Primary and Secondary Education in Uganda: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The education system of Uganda has gone through a number of changes since the colonial period. After attaining her independence in 1962 from Britain, several commissions and committees were formed to look into the education system and recommendations from time to time were reached for purposes of ensuring the achievement of educational goals. The implementation of these recommendations has greatly influenced the education system's implementation in Uganda. This paper provides a critical analysis of the educational challenges of the operating education system at the primary and secondary levels, and the policies under it with a view of highlighting the prospects. Lastly the writer makes recommendations and a conclusion.

Keywords: education system, education challenges, education prospects

Education world over is recognized as an important public service as it facilitates an individual's personal and any country's social, economic and political development. This partly explains why economies invest substantial amount of money to better the quality of education. Education is a human right (UNESCO, 2017) and there is no doubt that, education plays a role in ensuring that the economy remains competitive in the world markets which are now experiencing ever changing technologies and production methods. Education is one of the Millennium Development Goals which lays a foundation for a better future to the young to attain good employment, good health and socioeconomic status (UN, 2015). As World Bank (2018) points out, Uganda is one of the Sub-Saharan African countries that have taken a step to develop and implement education policies intended to promote quality education at various levels. Basic education for both children and adults is a right that is enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of Uganda and provided for under various articles for instance, article 30, clearly states that all persons have a right to education (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995). In 1998, there was decentralization of the civil service under which basic education was largely left to be managed by the local governments (The Local Government Act, 1997). The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for policy formulation and maintenance of educational standards through teacher training, examinations and curriculum development. The education sector in Uganda lies under the leadership of a Cabinet Minister who is assisted by three (3) State Ministers

responsible for pre-primary and primary, secondary higher and physical education and sports.

Educational Challenges in Primary and Secondary Education in Uganda

The Senteza (1992) in the Government White Paper on education indicated that, government was to provide free education to a maximum of four children from each household or family. In 1997, the government introduced the Universal Primary Education policy as a way of implementing this. The purpose of Universal Primary Education was to make basic education accessible to learners so as to eliminate disparities and inequalities as well as maintaining quality education. It should be noted that, though the government is making an effort to have the classrooms in place to cater for the massive numbers of pupils, it is still a big issue and government still has a long way to go (TISSA, 2013).

The introduction of the Universal Primary Education in many African countries served as a key driver in increasing the enrollment rates by 91% (UN, 2015). This phenomenon created a shortage of teachers, schools and scholastic materials. In Uganda, the teacher-student ration jumped from 1:40 to 1:57 in 1997 (World Bank, 2014). This has called for a continuous increase in the number of teachers, establishment of more schools and addition of more infrastructure to the existing schools, and production of more scholastic materials. This further calls for more government attention most especially in the government grant aided schools.

Further still on Universal Primary Education, primary school tuition, Parents-Teachers' Association fees and textbook fees for up to four children per family were abolished by the government of Uganda, although most public primary schools do still charge additional fees through PTAs. It is observed that part of this money is used to improve on teachers' welfare and to pay their allowances. However, across Sub-Saharan Africa, children from poorer households and from households in rural areas have less access to school than children from wealthier households and in urban areas (TISSA, 2013). This is reiterated by Nabugoomu (2019) who reported that 57% of the youth (15-24years) had not attained primary level education and 28% did not complete secondary level education in Uganda. This therefore implies that, children from poorer households have less access to basic education because of their parents' inability to meet the school requirements such as paying the additional fees and buying the scholastic materials. Therefore, offering 'free education' does not mean that, the parents have completely no obligation to meet as demanded by the schools.

Nabugoomu (2019) observed that failure to cope with school demands, early employment, long distances to school, early pregnancy, and poor academic performance were among the contributing factors to high school dropout rates in the rural areas. It was therefore recommended that, there was need for schools to provide accessible sexual and reproductive health services and provision of free sanitary towels to girl-children so as to reduce the problem of early pregnancy.

Glennie, Bonneau, Vandellen and Dodge (2012) reaffirm that adolescents who drop out of school are at risk of low socioeconomic status, low paying jobs, poor health and high chances of committing crimes. It must be argued that school dropout rate is still a key issue that needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the Government of the Republic of Uganda is the major employer of teachers in public primary schools. Though the responsibility of recruiting and appointing of teachers for primary schools is done through the District Service Commission, the number of teachers appointed and posted to schools has not been able to meet the staffing demands of the schools given the numbers of pupils in the different schools. Currently, there are 57 institutions producing Grade Three teachers and government is not able to employ all of them given meagre financial resource allocation to the districts. The pupil teacher ratio was 1:43 as of 2017 (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, the staffing status as of now for most of the public primary schools is still a challenge. Thus, the quality assurance frameworks to ensure that the minimum conditions for learning are ensured in each public primary school should be focused on and priority should be given to the staffing position of each of the schools given their learners' numbers. It is a well-known fact that schools cannot have the same number of teachers given variations in pupil numbers per class. Therefore, to ensure effective learning in the primary and secondary schools, an effort has to made by both the government and the private education service providers to ensure that the staffing position is improved upon.

The recruitment and appointment of teachers to fill the various vacant positions in primary and secondary schools has not been able to meet the demands of the schools since the establishment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007. The teacher development and management system project (TDMS) was developed in 1993 with an aim of enhancing the teaching and learning in primary schools. This project attracted funding from Royal Netherlands Government, Irish Aid, USAID, IDA and the Uganda Government. The TDMS project operated through a Central and District Management framework that involved a number of stakeholders which included: Ministry of Education and Sports officials, Principals and Deputy Principals, Tutors of Primary Teachers Colleges, Institute of Teacher Education Kyambogo (now Kyambogo University) and District Education Officers. It should be stressed that, this project was intended to train more primary school teachers and organize refresher courses for the in-service teachers, indeed, the project succeeded in producing more Grade Three teachers. However, the project is no longer producing any more teachers and this has been left to the few primary teachers' colleges located in some districts like Mbale, Kapchorwa, Masaka among others. Currently, the strengths of the TDMS project can be seen in the field of monitoring and supervision of primary school teachers through use of Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCTs).

In 2007, the local language policy in Uganda was formulated and provided guidelines to underpin the implementation of the thematic curriculum

in lower primary (P1-P3). The thematic curriculum policy was implemented in 2008 and the curriculum was largely delivered using mother tongues as languages of instruction. Teachers resource books were developed in nine local languages which included: Runyankore-Rukiga, Lugbarati, Ateso, Acholi, Luganda, Lusoga, Runyoro-Rutoro, Rukonzo and Ngakarimojong which were meant to help teachers use local languages as media of instruction. It is thus prudent to argue that, for the thematic curriculum policy to succeed, the national curriculum development centre needed to develop adequate materials and offer adequate training to the teachers in a phased manner given the limited resource allocation to education. For instance, in 2017/2018 financial year, Primary Education received Ushs.22.61bn for 7,188,036 UPE learners and Secondary Education received Ushs. 42.35bn for 1,018,109 USE/UPOLET learners (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2018).

It is important to note that, the thematic curriculum policy is vital for the Education for All (EFA) policy which aimed at promoting literacy, numeracy, life skills and values. However, the reading materials that were developed in the nine local languages were not sufficient for the children and above all, these are not the only languages spoken in Uganda. This left out many schools located in districts where these languages are not commonly spoken at a disadvantage as teachers have to use English as a medium of instruction most of the time at lower primary level. Therefore, since Uganda has no one standard local language, the implementation of the thematic curriculum has met numerous challenges which has affected the quality of education at lower primary level of education (Altinyelken, 2010).

Besides, there are a number of policy implementation issues in Uganda's education system. There are several legal frameworks derived from the constitution of the Republic of Uganda such as the Education Act (2008) which stipulates the roles of the various stakeholders in education, Local Government Act (2019) which specifies the role of local government in education, the UNEB Act (2021) which deals with the setting and management of national examinations, and the NCDC Act (2000) responsible for development of curricula and production of instructional materials among other acts. The issue of interest is that, most of these acts have got a number of policies which would be outdated and require amendment. The worst-case scenario is that some of the policies in these acts may not be known to some of the teachers and as such they end up not being implemented by them. A practical example to illustrate this argument is, when the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) introduced the thematic curriculum for lower primary in 2007 without adequate training of the teachers and preparation of adequate instructional materials that would be used during its implementation. Thus, Uganda being a multilingual country requires that such materials are developed in various languages to cater for the different ethnic groups.

In 2007, ten years after introducing UPE, the Government of the Republic of Uganda introduced the Universal Secondary Education which was aimed at

increasing access to quality secondary education for pupils completing primary seven. In the same year, 67 percent of pupils who completed primary seven registered into lower secondary and the remaining 33 percent either registered for vocational education or dropped out of school (TISSA Report, 2013). This report further identified inadequate basic infrastructure in primary and secondary schools as an issue which required urgent attention. It is observed that, though, the government of the Republic of Uganda has made efforts to put up the basic infrastructure, there is still a shortage of facilities such as classrooms, staff houses, well-stocked laboratories and libraries. Thus, most of the challenges raised in the TISSA Report, 2013 up- to-date such as low staffing, teacher absenteeism and attrition, teaching staff salary progression, inadequate teaching facilities and low involvement of teachers in the formulation of educational policies have not been fully attended to. This can possibly be attributed to the low funding for the education sector.

According to the World Bank Report (2009), there are high dropout rates in schools in the Sub-Saharan African countries partly because of distance to school and the costs of attending school. The share of expenditure on education per student is high for countries like Kenya and Uganda. In addition, in Uganda, child marriage and pregnancy is more of a reason for girls to drop out of school than boys. Nguyen and Wodon (2017) in their study reaffirm that, child marriage and pregnancy is the leading cause of the gender gap in education at secondary level in Africa. Most students in Uganda as one of the Sub-Saharan African countries are hindered by the large differences in the socio-economic status and living in the rural areas which requires students to travel for longer distances to access education. This therefore implies that, there is still limited access to education in Uganda most especially at lower secondary level. According to the World Bank Report (2018), for Uganda, access to education is standing at 55 percent which accounts for the inequalities in education. The high rates of children out of school therefore creates social and economic challenges which hinder the countries efforts to create sustainable long-term growth as the much-needed human resource cannot be met (OECD, 2008). Between 2013 and 2018, primary school attendance in Northern Uganda declined for girls and boys by approximately 20%. Girls were found to have the highest rates of school dropout and failure to regularly attend across upper primary, secondary and tertiary education (Atim, Mazurana & Marshak,2019).

According to the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC, 2013),there are a number of challenges in the implementation of the secondary school curriculum such as, largely unchanged content in the curriculum since the colonial times, overloaded learning content, textbooks entrenched with rote learning culture and devoid of illustrations, activities or assessment assignments, use of teacher-centered methods of teaching and allowing no opportunity for learners to acquire a wide variety of skills and competencies necessary for a successful living. This suggests that, the curriculum and the assessment systems are not to a large extent aligned with the needs of the learners and the society.

This has again been reechoed in a document published by the Ministry of Education and Sports (ESSP, 2017). This is supported by Rukwengye (2018) who reported that many students who are successful in schools do not learn enough of the skills and knowledge that is in line with current and emerging needs of employment. It is therefore prudent to suggest that, there is need for the teachers to provide more opportunities to the students during lesson delivery such that they can develop the power of imagination and skills required to solve simple and complex problems.

The limited use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education at both primary and secondary levels of education is still a challenge in Uganda's education system (Aguti & Fraser, 2006). Uganda developed its initial ICT policy in 2003 and one of the recommendations executed early in 2006 was the establishment of the ICT Ministry (Farrell, 2007). It is observed that currently, majority of the teachers have limited capacity to use ICT in education. The Government of the Republic of Uganda through the Ministry of Education and Sport has made an effort to equip schools with solar-powered computers with the aim of promoting the teaching of science subjects. However, the distribution of these computers is not based on the number of students in the schools and as such the student-computer ratio is far below the recommended practice. Consequently, most students have not maximally benefited. In addition, there is an insufficient number of teaching staff for computer studies as a subject at secondary school level. This, therefore partly accounts for the limited use of ICT in education (MOES, 2017) and it calls for the need for the teachers to be trained on how to use ICT to improve teaching and learning, and for recruiting more teachers with the specialization of ICT. Farrell (2007) reiterates that Uganda faces the same ICT challenges as most developing economies such as high bandwidth costs, poorly developed ICT infrastructure, an unreliable supply of electricity and inadequate resources to meet a broad range of needs. It is argued that when these concerns are addressed, more success would be achieved as far as the integration of ICT into the mainstream curricula is concerned.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (2017), identified poor inspection and supervision of schools at various levels as a major challenge in Uganda's education system. This implies that, there is no timely and regular submission of inspection reports by the concerned personnel such as the district education officers, the district inspectors of schools and the head teachers.

Recommendations

The Ministry of Education and Sports should strengthen the use of the teacher management information system (2020) as a tool recently introduced to manage registration, recruitment, confirmation, transfer and retirement of the teachers. This can be done through organizing regular workshops and seminars to create more awareness on the use of the system such that the concerned stakeholders can appreciate its contribution to the delivery of services.

School head teachers should incorporate in their budgets a component of training or capacity building for the staff serving in these institutions. The training should place more emphasis on pedagogy, preparation and delivery of the subject content in ways which effectively enhance the learning process for learners to acquire the knowledge and skills at various levels of education.

The District Education Officers should closely monitor the quality of teaching and learning environments in schools so as to ensure that the minimum standards as set are observed. Secondly, the district education officers and the head teachers should ensure that the school management committees and boards of governors for primary and secondary respectively play their roles as specified by the Education Act (2008).

The government of the Republic of Uganda should increase the budgetary allocation for the education sector to enable the Ministry of Education and Sports to provide the basic infrastructure and the other facilities needed in the schools. The Ministry of Education and Sports should work out a mechanism of producing low-cost teaching and learning materials to be distributed to the schools basing on their enrolments.

Lastly, given the complexities involved in the use of the locally spoken language in a particular district or region, there is still need to make use of English as another mode of instruction at the lower primary level. This would help in addressing the challenges posed by use of the local language alone for the lower classes where the thematic curriculum is being implemented.

Prospects for Uganda's Education System

Uganda's education system has the potential of still attracting many students from the neighboring East African countries. It is important to emphasize that whereas there are variations in terms of quality of education provided across rural and urban schools, Uganda has registered some success in the education sector after the introduction and implementation of various education policies such as; Universal Primary Education, Universal Secondary Education, and Universal Post Primary Education and Training among other policies. Secondly, Uganda's education is still being considered as cheap compared to the sister countries whose cost of education is considered comparatively high. This does not only apply to primary and secondary education but also to university education.

The government of the Republic of Uganda still has the capacity to attract more funding from international and local non-governmental organizations to fund the education sector. This can basically be attributed to the peace and security that is in place under the Museveni regime (Bureau of African Affairs, 2019). This has created a conducive investment climate which is a key factor for release of donor funds to support education activities in the country.

The Government of the Republic of Uganda welcomes the idea of collaborating with other countries in terms of rendering technical support to Uganda in the field of education and health among the other fields. For example,

the Government of Nigeria has continued to render to Uganda such kind of support most especially in the education field.

The Government of the Republic of Uganda still has the opportunity to expand the infrastructural facilities needed in educational institutions and more specifically those that are government aided by seeking for more donor support. It is for this reason that, the government has continued to release funds to schools to cater for this need.

Lastly, the Government of the Republic of Uganda appreciates and continues to embrace the need to use the modern technology for quality service delivery at all levels of education. It is evident that, this positive attitude by the government is an indication that using such technology would enhance assessment practices, coordination and supervision of educational activities in addition to facilitating the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the educational challenges and prospects in primary and secondary education in Uganda. It also highlighted attempts made by the government of the Republic of Uganda to address the challenges. The writer has made recommendations based on the analysis and identified the future prospects for Uganda's education system. The government of the Republic of Uganda through the Ministry of Education and Sports is making an effort to address the educational challenges. Education remains a priority area to be invested in as it serves as a catalyst for the country's development.

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