

Influence of Parental Education and Family Income on Children's Education in Rural Uganda

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Abstract

This article investigates the effect of parents' literacy levels and family income in Uganda on the quality and nature of parents' involvement in their children's primary education. A mixed-methods study with an ethnographic element was employed to explore the views and opinions of 21 participants through a qualitative approach. Methods for data collection included observation of family routines and practices, semi-structured interviews with parents and children, and review of relevant documents. Vygotsky's socio-cultural historical theory and the Feinsteinian concept of intergenerational transmission of educational success offer the basis for the investigation.

Findings indicated a significant relationship between parents' income and literacy levels and the quality of support to their children's education. Household poverty emerged as a major obstacle to educational success for children across the three socio-economic categories of family studied. Compromised lack of time for parent-child interaction proved to be the main obstacle as parents spent significant hours in non-academic matters for the day-to-day survival of their families. Parental illiteracy showed negative associations with children's literacy competence and subsequent success in primary school.

Keywords

Literacy, parents, rural Uganda, poverty, achievement

Context of the study

The study was conducted in the rural district of Moyo, located in the north western part of Uganda known as the West Nile Region. This is a region lacking in many development indicators including educational excellence in both primary and secondary sectors. Other features of this region include; remoteness from major urban centres, a challenging political and socio-economic history, and poor infrastructure.

Background of the Study

In order to understand the motivation behind this study, a personal story of growing up in rural Uganda is a good starting point.

I was born in a small mountain village of Gwere-Luzira in Metu sub-county in the

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district of Moyo, 12 km from the river Nile in the West Nile Region. It is a remote area, which is about 500 km from the capital city, Kampala. Comparatively, my parents were more educated than the other parents in the village and therefore they were employed and earning salary. My mother was a qualified primary school teacher, dad's college certificate enabled him to join the police and later he served as a prison warden. They spoke the language of both home (Ma'di) and of school (English), and other languages including Kiswahili, Acholi, Luganda and Lugbara, languages of the places where they had studied and worked. With such educational background and exposure to life, my parents had a knowledge of the school system and they understood the challenges of schooling from their own experience, and directly and indirectly passed those values onto us, their children, perhaps, as Delgado-Gaitan (1990) noted, even "without realising it."

Since my involvement in teaching between 1995 -2004 in the West Nile Region, the needs of students became apparent to me. Their struggles with the language of school (English), the lack of basic school materials, the lack of school fees, omitting lunch because there was no food at home, and their struggles with health issues, and so forth, prompted my current research interest, which explores the important relationship between parents' educational levels and literacy skills, and their children's performance in primary school.

These years of teaching made me realise how privileged my siblings and I were compared to most children in the village due to our parents' socio-economic status, which was a direct result of their level of education. It therefore makes more sense to me now when studies continue to suggest that parents' education not only makes a difference in their own lives, but also in their families' and the society in which they live and serve (UNESCO,

2006; Feinstein, Duckworth, & Abates, 2008). The literature is replete with references to research, which proposes that when parents are educated, the pattern of influence on their children's education and life in general tends to be different from parents with low or no formal education (Feinstein, et al., 2008).

The Literacy and Poverty Paradox

The relationship between the level of a person's education and poverty seem to be inter-twined. Internationally, UNESCO (2006) and the World Bank (2009) found a strong positive correlation between literacy and poverty. The World Bank (2009) observed that a lack of income and essential goods and services still exists in the poorer regions. UNESCO (2011) reveals that the poorer regions of the world, namely Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and West Asia also show the lowest literacy rates. Further, observation has shown that 1,115 million people in the developing countries live in poverty, that is below the upper poverty line of \$370 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) (Meier and Rauch, 2000). Of these, 630 million people (18%) of the total population of the developing world was designated extremely poor, that is they consume less than \$275 per annum, being the lower poverty line (Meier and Rauch, 2000). Although global poverty has been on the decline since the 1980s (Meier and Rauch, 2000), efforts to reduce poverty have been hampered, especially in the poorer regions by such factors as poor health and a lack of education. According to the World Bank (2009), these factors deprive people of productive employment and are likely to impact negatively on school aged children, especially when parents are neither literate nor employed, and live below the poverty line.

There exists evidence that family poverty is closely associated with family

instability, unemployment, and alcoholism, which can potentially impair children's educational attainment (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, & Halsey, 2006). Theorists argue, for instance that financial security within the family plays a key role in how parents and their children make decisions about educational choices and provision. This is related to the socio-economic status of the family, which in turn is greatly influenced by the education level of parents.

Inspired by the notion that parents' education has a direct effect on family income (Feinstein, et al., 2008), it can be hypothesised that parents' education levels and family income combine to influence children's school achievement. According to Feinstein et al., (2008) this can happen in two ways: through direct parent-child interaction, and indirectly through parent cognition and family resources, including such things as the "distal family factors", "internal features of the family environment" and "proximal family process" (p. 46). Consequently, Dolton, Asplund, & Barth, (2009) posit that the acquisition of human capital has been and still is seen as a main route out of poverty, both for the individual and for society as a whole (see UNESCO, 2006). Thus, Checchin (2006) asserts that "countries with higher educational achievement are also characterised by lower differences in educational achievement in the population" (p. 5). This implies that persons with higher levels of education are more likely to find employment and, owing to increased wages, educated parents with higher incomes are able to provide for their children's education, and thereby increase their children's chances of successful school attainment (Brown and Iyengar, 2008). Hence, Checchin's (2006) suggestion that

income inequality tends to be lower in countries where average educational achievement is higher. This suggests that literacy skill acquisition, especially for parents, can be an advantage in alleviating household poverty.

Impact of Income on Educational Attainment

The focus on income in the relationship between poverty and educational achievement has been challenged in recent years (Field, 2010; Goodman & Greg, 2010). It is argued income is only one aspect in accounting for the experiences of children in the school system (Ward, 2013). However, the impact of low-income on children's cognitive development is well documented. Evidence shows that low income children lag in cognitive development and lie one year behind in vocabulary when they enter school, with long-term consequences: "such early gaps may affect low-income children's attitudes towards school and their aspirations for school attainment" (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010, p. 36; see also Lauder, et al., 2006). In addition, there is evidence that poverty, in terms of family resources, has a powerful influence on children's ability to respond to educational opportunities (Eden, 2013 in Ward, 2013); Blanden & Gregg, 2004). Poverty, in terms of low family income affects children in several ways:

- the absence of learning habits and experiences at home;
- a lack of access to computers;
- a lack of a sense of self-esteem through appropriate interactions with parents;
- poor housing;
- an unhealthy diet;

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- possible mental health issues within the family;
- domestic violence;
- the stress associated with low pay or unemployment. (Eden, 2013, p. 35)

These all make it potentially difficult for children to see themselves as positive learners (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1989). Low income is likely to affect a parent's sense of being able to provide their children with the same advantages as those in the more affluent households. The parents who are stressed about money and employment, working unsocial hours in more than one job, are likely to have less time to provide their children within an environment conducive to good educational outcomes (Blanden & Gregg, 2004).

From these reviews it is widely recognised that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Feinstein, et al., 2008; Brown & Iyengar, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). This may differ from country to country, but the education of parents appears to be a strong underpinning factor.

Impact of Income on Educational Attainment in Uganda

Similar to the studies reviewed above, non-governmental organisations such as the Literacy for Adult Basic Education (LABE) in Uganda found close links between the literacy skills of parents and increased parental support to children (LABE, 2011). The lack of literacy owing to poverty is negatively linked with reduced parental support to their children (Nyamugasira, Angura, & Robinson 2005).

Until 1997, parents in Uganda had to pay fees for all of their children's schooling. Under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) leadership, the government of Uganda took over the payment of tuition fees leaving parents with the responsibility of providing children with other educational requirements such as school uniforms, exercise/text books, pens, pencils, school lunch, and funds for school development (Uganda Education Guidelines, 2008; MFPED, 1999). While the reform was generally welcomed, parents in rural districts such as Moyo in Northern Uganda still face significant challenges in keeping their children in school, with many children being excluded owing to a lack of resources to keep them there (Lubangakene, 2013). Primary schools in poor rural and urban slum areas characteristically have high rates of absenteeism and multiple repeats of classes (NAPE, 2011), with early pregnancies among girls and early marriages being a common practice (Kasirye, 2009; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). These practices lead to a high dropout rate of pupils before the completion of primary schooling (UNESCO, 2005). The situation is further aggravated by poor family economic status, low pay to civil servants, unemployment and high levels of illiteracy (MFPED, 1999).

Uganda's population of 33,425 million (UNESCO, 2010) is characterised by high levels of illiteracy, leading to high levels of unemployment and poverty (MFPED, 1999; Meier & Rauch, 2000). Table 1 shows the mean monthly income in Uganda, correlated with level of education. The table shows that wages increase with the level of education. Although this survey was conducted about ten years ago, the situation in Uganda has not changed appreciably.

Table 1: Mean monthly wages increase in Uganda across education levels

Education level	Mean income (Ug Shs per month)	Mean income (Euro per month)
No formal education	25,000	7.80
Primary education	74,000	23.13
Secondary education	94,000	29.38
Specialised Training	239,000	74.69

Source: Adopted and modified from Uganda National Housing Household Survey LMIS 2002/2003. UGX (current exchange rate) 1 euro =3,200

The figures indicate that individuals with specialised training earn almost ten times as much as those with no formal education.

In rural Uganda, it is estimated that only 8% and 31% of the population live in permanent and semi-permanent dwelling units respectively (MFPED, 1999). A two to three roomed house with brick walls, a corrugated iron roof and a cement floor, without electricity, indoor toilets, or water on tap (typical of northern rural Uganda, is regarded as a good house, with the particular benefit of providing space for children both to study and to sleep. By contrast, most low-income parents in this area will have a one-roomed hut where the family cook, recreate, sleep and keep their belongings. In such an arrangement, when children are above the age of seven (male or female), it is a common practice for them to sleep with the children of the neighbours separate from their own house. Usually, the girls would sleep with their grandmothers, and if there are no grandmothers, they would share a hut, referred to as *adra jo*, which means “granny’s hut”, with other girls of the village. It is uncommon for the younger boys to sleep with their grandfathers because he might have a second wife, and so they would sleep in a separate hut with the older boys. In the Moyo district in Uganda, the majority of the rural population live below the international poverty line, on less than \$1.25 a day (Meier & Rauch, 2000). The status of persons in the

labour market in Uganda illustrates that literacy and poverty are inseparable (LMIS, 2006). The 2006 survey indicated that people in the rural areas who are working are more likely to be poor than their counterparts in urban areas (40% as against 11%), while in the predominantly rural northern region of Uganda – the location of this study - an estimated 60% of working people are described as poor, compared to only 19% in the Central region [city area] (LMIS, 2006). Furthermore, people with no formal education are more likely to be counted among the working poor than those with primary education (55% as against 39%) (LMIS, 2006).

Against such stark statistics which continue to prevail in the 21st century, a study to examine the lived realities and opinions of families from the West Nile region of Moyo district in Uganda was conceived with the direct intention of exploring the triadic relationship between parents’ levels of education and literacy skills, their potential to earn an income, and their ability to support their children in primary school. It was hoped to be able to engage directly with families themselves, to experience their world on a day-to-day basis and to elicit their opinions about the impact of their own situations in terms of education levels and financial constraints on the degree of success their children experience in primary education.

This investigation is therefore informed by Vygotsky's socio-cultural historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). This theoretical perspective makes explicit the connection between the social, cultural and literacy practice in the home setting through the interaction between parents and children. Vygotsky views human development as inseparable from human social and cultural activities (Kozulin et al., 2003). The importance of cultural tools such as language, literacy, mathematical systems and memory devices in the development of higher mental processes (Palmer, 2001), lend this theory adaptable to this particular inquiry associated with human society in Northern Uganda. The concepts of mediation and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Kravtsova, 2009) are deemed necessary for a child's learning and must be aided by adults appropriately, and fits well with the current investigation. The transferability of knowledge from parent to child as demonstrated in the study of Feinstein et al., (2008) in the UK further elaborates the Vygotskian theory which underpins this study. According to Feinstein and colleagues, such social and cultural values inherent in the theory of Vygotsky, including literacy and educational behaviours, are effectively transmitted if parents are educated. The merging of Vygotsky's theory and the model of intergenerational transmission of educational success required a methodological design which was capable of tapping into the natural setting of human society and which is described in the section below.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design with an ethnographic element to explore the views of parents, educators and pupils regarding the impact of parents' literacy and household poverty on children's educational

success (Mason, 2006; Bryman, 2008; O'Leary, 2010). The investigation relied more on a qualitative approach owing to the natural setting – the home environment and everyday activities of the participating families, specifically focusing on the pattern of literacy activities taking place between parents and their children (Sarantakos, 2013). Insights from Hogan et al. (2009), who described qualitative research as “a multifaceted approach that investigates culture, society and behaviour through an analysis of people's words and actions” (p. 3), further convinced the researchers of the authenticity of a mixed-methods design for the current study.

The following research questions guided the methodology:

1. What is the relationship between parents' education and literacy skills with levels of household poverty, and what influence do they have on their children's achievement in primary school?
2. What evidence exists in the family of literacy related activities and resources as a result of the parents' education levels and what influence do these exert on the development of their children's literacy skills and subsequent achievement in primary schooling?
3. What challenges do parents face in supporting their children's education?

For this reason, a mixed-methods design with an ethnographic element (Bryman, 2008; Sarantakos, 2013) was used to explore the views of parents, educators and pupils regarding the impact of parents' literacy and household poverty in the home setting on children's educational success.

Semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and questionnaires were used for data collection with parents, children, and senior community members. This is shown Table 2.

Table 2: Methods used for data collection

Participants	Method	Activity	Duration
Parents	Semi-structured interviews	Family home setting	40-45 minutes
	Participant observation	Family home setting	2-3 days per family visit
	Document analysis	School and external	-
Children	Questionnaires	School setting	40 minutes
	Semi-structured interviews	Family home setting	30 minutes
	Participant observation	Family home setting	2-3 days per family visit
	Document analysis	Home and external	-
Senior community members	Questionnaires	Family home setting	40 minutes
	Semi-structured interviews	Family home setting	35 minutes

Data from interviews and family ethnography were used to assess the relationship between parents' education and literacy and poverty levels, and its mediating impact on the form and extent of parents' involvement in their children's education. Findings were grouped under headings related to the parents' educational/literacy skill levels in relation to their occupational status.

Further data were collected using in-depth on-site interviews, document analysis, and questionnaires (Boeije, 2010; Sarantakos, 2013), from responses of 21 participants (9 couples [parents], 9 children and 3 senior community members) studied across three sites (urban, semi-rural and rural).

Questionnaires were used as an initial tool to gather data from educators and children, while parents were specifically administered interviews since some parents were illiterate. The interviews and observations were conducted in the homes of the families studied.

Procedure

The main study involved data from 119 participants but only 21 are referred to in this article. This sample includes members of families who were visited at home in three sites: urban, semi-rural and rural in the Moyo district from July 9th through September 14th

2012. The 21 participants comprised parents (n= 9), children (n=9) and senior community members (n=3). The sample included families with different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. I was the sole data collector since I spoke the same language as the participants. I spent between 2 and 3 days and nights living with each family, sharing in their daily activities, household chores, field work, food preparation and recreation in the evenings. This provided an invaluable opportunity to get to know each of the nine families well and to be able to experience and document the literacy related environment in which they live. The families had been identified by the head teachers in the schools which their children attended, and represented the diverse sample of parental education levels and socio-economic standing that I was interested in exploring across the urban, semi-rural and rural divide. Three families in each location type, representing high, average and low literacy levels were selected and invited to participate in the study. Detailed information about the purpose of the study, its aims and the format of the extended site visit was explained to the families by both the head teacher and by me, before permissions were granted. The study operated according to the ethical standards of the School of Education at Trinity College, Dublin.

The home stay visits allowed a unique opportunity to observe the extent of parent-child interaction over a number of days, and to see first-hand the range of literacy related materials available for use by both parents and children in the home. It also facilitated the opportunity to conduct a semi-structured and recorded interview with the parents, and also separately with the children during quiet moments in the day. The children had previously completed an in-depth questionnaire in school about their own performance and the potential of their parents to support them academically, personally and materially while in primary school (phase one of the study). No payment of any kind was sought or offered, but I brought a little sugar, corn flour, and sometimes locally smoked fish as a gift to the households to help in supporting the families during my stay. At the end of my home visits, some families offered me some gifts that consisted of fresh sweet corn, smoked fish and live chickens. Because Moyo district does not have public transportation except for buses leaving the district for Kampala city once each day, I had to use the current common means of transport in the country, the motorbike taxi, locally known as the *boda-boda*. This means of transport was more convenient than using vehicles because it could penetrate and negotiate the narrow village footpaths up to the compound of these families, which other vehicles could not. Sometimes, deep in the semi-rural and rural areas, I had to finish my journeys on foot when crossing sections of streams such as Amua and Airo that had no bridges.

The order of reporting starts from families where parents were categorised as professionals with high levels of literacy skills, and includes three senior community members. This sample is marked A and the individual families are labelled A1. The semi-skilled parents with average literacy skills are marked B and the individual families labelled B2. The unskilled parents with limited or no

literacy skills are marked C, and the individual families labelled C3. My observation report is woven into the overall report while retaining the family labels - A1, B2 and C3 respectively. Responses from pupils are also annexed to each category of family under which they belong. Fictional names have been assigned to all respondents. The children selected for inclusion in this study were all attending primary six (P.6), and ranged in age from 11 to 18 (as a result of having repeated classes, started school late or dropped out of school periodically for financial reasons).

Findings

A. Category of professional parents with high level of literacy skill

This category involved one health worker (a female nurse in the urban area), one health worker (female nurse in the rural area), and one male secondary school teacher (in the semi-rural area). Three senior community members, one from each site are included in this sample because they lived in the villages with the families under research and had high literacy skills. All three are retired members of the community with education backgrounds; the two men (one in the urban and one in the rural areas) were initially teacher educators, and in their later careers served as District Inspectors of Schools (primary), while the female (from the semi-rural area) was a primary school teacher.

When asked if there was a link between parents' education/literacy levels and household poverty which in their opinion would be likely to influence a school going child, the responses of all participants in this category were consistent.

Across the three sites, they all acknowledged an association between parents' education and literacy levels and household poverty which is likely to influence a school going child. A common element in all of their responses is that these parents regard their education and literacy skills as a tool that has

overcome poverty in their families. This is specifically expressed in the following data.

Regina, the female health worker in the urban area reported:

....my parents valued education even though they did not go far with education. They encouraged me to go far with education so that I can support my own family in future...like now, the father of these children is out of job at the moment, but the children do not feel the difference because I am able to provide both for their well-being and education. What I am able to afford is because of my earnings from the job - I believe it is as a result of my education. I also keep telling my children, my own parents suffered – digging, and doing all sorts of things to get money in order to send me to school. But for you [*my children*] I have built for you a house [*permanent house*], I want you to aim high, be able to drive your own cars tomorrow...

Felix, the secondary school teacher (in the semi-rural area) appreciates his level of education because:

.... [I am] able to pay school fees not only for my children from the salary I get from teaching but also the children of my late brother. My father had three wives and we were 18 children in the family but despite their lack of education, they worked hard in the garden, those days, haaaah! Growing cotton..., and mum brewed *nguli* [local beer] to educate us. I tell you, if you had lazy parents those days, you get nowhere with poverty. I remember, my father often said, 'let illiteracy remain with us [parents]'. That is why now I am a teacher, even though the salary is low, at least, I am able to care and educate my children.

Rosanna, the health worker (nurse - in the rural area) likewise acknowledged that there is a link, and that being educated made a significant difference to her life and family. Like the parent in the semi-rural context, she

was able to pay her children's school fees through her salaried job as she reported:

...my education lessened my problems,....my colleagues who did not succeed dropped out of school early at primary level and got married earlier. The difference – I can get whatever I like, I can go to the bank and ask for credit for my small project, which the uneducated cannot because they are not earning. You see, sister being uneducated has multiple disadvantages like you cannot help your child when she/he is defeated in homework – you can get wrong information, like dates about your children's birth, you may fail to administer right medicine with right doses, which may lead to unnecessary deaths, and so on....

Regarding less educated parents, John, the retired school inspector in the rural area, reported that pressure of poverty forces families to:

.... overwork their children with fieldwork, sending them to work in the 'shambas' [Swahili for garden]. These roles lead to school dropout rates especially in rainy season - hah, first, you plant the beans, tend the cows...

The Deputy Commissioner for primary school in Uganda who was interviewed as part of this study, supports the claim about less educated parents tending to overwork their children in specific terms. He recalls the slogan among the illiterate parents in Bugandaland as saying to their children in Luganda (language of the Baganda):

... *na soma wa*, in other words, 'I did not go to school but are you [children] not feeding? Can't I support you?' Therefore, education is not necessary....

The illiterate are also renowned for sending their children to early marriages. They see their children as sources of wealth and labour. Sometimes there are forced marriages all in pursuit of bride prize. In this way, the illiterate parents are responsible for high rate of dropout of children in our primary schools by valuing wealth over education.

This sentiment is illustrated by Anthony in the urban area, formerly a school inspector in the 1970s, who recalls his childhood life lived in poverty in the 1950s:

...I started school at the age of 11. Until then, I was tending the family animals, a role assigned to boys not girls. When I saw that there was no attempt to send me to school because my relatives would like me to grow up and get married, I started digging my *shamba* of cotton. My uncle took pity and came to help me. The first produce earned Ush 15/= (equivalent of 0.005 cents) of which I spent only 5/=(3/= school fees, 1/= *sukuleke* (pyjamas) and 1/= flannel) and I gave the remaining 10/= to my father to buy his favour in order to let me continue with schooling. We used local herbs such as leaves of pawpaw and *gmbangiri* for soap. *Gmbangiri* is a kind of fruit from a tree, which looks like maize cob but reddish in colour. When it matures you plucked the red stuff and used it for washing your clothes, and it foams very much like soap. That is my struggle to get education.

He expressed a particular view about the dangers of poverty in the current Moyo town and described them as worrying:

... there is increased number of night clubs such as the AGANA Complex. Girls are particularly being lured by men who have money, they buy these girls things which some parents are not able to afford. ...in my observation, this tradition of letting teenage children sleep on their own in a separate hut is an added disadvantage... You, as a parent, you do not know what these children are doing. One obvious activity, unsupervised is, sneaking out for night discos, videos and the result is – behavioural problems, dropping out of school, unwanted pregnancies, teenage motherhood, sickness; notably, HIV/AIDS, these days, etc.... Moreover, some of the government officials who are supposed to ensure order and law are the ones corrupted by money. They receive money from these disco

operators and thus allow the disco to operate.

The responses from these professional parents link education directly to employment opportunities and the benefits gained from it. However, there is a worrying trend developing in the urban area, particularly supported by some educated individuals who, owing to corruption, are supporting activities which are potentially detrimental to the education of school going children - the night discos and video machine venues, for their own personal and material profit. In addition, there seem to be more disadvantages to children who do not have sleeping places of their own. Cornelius, guardian in the rural area reported:

....in most cases girls at Stella's age (primary six child) sleep with their grandma [in one roomed hut] where they do not feel confident to study because of lack of space to study. But if they have their own room, they can feel free to read and talk about their school work.

On a positive note, all six professionals interviewed acknowledged that there is an increasing change of attitude amongst the less educated parents. They claim that the majority of the less educated parents have begun to realise the benefits of education from observing other families. They argued that now more than ever, they desire their children to be educated, though they face very serious challenges of illiteracy and poverty which hinder the extent of the material and holistic support they can provide to enhance the education of their children. This is summarised in the words of the Deputy Commissioner at the national level who reported that the majority of:

....illiterate parents have confessed, 'since I have not gone to school, so let my children go to school and get the education we did not get'.

Three professional parents attested that although their parents had low or no level of formal education, they endeavoured to educate

them in order to 'stop the generation of illiteracy' (Felix in the semi-rural area).

Pupils from AI families

The three pupils (Celine, Nila and Lily) interviewed in this category all repeated classes before primary six (P.6). They attributed their repetition of classes to a lack of knowledge of the English language (the language of instruction), lack of textbooks and storybooks for personal reading and, above all, to personal factors such as a lack of motivation, fear of guardians and teachers, and laziness/lack of concentration. Only one of the three pupils (in the urban area) had a room to herself while the other two slept with their siblings which meant they did not have study spaces of their own. All three testified to the importance of parental education in supporting their work at school.

B. *Category of semi-skilled parents, with average education and literacy skills levels*

This category of parents completed either ordinary level of secondary education ("O" and "A") or they started but dropped out of school but they have no qualification in any skill. The study established that this category depended on casual jobs without written contractual documentation except Ben who is in the defence forces. They will be referred to as Mike (a builder), Ben (a soldier), and Cornelius (a civil servant) (in the urban, semi-rural and rural area respectively).

In response to the question of whether or not, there was a link between parents' education and literacy skill levels and household poverty which is likely to influence a school going child, their responses were striking, identifying a positive correlation between these factors but lamenting the very real challenge they face as a result of not having sufficient formal education.

Mike (in the urban area, a self-trained builder after "O" level, with no particular qualification) acknowledges the link between

education and poverty but he believes if he had a committed and faithful partner it would make a significant difference despite being unemployed. He reported:

...I can read notices on the way and in places. I can't do things like carpentry without education or manage building and carpentry calculations. But Moyo doesn't offer much opportunity for job, there are two problems with semi-skilled jobs: payment is irregular and very low. This is because we often make agreement verbally...verbal agreement is tricky, you know. Secondly, I lack tools, they are expensive otherwise, I could do joinery. For this reason, I have to travel to do on and off jobs in South Sudan.

Without a specific point of reference, two of the respondents in this category, Mike and Cornelius reported that they sometimes find themselves spending long hours (8 hours or days) looking for jobs and when such jobs are found, the pay is minimal which can hardly sustain the family. One parent's lament, 'I do not have valid papers' sends a strong message. In this way, their casual employers become manipulative because the job contracts are done verbally. However, Cornelius, who initially worked with a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) mobile telecommunication company and now works with local government reported a positive side to job seeking. He reported that moving from place to place in search of work sometimes has some advantages:

...because of the type of my job I have penetrated in places like Eremi, Abeso, Pe'ecoa in the mountains of Metu to erect telephone masts where I also learned how to grow vegetables from the people. Due to the mountains, the people there practice intensive agriculture unlike in my own area along the Nile where the land is flat and abundant. These movements have made me to compare life styles of people I have met with me. It has made me to both appreciate my own and learn from other people how I can do certain things differently.

Nevertheless, generally, the semi-skilled parents report facing significant domestic and marital problems; these ranged from financial, unemployment, broken marriages, big family sizes, and a lack of time to spend with children.

Ben's family (in the semi-rural area) presented a typical example of such marital and domestic difficulties. He serves in the national Army and reported that despite having a regular job in the army, it is poorly paid and that he could be transferred any time, from place to place, which does not allow him to spend time with his family. At the time of the interview, he was 300km away from home and so I had a telephone interview with him as his wife (illiterate as she admitted) declined to answer further questions apart from responding to greetings. Ben has five children born to three different wives, two of whom had left him and the current wife has two children, while also caring for the other three children left by the previous women. Similarly, Cornelius (in the rural area), who works with the local government 50km from home after having worked with different NGOs in the district shares in this predicament of being semi-skilled. Cornelius completed senior four, but when the civil war struck in the early 1980s, it interrupted his study. He is newly married without children but he is supporting five children belonging to his sisters whose marriages all failed due to alcoholism and some customary laws. He reports:

...my main worry is the movement of this child (Helen), between three homes; from home here to her father in the town, to her mother, and back here. Moreover, I do not know what times she goes to see her father and what she does while there. Since I am not always at home, I have not monitored what times she actually returns home or whether she actually goes to school. Despite the lack of time, I intend to meet the father about this so that if he thinks he can

take care of her, she should move totally to his home.

Cornelius, a civil servant, reiterates the mobile nature of his job which blends in with the general description of the semi-skilled parents, and prevents them from monitoring their children's activities. However, what he did not reveal was the customary sanction (revealed by Helen's father in a separate interview) which was placed on the child's father and which does not allow him access to the home where she lives with her uncle Cornelius and grandmother. He cannot have the custody of his children alleged to have been born in an incestuous relationship. In this situation, while Helen's uncle takes on the unprecedented financial burden, she grapples with the emotional and physical traumas, which inevitably affect her education.

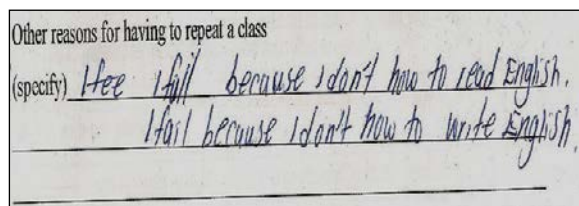
Pupils from B2 families

The three pupils observed in the semi-skilled families all repeated classes before grade six; Francis (urban) repeated grades 3 and 5, Martin (semi-rural) repeated grades 2 and 5 and Helen in the rural repeated only class 5. This data in this category is more heavily characterised by repetition of classes because these pupils reported getting no help from their parents.

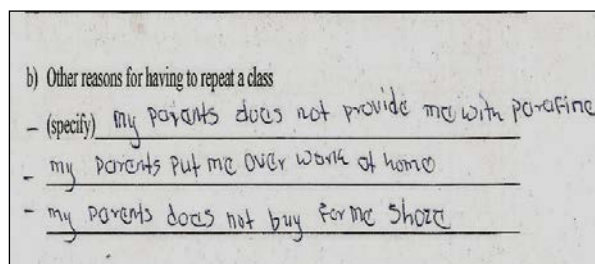
The reasons cited by these pupils for repeating classes included:

- being overworked at home;
- lack of school fees, which resulted in being sent home and missing classes;
- being left to mind the home instead of going to school;
- mistreatment from step parent(s);
- lack of the English language;
- inadequate provisions such as paraffin for studying and other scholastic materials such as exercise books, pens and pencils, maths set etc., and;
- lack of conducive environment for study (sharing room with other children).

Some of these points are expressed in the written words of the pupils as below:



(Dina, pupil, semi-rural area)



(Helen, pupil, rural area)

Two important aspects emerge in these writings. First, the standard of language (English) clearly indicates and confirms pupils' reports that they face difficulty in expressing their ideas in the English language. At primary six, despite curriculum requirements, they are not competent in handling tenses, spelling and punctuation. This is compounded by the fact that the semi-skilled parents are reported by their children as neither having the time, the resources, nor the willingness to assist their school going children in their academic work. The pupils reported that they think their parents' education is important for their academic achievement for the following reasons, that:

- "parents can tell them the importance of education";
- "parents can be able to help them in their homework";
- "parents can be able to afford to buy scholastic materials";
- "parents can provide food", and;
- "parents can be able to treat them when sick".

These pupils reported that they wish all parents had sufficient education and literacy

skills so that they can assist their children in school matters.

C. Category of parents who are unskilled labourers, with low or no level of literacy skill

The study established that this sample of parents is poorly positioned in relation to their children's education. It was observed that the lack of literacy and household poverty were the dominant hurdles they reported as having to contend with.

George (unskilled labourer in the rural area), is a fishmonger in the river Nile and a peasant farmer. He reported that there is a significant difference between educated parents and less educated parents. According to him when asked to describe his own illiteracy status, he said that "... illiteracy is like being blind".

The main occupation of this category of parents is agriculture. They reported that with the increase of population in the settled areas, family fields are located at a distance ranging from 4-10km from their homes. Both parents spend long hours (6-12 hours or several days at a time) in the field; digging, planting, weeding, harvesting, and gathering wood for use at home (cooking), and the surplus is for sale. The surplus of farm produce such as cassava, sorghum, sweet potatoes, peas and vegetables (onions, okra, egg plants, tomatoes, and some fruits: mangoes, avocado, pawpaw, oranges and banana, etc.) is often sold to get money to buy non-farm items such as soap, paraffin for lighting, salt, sugar and to support the general welfare of the family needs.

Adam (urban area, unskilled labourer) engages in trade (buying goats and reselling them to the town butchers), while Angela, (a single mother of six in the semi-rural area) engages in brewing *nguli* or *marwa* (local liqueur and beer). Both of these parents reported that the money gained from these activities is minimal; it cannot meet the needs of their school going children. . One of the

senior community members, John (rural area) recalled his experience with his father:

My father was a fishmonger; he also hunted hippopotamus and other animals in the River Nile. When he got the fish, he took it to Yumbe (a neighbouring district) for sale, a distance of over 50km either by bicycle or on foot. On two occasions, I followed him to collect money for my school fees and I got nothing.

This experience highlights the considerable struggle reported by the unskilled parents, who are predominantly engaged in agricultural activities, petty trade and are illiterate. When asked what they did with their leisure time, the response was prompt from Angela:

...you are fatigued - you want to rest with friends – do my hair, family responsibilities and usually travel to attend funerals of relatives.

As for assisting their children in school, she reported the hindrance of illiteracy in many ways:

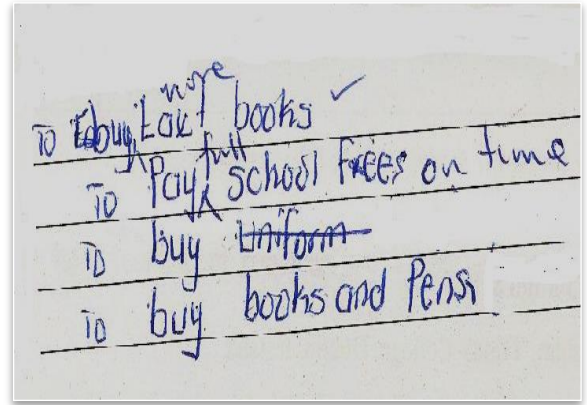
...hmmm, the problems of being illiterate are so many, especially, when you are alone...see, I am unable to check the work of my child even though I know she needs my help... yes, I can distinguish between a cross and a tick of the red pen of the teacher but I can't justify if the teacher is honest or not.

The sample interviewed also reported other aspects of being a parent who is illiterate and faces the following difficulties:

- unable to read to your child;
- no knowledge about the required books for the child,
- socially confined;
- no proper job opportunities;
- constantly digging in the field;
- frustrating experience of financial deficit;
- restricted travel because of language limitations, and;
- limited participation in school activities, for example, PTA meetings.

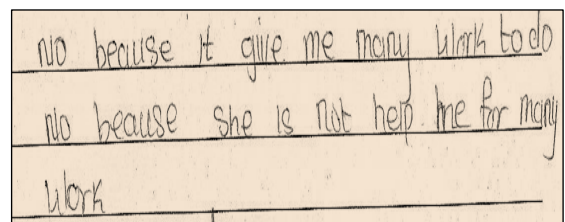
Pupils from C3 families

The three children of the unskilled parents with no or limited literacy skills, and irregular employment all reported having repeated classes before arriving to primary six. Adam's daughter Zina in the urban area spent 5 years repeating classes; she repeated P.4 three times and P.5 twice. Although she did not state the reasons for her repetition when asked about what support would help her to improve her grades, she noted that she expected the following from her parents:



(Zina, pupil, urban area)

In the semi-rural area, pupil Dina (daughter of Angela, who herself stopped in P.2) reported that she thinks education is important, but when asked if she thinks her mother's level of education can help her in her academic work, she stated:



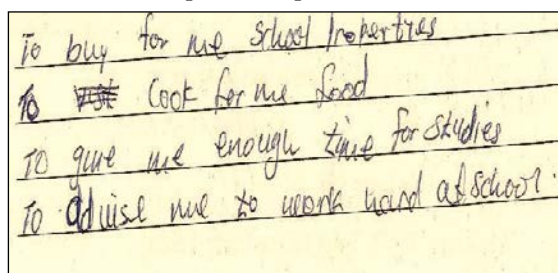
(Dina, pupil, semi-rural area)

According to Dina, her mother over works her (she is the only girl of six children) and does not help her in the work. 'Work' here refers to both other domestic chores and to her schoolwork. Dina repeated classes 3 and 5 before entering primary six.

In the rural area, Joel repeated only primary one and in the same vein, reported that his parents' level of education is not

helpful because both parents are illiterate.

However, he expects his parents:



(Joel, pupil, rural area)

Joel's concerns cover multiple needs for a school going child, ranging from school requirements, nutrition, study time at home and parental advice. The pupils' expectations of their parents suggest that they do not have adequate resources for their schooling at home. This was confirmed during my home visits and the main reason was the lack of money and poverty.

The data found that all parents and educators interviewed reported that parents, regardless of their levels of education, are eager for their children to do well in school in order to secure a better life and opportunities. However, those in the semi-literate and illiterate categories reported facing common challenges related to illiteracy and household poverty, which result in:

- reading neither to their children nor for themselves;
- lack of time, for individual children's needs;
- not helping children in their homework due to a lack of time and literacy skills;
- rarely visiting school to discuss their children's school progress;
- inadequate provision for children's school requirements due to low income, and poverty;
- an over-burdening engagement in activities for the survival of the whole family, instead of focusing on academic matters with their children,
- illiteracy as a hindrance between parents-children interaction on academic and school matters,

- an expectation from work colleagues to spend leisure time [educated parents] out with friends rather than with family;
- children spending most of their time separated from adults, including parents, and
- children rarely interacting with parents due to cultural values.

These reported challenges present significant implications for the school going child in the Moyo district of Northern Uganda.

Discussion

While parents in this study were willing to be involved in the education of their children, in practice, illiteracy and low levels of living standards, generally reported in the rural district, compromised parent-child interaction time. Parental employment outside of the home presented two perspectives: on the one hand, it brought in money to the family, but on the other hand, it was disadvantageous, as parents had to be away from home for long periods, taking into account that in Moyo district professional jobs are located in the urban centre areas. While survival was the main reason for parents' employment outside of the home (paid or unpaid), it denied parents and children time for educational interaction, the balance of time being spent in most cases on non-academic chores and activities. In part, the cultural norms where children are not often engaged in conversation with parents in these communities are an added disadvantage to parent-child interaction. Thus, the balance of parental resources in terms of time, money and interaction devoted to children is minimal at best and, as reported in this study, does not enhance the primary school children's academic development or achievement. Furthermore, as literacy activities tend to be consistently underplayed in the family setting as was evident during site visits, there appear to be no role models for children to emulate. In contrast, modern symbols such as social centres, and tools such

as radios, cell phones and videos appear to be replacing the absence of parental involvement in family homes and in wider society, but unfortunately they are adapted in ways that seem to reinforce the traditional values associated with such activities as dance, music and oral forms of leisure rather than engagement with text or language for educational or developmental purposes.

The data from the family site visits revealed that while the situation for the educated and consequently professionally employed parents is considerably better than the other two categories of participants in this study, they still face challenges with regard to time constraints. They are not able to fully support their children in school. Their homes however featured greater evidence of a literacy rich environment than the other participants, and the materially better off parents were able to provide greater space and resources to their school going children, and encouraged them to achieve in school in order to get a good job as was the case with Regina (urban area) and Felix (semi-rural area).

For instance, Regina's daughter, Celine was the only one who had her daily timetable posted on the wall in their living room. There was also literacy related evidence available in the house, which included a radio, a calendar, a clock, posters about health and a box full of a variety of books and printed text. Some of these printed materials belonged to her parents. Above all, Celine had her own sleeping room, while the children of the other professionals in the semi-rural and rural areas, though they had separate huts for their children, they had to share them with their siblings.

In contrast, the data showed that the children of the semi-skilled and the unskilled parents had no such items in their homes. There was little evidence of their [professional] active engagement in their children's schoolwork. Their willingness, nevertheless in assisting their children was undeniable. Regina (urban nurse), who at the

time of my home visit was on maternity leave was able to spend all the time with her children at home. I noticed her asking her 9 year old and her 12 year old daughters about their mock examinations as soon as they arrived back home from school: "What exam did you do today?", "What questions came?", "What answers did you write?", "Did you complete all the questions?", and so on. The children in turn asked her to explain some of the questions they were not sure about, for example, the 9 year old told her mother that she did not answer one question in her Social Science paper because she did not understand what the word 'importance' meant in the question, 'what is the importance of roads?'

In the evening, the family read some texts from the bible in both the local language (by the grandmother to the children) and in the English language (by Regina to the children) and later the two children read the same texts in both languages. The reading sessions were then followed by storytelling after supper. This indicated clearly that professional parents are willing to help their children in their school work if they have time.

Conversely, I did not witness any of the less educated parents engaged in literacy related activities such as reading, writing and educational conversations about school with their children even when they were doing work together. During my visits to these categories of families, I noted that parents mostly gave instructions and orders to children: 'Zina, peel the potatoes' (urban), 'Dina, collect the cassava when the rain comes' (semi-rural), and 'Joel, do not forget to bring in the goats before dark'.

As for the home learning environment, there was no comparison with those in the homes of the professional parents. For instance, I witnessed a two year old girl (unskilled rural family) fiddling with a maize cob as her toy baby. She was requesting her grandmother to tie the cob on her back as the local women do with their babies. This activity reflects how the socio-cultural values and

norms inform children's development and points to the importance of how homes rich in cognitive stimulation can help children to imitate what adults do and thereby develop their social and educational potential. In this case, the child was using, and was encouraged to use the resources available as she does not have the real toy baby to play with. This led to some valuable opportunities for oral language development, but her grandmother did not actively engage with her during this extended play activity.

Overall, the implications of this data for the school-going child are many. Firstly, where parents are not practicing reading, either to their children or for themselves, it suggests an absence of practical literacy activities in the family. Additionally, when parent-child interaction does not take place, either due to a lack of time (professionals at paid jobs), money (semi-skilled and unskilled) or illiteracy (unskilled) parents, the practice of writing and reading are alienated from day-to-day activities in the home. This may not only reduce a pupil's creativity and thinking, but also affect his/her academic achievement by not being able to meet the standard of reading and writing required for academic purposes as demonstrated in this study and as already alluded to in various other studies (UNESCO, 2006; Feinstein et al., 2008; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Brown and Iyengar, 2008; UNESCO, 2005).

Secondly, the high levels of semi-literate and illiteracy among the parents studied posit the problem of unemployment and underemployment, both leading to low incomes and household poverty in over two thirds of the sample reported here. This agrees with reports by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED, 1999; UNESCO, 2006), that where the quality and productivity of labour are low, so are salaries and wages. As indicated by the World Bank (2009), low income parents are unable to provide holistic support to their school-going children, including meeting basic

needs such as food, shelter, clothing and good quality education as recommended by the government of Uganda (Lubangakene, 2013). This posits the demand for a new way forward.

Recommendations

Arising from this study, two types of recommendations arise: a practical short-term suggestion and a longer-term recommendation are deemed appropriate in alleviating parents' challenges in providing support to their children in the face of literacy and poverty challenges. These proposals were mooted by the participants in their interviews.

Local income generation (short-term)

The semi and unskilled parents could engage in other income generating activities that may not take them far away from home. Activities such as growing of vegetables, though labour intensive, could be time saving, if they are grown near to the home so that the children can also participate in the activities and spend more time with their parents after school. Furthermore, horticulture does not require a large piece of land and so this may be conducive with the increasing population.

Intervention (long-term)

A number of suggestions were noted in this category. First, the government should ensure a salary increase for civil servants, improve infrastructure, sensitise parents through local leaders about the value of education and launch a country-wide adult education programme. Secondly, it was proposed that parent-parent partnerships need to be developed between parents with high education and literacy skill levels and those with low educational backgrounds at community level so that parents get to help each other in relation to the education of their children.

Conclusion

The study established a strong relationship between parents' education, literacy levels and

poverty in terms of household income as having a significant impact on the educational achievement of children in primary school. It is recommended that if poverty was reduced and parents' education and literacy levels increased, the gap between the illiterate and literate parents could be narrowed.

When parents are educated, particularly about the value of spending dedicated time with their children, showing an active interest in their school work and related activities, and speaking, reading and writing with them, it may substantially improve their children's chances of achieving to the best of their individual abilities in school. Raising the educational levels of parents has benefits not only for the individuals but also for their families and the wider society.

Apart from parents' education and literacy skill levels, it was evident that there were other variables in the home setting that influenced the educational achievement of children. For example, the presence of significant other members of the family such as older and literate siblings, and grandparents, which could serve to create a rich home learning environment that is capable of enhancing cognitive stimulation and the child's own contribution to his or her education. Nevertheless, these findings confirm Feinstein et al.'s (2008) assertion that the effect of income on children's achievement can be an effect of prior parental education, which this study has shown has a mediated positive effect on children's educational outcome overall.

The educated parents are aware of the problems and the advantages of education, but the reality of their lives and the financial challenges they face restrict them in prioritising time for education with their children. The semi-literate and uneducated are aware of the broader benefits of education, but are not fully aware of the level of interaction that is required to support and encourage their children. This is mediated by harsh financial realities as well. There is

evidence of an overly heavy burden of responsibilities on parents that are work related. This was noticeable across all socio-economic bands in the study, but the culture of meeting one's work colleagues after work for socialisation purpose was reported by those in professional employment, and placed further demands on these parents' time and limited financial resources. They all noted the negative impact of this practice, particularly prevalent among the men.

The respondent, Regina who is a nurse on maternity leave, highlighted the valuable opportunity that this afforded her to stay at home and engage more actively and consistently with her children on their schoolwork and also in terms of general reading and storytelling activities which her children responded well to. These practices and the demands on parents' time need to be addressed in the interest of supporting children's educational achievement.

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