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Full Length Research Paper

Achieving equity in education in Kenya: some preliminary thoughts

[1]James Alan Oloo* and [2]Anthony Wando Odek

[1]University of Regina, Canada
[2]St Paul's University, Kenya

Abstract

Education has historically been viewed as an effective way of reducing socioeconomic disadvantage (Oloo, 2010). This is because quality education is capable of empowering and creating more opportunities for less advantaged children and improving their chances for success in life as adults. While access to primary education has been enhanced in Kenya since the introduction of free primary education, achievement gap between students from rich and poor families in the standardized Kenya Certificate of Primary Examination has persisted. Using extended literature review, this study explores education inequity in Kenya. It recommends that the government of Kenya promote early childhood learning among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, overhaul its admission policies to secondary schools, and revise its education funding formula.

Keywords: Education inequity, standardized tests, Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, achievement gaps, socioeconomic status.

INTRODUCTION

"Quality education for all" is a popular slogan among many African countries that are implementing universal primary education policy (Reche et al., 2012). Like in most developing countries, quality education is one of the key national development goals of the Kenyan government. The country adopted a universal Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 2003 which saw a significant increase in primary school enrollment. Indeed, because of the FPE policy, more marginalized children could now go to school. They do not have to pay for their tuition, and can receive free textbooks and school supplies from the government. This policy increased access to education especially for children from marginalized families. However, increased enrolments have been blamed for larger class sizes and declining teacher morale (Swamura and Sifuna, 2008).

Despite increased access to education, there is growing inequity in academic performance of children from rich and from poor backgrounds. The aim of this study is to explore the issue of educational inequity in Kenya. The study attempts this using examples from private and public primary school systems in Kenya.

Statement of the problem

Education has historically been viewed as an effective way of reducing socioeconomic disadvantage (Oloo, 2010). This is especially because quality education is capable of empowering and creating more opportunities for less advantaged children and improving their chances for success in life as adults while at the same time breaking the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and inequality. Yet, as Tavernise (2012) found, achievement gap between students from rich and poor families is widening, a phenomenon that he posits, threatens to dilute education's levelling effects.

In general, children from affluent families tend to perform better in school than their counterparts from poor families (Tavernise, 2012; Willingham, 2012) due to various challenges faced by disadvantaged children. While arguing that the difference in academic

*Corresponding Author E-mail: oloo200j@uregina.ca

performance by children from rich and poor backgrounds cannot be exclusively attributed to money, Willingham (2012) suggested that wealthier parents have more resources to provide for their children while disadvantaged families are subject to a lot of stress, such as, crowded homes, less parental involvement in children's education, low teacher expectation, and the fact that poor children are more likely to be less engaged in school and befriend other poor children who are themselves not engaged in school. Despite being an important policy issue, education inequity has not received much attention in Kenya. This study is designed with this gap in mind. It is hoped that the study will increase the level of understanding of educational inequality in Kenya and provoke debate on this important issue.

Literature review

The issue of education equity is important especially because formal education is necessary for individual and social wellbeing. Principles of fairness, equity and social justice postulate that all children, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds, have an equal start in life. In the United Kingdom, Audit Commission (2010) report, *Giving children a healthy start*, concluded that an equal start in life is vital for children's health and hopes. Kenya's Vision 2030 underscores the importance of achieving equity in education and other socioeconomic outcomes.

Indeed, Article 53(1) (e) of the Constitution of Kenya provides that every child has a right to free and compulsory basic education. Chapter 8 Section 7 of the Children Act of 2001 also provides for the child's right to education. It states that every child shall be entitled to education the provision of which shall be the responsibility of the government and the parents. It provides further that "Every child shall be entitled to free basic education which shall be compulsory in accordance with Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child."

Kenya has two broad types of schools that are formally recognized – public and private schools. In the past decades, non-formal centers have also evolved and taken various forms including community schools (Onsomu et al., 2004). Most Kenyan schools are public and the government is responsible for payment of teachers' salaries, subsidizes the costs of textbooks and school feeding programs, and has an oversight in the country's education system in the form of curriculum development. Usually, the government and local authorities pay salaries of non-teaching staff. Community involvement in public schools is mainly in the form of fundraising for construction of school buildings (Onsomu et al., 2004).

Private schools are generally owned by private entrepreneurs, religious organizations, and trusts that manage and finance the schools through school fees and contributions from the government and sponsors. They take various forms including relatively low-cost and more expensive schools. Among the former are also "private schools that are unregistered/unrecognized, which are often missing from official data and statistics" (Dixon, 2012, p. 186). The latter include International School of Kenya where tuition, excluding fees, range from $10,400 for pre-kindergarten to $20,800 for Grade 12 students per year (International School of Kenya, 2012). Students in private schools tend to do generally better than those in public schools. In fact, Dixon (2012) found that "children seem to do better in low-cost private schools compared to government ones" (p. 186). It is worth noting that a number of high cost private schools do not offer Kenyan school curriculum, but rather follow curriculum from the United Kingdom and North America. For this paper, all private schools are grouped together.

Despite effort by the government and various stakeholders to provide students from public primary schools with good and quality education, there is a wide gap between educational outcomes for students from poor backgrounds and those from relatively well to do backgrounds, especially those attending private schools. Consequently, the majority of the students getting places in the top secondary schools are those from private schools hence creating disparity in access to top performing secondary schools (Ngugi, 2007).

While Kenya has high average education outcomes, especially at primary level, it is far from achieving equity in education. According to official Kenya Ministry of Education reports (Oduor, 2012), in 2011, 776,214 candidates wrote a national standardised test in Grade 8 called Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). Of these, only 562,761, or 72.5%, were been selected to advance to Form One (Grade 9) while over 210,000 missed admission to secondary schools. For most of the 210,000 students, the only options available are to repeat Grade 8 and write KCPE examination again, or quit formal education altogether with Grade 8 as their highest level of education.

Further the structure of education system does not go far enough to eradicate inequity in education. Of the 562,761 students who will be joining Form One, the top 10,282 students are expected to join national schools. National schools refer to a 'select' few schools where the best students from across the country are admitted upon finishing KCPE.

The next best students join provincial or county schools. There are eight provinces in Kenya. Except for Nairobi, each Kenyan province includes a number of districts. As an illustration, Rift Valley province covers over 40 districts, is about an area of 173,854 square kilometres, an area larger than Austria, Luxembourg and

Switzerland combined and with a population of about 10 million. The best students, after selection to national schools is completed, go to provincial schools. In 2011, provincial schools were allocated some 138,479 seats 75,431 for boys and 63,048 spaces for girls (Oduor, 2012).

After Kenyan students write KCPE examinations, national schools select the top students. When they are done, provincial schools do their selections. The students who are left are selected by district schools. Inequity is thus ingrained in this process. Kenyan students are not only discriminated based on their gender and socioeconomic background, but the system of admission to Form One is also stratified based on performance in just one standardized examination, KCPE. By the time these students join Form One, those in National Schools already have more advantage compared to those in District Schools.

At the end of Form Four (Grade 12), all students in the country write a standardized national examination, Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Although those who meet bare minimum requirements can join Kenyan public universities, they generally do so as self-sponsored students as opposed to students who perform above the cut off-point for publicly funded students, and are admitted to public universities. Those who are self sponsored are usually those who score less than the cut off point for admission to public universities as publicly funded students. They are likely to be proportionately more students from poor schools, and many poor families are unlikely to afford to send their children to universities as privately sponsored students.

Richards (2008) notes that "it is almost universally the case that low education levels condemn people to fail in a modern industrial economy" (p. 1). Yet, most children from poor families do not get effective pre-primary education, and when in primary school, are generally destined to go to secondary schools that are unlikely to perform well in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Thus, rich kids attend good pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, and have a better chance of performing well in KCSE, and joining universities in Kenya.

A myriad of evidence exists on the correlation between education attainment and employment levels and earnings. For instance, Howe (2011) noted that "It would seem that the critical importance of education should be patently obvious. This is the Information Age, when people get paid largely on the basis of what they know. …The financial stakes turn out, in fact, to be large; unexpectedly large" (p. 4). There is a broad consensus that early childhood development is considered the most important stage in building a learning foundation for all later learning (Lee and Burkam, 2002; Klein and Knitzer, 2007). Studies indicate that the skills children need to succeed at school start to develop early in life, well before they reach school age (Lee and Burkam, 2002). Hence, early intervention is a more effective investment than remedial or compensatory interventions in human capital later in life (Freeman and Bochner, 2008). Indeed, a number of early intervention programs such as Head Start in Canada, Early Head Start and Even Start Family Literacy Program in the United States, and Early Childhood-Invest to Grow initiative and National Early Childhood Development Strategy in Australia are based on such studies (Freeman and Bochner, 2008). These programs generally aim to improve long-term outcomes for children especially those who are educationally at risk such as those from low socioeconomic and marginalised backgrounds.

Frigo et al. (2003) argue that early childhood learning helps set strong foundations for lifelong learning and parental engagement with their children's education and development. Frigo et al suggest that it is thus possible that achievement gap between children from rich and a poor background are symptomatic of inadequate educational progress in the early years of schooling of children from poor backgrounds.

A number of studies have been conducted in the United States on effects of early childhood education and which may have implication to educational out comes in Kenya. Before starting preschool, for example, "on average, the cognitive scores of children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60% above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group" (Klein and Knitzer, 2007, p. 2. See also Lee and Burkam, 2002). At age 4 years, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even larger. Klein and Knitzer argued that by the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in grade three, they know about 12,000 words. Grade three students from low-income families with undereducated parents who do not talk to them very much have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers (Klein and Knitzer, 2007).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This research takes a qualitative approach geared towards the achievement of the study objectives. It is mainly based on document studies particularly from existing or fairly accessible academic and government records. Review of literature and other documents is relevant to this study because it provides the opportunity to study trends over time and re-analyze the data from a new perspective with a view to gaining new insights (Fielding, 2004). However, potential weakness of this methodology is that the documents could be inaccurate or of questionable authenticity, incomplete as locating

Table 1. Top 100 candidates in the 2006 KCPE exams by category of school

Province	Public schools	Private schools	Total
Coast	20 (17.7%)	93 (82.3%)	113 (100.0%)
Central	17 (14.4%)	101 (85.6%)	118 (100.0%)
Eastern	71 (55.9%)	56 (44.1%)	127 (100.0%)
Nairobi	16 (14.1%)	97 (85.5%)	113 (100.0%)
R. Valley	29 (22.3%)	101 (77.7%)	130 (100.0%)
Western	57 (46.3%)	66 (53.6%)	124 (100.0%)
Nyanza	59 (51.7%)	55 (48.2%)	114 (100.0%)
N. Eastern	65 (63.1%)	38 (36.9%)	104 (100.0%)

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council, 2006.

suitable document may pose challenges (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Research Design

This study is based on an extensive literature review gathered from different sources. Anderson (1998) posits that successful research is based on knowledge, research and thinking that precedes it. Hence, according to Anderson, literature review is a research in its own right as it involves many of the same steps of doing original research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the study findings, the continued and consistent dominance of private schools in the KCPE is quiet a clear indication of the rising disparity in quality between public and private schools. Performance at KCPE shows that most of the students making transition to top secondary schools are from private schools. This creates inequality to access of opportunities to national and top performing provincial schools (Ngugi, 2007). For instance in the 2000 KCPE results, students from private schools accounted for most of the top 100 positions in all the provinces. In Nairobi, a private school called Makini Schools claimed 22 slots out of the top 100 positions.

Nationally, only 24 out of 138 students (17.4%) in the top 100 positions came from public schools. Nairobi province ranked fourth among the districts with a mean of 272, marginally higher than the national mean by two points. But these figures mask large disparities (African Population and Health Resource Centre, 2008), for instance, the bulk, 97 (85.5%) came from private schools compared to only 16 (14.1%) public schools (see Table 1).

A further comparison of the examination results released by the Kenya National Examination Council for the years 2007 and 2008 respectively clearly revealed that public primary schools have continued to perform poorly academically as compared to their private counterparts. The 2007 KCPE results show that private schools performed better than public taking 82.5% of the top 100 positions (KNEC, 2008). Comparison of 2008 KCPE results at provincial level confirms that out of the top 100 positions in KCPE performance, private schools were leading in five out of the eight provinces (Nyokabi, 2009). In 2010 KCPE results, all top ten candidates were from private schools and out of 121 students in the top 100 positions nationally, only 26 came from public schools (KNEC, 2010). It is thus evident that students in private schools do better in KCPE examinations than those in public schools.

There are numerous reasons for performance gap between public and private primary schools. Sawamura and Sifuna (2008) assert that the government tends to focus on the quantitative expansion of education, paying less attention to value, significance, and effects of education for individuals. Gathigia (2012) found that inequity between private and public primary schools in Nairobi existed in terms of resources, quality of teachers and teacher/pupil ratio. Reche, Bundi, Riungu, Nthia, and Mbugua (2012) also attributed the relatively poor performance to inadequate learning resources, inadequate monitoring by head teachers, understaffing, high teacher turnover, inadequate prior preparation, lack of motivation for teachers, large workload, absenteeism by both teachers and students, and little or no support from parents. Similarly, Onsomu, Mungai, Oulai, Sankale, and Mujidi (2004) argue that high-performing schools tend to be relatively well equipped, have smaller class sizes, and numerous academic and extracurricular activities.

The apparent gap is also attributed to investments levels. Tavernise (2012) posits that the achievement gap between poor and rich children can be attributed to the fact that on average, wealthy parents invest more time and money than ever before in their children (such as in extracurricular activities and additional academic support in the form of private tutors for their children as well as

being children's schooling), while lower-income families, which are now more likely than ever to be headed by a single parent, are increasingly stretched for time and resources. This has been particularly true as more parents try to position their children for college, which has become ever more essential for success in today's economy (Tavernise, 2012).

Generally, public schools are sponsored in the implementation of free primary education and the Kenyan Ministry of Education has a system in which all public primary schools receive funding from the Ministry. In 2007/2008, the annual amount was 1,020 Kenyan shillings (14 US$) per student, which was earmarked for purchasing educational materials, such as textbooks and notebooks, as well as for the repairing of school facilities and to ensure quality assurance (Sawamura and Sifuna, 2008). However, the annual budget is often inadequate in the face of increased enrolment and the fact that public schools generally do have other sources of income. A study carried by Uwezo (2011), a nongovernmental organisation, found that students in private schools perform better than their counterparts in the public schools in the three east African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Uwezo also noted that in literacy and numeracy tests for students aged 10-16 years, the average score for private and public schools in Kenya was 83% and 71% respectively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KCPE performance illustrates that most of the students making transition to top schools are from private primary schools and this creates inequality in access to top secondary schools. This is because they record better performance than their counterparts in public schools. To remedy this disparity, Klein and Knitzer (2007) suggest two broad actions: 1) using an intentional curriculum and 2) providing teachers with the kinds of professional development and supports geared towards nurturing and emotionally supportive classrooms. They describe intentional curriculum as one that is content driven, research-based, emphasizes active engagement with children, includes attention to social and regulatory skills, and is responsive to the student's cultural background. "An intentional curriculum enhances positive peer and teacher interactions, and is developmentally appropriate (Klein and Knitzer, 2007, p. 3). To these two recommendations, we argue that the government funding formula for primary schools should be in such a way that the disparity between public and private schools with respect to resources and teachers is minimized. Early learning is an important investment, particularly for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom have limited or no access to written language and books before starting school. Therefore the government should come up with policies that ensure targeted access to early learning for children from poor families (Freeman and Bochner, 2008).

Develop and enhance positive partnerships between school and families and communities while encouraging parental involvement in their children's education. As well, there is need to encourage the introduction of children from poor families to book-reading techniques at an early age.

Kenya can learn from countries whose educational policies that have had greater success in achieving equity in education. Such countries include Finland. While the two countries are very different, Finland has recorded some of the smallest achievement gaps between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. Among the key features of Finnish school system are: prompt identification of students who are at risk of, or are falling behind; small schools and small class sizes (of 20-30 students); and collaboration between schools and cross-disciplinary teams such as social workers, family, and health workers to address challenges facing the students (Kupiainen et al., 2009).

The rich-poor education gap being experienced in Kenya today is perhaps the greatest policy challenge facing the country's education sector. The inequities based on socioeconomic status are a major concern especially because 1) they are socially unjust. They mean that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are denied the same educational opportunities as other students; 2) the gaps mean that students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations, and positions of influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds; 3) the gaps in school outcomes indicate a waste of talents, skills and resources. They are, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity (Cobbold, 2010).

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