Socio-Economic Causes of Low Internal Efficiency of the Universal Primary Education Programme in Eastern Uganda

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Abstract

Internal efficiency, the extent to which the internal objectives of a programme, institution, or system have been achieved is one of the yardsticks for determining the performance of an education system. In the current study, internal efficiency was taken to mean the degree to which the UPE (Universal basic Education) programme has met its internal objectives of increasing access/participation, retention of pupils up to completion of primary education, and elimination of disparities and inequalities in primary education in Uganda. Ten districts in Eastern Uganda were randomly selected to participate in this study. Respondents included Head teachers, teachers, parents, pupils, and officials from the Ministry of Education and Sports. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The research instruments included questionnaires, interview guides, participant observation checklist, and focus group discussion guides; while the responses were collected using a voice recorder and digital camera. Quantitative data was analysed by computation of percentages and summation of enrollment statistics obtained from the participating schools. On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed by coding and identification of common themes in the responses. The study findings revealed low school enrollment with most schools operating at excess capacity; school attendance was irregular for both pupils and teachers, completion rate was only 37%, the near gender parity witnessed in lower classes dwindles as one progresses towards primary seven. The study recommended that the government should redress the socioeconomic factors that bar children from enrolling, attending and completing the primary cycle of education.

Keywords: Internal efficiency; Economics of education; Education and society

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, education is considered vital to economic growth. Neo-classical economic theories hold that growth is driven by technological change, which is a product of education and is perceived as an endogenous, separate factor in the production process (Ablett and Stengesol, 2000; Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1995; World Bank, 1995). Literature regarding the economics of education has long aptly explained the incentive for public and private investment in education. Psacharopoulos’ studies reveal that public and private rates of return to education are generally highest at the primary level and that this trend is more evident in low-income countries (Psacharopoulos, 1995).
Given the evident benefits of basic education, one would expect all children of school age to be enrolled in school but this is not the picture in several poor countries (Hillman and Jenkner, 2004). Economists explain this occurrence from the supply and demand point of view (Psacharapoulos, 1994; Ayot and Briggs, 1992; Hillman and Jenkner, 2004). They argue that demand for education is low in such poor countries because poor families must meet their basic needs—food and shelter—first. In addition to tuition, books, and school supplies, there may be expenses for transportation and school uniform which poor families cannot adequately incur.

In economically deprived areas, access to education is affected by what Ndabazinhle, (2004) calls “household barriers”. Such barriers according to him include family resource levels, and consist of direct and indirect costs. Direct costs in education refer to tuition fees, cost of books and stationery, cost of school uniform and other school requirements. On the other hand, indirect costs relate to family values, domestic work, and household chores foregone by a student in school (opportunity cost in the pure economist’s jargon), disability and poverty (Lerotholi, 2001; Ndabazinhle, 2004).

There is a lot of evidence to show that a child’s education takes place both at home and at school (Ezewu, 1983; Perelman and Santin, 2005; Muwagga and Kaahwa, 2008). Factors like parents’ level of education, number of siblings in the home, socioeconomic status of the family, parents’ economic activities need not be adumbrated since they all determine whether or not the concerned child will get the necessary facilitation to go to school. On the other hand, gender, distance from school, geographical factors like weather, and cultural practices directly affect enrollment, attendance, retention, and school completion.

The salient labour source for most families is the husband, wife, and the children in the family; although very few households use ox-drawn ploughs for cultivation. Farm activities are characterized by peak periods of planting and harvesting and both activities are done manually by the family members. It is possible that this set up has negatively impacted on the internal efficiency of the UPE programme in the region.

**Contextualization of the study**

Several Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries have implemented universal access to primary education in response to the Education For All (EFA) declaration (Avenstrup et al, 2004; UNESCO 2005; Cameroon, 2005; Coulson, 2003; Aguti, 2002; Nzomo, 2009). Uganda launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in 1997. Launch of the programme has had several implications on key indicators of efficiency especially retention and completion rates and it has also affected enrollment. A study by UNESCO, (2005) estimated Uganda’s Primary Completion Rate (PCR) at 55% at that time, which is too general and therefore shows little about the primary completion in particular regions of the country.

The International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP), (2000) emphasizes that completion rate is best assessed using the student flow analysis. Consequently, primary completion rate for the current study was estimated using a cohort approach. Completion rate was estimated by taking the enrollment of primary seven pupils as a percentage of the enrollment of primary one pupils for each cohort. The period 2001 – 2005 was preferred because all the schools that participated in the study had the enrollment statistics. Muwanika, (2010) emphasizes that a cohort survey requires detailed and disaggregated data, and is therefore more appropriate in well established schools that keep such records.

Bategeka and Okurut, (2005) revealed that there is evidence of a significant drop-out rate of pupils from the primary education cycle. They revealed that of the 2,159,850 pupils that were enrolled in primary schools in 1997 after launching the UPE programme, only 485,703 (23%) reached primary seven in 2003. Their study revealed that pupils abandon school for various reasons, but the most common causes include lack of interest (46%), family responsibilities (15%), and sickness (12%). Deininger, (2003) found out that the introduction of UPE in Uganda was associated with a significant increase in enrollment by the poor.

In the current study, internal efficiency was taken to mean the degree to which the UPE programme has met its internal objectives of increasing access/participation, retention of pupils up to completion of the primary cycle, and elimination of disparities and inequalities in primary education. It was assessed by examining regularity of school attendance by the pupils, and completion of the primary cycle of education. This was based on the argument by several economists like Levin, (1974), Hanushek, (1979), Sachs and Larrain, (1993), Ablett and Siengesol, (2000), Olaniyan and Okemakinde, (2000), and Okumu et al, (2008) who equate internal efficiency to survival and/or school completion.

The study therefore sought to try and establish the effect of the above-described socio-economic set up on the internal efficiency of the UPE programme in the study area. It was thought that if this is not assessed, government and other stakeholders would continue spending colossal sums of money when the benefits are not trickling to the intended beneficiaries. Universal Primary Education (UPE) has been defined as the provision of basic education to all Ugandan children of primary school going age (6+ years) (MoES, 2004). In the current study, primary education was limited to the formal education that takes place in primary schools from Primary one (P1) to Primary seven (P7) in Uganda.
Statement of the problem

Education economists argue that the opportunity cost of educating children in poor families is very high because in such families children are a source of labour on family farms, work to supplement household income, do household chores, care for siblings, or care for sick family members (World Bank, 1995; Psacharopoulos, 1994; UNESCO, 2000). This consequently affects school enrollment, attendance, and completion. On the other hand, governments are spending heavily on the provision of education, implying that if the communities cannot afford to send their children to school; or if enrolled children do not remain and complete school – dropout and lapse into illiteracy - such resources are wasted. The problem of this study therefore was to try and establish how such socioeconomic dynamics have affected the internal efficiency of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in Uganda with particular focus on Eastern Uganda.

Objective of the Study

To find out the socio-economic causes of low internal efficiency of the UPE programme in Eastern Uganda.

Research question

What are the socio-economic causes of the low internal efficiency of the UPE programme in Eastern Uganda?

Methodology

In this study, the researchers adopted a cross sectional survey design. According to Gay, (1996), Amin, (2005), Mugenda and Mugenda, (2003), this design is appropriate for studies of this nature. This design was deemed appropriate because the study required collecting data from a cross section of respondents regarding enrollment, attendance, and completion in the selected schools in the study area. The findings enabled the researchers to assess the socioeconomic causes of low internal efficiency in the study area. A total of 560 participants informed the study. These were head teachers, teachers, parents, pupils, and Ministry of Education and Sports officials. These were selected by simple random sampling, purposive sampling, convenient and stratified random sampling. Ten districts (Kamuli, Luuka, Bugiri, Mayuge, Busia, Tororo, Kalro, Namutumba, Butaleja, and Buyende) in Eastern Uganda were randomly selected out of a total of 32 districts in the region. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The research instruments included questionnaires, secondary sources (documentary analysis), interview guides, participant observation checklist, and focus group discussion guides; while the responses were collected using a voice recorder and digital camera. Copies of enrollment statistics were obtained from the schools that participated in the study. Quantitative data was analysed by computation of percentages and summation of enrollment statistics obtained from the participating schools. On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed by coding and identification of common themes in the responses. This enabled the researchers to compile the study findings as presented in the next section.

Presentation of the study findings

The study analysed school attendance, and school completion and how they have been affected by the socioeconomic set up described above. Survival meant staying in school for the whole day and attending school regularly; while completion meant being in school from Primary one to Primary seven without transferring to another school or dropping out of school. Enrollment data by class and gender was collected from all participating schools for five cohorts. The data obtained is summarized in the table 1. The table shows enrollment statistics per year for the schools that participated in the study.

The study revealed the following as the significant socio-economic mechanisms that explain the low internal efficiency of the UPE Programme in Eastern Uganda. All (100%) head teachers interviewed revealed that children participate in planting and harvesting of especially rice and millet during the relevant seasons. They further explained that in some cases children are asked to stay at home and look after their siblings when the parents have gone to the gardens; yet in other areas children are required to assist in collecting papyrus reeds from the swamps used for making papyrus mats for sale.

80% of the head teachers also pointed out that boys in particular are required to look after cattle, which bars them from enrolling in school, attending regularly, and completing the primary cycle of education hence explaining the low internal
Table 1. Summary of Enrollment per Cohort in the Study area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total enrollment for each cohort in the selected schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>12,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>8,536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Enrollment</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distance from school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance from school</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 0 – 1 kms</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 1 – 2 kms</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 2 – 5 kms</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 More than 5 kms</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

efficiency. This was compounded by a child of school-going age found at home during school time who gave the following testimony:

*My father asked me to go and help him to plant rice. I missed school for a whole month until we finished planting the rice........... during harvesting time, I will not go to school because I have to chase away birds from eating the rice...........I want to go to school but I cannot refuse to do what my father has told me to do (Interview with a boy found at home during school time in Butaleja district).*

It was also revealed by 87% of the head teachers that there is popular belief in the region that when you educate a girl you are educating somebody’s future wife; therefore under conditions of scarcity of resources, many poverty stricken homes give priority to the boys at the expense of the girls.

The parents (89%) on the other hand revealed that the majority of them are only willing to send their children to school at lower levels, but after Primary five the situation is different as such children are looked at more as sources of labour and wealth than school pupils. Even more important was the revelation that sending children to school is very expensive, involving payment of various dues levied by the schools like development fees and feeding fees; buying of school uniform and scholastic materials; and above all such a child could be more productive in the garden according to many parents. One of the parents put it this way:

*These days life is very expensive, I cannot afford the fees for all the seven children in the family, so if one can attend school up to P5, he can give the young ones a chance then he can start his own life. We thought that the president was going to pay for everything but it is not the case; in the village where does one get money to pay fees for all children? The children who would have helped with the farming activities are the very children that are supposed to go to school (Interview with a parent in Kamuli district).*

The study findings also revealed that pupils do not attend school regularly. Irregular school attendance was reportedly common on rainy days, during planting and harvesting seasons, after lunch many pupils do not return to class; and for the girls in upper primary, it was very common. Distance from school was one of the factors that bar pupils, teachers, and head teachers from reporting to school daily. The table below shows the distance of pupils and teachers’ homes from school.

Table 2 reveals that the majority (86%) of the teachers and 68% of the pupils stay at least 2kms away from school which is long. It implies walking at least four kilometers daily.
The majority of the head teachers (77%) also reported that on market days over half of the pupils do not attend school because either they are requested to assist their parents as vendors, or some of the children themselves carry out petty trade activities that keep them away from school.

Furthermore, 96% of the head teachers revealed that it is only children from the very poor families that attend the UPE schools. Such children come with poverty-riddled minds, hence school is not one of their priorities; they instead think along the lines of petty trade, grazing cattle, fishing, growing rice, and marriage.

The majority of the teachers (72%) on the other hand reported that boys who are 15 years and above are required to undergo circumcision which is a cultural practice of initiating boys into manhood among the Bagishu; or some children simply enjoy participating in the festivities associated with the initiation practices of the Bagishu in the relevant years. This bars them from attending school for several days. Bagishu is one of the dominant tribes in the study area.

Most pupils (79%), and teachers (88%) alike, don't attend school on rainy days because of the poor village paths that are rendered cumbersome to walk through by dew very early in the morning. As for the pupils 59% indicated that due to fear of being punished when they get to school after 8.00 am, some of them stay at home altogether once they realize that they will get to school late. The majority of the girls (73%) in Primary six and seven revealed that their parents do not provide enough sanitary towels to them hence on days when they have to answer such a call of nature, they simply do not attend school.

All the 142 teachers (100%) indicated that NOT all pupils who join Primary one remain in school and complete the primary cycle. Furthermore, the enrollment statistics provided by the head teachers revealed an overall completion rate of 37% which is very low. It implies that on average only 37 percent of the pupils enrolled in primary one reach primary seven in the study area. It was also revealed that school completion for girls is much lower than that for boys in all schools in the study area.

The majority of the head teachers (94%) reported that the pupils lack role models since they come from villages where almost everybody is illiterate. Such pupils therefore see no reason as to why they should be different from the rest of the community. Even their teachers are not any better off; they are not very different from their parents.

Parents similarly gave explanations for low completion; a parent who was interviewed about school completion made the following revelation:

*These boys and girls (the pupils in P5-P7) are big enough to start their own families. They need to learn how to produce food for their families. School is not teaching them how to be responsible family owners* (Interview with a parent in Buyende district).

The interviews with the pupils revealed that their parents cannot afford the costs of scholastic materials for them. Many pupils (56%) in Busia, Tororo, Buyende, and Mayuge districts reported that they have to work in order to get money to buy scholastic materials for themselves and their siblings. Furthermore, the pupils revealed that early pregnancy is a major cause of low school completion; and that this affects the Primary six and Primary seven girls. They revealed that the long distances to and from school force the girls to get involved with the young men in the bicycle transport business to offer them lifts or give them money for transport, of course in return for sexual favours. Some girls revealed that since they are not given the necessities including sanitary pads, they have to look elsewhere.

The Ministry of Education and Sports officials interviewed were of the view that low internal efficiency of was as a result of negligence of the parents who do not value education and therefore do not provide midday meals, stationery, and proper counseling to their children. They emphasized that Government had provided the minimum requirements for children to enroll and stay in school up to the end of the primary cycle of education. They also pointed out that the Government had provided Universal Secondary Education to enable primary school completers continue to secondary.

The ball, according to the Ministry of Education and Sports officials, was in the hands of the parents and/or their children.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the socio-economic dynamics in the area had dealt a big blow on the internal efficiency of the UPE programme leading to wastage of resources in such schools. Low internal efficiency constitutes wastage of resources, perpetuation of illiteracy, and poverty in society. This clearly articulated the view that any policy or programme requires auxiliary services for it to be beneficial to the targeted population. Furthermore, the study confirmed the pure economist’s view that in most cases the policies that are intended to help the poor do not actually do so because of the direct and indirect costs associated with participating in such programmes - the view that “free things are not entirely free to the poor” (Okun 1975). Transfers to the poor are like a leaking bucket where the final recipient gets less than the amount actually transferred.
Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:
1. The study recommended that the government should redress the socio-economic underpinnings that bar children from enrolling, attending regularly, and completing the primary cycle of education.
2. The Ministry of Education and Sports should also sensitize society about education in general and girl-child education in particular; and allow pupils who drop out of the system to drop back.
3. The study also recommended that the government should enforce the legislation of compulsory UPE with strong punitive measures against defaulters. Similarly, laws against child labour, early pregnancy, and early marriage need to be enforced.
4. The study recommended that the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) should integrate knowledge on family life matters in the curriculum so as to prepare current pupils for their roles as family owners.
5. The parents/guardians should provide midday meals to the pupils especially in the rural areas. This could even be extended to include early childhood nutrition and development activities to address the negative effects of malnutrition on education.
6. As regards school fees, it was recommended that any fees payments in UPE schools should be abolished; advise peasant farmers in the rural areas on alternative sources of income and labour and better farming methods and practices.

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