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Universal Primary Education in Kenya: The Incongruence Between Its Percieved Success and the Current Situation

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Since its independence in 1963, The Republic of Kenya has committed itself to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Of these goals, accessible primary education in particular has taken great strides in Kenya, but the system is still far from optimum functionality. Many children do not have access to education, while many others have dropped out without completing the primary grades. Still others have no alternative other than private education. Factors including poverty, sickness, inadequate facilities, under-qualified teachers, and a lack of instructional resources have collaboratively led to low literacy scores, unpredictable attendance, a high drop-out rate, and few transferable skills in the workplace. Despite these outcomes from the current situation, there is still no doubt that education is a major stepping stone to the success of a developing nation. Recommendations have been made by scholars and in-field researchers to re-evaluate the effectiveness of current primary schools, to use downward accountability models in district education offices, to encourage community-based fundraising for school needs, and to incorporate practical skills into the primary curriculum.

Education has undeniably contributed to decolonization in all African states, Kenya included. While some of the earliest formal writing in Africa was introduced "through [missionary] work on local languages [which] contributed to the invention of 'tribal identities,'" it was interaction with Europeans that led to the greatest educational reforms (Reid 2009, 127). After the Second World War, soldiers who had served in the army returned home not only with newly-acquired practical skills and training, but also with a deeply broadened perspective on the world outside of Africa and thereby a new perspective on Africa itself. This new perspective sparked what would soon be known as Pan-Africanism, the consciousness that augmented the eventual decolonization of the continent. As Pan-Africanism was in its early stages on the continent, the 1941 Atlantic Charter prompted educated Africans to ask a new question; "Did the fundamental right of all peoples to self-determination and protection against aggression and persecution...not also apply to them (Reid 2009, 242)?" The learning experiences of those who questioned their rights were absolutely vital to their capability to question the new western ideology because access to the charter itself or news about it would be dependent on their grasp of the English language or their ability to read. In a contemporary context, the importance of literacy is still emphasized. By 18 April 2010, President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga had distributed one hundred thousand copies of the draft of the new constitution to northern Kenya and have been encouraging citizens to engage in "civic education (Nation team 2010)." This constitution will bring significant changes to the way the country is run, yet, will a hard copy of the document be any use to the one quarter of Kenyan adults who cannot read (UNICEF 2010)? After all, "education

is, of course, a political weapon... and even a small increase in the proportion of the population which is literate can mean an increase in the number of people [who will] engage in political discourse" (Reid 2009, 240)? The value of literacy in the developing world is not to be underestimated.

Recently, BBC News published an article about a seemingly revolutionary farmer who is "now seeing the practicality of the internet...in rural Kenya. The problem is [he is] the only one" (Ross 2010). While this might be a generalization, this farmer has been able to use his literacy skills to have local forests protected, to find information on how to keep his crop alive, and even to find buyers for his products. Case stories such as these highlight the simple tools that western cultures often take for granted. Despite the obvious benefits of internet use, few rural Kenyans actually make use of these resources because they are unable to do so for various reasons or because they do not understand its use.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals include achieving universal primary education by 2015 (United Nations 2010). Second on the list of humanitarian goals, education is again underscored as an item of extreme importance. On the fact sheet for the education goal, Kenya is celebrated as an example of "what has worked" through its abolition of school-related fees (United Nations 2010). However, Kenya has only reached this point after decades of struggle with its education system, and it is still far from perfect.

The first major move toward educational accessibility occurred in Kenya in 1974 when "formal school fees for the first four grades were abolished" (Somerset 2009, 236). This was an attempt by the Kenya African National Union to achieve universal access by 1980 (Mukundi 2004, 232). Schools were reported to have had great difficulty in supporting the sudden influx of students, and, even though fees had been abolished, non-school fees kept children from the poorest families out of the classroom (Somerset 2009, 237). These non-school fees went toward uniforms, building construction, and other miscellaneous costs, in some cases adding up to more than the original formal school fees (Somerset 2009, 237). Although this was not the case in all schools, Kenya' education still could not be considered universal or free. After the death of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, his successor, Daniel arap Moi abolished non-school fees and implemented school nutrition programs, but schools had difficulty in dealing with the massive influx of students who before this point had not attended school because of high fees (Somerset 2009, 238). Moi also introduced a cost-sharing system, which imposed on parents fees that resembled tuition after the traditional *harambee* (community-based fund raising) system failed to be adequate in funding the needs of each school (Somerset 2009, 243). By 2002, there were 1.3 million children of primary school age who were not enrolled (Dixon, Stanfield,

and Tooley 2008, 243). The deficit in educational need would soon be visited once more.

In 2003, the National Rainbow Coalition government introduced a third version of free primary education (Dixon, Stanfield, and Tooley 2008, 450) which would ensure that, "except with authorisation of district administration, school management committees were prohibited from collecting parental contributions of any kind" (Somerset 2009, 243). All costs would then lie on the government (Mukudi 2004, 232). Despite the accolades awarded to the Kenyan free primary education system, there remain a host of problems associated with it because of insufficient funding. "The government has ultimately failed to guarantee universal access to education that matches both demand and the development needs of the economy" (Omwami and Omwami 2015, 243). While sustainability is being emphasized across development forums, Kenya's education system is not meeting the needs of its learners.

Further, the third free primary education effort in itself was perhaps commenced for the wrong reasons. Somerset (2009) states that "even more than its two predecessors, FPE 3 (the third wave of free primary education) was essentially a political initiative...launched in fulfilment of an election pledge (243)." After he was elected, the new president, Mwai Kibaki, was faced with the task of implementing the new act a mere month before school was scheduled to begin for the year. Overcrowding in primary schools after each of the free primary education efforts was enacted imposed massive strain in the school system. With one million incoming students and no time to gather enough qualified teachers, many students were put under the charge of instructors of questionable skill. The capital, Nairobi, experienced an increase in enrolment of 48.1% (Dixon, Stanfield, and Tooley 2008: 451). The 2004 World Bank report noted that the Kenyan National Union of Teachers needed another 60 000 teachers in addition to the 175 000 already employed (Burnett and Kattan 2004, 62). Anthony Somerset's interviews with primary students who had transferred from government schools to private schools revealed conditions that included descriptions of students whose questions would rarely be answered because of the high number of students in his or her class, or assignments and exercises that were never marked because of the volume of work it would mean for the teacher (Somerset 2009, 248). There were not enough qualified teachers, leaving undertrained citizens to carry out important work. Datta, Phillip, and Verma (2009) state that "the quality of education is becoming more questionable because of high teacher/pupil ratios, inadequate facilities, and a lack of trained teachers" (204). The value of a primary education decreases as its quality decreases.

The student experience is also significantly hindered under conditions where the physical learning environment is insufficient. Kenya's school infrastructure was simply not able to accommodate the overwhelming size of an increase in the student population. Somerset's (2009) interviews also revealed school environments where there were "class[es with] fifty or more pupils," "not enough teachers," and "one desk...sat (in) by around seven pupils" (248). Even if students are resolutely eager to learn, the task is made much more difficult in such cramped and inefficient conditions. One study showed that in most parts of a region called Suba, the population "is so poor that the primary school infrastructure is typically dilapidated and inadequate" (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 209). In addition, some schools are noted to not even have basic toilet facilities (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 209). In these cases, student safety is a legitimate concern. School facilities filled beyond capacity can be structurally unsafe, especially when they are not properly maintained due to tight budgeting. Because of this overcrowding problem, the government schools in many areas are not productive learning environments.

Perhaps it would be understandable for these conditions to exist for a short while and then be improved, but, aside from the massive influx of students in the first few years of the program, many of the problems still remain because of a lack of funding. In 1997, each student in Kenya was allotted an average of 2774 Kenya Shillings per year, but this amount has decreased by more than half to a scant 1020 Kenya Shillings per child (Omwami and Omwami 2010, 251). Of this allowance, 70% is spent on salaries and allowances, leaving little for other essential teaching resources (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 204). How is this financial deficit being countered? Omwami and Omwami (2010) state that "even under current assumptions, parents will continue to shoulder an almost 50% of the total cost of primary education" (251). Kibaki's promise stated that no child should be excluded from primary education, so the alternative is that many of the poorest students are forced to enter the school system under less than ideal conditions, which will be discussed later in greater detail. In other cases, the inability to pay for school provokes many students to drop out altogether.

The dropout rate is representative of the Kenyan primary school system's failure to accommodate all students. Mukudi (2004) reports that the 2002 completion primary school completion rate was at a mere 47%, meaning that over half of all students did not complete primary school (232). Many students have obligations at home, which may include required farm work (Burnett and Kattan 2004, 62); caring for siblings or ailing parents; (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 204) or any other prevailing tasks. These activities reduce time spent on homework and in the classroom. Another contributor to this drop-out rate is KCPE (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education) sifting (Somerset 2009, 241).

Students in the seventh grade are expected to meet and maintain high standards before being considered for secondary education. Evaluations include extensive and expensive testing. Many students opt or are instructed to repeat the seventh grade. If, after their second attempt at qualifying, they do not meet the requirements, many students drop out. On the topic of infrastructure, Datta, Phillip, and Verma (2009) explain how even a lack of toilets causes post-pubescent girls to drop out for sanitary reasons (209). It is clear that any number of factors can lead to a student dropping out of school, but the lack of accommodation made for these students is equally clear.

Despite Kenya's decently high standard of living, HIV/AIDS is still prevalent in the country. Approximately 11% of all Kenyan children below age 15 have lost one or both parents to the disease or illness (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 204). Orphaned children are at an especially high risk of dropping out of primary school because of their need to survive. Even children who have lost one parent likely have extensive responsibilities at home and thus cannot afford to spend as much of their time or energy on their education. Even though uniforms are stated to be mandatory, because of Kibaki's promise to not let any child be excluded from having an education, many orphaned and vulnerable children are forced to attend school with no uniforms, or with tattered, dirty, or outdated ones. Datta, Phillip, and Verma (2009) admit the unfortunate truth that corporate punishment for such violations is rampant in government primary schools (209). They state that students are often given maintenance responsibilities at the school or sometimes even at the homes of their teachers, a scenario in which sexual abuse is not uncommon. If female students become pregnant (note: many students who are given such punishments are significantly older than their peers), they are no longer even allowed to attend school until the pregnancy is over. Mobile pastoral communities also have accessibility trouble with primary schools. Some feel that many past "measures are shown to have little impact on increasing access and participation of [their communities] in primary education; for they have usually been introduced without serious consideration of the prevailing socio-economic conditions" (Sifuna 2005, 499). Unfortunately for all of these students, overpopulated schools makes differentiated instruction or even accommodations very difficult, and students must often repeat grades until they are able to attend often enough to pass, that is, if they do not drop out.

In addition to his promise to remove all education-related costs, Kibaki, also promised to create a total of five hundred thousand jobs per year, a number that happens to mirror the number of people predicted to enter into the job market each year (King 2005, 424). This meant that students needed to be well-prepared for these new jobs, and that alterations to the curriculum needed to be made. In 1985, six new subjects were added to the curriculum, but since then, no major

changes have been made. This could be a detrimental fault. In spite of this, there is definitely awareness among leading guardians of Kenyan education. Senior deputy officer of primary education, Stephen Karaba, stated that "building a proper school system eventually will help every level of society" (Burnett and Kattan 2004, 62). This is a common belief amongst most societies, but why does it not seem to be happening here? Again, the recurring problem is not only the lack of funding, but also time. While formal education in the west has been developing for thousands of years, eastern Africa in particular has been forced to quickly adapt to an entirely new system. Improvement will require time.

In light of the problems in government schools, many Kenyan families have resorted to private education. There has been a shift in which private education is no longer a tool of socio-economic or racial segregation, but a necessary alternative for parents who demand quality in their children's education. Strangely, many of those privately educated are among Kenya's poorest children, especially in the slums. Evidence shows that "a fee-paying private...education sector...has 'mushroomed' in developing countries to meet the needs of the poor, in part because of perceived...inadequacies of state education" (Dixon, Stanfield, and Tooley 2008, 451). "There is generally an unacceptably high level of utilization of private schools in the slums by the poorest," a phenomenon which occurs because there are not enough schools in poor areas, and of those schools, spots tend to be filled by the least poor in the area (Ezeh et al. 2010, 31). This phenomenon can be found in the reverse in non-slum areas where those of higher socio-economic status prefer private schooling, which in these cases are of higher quality (Ezeh et al. 2010, 31). The private schools that the poor are obliged to attend tend to be of lesser quality (Dixon, Stanfield, and Tooley 2008, 451). If any student has no other alternative than to attend a private school, then Kenya's free primary education movement has failed.

Through the discrepancies in private and public education, socio-economic discrepancies are further highlighted, and with it, attention is brought to potential ways of addressing Kenya's educational woes. Ezeh et al. (2010) suggest that the government consider implementing "unequal treatment of unequal...to improve on educational opportunities and equity" (31). The logic behind this idea is that equal treatment for unequal people has clearly not worked, and reasons for this lie primarily in money. After the first two movements toward free primary education, the students who remained in school scored high enough on standardized tests to remain in school and they were also from families who could afford it. With that said, it is the poor who are at the highest risk of not completing their primary education. By giving increasing assistance to families in order of decreasing socio-economic status, children will be given what will resemble, if not be, equal opportunity.

Sustainability will forever be a concern, and the case of education is no exception. *Harambee* fundraising activities were a primary emphasis after the 1974 free primary education movement (Somerset 2009, 239). Communities were expected to collaboratively raise the money or labour needed to maintain their schools. Although *harambee* was not sufficient in maintaining the entirety of school needs, it could potentially be reintroduced as an important cultural tool for the maintenance of specific school needs. For example, only a single entity such as the school building could be dependent on *harambee*, or perhaps it could go toward the salary of a teacher chosen by the community. The rest of the school necessities would be funded by government-granted per capita amounts based on the salary of the parents (if there are parents) of each child. With this kind of ownership over community education, there would be added onus on that community to provide its children with quality education that is suited to that community's collective needs.

Finally, there is the aspect of downward accountability. Instead of presenting an obligation on the population to meet the demands of higher authorities on the topic of education, benefits might easily be found in the obligation of administrators to meet the needs of the beneficiaries, or in this case, of Kenya's children (Datta, Phillip, and Verma 2009, 213). This simplistic approach has been piloted by Concern Worldwide Kenya, an organization devoted to creative effective partnerships between groups whose interests overlap.

While some researchers call for a thorough study to be completed on Kenya's primary education system, the past and current evidence presented here depicts a clear picture of the progression, inadequacies, and areas of improvement for free primary education. Not all children are being given the opportunity to receive a primary education, nor is the current system capable of catering to the needs of over half of its youth. There are resources that could be harnessed to improve the situation, namely community commitment and accountability. Kenya has taken drastic strides in the development of its education programs, but there are still many improvements that need to be made before it should be advertised that the country has indeed achieved the making available of primary education to all its citizens.

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