

The Education Policy Agenda and Education Research in Africa : Concerning Mainly Primary Education

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Abstract

This paper reviews the education policy agenda and trends in research relating mainly to primary education in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region in the world where the spread of primary and secondary education has proliferated the least. Naturally, the situation in Africa differs considerably from country to country, but sub-Saharan countries also share common issues. Almost all the countries in this region face, to varying degrees, problems relating to the legacy of colonialism, political and economic problems, HIV/AIDS at epidemic levels, and conflicts or disputes among ethnic groups, among others.

As seen in the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and the UN Millennium Development Goals, achieving Education for All (EFA), starting with universal primary education, is an urgent and vital issue in the international community. Although the number of children not in school fell by 21 million from 1999 to 2004, there are still 77 million who do not go to school, and the majority of them are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has a shortage of the talented, motivated teachers needed to reach EFA goals: in Sub-Saharan Africa the number of teachers will need to increase from 2.4 million in 2004 to 4.0 million in 2015.

In recent years, there has been more research carried out in Japan about education in Africa than had previously been the case. Nonetheless, Japanese researchers in this field are still not numerous; many more research papers on this subject are being published by non-Japanese researchers. This paper reviews research trends and discusses a number of important issues relating to the education policy agenda in Africa, such as improving access to primary education; policies relating to grade repetition and promotion; policies for making primary education free; and decentralization, privatization, and community participation. Finally, this paper also touches on problems related to the formation of opinions by aid organizations.

Key words: education policy, sub-Saharan Africa, structural adjustment, primary education, EFA (Education for All)

Introduction

This paper examines the education policy agenda and trends in research relating mainly to primary education in Africa. Unless otherwise stated, "Africa" here refers to sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region in the world where the spread of primary and secondary education is the least advanced. Naturally, the situation in Africa differs considerably from country to country, but sub-Saharan countries do share common issues. For example, almost all the countries in this region face, to varying degrees, problems relating to the legacy of colonialism, political and economic problems, HIV/AIDS at epidemic levels, and conflicts or disputes among ethnic groups, among others.

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Development Goals, achieving Education for All (EFA), starting with universal primary education, is an urgent and vital issue in the international community. Since 2002, UNESCO has been monitoring the progress of EFA and has issued an almost-annual EFA Global Monitoring Report. UNESCO's most recent Report states that the number of primary-school age children out of school worldwide declined by 21 million from 1999 to 2004, but nonetheless remained unacceptably high at 77 million. Of this number, 38 million are children living in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the assertion that such children are concentrated in this region (UNESCO 2006). This Report also notes that there are not enough qualified and motivated teachers to reach current EFA goals. In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of teachers would need to increase from 2.4 million in 2004 to 4.0 million in 2015 (UNESCO 2006).

In recent years, there has been more research carried

out in Japan about education in Africa than had previously been the case; nonetheless, Japanese researchers in this field are still not numerous: the number of research papers on this subject published by non-Japanese researchers is much larger. This paper reviews research trends in African education; it focuses on the region, rather than on any specific African country, and on the research contributions made by non-African researchers. Ultimately, this paper identifies the main elements of research trends and discussion on a number of important issues relating to the education policy agenda in Africa.

1. Improving Access to Primary Education

In Africa, the most important policy agenda is that pertaining to improving access to primary education. Let us first review the state of the primary-education enrollment ratio in Africa today, examining the net enrollment ratio—a figure that expresses the ratio of primary school enrollees of primary school age to the overall primary school-age population. In developing countries, children are sometimes still enrolled in primary school although they are older than the graduation age, or children are enrolled who are still too young for primary school. This is why the gross enrollment ratio (i.e., the ratio of primary school enrollees to the primary school-age population) sometimes exceeds 100 percent and figures are broken out separately for the net enrollment ratio. In terms of the net enrollment ratio for primary education, in 2004 the average (i.e., weighted average) for Africa as a whole was 65 percent—10 percentage points higher than the 55 percent recorded in 1999. There are wide variations among countries with regards to enrollment ratio: in the 33 countries for which data are available, this figure ranged from a low of 39 percent in Niger to a high of 98 percent in Sao Tome and Principe. The enrollment ratio exceeds 90 percent in five countries; this means that while the enrollment ratio remains under 50 percent in some African countries, primary education has become universal in a number of others.

However, the data demand careful interpretation. First, while the average enrollment rate for Africa is 65 percent, only countries for which data are available contribute to that figure. There are 13 countries—including Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Angola—for which data are not available. Second, the enrollment ratio is calculated based on the number of enrollees (i.e., actual enrollment basis), which is different from the number of children actually attending school. Furthermore, depending on the report cited, there are wide disparities in figures; this is an occurrence common to statistics for developing countries. For example, a passage from a UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report notes the

following:

The UIS and UNICEF estimated the number of out-of-school children for the school year ending in 2002 using administrative enrolment data from governments for some countries and information from household surveys for others. The resulting global estimate of children not in primary or secondary school was 115 million, whereas the estimate made solely on the basis of administrative data was 94 million.

Furthermore, both the UIS and UNICEF may underestimate the number of children who are not receiving effective schooling. For example, a recent extensive survey of primary schools and pupils across India showed that on days when schools were visited, the average absentee rate was 30 percent (UNESCO 2006).

Let us now examine a few studies concerning the primary enrollment ratio in Africa. Many are studies of the factors that determine the enrollment ratio, and many employ cross-national data. Among representative studies of this type is the research of Colclough and Lewin (1993), who analyzed the factors that determine the enrollment ratio, based on 1986 data for 82 developing countries, including African nations; they advocate the importance of improving the efficiency of public spending on education. Another is a study by Shultz (1987), who analyzed data from 90 countries, including 30 African nations, at five-year intervals from 1950 to 1980. Still another study—one focusing specifically on Africa—is that by Lee (1988), who used data from 32 African countries to show the need for increased spending on primary education and lower fees per enrollee. Among more recent studies is a time-series analysis by Mutangadura and Lamb (2003) that examines data for 29 African countries, from 1980 to 1997; according to that study, government spending on education, the urban population ratio, and the west African region (dummy variables) are the main factors determining both the first-year enrollment ratio and the primary enrollment ratio, and there is a significant relationship between the primary enrollment ratio and each of per-capita GNP and debt ratio. The study's authors were unable to establish any significant connection between levels of ethnic diversity and both the first-year and primary enrollment ratios. It had generally been believed that in Africa, ethnic diversity has a negative impact on a country's enrollment ratio as a whole, and so it is interesting that the empirical findings of Mutangadura and Lamb do not accord with this.

2. Improving Internal Efficiency

In Africa, dropping out of school and repeating a year are very common phenomena, even at the primary-school level. In most sub-Saharan countries in Africa, less than

two-thirds of first-year pupils complete their final year of schooling (UNESCO 2006). The most direct means of resolving the repeated-year problem is automatic promotion. Although the World Bank (1995) does not explicitly recommend automatic promotion, discussions of the issue of automatic promotion frequently arise. In any case, many African countries are hesitant to adopt automatic promotion, because they feel that this would sap both teachers' interest in teaching and students' interest in learning, and that this would in turn result in an education system that cannot guarantee a minimum level of schooling.

On this issue, the case of Ghana—as one of the first countries in Africa to adopt automatic promotion—is instructive. Ghana introduced automatic promotion in 1987, as part of its education reforms. A recent study comparing Ghana to its neighbor Togo (which has very demanding examinations for promotion) discusses which scenario is better: an automatic promotion system like Ghana's, or a system that features tough examinations like Togo's—the latter of which results in large numbers of children repeating a year. According to this study, automatic promotion has the following advantages in Ghana: it allows students who have been relatively disadvantaged to date (e.g., girls or children from poor families) to stay in school, whether or not they have achieved a certain level of scholastic proficiency. This, say the study results, contributes to improvements in the country's human capital; children no longer need to fear exams and no longer face the stigma of having failed; and repeaters no longer pool in the lower grades, which has the result of improving the quality of education in the lower grades. On the other hand, the study outlines the following disadvantages of automatic promotion: teachers lose their motivation and no longer try to get through the entire curriculum; since students face no exam pressures until they take the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) at the end of their ninth year of schooling, the shock to parents and the students themselves is great if marks obtained on the test are low; because there are no examinations, parents cannot tell how well their child is doing academically; and children can say they have completed basic schooling, even if they do not know how to read, write, or perform arithmetic (or, put another way, many primary school graduates cannot read or write, even after completing their basic education). In contrast, in Togo, which has retained a system of stringent exams for promotion, while a minimum level of academic achievement is guaranteed for each school year, students who fail to pass will pool in the lower grades, or their average length of stay in school becomes longer—two scenarios that put a heavier burden on state expenditures (N'tchougan-Sonou 2001).

3. Discussion Surrounding the Policy of Making Primary Education Free

As the studies cited at the end of section 1 make clear, it is a given that the state of government finances is a major issue where achieving EFA is a concern. Clearly, EFA cannot be achieved without government financial support. However, one of the important problems in relation to EFA is who should bear the cost of primary education, and how the cost burden should be shared. Of course, government spending is important, but in the case of Africa, governments lack the financial resources needed to make schools completely accessible to the continually expanding primary school-age population. In many countries, the reality is that families must bear some of the burden. One of the notable features of the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) is that it clearly states the “free” principle: “free,” in this case, means that families do not have to pay and that the government pays education costs.

One study on the education expense burden placed on households—and which has recently attracted attention—is that of Kattan and Burnett, who carried out a study for the World Bank (2004). In their study, a questionnaire survey was carried out among 79 World Bank client countries, including 27 African countries, in October 2001. This study grouped primary education expenses into five categories—namely, tuition fees, textbook fees, uniforms, financial contributions, and others—and asked the following questions for each category: “Are fees levied?”, “Is there a legal basis for charging fees?”, “Who collects the fees?”, and “Did the World Bank encourage charging or adopting fees, or did it reduce the fee burden?”. Findings from the survey were as follows: 77 countries, or 97 percent of respondents, said that they charged some kind of fee for primary education. Two countries (Uruguay and Algeria) replied that primary education was completely free, and eight others (Burkina Faso, Malawi, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia, Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Brazil) indicated that except for financial contributions, primary education was free. In other words, 69 of the 77 countries surveyed charge several types of fees. Mauritius, Tanzania, Togo, Egypt, China, Vietnam, and Pakistan charge all five types of fees (i.e., tuition fees, textbook fees, uniforms, financial contributions, and others) (World Bank 2004).

Among the African countries surveyed, 11 of the 27 countries charge tuition fees; of those, six had been supported by the World Bank in terms of reducing the burden on households and five were taking steps to phase out tuition fees. Other countries, such as Malawi and Uganda, have eliminated tuition fees, based on cooperation between the World Bank and those countries' governments. The results of the study stress that there were no countries in which the World Bank had

encouraged the government to charge tuition fees. Ten countries charged textbook fees, and in each of those countries, there was a legal basis for this fee. A fee for uniforms was compulsory in 12 countries, and the fee had a legal basis in 10 of those countries. For both textbook fees and uniforms, the World Bank was either providing support to reduce or eliminate these charges, or had not promoted such fees. Twenty-two countries assessed financial contributions, but in only 12 countries was there a legal basis for this. The World Bank provides support to most countries to reduce the burden of financial contributions or eliminate such contributions, but in Madagascar, it was encouraging financial contributions by local communities. Twelve countries charged other fees related to school activities, with there being a legal basis for this in nine of those countries. The World Bank encouraged the adoption of such fees in the Comoros, but most countries provided support toward reducing or eliminating them.

Bray (1997, 2002) and others have discussed the relationship between government finances and the cost burden of education, but Kattan and Burnett's World Bank study is noteworthy, because it clearly describes the various forms of that burden. Additionally, to date, the World Bank has held that levying small fees on parents had positive effects on education, by strengthening parents' awareness of education, improving school accountability, and so forth. It has also said that, for primary education, it is important to encourage local communities and citizen groups to establish and operate schools (World Bank 1988). For this reason, the World Bank was interpreted as having encouraged or approved of placing a burden on local communities or parents, but Kattan and Burnett's research has drawn a picture of the World Bank that diverges from that image.

In recent years, a number of countries have adopted policies that make primary education free: Malawi in 1994, Uganda in 1997, and Kenya in 2003. In each of these countries, the number of enrollees has grown rapidly as a result of the free education policy, and primary education enrollment has expanded tremendously. Because the tuition fee burden at the primary education level was a barrier to enrollment, these countries are sometimes cited as examples of success in raising enrollment ratios through fee elimination. In particular, there have been many studies on the adoption and elimination of tuition fees in Malawi (Thobani 1984, Klees 1984, Al-Samarrai and Zaman 2002, Rose 2003, World Bank 2004). Some recent research has emphasized the negative aspects of policies that make primary education free. For example, Kadzamira and Rose (2003) discuss how, as a result of Malawi's "free primary education" policy, the number of enrollees increased so rapidly that class sizes grew too large, prompting the need to hire less-talented teachers and the end result that the quality of education suffered

greatly. Furthermore, they say that while this policy had been aimed at assisting the poor, it failed to meet their needs and, consequently, the policy did not contribute to poverty reduction.

4. Decentralization, Privatization, and Community Participation

The aforementioned issue of education expense burdens needs to be examined from the viewpoint of the World Bank's stance toward Africa. Because the World Bank is backed by plentiful financial resources, it has a strong influence on developing countries' education policies. As far as Africa is concerned, the World Bank has exerted immense influence before, through structural-adjustment lending and other measures (Takala 1998). The relationship between the World Bank and the burden on the beneficiaries of primary education needs to be understood from the perspective of the policies of decentralization and privatization of education that the World Bank has promoted.

Today, the decentralization of education being carried out by many African countries involves allowing regional governments and local communities to share in the management and operation of education—something which had, to date, been under the sole jurisdiction of the central government. These reforms have made it possible for schools to take on more operation and management duties themselves, but this also means that they must take greater responsibility. In other words, the schools must also somehow secure the resources needed to operate them autonomously.

The privatization of education bears two noteworthy implications. One is that it allows or encourages the founding of private schools, or the private sector to enter the education field; the other is that it allows for the charging of fees (i.e., relying on private funding, such as that from families). Of course, for private schools, fees are usually the main source of school-operating income, so there is an especially close connection between fees and privatization. In Africa, private schools can take many forms. For example, Kitaev (1999) groups private schools in Africa into the following four categories, based on their distinguishing characteristics: community schools, established and operated by communities; religious schools (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, etc.); non-government approved schools set up voluntarily by nomadic peoples; and for-profit schools for the wealthy.

Indeed, there are many different types of private schools in Africa, and each fulfills different functions; nonetheless, it is quite clear that the World Bank's structural-adjustment policies have underpinned the privatization of education in Africa. Historically, the issue that many African countries faced immediately upon securing independence was the promotion of education

for nation-building—in other words, the nationalization of education. A major issue related to nationalization was bringing schools established by missionaries under the auspices of government management, rather than continuing to be “mission schools.” The trend toward nationalization was reversed when Africa had a financial crisis—an event that was followed by structural adjustment. Under structural adjustment, it was imperative to reduce the role of the central government, trim the number of civil servants, and cut government spending. Under these structural-adjustment policies, it was difficult to continue nationalization; in fact, governments were forced to establish private schools and allow the private sector to enter the education field. However, not all African countries privatized education in the same direction or manner. Regarding the Kitaev’s aforementioned private-school typology, in former English colonies, there are many community schools, while in former French colonies, there are many religious schools; it does make sense, therefore, that privatization among various countries would take different directions.

In Africa, decentralization, privatization, and community participation are viewed in a positive light, because it is believed that local residents understand their communities better than the central government can, and that they can therefore carry out more effective decision-making for themselves. The World Bank has been very critical of central governments in Africa and frequently stresses the need to pass authority relating to education from the central government to local residents (World Bank 1995). However, the findings of recent research do not accord with the assumption that “local residents know best.” For example, Chapman et al. (2002), surveying 643 educators, community leaders, and parents in 18 farming villages in Ghana, found that respondents lacked an accurate understanding of and an appropriate attitude toward both practical education activities in schools and local community support for schools. The implications of decentralization in Africa must be understood within the African context (Therkildsen 2000, Maclure 1994, Suzuki 2002); given that these studies challenge the premises underlying the very decentralization policies themselves, more detailed research should be carried out.

Conclusion

This paper examined recent trends in policy directions and research with respect to primary education in Africa. One characteristic of research on education in Africa is that much of it (including research commissioned by donor organizations) is undertaken by aid organizations (particularly the World Bank), and that these are the dominant opinion-makers. In other words, rather than serving purely as academic research, the studies

themselves are closely connected to aid, and so what the aid organizations view as problems tend to reflect in the issues that the researchers study. The history of education in post-independence Africa is inseparable from the history of aid for education. Education in Africa is always at the mercy of aid organizations—a state of affairs that, although it may take different forms, can be said to continue today.

However, new trends are emerging in the research community. Maclure (2006) has stated that education research in Africa—which tends to follow a donor-controlled approach that is carried out according to the West’s aid theories—often fail to meet Africa’s needs; he focuses instead on a spontaneous network/application-oriented approach. As examples of the latter, he cites the Education Research Network for West and Central Africa (ERNWACA) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), and he analyzes the potential of these organizations. To date, the World Bank’s policy documents have been criticized for leaning in the direction of the studies quoted therein; in other words, most of the research was funded by aid organizations and carried out by researchers from developed countries, while research by African researchers has been ignored (Eisemon 1989, Brock-Utne 2000). It is hoped that through spontaneous, network-oriented education research like that described by Maclure (2006) that African views will be firmly rooted both in research and in the aid community.

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