

Factors Affecting Primary School Enrolment and Retention of Pupils in Kotido District, Uganda

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Abstract

This study investigated factors that affect enrolment and retention of pupils from Primary one until Primary seven and the study was inclined towards an interpretive paradigm. A total of 177 respondents participated in the study and 108(61%) were male while 69(39%) were female. Face to face interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. The study elicited an understanding of the multifaceted nature of the factors affecting enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Kotido district, Uganda. Results show that the majority of factors are culture related: pastoral lifestyle, strong cultural values, negative attitude towards education and engagement in domestic work. Other factors included social economic characteristics and environmental factors among others. Future strategies to improve enrolment and retention in schools should be broad based to address Karimojong people's culture as well as socio-economic characteristics.

Keywords: Enrolment, retention, education, culture, socio-economic characteristics

1. Introduction

Despite the undisputable role of education as a prerequisite for development, the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2010) pointed out that 72 million children were not enrolled in schools. In cases where they get enrolled, there is yet a challenge of low pupil retention in schools. Enrolment and low retention of children in schools has remained a global challenge particularly for marginalised groups. One of the groups affected by the problem of low enrolment and retention in school is the pastoral community (Carr-Hill, 2005). In Uganda the people of Karamoja as nomadic pastoralists are particularly affected and many Karimojong school-age children are out of school or do not complete a full cycle of basic education (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2008).

Karamoja region is characterized by climatic variability and civil insecurity. This climatic variability has led to a nomadic life style. Competition for limited resources due to the climatic variability has led to decades of inter-ethnic raids which have culminated into civil insecurity in the area (Chronic Poverty Research Centre 2008). Generally, Karamoja region presents unique challenges leading to overall low development indices (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: UNOCHA, 2009). The region has remained less developed than the rest of the country despite various development interventions (Kakande, 2007). This low level of development can partly be attributed to low education attainment in the region. Numerous studies have been carried out in different countries on factors affecting access to education (Pryor & Amphiah, 2003, No et al., 2012) but not many studies have been carried out in Kotido district in Karamoja. Kotido district is one of the seven districts that make up Karamoja region. The district is home for about 200,000 people whose main livelihood is nomadic pastoralism. The current study investigated factors that affect enrolment and retention of pupils in primary schools in Kotido district.

2. Statement of the Problem

Close to the global commitment to Education for All by 2015, a UNESCO Report 2010 recognised that children from marginalised groups had not yet benefited from basic education strategies. Studies have indicated that children from

minority groups were more likely to miss education (Laird et al., 2007, Bangsbo, 2008). Apart from a study by Irish Aid 2007 quoted by Powell (2010) which showed that 60.3% of 6–25 year olds in Karamoja region had never been to school, no study has been carried out on factors affecting enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Karamoja. This study attempted to investigate factors that affect enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Kotido district, one of the districts that make Karamoja region in Uganda, where enrolment and retention in school has remained a big challenge.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify factors that affect enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Kotido district, Uganda.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study was premised on Abraham Maslow's theory on human motivation (Maslow, 1943) as well on the African worldview (Jegede, 1995). Maslow (1943) contends that people have tendencies towards and needs for certain things. Maslow discusses that if one was both hungry and thirsty, he would try to address the thirst first as the most immediate need. The theory of human motivation may be a plausible explanation for the enrolment and retention dilemma in Kotido district as people have to make choices on whether to send their children to school or not; amidst other social pressing needs. On the other hand, the African worldview was also thought to be relevant, considering the unique cultural practices of the people of Karamoja region, as the view deals with subtle yet significant differences in the African way of knowing (epistemology); the way of being (ontology); way of interpreting the structure of the universe (cosmology); and the values systems (axiology) (Jegede, 1995). The study was generally inclined towards an interpretive paradigm; which views people as having a human life, a social life, a human mind, human behaviour as well as a social world and not as mere sources of data (Mason, 2002, Niewenhuis, 2007). Despite strategies and structures to improve access to education in Uganda, the situation in Karamoja region has not improved and the region registers the lowest levels of literacy in the country.

5. Review of Related Literature

A number of studies have been carried out in different parts of the world on factors affecting access to education; although most studies have focused on factors affecting dropping out of schools (Pryor & Amphiah, 2003, No et al., 2012). The various studies have identified different factors ranging from individual to institutional factors (Natriello, 2002, Nicaise et al., 2000). Some of the individual factors include: the people's worldview among others. Jones (1992) argues that all people have a worldview shaped by their lived experiences which helps them to make sense of their surroundings and ultimately determine their actions. Worldviews are believed to be products of culture. Culture is generally defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution, organization or group (Hofstede, G. 2001; Matsumoto, D. 1996). These various cultural aspects will determine who may access education or not. Studies by Admassie (2003) and Boyle et al (2002); for instance, indicate the preference many households have for the education of boys over girls. In some cultures girls are left to take on domestic responsibilities, and boys often receive preference when parents have to choose who in gender terms enrolls and attends school. Still, in many African cultures, division of labour is by gender and age, and femininity is associated with passivity and dependence whereby girls are raised to believe that they should not aspire for great heights since their work is primarily around the kitchen. This belief puts girls at a disadvantage and sometimes they are primarily seen as objects for bride price. Pool (2002), for instance, points out the link between the monetary value of bride price and early marriages in Africa. In such situations, the girl child is seen as a mere commodity to trade for wealth. The United Nations Girl Education Initiative [UNGEI] (2006) quotes Peggy Ilukol, the headmistress of Naitakwe Primary School in Karamoja, explaining that when a Karimojong girl reaches 13 years of age or starts to develop breasts, her parents take her out of school and find a husband for her; who normally pays between 60-100 cows as bride price. This practice is quite pervasive, even among those women who are to be married, according to Karimojong tradition. In the same publication, Paul Adul Moroto, District Education Officer, points out a popular belief among Karamoja parents that if their daughters attain formal education they would become less competent wives, become prostitutes and get married to non-Karimojong men (UNGEI, 2006). A study in Kenya by Amadi et al (2013), however, indicated that there were significant differences in the perceptions of teachers and students on cultural beliefs, health and pregnancy, as factors contributing to dropout among other factors.

In addition, Akresh (2008) points out that the decision to enrol and keep a child in school involves considering

many variables, including parental beliefs and expectations about the value of schooling. The perceptions that parents hold on the relevance of what is taught at school to their felt survival needs also influence decisions on enrolment and retention in schools. Deficiencies in the link between schooling and the necessary skills for the local labour market was found to be a significant factor in explaining school drop-out rates (Nicaise et al 2000, Natriello 2002). Chelimo (2005), for instance, points out the pivotal role children's labour plays towards survival of the households in Karamoja. Chelimo (2005) observes that a school system that undermines children's fulfilment of their household obligations disrupts the households' micro-economy. This may create reluctance among parents to send children to school. A research by Pryor & Amphiah's (2003) on schooling in a Ghanaian village indicated that education was regarded as a relative luxury, with many villagers considering education not worthwhile. Perceptions on the value of education can be influenced by where one lives. Living in a rural or urban setting may influence the value that people attach to education. Nicaise et al (2000) and Natriello (2002), for instance, point out that absence of professional role models in a community, which is the case in the Karamoja setting may hinder imagination of the value of education.

Besides, Profulla & Gareth (2009) quote the findings from a survey carried out during 2004 on indigenous children primary school attendance and dropout rates in north-eastern Bangladesh, which revealed that only 22% of the indigenous children completed a year of primary school education and an additional 18% attended some school but dropped out. When studying factors that affect access to education by the people of Kotido district, the rich history of how the Karimojongs have managed to remain a unique people amidst external influence cannot be ignored. Munaabi & Mutabaazi (2008) give insights on the Karimojong people's strong cultural structures, which are headed by elders; who are believed to be intermediaries between gods and people. Karimojong elders were at the forefront in resisting formal education when it was introduced to the region as recorded in the symbolic burial of the pen during the colonial days (Munaabi & Mutabaazi, 2008). These historical events were a symbol of outright disdain for formal education Saminsky (2010). Besides, Owiny (2006) argues that Karamoja history and the people's uniqueness has often led to prejudices where Karimojong people have been viewed as conservative, obstinately resistant to change and retrograde.

Whereas primary school education targets children, the decision to attend school is normally influenced by parents (Kailembo, 2000). Traag & Van der Velden's, (2006) research with young students demonstrated that having unsupportive parents is likely to be associated with dropout from school. Based on Traag and Van der Velden's argument, the values that parents hold go a long way to encourage learners to stay in school or to dropout. Bangsbo (2008) quotes a Tibetan experience where ethnic minority parents perceived values transmitted by state schooling to be strange to the people's own values and thus of little relevance to the local people's own culture. Burgett (2001) and Azzam (2007) argue that schools should be able to meet the respective needs of the populations they serve. Studies have indicated that universalisation of primary education in Uganda has not succeeded in Karamoja since it was not adapted to meet the educational needs of a pastoral lifestyle (Chelimo, 2005).

Whereas there is no global definition for 'indigenous people', the people of Karamoja can be categorised as indigenous since they are a social and cultural identity group distinct from the rest of the country, with values unique to themselves. Onyang & O'Kasick (2007) point out that the Karimojongs are proud of their traditional way of life as semi-nomadic herders. There is a popular historical account dating from the colonial days that the Karimojong people resisted formal education and modernization. However, during the symbolic 'Unearthing of the Pen' at the launching of Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) the Karimojong people avowed commitment to embracing education (Chelimo, 2006). This historical account is in line with Novelli's (2001) opinion that Karimojong people are not opposed to change as they recognise that customs are ordered to suit the needs of life. Studies (Zins et al., 2004, Azzam 2007) point out that most schools are not culturally and contextually sensitive to the diverse needs of the diverse populations that they serve. Schools should thus be sensitive to the diverse needs of populations they serve. The factors that affect enrolment and retention of pupils in schools can only be studied in the context of the people's livelihoods and survival strategies. Otherwise, a study by Burgett (2001) in New York indicated that failure of school programmes to meet pupils' needs is a major reason for children dropping out of school. Thus, it is imperative to understand the context of Kotido district, which is home of a nomadic pastoral ethnic group.

Other studies indicate that children with low socio-economic mobility characteristics have less chances of attending school and that children from better-off households are more likely to enroll and remain in school (Brown & Park, 2002; Hunt, 2008). The studies further indicate that children from poorer households have fewer chances of enrolling in school or have higher chances of dropping out after they have enrolled. Other studies have indicated that the parents' level of education has a significant influence on their children's chances for formal educational attainment.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

A case study design was adopted for this study because it was deemed to provide invaluable information on factors affecting enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Kotido district. The study sample comprised of 177 participants (8 head teachers, 28 classroom teachers, 38 pupils, 33 youth who had never been to school, 28 youth who had dropped out of school, 36 parents and 6 opinion leaders). The study participants were purposefully selected because the varied categories would provide rich information on factors affecting enrolment and retention in schools. Data was collected during face to face interviews using open-ended questions while four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed to collect data from pupils. The face to face interviews lasted 30 minutes each while the FGDs were 40 minutes each. Data was analyzed using content analysis, which is a method that involves comparing, contrasting and categorizing data in order to draw meanings and themes from the data (Gall, et al., 2007). Open coding was employed in this case and the coding was done statement by statement to get the main ideas. This was followed by axial coding where ideas were grouped to form themes (Barbie, 2010).

7. Results

7.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

From the four FGDs responses are presented and discussed in the following themes: lifestyle; gender roles; environmental factors; socio-cultural factors and individual factors. The most common factor why many children did not attend school is the people's nomadic pastoral lifestyle. In this lifestyle, the kraal system was pointed out in all the four sessions as a key factor why many children, particularly boys, could not attend school. In Kotido district, cattle from several homesteads is kept and grazed together in mobile kraals which move from place to place in search of water and pasture. It is the responsibility of young boys (before teens) and youth (teens) to take care of the animals under the leadership of grown up kraal leaders. This is reflected in the selected direct quotations from only the first session of the FGDs: *"You see many of the children live in kraals and do not attend school. In the kraals they have a responsibility of keeping and protecting the cattle."* (Session 1). In Kotido district, cattle from a number of homesteads are collected together in one 'kraal' which is normally located in a wilderness far away from the settlements where young boys and youth live for weeks as they take care of the livestock. This kraal system is also a means of socialising the young generation into Karimojong culture.

In all the four focus groups, the issue of children's engagement in domestic work was presented as another key reason why many children could not enrol and stay in school. This factor seemed to affect girls more than boys. For instance, one of the direct responses from the focus group expressed that *"Some children are not in school because their mothers tell them to stay at home and help with work"* (Focus group Session 2). Furthermore, participants expressed that *"Many girls remain at home to baby-sit, to look for firewood and some children are instructed by parents to stay at home to scare birds from sorghum crop."* (Focus group Session 1). The work of taking care of the young ones in the family rests on the bigger children, particularly the girls and this makes it very difficult for many girls to attend school. Participating in housework may not be unique to Kotido district, but the challenge is possibly the failure to strike a balance between ensuring that children can do some work, and still enrol and attend school. Withdrawing children from school to attend to crops was explained to be critical due to the harsh environment whereby the district suffers from chronic food insecurity. Parents would thus prioritise food security over sending children to attend school.

In terms of gender roles, focus group participants expressed that boys graze animals, and this is a hindrance to school attendance. For example, the comments from the focus groups confirm that *"Grazing animals is non-negotiable. Boys have to graze cattle otherwise we lose our identity. Girls also, have to do work to help their mothers"* (Session 2). Also, *"Some children who are not grazing cattle or helping mothers have no desire to go to school. I mean, they are not interested in schooling"* (Session 3). Judging from the focus group's words it is clear that indeed the people's culture has an effect on the children's participation in schools in Kotido district. Among individual factors were ideas that some children did not want to enrol in school because they were not interested and that other children had left school because they felt learning was hard.

The most interesting finding was that there was a popular belief among the pupils that when girls get educated they become prostitutes. This idea was pointed out in all the four FGDs. A quote from Session 4 *"Many girls do not want to come to school because they tell us that when girls get educated they become prostitutes"*. This was echoed by both boys and girls in the four sessions. Karimojong culture detests prostitution and therefore many girls shun attending school for fear of identifying with prostitutes.

7.2 Open-ended questions

The findings from the open-ended questions were analysed and summarised using themes, frequencies and percentages as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses on Factors Affecting Enrolment and Retention of Pupils

Theme	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Cultural factors	Engagement in domestic work	24	6.3
	The pastoral culture i.e. grew up in the kraal, cattle raids, grazing animals	86	22.5
	Lack of interest in attending school and negative attitude towards education e.g. Parents' negative attitude towards education	90	23.5
	Parents did not want me to go to school e.g. parents feared that girls could get infected with HIV/AIDS if they went to school, belief that educated girls become prostitutes	32	8.4
	Children getting involved in early marriages	12	3.1
Sub-Total		244	63.8
Environmental factors	Hunger, precarious situations/drought/hardships	33	8.6
Sub-Total		33	8.6
Strategies by government	The school was not providing enough food	3	0.8
	School was very far away from home	9	2.3
	Irrelevant school curriculum to the immediate and economic needs of this society	1	0.3
	There were not enough teachers at school	5	1.3
Sub-Total		18	4.7
Socio-economic factors	Poverty i.e. lack of financial support, both parents dead and lacked support from relatives, lack of clothing to wear to attend classes	52	13.6
	Peer influence	25	6.5
Sub-Total		77	20.1
Insecurity	Insecurity	11	2.9
Sub-Total		11	2.9
Grand Total		383	100

8. Discussion

Five broad themes emerged from the various responses, namely: cultural factors; environmental factors; strategies by government, socio-economic factors and insecurity. Among these themes, factors relating to the people's culture had the highest frequency of 244(63.8%) and insecurity had the lowest frequency of 11(2.9%) (Table 1). Included in the cultural factors were: lack of interest in schooling, negative attitude towards education by both parents and children which constituted the highest values of 23.5%, followed by the pastoral culture where children grow up in kraals, get involved in cattle raids and grazing animals pegged at 22.5% and the lowest was children getting involved in early marriages with only 3.1%. Karamoja, being a somewhat indigenous community, it is no wonder that there is a strong value system. Being a pastoral community explains why the frequency of issues related to keeping animals is high. From both the FGDs and the interviews, the traditional way of life as pastoralists is a major obstacle to participation in formal education, as the lifestyle makes it impossible for the children (particularly boys) to fit into the formal education routine. This finding is in agreement with Chelimo's (2005) observation that children's labour is critical to the survival of the household and that a formal school system may disrupt the households' micro-economy. Because children have an obligation to graze animals, this creates conflict of interest in the labour and activity market. Whereas one could consider animal grazing to be more of a socio-economic factor, this study considered it to be a cultural factor since the Karimojong people do not only keep cattle for economic reasons but also for an identity.

As a pastoral community, parents are torn between the conviction that education is valuable and the fact that livestock is the family's main source of livelihood and identity. This is enigmatic when parents have to decide whether to withdraw children from grazing in order to attend school. On the other hand, the parents' negative attitude towards education could also be influenced by failure to see any immediate benefits from the quality of education delivered. During data collection there were children who were neither attending to animals nor were in school. As Kailembo (2000)

argues the household decision to enroll a child in school is not only influenced by costs and anticipated future benefits of schooling, but also by how parents perceive the quality of education services offered. The high frequency of culture-related factors suggests that the people of Kotido district generally have a different worldview, which is in agreement with Jegede (1995) who argues that people harbour views, beliefs, experiences and preconceptions. These preconceptions have affected the Karimojong cultural values and way of life. This finding may be due to that the long history of the Karimojong institutional resistance to education: the symbolic burial of the pen (Munaabi & Mutabaazi, 2008) and its respective unearthing during the launching of ABEK (symbolising institutional commitment to education (Chelimo, 2006)). It is possible that there are lingering effects of the institutional rejection to education. It is not surprising that the people's experiences were likely to have influenced their worldview and actions as an indigenous people, other than the Western culture (Jegede, 1995). The results are also in agreement with Bangsbo's (2008) finding where formal education was considered alien. Considering the unique way of understanding the world around them (cosmology), the interventions to improve access to education in Karamoja should include a lot of sensitisation to help the people to appreciate other worldviews. The traditional elders should be specifically targeted since they are the key custodians of Karimojong culture. It is interesting to note that early marriages and pregnancies were rated low as factors that affect access to education: this could be because it is perceived to be normal and possibly the responses represent outsiders' views (teachers and opinion leaders). This can be attributed to the popular African ontology that a woman's role is to deliver babies irrespective of the age. This may corroborate the finding by Amadi et al (2013) where there were differences in perceptions on the effect of culture, health and pregnancy on drop out. In fact, for Karimojong girls the onset of puberty signifies their readiness for marriage, which undeniably affects education attainment.

This study did not attempt to analyse the poverty levels of the people of Kotido district, but the mere fact that children could not attend school because they graze animals somewhat contradicts the poverty factor since UPE is free and that parents' contribution to education is quite minimal. Some parents expressed that they could not send their children to school as the children lacked clothes to put on. From observation, many of the children in the villages were barely dressed and many in schools did not have proper uniforms and the vast majority were dressed in frayed clothing. This may imply that the low level of income had an effect on enrolment and retention as some children could not enrol in school because they had no clothing to wear to school.

It is worth noting, however, that there are interconnections amongst the factors for instance the people's socio-economic characteristics have been influenced by their culture and *vice versa*. Likewise, the environmental factors have an effect on the socio-economic factors: the limited livelihood options, droughts and famine which make survival in the region very difficult and influence the survival priorities. The nomadic pattern, too, is due to environmental factors as people are forced to migrate from their homesteads due to droughts. Pressing issues render education a relative luxury. This is in agreement with Maslow's theory of human motivation (Maslow, 1943) where people strive to satisfy their immediate needs first. It is clear why the vast majority of parents would rather choose other alternatives for their children other than education. This may explain instances where economic needs like grazing animals or scaring birds in sorghum fields were prioritised over school attendance. The people's value system (axiology) might also be a plausible explanation whereby all other activities had higher priorities over enrolling and keeping in school. This finding could also explain why some children enrolled in school in order to access food at school.

Whereas respondents indicated that most households kept some animals, the animals were more for symbolic identity than for economic wealth and thus could not easily be converted to support the education of the children. The people seemed to be happy to own animals but not to use their animal wealth to sort out other needs such as education. This can be seen as a cosmology issue where animal wealth was highly prized. In reality, education wealth is more important than animal wealth in the long run and yet this is not the case in Kotido district.

For government strategies, some respondents indicated that schools were far from the settlements and thus they could not send small children to walk long distances and insecurity was pointed out as a hindrance (Table 1). Whereas insecurity had the lowest frequency of 11, it is important to note that Kotido district is characterised by insecurity that mostly arose from cattle raiding. These raids are frequent and they disrupt all social functioning in pursuing raiders to recover the raided animals (which sometimes take days) and sometimes children actively participating in raids. Additional insecurity was reported to arise from the government disarmament process. One response indicated the irrelevancy of the school curriculum. Even though this was one response, based on the social position and stature of the respondent, this may need further study to assess the relevance of the generic national curriculum to Karamoja context. It may be possible that the people of Karamoja look at the UPE curriculum as irrelevant to the needs of the region. The Karimojong way of being (ontology) as nomadic pastoralists may further require revising the curriculum to make it more relevant to household survival. This is similar to the Tibetan experience where the people considered the government system of education as too nationalistic and alien (Bangsbo, 2008).

9. Conclusion

The study findings portray that enrolment and retention of pupils in schools in Karamoja region is a complex issue which is affected by many diverse factors. The study established that the factors affecting enrolment and retention of pupils in schools include: culture, socio-economic characteristics, the environment, strategies by government and insecurity. These diverse factors may indicate that the people of Karamoja are not resistant to change as such but there is need to understand the complex issues surrounding their choices on sending children to school. The study also established the interconnected nature of the factors whereby the interventions developed to address the enrolment and retention challenges should be broad to address the underlying causes. Some of these factors were unique to the region. This suggests that new approaches unique to Karamoja may need to be developed in order to address the low education attainment challenge in the region.

10. Limitations

The small sample size was a limitation and the results from the study cannot be generalised. However, the study findings offer some insights into the multifaceted nature of enrolment and retention problem in Karamoja region, Uganda.

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