the inspection of schools, they use public means. District B has one motor vehicle and three (3) motor bikes which they use to inspect schools. Each inspector is in charge of one sub county. In both districts, the inspectors
said they inspect 20 – 25 schools each quarter in both districts. They both said they focus on the following in the process of inspection:

1. Teaching and learning which includes lesson plans, schemes books, testing and interact with teachers, pupil’s exercise books, testing and extra curricular advices.
2. School facilities – toilets, kitchen, teachers’ housing, meals for children and teachers if any, water or sanitation.
4. Other areas: Teacher’s use of instructional materials
   Evaluation of pupils
   Feedback methods
5. Monitor construction of classrooms. Attend school open days or speech days where have opportunity to talk to large number of parents.

District A is able to visit schools once a year and some schools miss out due to shortage of funds. The Ministry of Education and Sports, Educational Standards Agency (ESA) sends money for this purpose three times a year. This district reported that money arrives late when schools have closed. This money is meant for inspection of government aided schools only and not private schools. However district B receives this money at the beginning of each term and schools are inspected three times a year. Since there are only four inspectors, the school is inspected only once a year. With rural schools which are poverty stricken, with few qualified teachers with questionable qualifications, each school should be inspected at least three times a year.

Challenges

Implementing the primary curriculum by teachers who have difficulties of reading and writing English, the language of instruction is a big challenge. This implies teachers cannot express themselves and are not able to write current English for their pupils. Numeracy skills are also a
challenge to the teachers who teach in these rural schools. Districts A and B confirmed that untrained teachers and weak teachers are posted to the remote hard to reach schools.

Mwalimu Team (2012) said “since the coming of UPE the quality of teaching has declined because of emphasis on quality of pupils who are able to access some education. There is need to deal with the quality of learning” (pg12). There is automatic promotion, no repetition of classes whether a pupil has learnt anything or not.

The thematic curriculum is also a big issue because it is difficult to implement in some schools. The two districts being located along the River Nile and Lake Kyoga tend to have a mixed population. The local languages are not written as text books except Luganda. Some teachers cannot read and write these languages and therefore cannot teach it. Both district have 1 – 3 languages spoken locally and teachers are not trained to teach local languages. There are no textbooks in local language which teachers in the two districts can read and write competently, there are no libraries, no newspapers and the reading culture among teachers is poor.

Teachers face challenge of teaching large classes 60 – 100 and yet they were trained in teacher training colleges to teach 40 – 50 pupils only in a class. Refresher in service courses are not offered in the two rural districts. Lack of teaching/learning materials in schools doesn’t motivate teachers to use a variety of teaching methods to make learning interesting to their pupils. Methods used cannot promote critical thinking problem solving; team work and community involvement. The examination oriented education instead promotes rote learning rather than higher order thinking skills.

The Inspectors of Schools are in a dilemma, they cannot reprimand head teachers and teachers over issues of late coming and absenteeism, and other related issues of funds since they know the scarcity of funds in schools.

The two districts being rural do not have diversified broad based tax resources. The districts get some income from the weekly farmers’ markets, in the big trading centres. This doesn’t bring in enough income to distribute among the various departments including education. “The district has a small tax base” (District B). District A added “local governments have no sources of
income; they depend on funds from the central government. There is no local revenue worthy talking about”. This explains why there is lack of essential, friendly learning/teaching environment in the districts.

According to the ministry Of Education (2012), the access problem was solved, but the following problems were created; Shortage of classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, shortage of teachers, declining achievement levels, and enrolment of under age children. This confirms the above responses from the participants in the study.

**Conclusions**

There are many factors leading to lack of access to quality education in rural districts:

1. The poor infrastructure; classrooms, chairs and desks, latrines, kitchen, teachers’ houses even a play ground.
2. The extreme lack of well qualified teachers some schools have one or two grade three teachers and the rest secondary school drop out. Teachers are hungry, walk long distances and not motivated.
3. Although government has tried to supply a relevant and appropriate text books, they are not enough for the ever increasing number of pupils.
4. The quality of students is relatively poor, they are not inspired to stay in school. They are hungry, walk long distances, no lunch at school, not adequately supported by their parents. This leads to absenteeism and later drop out of school.
5. The school management committees, who are also semi illiterate, do not know their role in schools. They dot monitor the running of schools as expected.
6. The parents who are semi illiterate put little value on education of their children and do not seem to care what happens in the schools. The extreme poverty of the majority of the rural people makes them feel hopeless, since education is very expensive.
7. Education offices in both districts are incapacitated by lack of funds to enable them monitor the schools, buy essential educational materials and organise refresher courses for teachers.

8. With the above factors, access to quality education in rural schools is a dream.

**Recommendations**

Government should build more classrooms, teacher’s houses and latrines for rural schools.

Government should inject more money in primary schools since 45% of the population are children and youths.

Government should recruit primary teachers as a matter of priority to be posted in these remote schools.

School Management Committees should be sensitized by the District Education Office about their role in the education of children in the school they manage.

Local government should be empowered to carry out monitoring activities in all primary schools.

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