

FREE EDUCATION AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES: CASE OF LESOTHO AFTER 2010

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the opportunities and challenges of free primary education in Lesotho. Qualitative research methods were used for data gathering and analysis. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to choose interviewees who were education officers, school board members, school principals and teachers. The study established that for Lesotho, free primary education is part and parcel of efforts by the government to attain the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 Education 2030. The study also established that the efforts to educate children of the poor are actually liberating girl children from child marriages as well as providing a platform for children to discover their talents. However, inadequate infrastructure, poor learning and teaching material, overcrowding and indiscipline are outstanding challenges the public school system still needs to overcome in order to provide public school children with quality education.

Keyword: Public school, Teacher/ pupil ratio, Teaching/ learning material, Curriculum, Long term development plan

1.INTRODUCTION

Free provision of education to the whole nation is the most ideal step to take considering that education

should be a basic human right in any civilized polity. Indeed education is a basic human right which should benefit every child despite their background. With the state providing free education, children from poor families get access to an education and this has the benefit of helping break cycles of poverty as children from disadvantaged backgrounds have an opportunity to liberate themselves. Where education is co modified, free provision of education by the state helps break monopoly hold on education by the elite. However, free education provision by the state faces a plethora of challenges which border on the idea being unrealistic especially when it comes to the execution part considering that there is teaching and learning material to be bought, salaries to be paid as well as infrastructure to be erected, serviced and maintained. This is more so in a developing economy that has a tight budget under normal circumstances due to the absence of a robust industry to produce and sustain the economy like that of Lesotho. For populist political agenda, it is very ideal because it is a concept that appeals to the masses, especially the impoverished constituency, yet in reality it is very difficult to implement and sustain. Provision of free education is very popular with the ordinary citizens but because of poor resource provision to prop up the free education system, the end result is very poor quality education for the public primary school system and this reverberates into high school, tertiary education and industry. Parents who can afford it send their children to private schools where the quality of education is a lot

higher and in the long run society is polarized as children from better off families excel in future enterprises as compared to their counterparts from lesser fortunate backgrounds who are products of the public school system.

Children should not just go through an education for the purpose of attending class and go through a certain level. Education should be quality in order to produce a citizen competent enough to meet the demands of the global world of today. A school system product should be able to compete and survive the rigors and demands of any employment system anywhere in the world. It is therefore counterproductive to establish an education system that does not empower the product to compete anywhere in the world because the student was not equipped enough to compete in industry and prosper locally and globally. Moreover, students with a weak educational background struggle when they advance with their studies beyond primary and high school. Primary education should therefore provide a strong foundation in order for the products to prosper in their future endeavours in industry or academia. It is in the interest of this study therefore, to establish how the public primary school system in Lesotho fares in comparison to the private schools in terms of the quality of the products.

2.BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The Bureau of statistics (2014) writes that the system of education in Lesotho has 8 levels starting from level 0 to level 7. Pre-primary or kinder garden (level 0), elementary or primary school (level 1).

Secondary education includes junior (level 2) and senior high school (level 3), Post Secondary (vocational and technical schools, IBM) (level 4) tertiary or Higher education, (Level 5, 6 and 7) (Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Level 0 is known as pre-primary education or preparatory education, intended to provide early childhood care and development education. These are institutions that have been developed for children ranging from the ages of three to five in Lesotho (Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

The playing activities, experience, and social interaction at this level are accepted as essential aspects of

developing skills and knowledge of a child (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Few Preparatory schools are operated formally by government, churches and private individuals while many are operated informally by private individuals, local communities and non-governmental organizations (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Many parents, especially those in urban areas, take their children to preparatory schools as early as when they are three or four years old. Preparatory schools are usually more expensive than primary schools (level 1) (Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Schools at level 1 offer primary education. This is the basic education in reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as other subjects such as history, geography, religious and social studies (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Officially, primary education starts at Grade 1 when a child is at least six years old and lasts for seven years. Successful candidates usually complete primary education when they are 12 or 13 years old, but many complete primary level at older ages because they begin Grade 1 late (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). At the end of the seven-year primary level schooling, pupils sit for the primary school leaving examination (PSLE) administered by the Examinations Council of Lesotho.

The sitting for PSLE assists in making the decision about the promotion and selection of those who qualify to attend secondary school (level 2) (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The first three years (Forms A, B and C) are called junior or lower secondary; usually referred to as 'secondary' or Level 2. The remaining two years (Level 3) are called 'senior or upper secondary', usually referred to as high school (Form D and E) (Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Progression from secondary to high school is through the Junior Certificate (JC) examination, administered by the Examinations Council of Lesotho (Bureau of Statistics, 2014). High school candidates sit for the Cambridge Overseas Certificate (COSC) of the University of Cambridge Examination Syndicate. (Bureau of Statistics, 2014) writes that the COSC forms the entry requirement for higher and tertiary programs. Level 4 refers to post-secondary education which is not tertiary education. Institutions belonging to this category offer technical training, they are technical and vocational. All such institutions are owned by the Government (Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

3.STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Government of Lesotho implemented free primary education for all policy in 2009. The main objective of this programme was to make primary education accessible to all children irrespective of their economic backgrounds. However, a sudden increase in pupil population has had far-reaching implications in terms of existing physical infrastructure, educational material and human resources. That is, there now exists a gap between the intents of the Government of Lesotho free primary education and the unforeseeable challenges. This study, therefore, was designed to establish these challenges and find ways of overcoming them.

4.STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are to establish:

- (a) To identify challenges faced by Free Primary Education in Lesotho public schools;
- (b) To investigate the effect of the challenges raised in (a) above to the realization of Free Primary Education in Lesotho public schools; and
- (c) To offer suggestions to overcome the obstacles faced by Free Primary Education in Lesotho public schools.

5.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by the post- development school of thought, propounded by Ivan Illich (Zaldivar, 2015), which critiques the theory of modernization of development. The idea of free provision of education emanates from the ideology or theory of modernization of development, a theory that is part and parcel of the 1950s and 1960s which incorporates the full spectrum of the transition and drastic transformation that a traditional society has to undergo in order to become modern ((Hussain et al. 1981; Lenin, 1964) in Matunhu, 2011). The post- development school claims that it is time to think about alternatives to development instead of alternative ways of reaching development in the Third World (Ziai, 2007).

6.LITERATURE REVIEW

Menashy (2014) writes that the past decade has witnessed a notable shift in the education policy environment, characterized by a rapid growth in private

education provision. Menashy (2014) goes on to cite Fielden and LaRocque (2008) and Patrinos et al (2009) saying that supporters promote private provision as a reform policy to increase access, competition and thereby quality, along with relieving public sector costs.

Writing about free provision at primary school level I Ethiopia, Oumer (2009) says that the abolition of school fees for primary schooling was viewed as a positive development overall by various stakeholders, including parents, headmasters and teachers, as it was matched by a compensating increase in public funding for schools. In Ethiopia, the effects of the abolition of school fees were visible because the country had traditionally had low enrolment and wide disparities across and within the regions (Oumer, 2009). However, given the high opportunity costs in rural areas, the absence of school fees may not be sufficient to improve school enrolment in the long run (Oumer, 2009). Sometimes schools suffer cash-flow problems following the abolition of school fees due to the delays in disbursement from upper administrative levels (Oumer, 2009).

In 2001, Tanzania implemented the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) with the support of international donors and eliminated public school fees in order to increase access to primary education (Dennis and Stahley, 2012). Dennis and Stahley (2012) also write that the elimination of school tuition fees in Tanzania is supported by the World Bank and UNICEF to increase school enrollment and achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2030. However, according to Dennis and Stahley (2012), increased enrollment without prior improvement to school infrastructure decreases the quality of education.

In a study to investigate the challenges of free primary education in public primary schools since its inception in 2003 in Kenya, Kalunda (2015) established that though teachers were highly qualified and experienced, they were inadequate, and that teacher-pupil ratio, inadequate physical facilities and teacher professionalism all hindered provision of free primary education. The main challenges the school administration faced were high pupil enrolment, inadequate teachers and instructional materials (Kalunda, 2015).

Citing the Ministry of Education and Training, Morojele (2012) writes that in Lesotho the primary school enrollment grew 80% between the year 2000 and 2002. The immediate challenge that the influx of learners into schools created since the inception of Free Primary Education, was the need for more infrastructure and teaching and learning resources (Morojele, 2012). Morojele (2012) also writes that the overcrowding in the public schools due to free provision of primary school education does not only compromise quality of education but also poses a health threat as classrooms become overcrowded with learners of different ages, most of whom come from poverty stricken households where it is difficult to maintain acceptable levels of hygiene.

Writing about challenges emanating from free primary education provision in Lesotho, Lekhetho (2013) says that many schools in the remote mountain areas still lack facilities and educational resources which compound to poor education quality. A critical shortage of qualified teachers is another challenge, especially in the mountain areas, mainly due to lack of infrastructure in those areas (Lekhetho, 2013). In some cases even trained teachers are not competent to handle the curriculum; they lack the requisite pedagogical skills (Lekhetho, 2013). The causes of this are multiple, and include low entry requirements or lack of selectivity of students who want to pursue a primary school teaching career, a lack of a reading culture and the drive among teachers to continuously update their knowledge (Lekhetho, 2013).

7.METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out using the qualitative research method. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. The population for this study was school principals from ten various schools in Maseru district, board members of the schools, teachers and the ministry of education. Purposive sampling was adopted to select the respondents for this study, it was considered because of its ability to identify and select

individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest ([Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011](#)). This sampling procedure was therefore used in choosing respondents with appropriate characteristics required for this study. The sampling frame consisted of three full time teachers from each school, ten principals, and a member of the school board each. School principals and ministry officials were also selected using purposive technique for interviewing and simple random sampling was used to identify teachers who participated in the study.

Snowball sampling was used to choose school board members for the study. Interviews were carried out with school principals, board members of schools, teachers, parents and the ministry of education office responsible for policy and planning. MacNealy (1999) maintains that snowball sampling is usually applied in cases when the population of interest cannot be identified other than by someone who knows that a certain person has the necessary experience or characteristics to be included. Snowball sampling also includes relying on previously identified group members to identify others who may share the same characteristics as the group already in place (Henry, 1990). In this case principals assisted the researcher with referrals of teachers who may be available to provide information who in turn identified their colleagues to assist with data.

Interviews were administered as a method of data collection for this study because of their ability to provide in depth information and because they allowed the researchers to probe for more questions when clarity was needed. Schostak, (2006) agrees that an interview is an extendable conversation between an interviewer and interviewee that aims at having 'in-depth information' about a certain topic or subject, and through which a phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of the meanings interviewees bring to it. The researcher was not able to use a tape recorder because respondents did not feel comfortable being recorded. Hence reliance was only on the information that was noted by the researcher during the conversations.

8.FINDINGS

Responses from interviews with education officers solicited the information that, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 Education 2030, education is fundamental for the economic development of Lesotho and an educated nation will no doubt go hand in glove with economic growth and therefore development of the national economy. The same officials went on to say every child has got potential and school can help bring out whatever talent lies dormant in children despite their backgrounds, hence government efforts to create free platforms for this dormant talent to be unleashed for the benefit of all. The officials went on to explain that girl children from poverty stricken families try to escape abject poverty from home by getting married so free education liberates these hapless girl children from the clutches of early marriages.

The study established from interview responses from school authorities that the public school system in Lesotho faces the challenge of lack of teachers with requisite qualifications to cater for pupils with special needs. Special needs children who attend ordinary public school without facilities and human resource to cater for them suffer the most. Interviews revealed that teachers face challenges dealing with pupils who are disabled and in need of specialized teaching because they were not trained on special education. This results in improper care for these pupils and frustration on the part of teachers

School stakeholders also responded that there is a lack of teachers in public schools which leads to lack of specialization and the result is that teachers with no specialization end up getting hired. For example, most teachers would not have done well in sciences and mathematics but they end up teaching those subjects because of unavailability of specialists yet students will have to have a teacher.

The response from teachers in high school is that there is a challenge of overcrowding in these schools with pupil teacher ratio averaging 80 pupils per one teacher in some schools while in better schools the ration is two teachers to 80 pupils. The result is that remediation is difficult meaning weaker or slower students are not well catered for as there is no ample time to pay special attention to their needs.

The teachers also cited the challenge of lack of resources such as textbooks and exercise books, lack of equipment for science subjects and computers. Books come from the government and they are usually supplied late that is if they are delivered at all.

The teachers in their interview responses also said that the majority of their pupils are from the extremely poor families or child headed families being orphans and the challenge with such disadvantaged pupils is that there is no one to assist them with homework and there is no encouragement from home with school work. Parents, siblings or guardians will be too engrossed in thinking of basic survival to bother about the children's performance at school. They cannot afford buying school material if none is forthcoming from the government and the way children come dressed in any kind of apparel works negatively on the children's self esteem because at home they cannot afford basic school uniform.

Teachers also responded that pupils coming from homes with illiterate parents lack motivation because everything has to come from the school with the parents clueless of what takes place in the educational life of the children.

The teachers also responded that due to the fact of most of these pupils' poor backgrounds, the parents cannot afford to take them through nursery school and the end result is that these pupils lack that foundation attained at nursery school level.

Teachers also responded that the public school system is indiscriminate in enrolment and the result is that they will end up teaching elderly students who are very difficult to teach. However, there were mixed reactions from teachers with some saying the indiscipline levels of elderly pupils are very high whilst others said the older students know what they want and hence are not too undisciplined as compared to their younger counterparts.

9.DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS/ ANALYSIS

The government of Lesotho should consider the plight of children with special needs. These are children who,

because of their unique features and endowment, cannot be adequately and satisfactorily catered for in the regular classroom (Fuandai, 2010). Pupils attending public schools are predominantly from poorly resourced families and the parents cannot afford the additional material required for the physically challenged children so this means they are doubly disadvantaged. An education system dedicated to cater for all should therefore prioritize assisting the children with special needs so that they can be at par with their counterparts. Teaching pupils with special needs in the inclusive classroom deviates from the "regular" programme (Okongo, Ngao, Rop and Nyongesa, 2015). Pupils with special needs may require more instruction time, other learning methods and professional knowledge (Okongo, Ngao, Rop and Nyongesa, 2015). This can be achieved by an increase in resources or by re-arranging available resources (Okongo, Ngao, Rop and Nyongesa, 2015). This study established that the public school sector in Lesotho has a shortfall in that area and it needs rectification.

Meaningful, quality learning can improve the lives of broad sectors of the population more than does the expansion of low-quality, precarious schooling (Zaldivar, 2015). The government of Lesotho should invest in manpower development in the form of teacher training, especially in the area of mathematics and science subjects so as to improve the quality of delivery in those subjects in the public school sector. There has to be an effort of commitment to provide quality education in the public school sector and this has to start with the provision of well trained teachers for the whole curriculum on offer. Without that, it will be a matter of going through the motions of providing education that is not beneficial to already disadvantaged communities; children of the poor who populate the public school sector.

Teacher- pupil ratio has an impact on pupils' performance. When the teacher- pupil ratio is high, performance in terms of performance scores are low (Waita, Mulei, Mueni, Mutune and Kalai, 2015). Waita et al (2015) carried out their study in Kenya on classes averaging 50 to 60 pupils and established that the higher the teacher- pupil ratio the lower the performance. In some of the Lesotho public schools, the teacher- pupil ratio is one teacher to 80 pupils meaning

the performance by such pupils is even lower. The authorities should therefore seriously consider rectifying this anomaly.

For the public school sector, the government of Lesotho should ensure adequate supply of educational paraphernalia such as textbooks and stationery. The amount a country spends on learning materials is a good indicator of its commitment to providing a quality education for all (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO (2016) isolates textbooks for special mention saying that textbooks are especially relevant to improving learning outcomes in low income countries with large class sizes, a high proportion of unqualified teachers and a shortage of instructional time.

Maluleke (2014) cites St John and Griffith (1997:48-52) saying that there are important benefits that teachers, learners and parents derive from parents' participation in school programmes and activities such as healthy communication, generation of interest and building positive self- esteem and confidence, to mention but a few while their children attending school during pre-primary, primary and secondary level. School authorities, teachers and parents should work together so that they provide as much moral support as possible to pupils attending public schools. It should not be a burden for teachers alone to deliver lessons and motivate the pupils without constant consultation with parents and guardians. There should not be segregation against the parents because of lack of material support to the children's education. They can provide motivation through moral support.

Free education should start at pre- primary school level so as to provide children from disadvantaged families with that requisite essential educational background. Government should assist the public school sector by coming up with clear cut policy on discipline in order to properly accommodate over- aged pupils. Ogola (2010) writing on the issue of the prevalence of indiscipline in the Kenyan public school sector says that indiscipline was becoming common, especially among the over- age pupils, and it was made worse by the large numbers of pupils in the face of few teachers. Ogola (2010) goes on to say that some pupils (especially the over- age) were reportedly smoking cigarettes, chewing Khat or sniffing glue as well as bullying, rowdy behaviour, fighting,

rudeness, harassment, defying teachers as well as refusing to do assignments.

Overall, it is the quality of education offered, not the quantity of people who have gone through the school system that can positively impact the national economy and development. The government, therefore, should work hard towards quality provision of education in the endeavour to provide education for all rather than merely ensuring children pass through the school gate.

10.CONCLUSION

The objectives of this study were to establish the opportunities and challenges for free education at primary school level in Lesotho. The study went on to establish that free primary education in Lesotho has created the opportunity for children who could never have accessed primary school education with the chance to attend school and attain an education with the government making visible efforts to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 Education 2030. However, the findings established that much as public schools are enrolling and offering classes to all children in need of education, the quality of that education is of poor quality due to poor resources in the form of inadequate infrastructure, lack of educational material, shortage of teachers with requisite qualifications and overcrowding. The government should therefore make serious efforts to provide sufficient teaching and learning material, qualified human resources to deliver quality education and improve delivery in the public education sector.

11.RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that communities should be urged to take the initiative to fund education and work hand in hand with government rather than relegating education development to be the sole responsibility of the government. The study also recommends that schools, at their level, should engage with parents and guardians in order for them to support pupils and provide back up in studies at home rather than leaving everything to do with school work entirely in the hands of teachers.

The study also recommends to the government to ensure delivery of educational material on time and for the facilitation for in-service training of teachers already teaching so that they constantly upgrade themselves. Government should also provide incentives so that they attract teachers with special skills to the public school sector in order to cater for pupils with special needs. The same scheme of incentives can be used to lure teachers specialised in the teaching of science subjects and mathematics to the public school sector.

The study also recommends that teacher- pupil ratio be standardised to smaller manageable sizes so as to create room for teachers to cater for all pupils. Professional counsellors should also be engaged and stationed in public schools to cater for the over-age pupils with disciplinary challenges.

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