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ACCESS ISSUES IN KENYAN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Typical Kenyan Classroom.

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Prior to the British colonization of Kenya, indigenous people had a flourishing educational system, which was conducted in the context of family, community, clan, and cultural group (Mungazi, 1996). This traditional system of education was informal and carried out through a continuous life-transforming process involving age groups related to the acquisition of experience in their order of seniority and wisdom. The existing literature argues that the objective of traditional education was to build the capacity of individuals to be responsible citizens, as well as to contribute significantly to meeting the needs of their community (Mungazi, 1996, p. 40). Additionally, traditional education in Kenya was conducted through “immersion in traditions, dance, song, and story, involvement with learning groups, exposure to cooperative work, and ancestor spirit of worship that cemented kinship ties and obligation” (Mungazi, 1996, p. 40). This form of education provided individuals with practical and relevant skills to help address the emerging needs of the society (Busia, 1964, p. 17). It is argued that traditional education in “old Africa encouraged social responsibility, political participation, work orientation, morality and spiritual values” (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 1982, p. 10). This traditional education system flourished, particularly in Kenya and other Africans countries, because it integrated components such as “child character building, intellectual training, manual activities and physical education” (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 1982, p. 10).

The Western system of education in Kenya was first introduced by the early missionaries in 1557 along the Kenyan coastal towns such as Mombasa and Lamu with the intent to spread Christianity, and teach technical subjects such as carpentry and gardening (Battle & Lyons, 1970; Ojiambo, 2009; Sheffield, 1973). The partition of Africa in 1884 led to the establishment of the British occupation in Kenya, which opened up the main land for more missionary schools through the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as a means to convert more Africans to Christianity as well as to serve as rehabilitation centers for freed slaves from the Arab traders (Battle & Lyons, 1970; Ojiambo, 2009, Sheffield, 1973). The construction of the Kenya-Uganda railroad further encouraged more missionary settlement in Kenya, resulting in the introduction of a Missionary Board of Education representing all denominations to foster the development of three-tier racially discriminated schools for Europeans (Whites), Asians, and Africans

(Anderson, 1970; Bakari & Yahya, 1995; Battle & Lyons, 1970; Ghai & Court, 1974; Ojiambo, 2009; Sheffield, 1973).

The critics of the colonial education in Africa such as Apollo Rwomire argue that economic inequality has a significant impact on access to education in that it leads to social stratification which, in the long run, leads to internal neo-colonialism within the country. In addition, the curriculum model designed by the colonialist did not take into consideration African culture and needs, meaning it was viewed to be largely inadequate and irrelevant to the local population (Rwomire, 1998). Uchendu also contests that “the British system of education [has] brought in issues of rural-urban disparities, ethnic and geographic inequality of access, and differences between mission and nonmission-based education” (Uchendu, 1979). For example, the traditional roles of education, socialization of the youth, and cultural transmission have been submerged by the political mandate that schools must function as the servant of government policy. In addition, this system of education promoted economic exploitation under the era of colonialism in the country (Moumouni, 1968). The western system of education brought some benefits to the country as a result of missionaries and colonizers in school infrastructural investments, particularly in urban coffee, tea, and sisal plantation areas to serve the smaller population of interest (Swadener, Kabiru, & Njenga, 2000). To date, communities such as the Maasai and Samburu living in rural areas realize the need to embrace the Harambee (Swahili word meaning pulling together) teamwork spirit to work on development projects such as nursery and primary schools in their community for younger children to access education (Swadener, Kabiru, & Njenga, 2000).

After obtaining independence in 1963, with Kenyatta as the first African president, the government formed a commission led by Ominde in 1964 to review the critical issues in the education system in order to promote social equality and national unity and to develop the highly skilled individuals needed to foster high productivity in the country. This commission recommended that educational facilities be well distributed in the country, particularly in underprivileged regions, and that the religious beliefs of all people be safeguarded and respected (Anderson, 1970; Ghai & Court, 1974). In addition, the commission stated that there is an urgent need to expand the educational facilities for those districts and provinces that had been educationally marginalized in terms of quality education and number of schools developed, and enrollments for them to be at par with other regions in the country (Ghai & Court, 1974). However, to achieve a balanced educational system throughout the nation required equal distribution of qualified teachers from highly concentrated areas such as Central and Nairobi to those long–standing educationally disadvantaged areas such as Narok in the South Rift Valley and Turkana in Northern Kenya (Oucho, 2002). This redistribution was needed because “the development of formal education in Kenya as a British colony led to a regional distribution in educational facilities and opportunities which consolidated inequalities between regions and ethnic groups in the 1960s and 1970s” (Oucho, 2002). This system mainly favored the

White settlers' highlands in central Kenya in the allocation of government resources for any kind of development between 1963 and 1978. During this period, the Kikuyu tribe benefitted more than any other tribe as a result of working as laborers at the settlers' plantations as well as having access to well-established schools in Central and Nairobi regions where the British invested their development heavily (Oucho, 2002).

The British left Kenya 50 years ago, and since that time, there have been regional disparities in education as a result of fewer schools, difficult access to schools due to poor roads and lack of transportation facilities, and socioeconomic disparities, particularly in regions such as North Eastern and the Coast (Kimalu, Nafula, Manda, Mwabu, & Kimenyi, 2002). Therefore, Kenya inherited an educational system created by the colonial masters and the postcolonial period (ruling elite) who continued to promote unequal treatment based on racial discrimination and ethnic criteria (Kimalu et al., 2002; Ojiambo, 2009; Owino, 1997). Despite the wishful reforms the government attempted to put in place, this system has not changed much. For example, a bigger portion of government resource allocation goes to the national schools such as Alliance, Mangu, Starehe, and Moi Forces Academy, followed by provincial schools and, at the bottom of the table, district schools (Kihato, 2008). The regions most marginalized in the country by this type of educational system include North Eastern, Coastal Provinces, and some districts in the Rift Valley such as Narok, Kajiado, Samburu, Turkana, and West Pokot. The prevailing conditions in these areas make it hard for students to go to school and their parents cannot afford to pay for their children's school fees. This system of education has encouraged economic disparities instead of attempting to bridge the widening gap as communities in less developed regions/districts have higher rates of poverty (Kimalu et al., 2002; Ojiambo, 2009; Owino, 1997).

Additionally, severe poverty makes it unrealistic for many Kenyan children to obtain an adequate education (Sen, 1999; Streeten, 1994; World Bank, 2013). A recent World Bank (2013) report estimates the poverty rate in Kenya to be between 34% and 42%, which according to the report could be eliminated by 2030 by targeting a two percent rate reduction each year. However, for this reduction to be achieved, growth must go hand in hand with development and reduction in inequality in the country (World Bank, 2013). Sen (1999) argues that lack of education is both a part of the definition of poverty and a means to long-term improvement in productivity, supporting Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, and Hunt's (2007) assertion that access to basic education lies at the heart of development. As a result, the Enhancing Sustainable Livelihoods Through Education Project began in May 2012 to assess the factors that influence access to primary education in the study area. The overarching project goals are to analyze these factors and provide strategies to help improve student access to education as well as encourage a high rate of retention in Kenyan rural schools.

The purpose of this article is to present findings from the first year of a two-year study to document challenges Kenyan primary-aged students face in obtaining and excelling in education in their native land. Through the use of photo methods, the participants and researchers illustrate barriers to education and provide solutions for change.

Methods

The participants in this ethnographic study were 24 public school teachers from the Maasai Mara Region, Narok County, Kenya, selected using purposeful sampling based on the criteria that they had to be primary school teachers from the area (Babbie, 2008). In keeping with the participatory and advocacy focus of photo methods (Wang & Burris, 1997; Werts, Brewer, & Mathews, 2012), multiple sources of information were used in this study to allow for the analysis of data collected by both the participants and the researchers, specifically participant-generated photographs and semistructured interviews. Data were collected over a two-month period between May and June 2012.

One of the researchers visited the schools that were the target of the study and met with the school administrators and teachers. During their discussions, he shared with them the purpose of study as well as recruited them to participate in the study. Each of the 24 participants were outfitted with Kodak and Fuji disposable cameras, each having 24-exposure film, and were asked to document the impact of free primary education as well as school feeding programs in the region. These participants were asked to take photographs of places or things at both day schools and primary boarding schools that they felt had positively or negatively affected student access to education. The respondents were given the cameras for a week, and during that time, they were asked to take as little or as much time as they wanted to take photos of different impacts. However, the actual photography took only two to three days. At the end of the week, the researchers collected the cameras from the respondents and printed the photos at a lab in Nairobi. The researchers returned to meet with the respondents at the prearranged time, place, and venue to conduct the photo-interviews. In Kenya, day schools are attended by students from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, while Kenyan boarding schools, similar to their counterparts in the United States, provide on-site learning, activities, and housing for admitted students.

After the participants took the photographs, the researchers conducted 30-minute (approximately), semistructured interviews at their schools to assess the meaning of the images. The researchers conducted an inductive thematic analysis process to identify themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) to analyze the photographic images. This process identified categories/themes found in the data collected and also used the interviews to identify themes that represented the challenges Maasai children

face in obtaining a primary education: poverty, discrimination, transportation, and looking to the future. The poverty theme illustrated the access issues created by the lack of general economic resources in Kenya; the discrimination theme and the sexism in Kenya, particularly against females, and its impact on education; and the transportation theme, the extreme conditions and lengths that students endure in order to get to school. Finally, the look-to-the-future theme emphasized that the lack of willingness to learn was not the underlying factor holding the Kenyan education system back, rather it is the systemic barriers and environmental impediments that impact student access to education.

Poverty

As a result of rural poverty in this area, access to primary education is unevenly distributed and based on household wealth and the ability of families to afford schooling for their children (Seers, 1977). This inequality in family income and social status has a significant impact on a child's future and his/her ability to escape poverty. As various participants indicated during the interviews, if students from certain households/families are denied access to education due to costs associated to schooling or any influencing factor, then they would be more likely to miss the benefits accruing from education. This reality is supported by existing literature, with Spring (2011) arguing that "access to education can help students escape poverty by giving them the tools and character traits needed to advance in the free market system." Spring (2011) further argues that "children in early childhood education programs are more likely to score higher in reading and math, more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, more likely to hold a job, and more likely to earn more in that job and thus, break the cycle of poverty." Study participants indicated that poorer students may not be able to attend school on a regular basis due to the need for children to help support the family, as illustrated in picture of a school boy tending a goat farm for the well-being of his family. As participants explained, this work infringes on student study time as well.*Students help their families survive.*

Students help their families survive.

Some students are fortunate enough to have parents who can walk with them to and from school in order to provide protection from environmental hazards. Unfortunately, participants indicated that most families are not economically stable to provide this type of luxury and students miss school due to this as well. In addition, for those who do get to school, many arrive exhausted by their long and treacherous treks to get there.


A parent protects her children.

Approximately 80% of Kenyans live in rural areas with less than 20% of its land suitable for agriculture (Langinger, 2011). These communities often are too poor to build enough classrooms to sustain the growing student enrollment in primary schools. Teachers are also forced to teach students in outside classrooms under the trees due to limited or no space available in the few existing structures.

Classes meet outside when no classrooms are available.

Some of these issues concerning attendance and the energy necessary for learning have been mitigated by the introduction of food programs in most rural nomadic communities in Kenya. These free meals serve as an incentive for students to stay in school, especially during periods of drought. The communities, which rely on livestock as their primary livelihood, move extensively in search of pasture and water (Goyal, 2005). Participants acknowledged the benefits of the program, mentioning that school vegetable gardens provide sustainable food security and balanced diets for primary students in boarding schools, while others acknowledged that this program is not as effective for students in day schools who suffer from malnutrition as a result of being fed only with boiled dry beans and/or dry white corn-maize throughout the semester. Worse yet, sometimes the schools run out of food and in some cases, students in public primary day schools lack a balanced diet as a result of the cost involved in procuring food for the school.

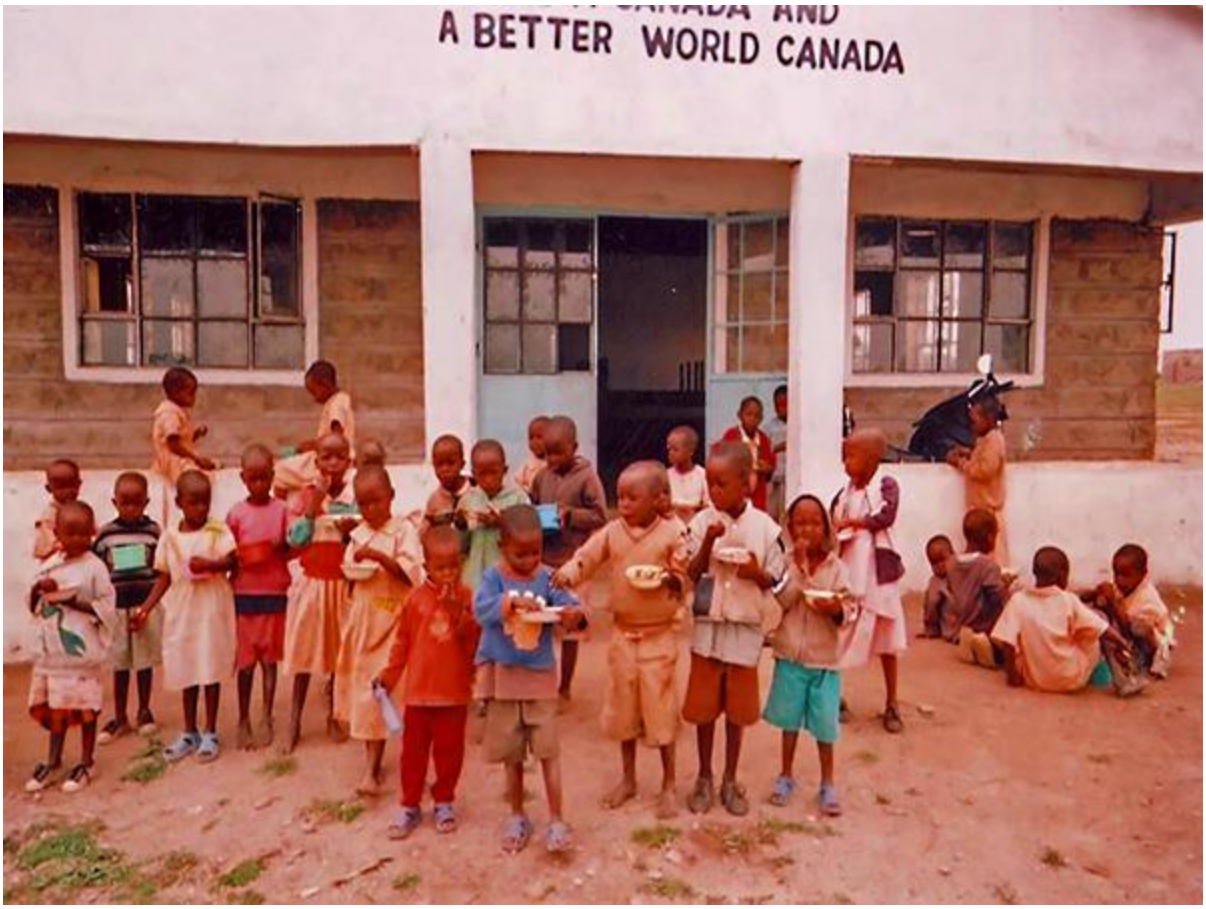
Malnourishment continues to be a problem, though school vegetable gardens may provide a bit of balance for some.

Facilities and structures are improving, albeit slowly, in the country. The provision of facilities and equipment in rural communities, such as desks and spacious classrooms by the government through community development funds, has encouraged school attendance rates, particularly among young children between grades one and four.

Rural development is needed.

Private donors help to build a new school.

As a result of the collaboration between the local community and tourism developers in the area, more schools are now being constructed with an attempt to encourage younger children to begin schooling at the required age as well as to encourage local residents to see the importance of educating both boys and girls. The majority of the children, in particular girls, are now being given education sponsorships by donors as an incentive to encourage parents to send them to school through their teenage years. Nongovernmental organizations, such as A Better World Canada, are donating food to help sustain underprivileged children in schools.



Kindergarten children enjoy food donated by nonprofits.
The introduction of school farms as a homegrown school feeding program in rural areas in Kenya is seen as one way to sustain the program as well as to create an incentive to minimize school dropout during the drought period.

School farms sustain school feeding programs.

In contrast to the day schools, students in private schools in Kenya enjoy the comfort of available resources such as learning materials, spacious classrooms, qualified teachers, and a quality learning environment, with teachers being assigned a manageable number of children to teach in a single class. Primary boarding schools have also been the beneficiaries of donors whose support has significantly motivated the local community to send their children to school in large numbers as well as reducing the dropout rates in the area. Participants mentioned that “the provision of food and other necessary learning materials by donors in this school has not only saved children from walking long distances, but also improved child health, hygiene and educational performance.” This special care given to students in private schools has improved the quality of the health in the country as well as the performance on national examinations in Kenya. Unfortunately, very few families can afford private education for their children, especially for female students.

Private schools have more resources.

Discrimination Against Females

Parents in rural communities, particularly the Maasai in Kenya, believe that it's a waste of time and money to invest in a girl's education. These communities foster a significant gender gap, especially in education, as boys are given more favors and opportunities. Acknowledging that supporting girls' education in such indigenous communities will not only assist in increasing women's wages and their well-being and productivity, but also provide them access to rising job markets is important for the country of Kenya. Females in Kenya are rarely afforded the option of education given to young men.

Girls in a classroom are, a rarity.

Girls are not only denied access to education, but they are also used as a source of income, commonly working on sugar plantations or as housemaids/house girls for low wages with their salaries frequently being used to pay school fees for the sons of the family. As a result, few girls in rural areas attend school, and those enrolled rarely complete the eighth grade because they become sexually active, seeking money, love, and comfort from men (Mpangile, Leshabari, Kayaa, & Kihwele, 1996). Once they become pregnant, their families, especially fathers and brothers, disown them because of various religious and cultural beliefs (Chege & Sifuna, 2006).

One of the most significant observations of this study involves the researchers' perception of the Maasai women. Researchers found them reluctant to speak honestly about their feelings or opinions in the presence of men, particularly to those who do not speak their language; however, when speaking with them alone, the researchers were impressed with their knowledge and insight. In fact, the female participants offered more specific and well thought out information than the men did. This intelligence and insight needs to be recognized and nurtured, as it can be harnessed for the good of the Kenyan society as a whole. Encouraging young ladies to attend school will strengthen the country (Chege & Sifuna, 2006).

Inside a school for girls.

Transportation

In Kenya the day starts early as young children have a multitude of before-school responsibilities, dealing with home and family life issues not encountered in first world countries such as the United States, Britain, and Canada. Then, as the participants indicated, they have to walk or run to school, trips often ranging between five and seven miles one way, which are exhausting under the best circumstances, and debilitating for children with very little to eat. At the end of the day, they repeat the trek to return home. Young children are often unable to attend school because they cannot walk long distances nor keep up with the older students. More importantly, the lack of nourishment has been found to affect brain development in young children. According to Lempinen (2012), “a host of recent studies show that growing up in poverty can shape the wiring and even the physical dimensions of a young child’s brain, with negative effects on language, learning, and attention” (p. 428).

Long walks to school.

Furthermore, often-sick students are unable to make the arduous trip to school, leading to a variety of problems. Participants commented that corporal punishment is used by teachers to discipline students (well or otherwise) for missing school, thus providing an incentive for those who miss school for one reason or another to stay at home, eventually dropping out for fear of punishment. Even students who are able to handle these disciplinary problems must work through the mental and physical exhaustion of these trips.

In addition, the majority of Kenyan schools require students to wear uniforms, and since few families are wealthy enough to afford more than one, students who find themselves walking home through the frequent afternoon rainstorms are left with few viable options. Participants said that they can attend school without wearing their uniforms and risk corporal punishment, or they can stay home, receiving their punishment when they return to school. School attendance is further impacted by the fact that most students who walk to school are unable to afford shoes to protect their feet. Even though older students sometimes assist the younger ones by carrying them on their backs, participants stressed that the lack of shoes was a hindrance to school attendance.

Bare feet make the long walks more difficult.

In addition to these problems, Kenyan wildlife also poses a dangerous situation for children traveling to school. African students have to be mindful of lions, elephants, and puff adders—a venomous snake species found in wilderness areas. Participants further explained that the need to learn survival skills also requires students to use time that they could otherwise allocate towards more traditional academic pursuits. Furthermore, due to these physical dangers, female students are often encouraged to stay home. Environmental factors are among the primary reasons leading to the extremely low completion rate of 42.3% for primary school (Ruto, Nyamauncho, & Mugo, 2009).

Dealing with wildlife: A student carries a makeshift spear to protect himself. In contrast, board school compounds can provide sanctuary from worries of attack from dangerous wildlife and the debilitating effect of the long walk to school. These compounds appear to provide students with a safe, secure environment, giving them the freedom to concentrate on their schoolwork and physical fitness/well-being.

Happy students playing freely in a primary boarding school compound.

Looking to the Future

In the photo below, we see a group of excited young boys, their smiles indicating the joy they feel after receiving sporting and educational materials. In response to this photograph, our interviewee described the hope on the faces of these boys. The picture illustrates that when proper resources are provided, Kenyan students are interested in learning. The participants echoed this idea as well, saying Kenya is not in need of a dramatic change of will; it simply needs the resources to allow children the opportunity to learn. The hope and excitement seen in these boys' faces is found in both pictures below.

Students are eager to learn.

Volunteers are needed.

While a variety of agencies and institutions from around the world send volunteers and supplies to assist the children in this country, Kenyans are also encouraging their young people to get educations—but at the same time not forgetting their heritage. Exposure to cultural elements can also motivate and encourage students to stay in school.

Cultural exposure motivates students. Students in a girls' primary boarding school perform a traditional dance for the Kenya Music and Cultural Festival.

Discussion

This study examined the challenges to education faced by students in Kenya. While the small size of the participant sample limits the ability to draw significant conclusions about the larger Kenyan educational experience, it emphasizes the educational phenomena that must be addressed in order for Kenya to take its place in the knowledge economy and in the global world of the 21st century. More importantly, challenges hindering student access to education in rural areas need to be addressed by education stakeholders to improve the country's general quality of life. The most prevalent issues identified were the difficulties the students faced in getting to school and the physical impediments that prohibit them from obtaining an education. Here we see an unfortunate cycle—if Kenyans fail to obtain an education**,** they will fail to break out of poverty, the condition that often prevents them from obtaining an education.

A variety of solutions have been identified in this study to help alleviate this situation. Boarding schools enable students to avoid the daily long, treacherous walk. School food programs, gardens, and donations from various charities provide an incentive for malnourished students to make the treks. In

addition, education in traditional Kenyan cultural activities and exposure to cultural events provide incentives for school attendance as well as retention in educational programs.

More importantly, it is essential that Kenya address its discrimination against women. This exclusion from the educational system limits the potential and capabilities of the Kenyan workforce, and this discrimination leads to the sexual objectification of women, resulting in their identification as simple reproductive mechanisms. Young women become pregnant, more children are born, and the unmet demand for education increases.

The most important implication of this study is that hope exists for Kenya. The semistructured interviews and photographs indicate that Kenyan youth do have a desire to learn. Currently, this desire is frequently being met by the donations and volunteers from outside the country. While this strategy may work in the short term, it is not functional over time. As a country, various stakeholders involved in the Kenyan education system must take the necessary steps to generate new ideas about how we can fulfill this desire by relying on ourselves and using the resources we have within our boundaries. We need to educate our youth to be citizens of the modern world—and then to pass this knowledge and experience on to the next generation. Doing so will move Kenya from a developing country into a developed one.

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