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Quality of education in Uganda: A narrative from a common man's view

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Abstract

Uganda started the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in 1997, purposely to allow access to all children of school-going age. However, during the implementation phase, many institutional and structural issues emerged that impacted the quality of education provided. This paper focuses on the views of a common man on the quality of education and particularly UPE in Uganda. In other words, how doses a common man who goes about his daily businesses in the markets, on the streets (informal sector) hustling to make ends meet, including payment of school dues view the quality of primary education in Uganda? Data was collected using interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) from a total of 110 respondents spread across the five divisions of Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) area. Results indicate that the common man is fully aware that the different challenges affecting UPE have compromised its quality; and these range from inadequate funding by the government, corruption by government officials both at national and local levels but also headteachers and teachers in schools to issues of insufficient infrastructure in schools, absenteeism by both pupils and teachers and a curriculum that is not focused on local realities and needs. All these challenges in the eyes of the common man have affected the quality of UPE in Uganda. As a way forward, the paper recommends that there is a need for government to review the entire UPE policy with a view to understanding the implementation challenges in detail and seek for solutions. The curriculum too needs to be reviewed to match the community needs. Equally important, government needs to increase education budget and fully fund the education sector.

Keywords: education, UPE, quality, institution and structure, informal sector, common man

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Background

Education is a foundation of human capital development in the world (Witson, 2018). The quality of primary education world over is state controlled to foster national development. Education as a concept is difficult to define, although many attempts have been made at defining it. Farrant (1980) quoted in Khadidja (2014) defines education as the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, talents trained and skills developed. Although education poses problems in its definition, what is known is that the existence of education is as old as the human race. Education is labour intensive whose quality depends on the competency of the teacher and the learning environment.

Education is also an ongoing process in everyone's life. It never stops. It starts at birth (some would argue even at the pre-natal stage) and ends at death. Education is not something that is easily attainable as expressed by William Lowe Bryan (1860-1955) when he said that education is "one of the few things a person is willing to pay for and not get". The person grows and develops into a useful individual in his/her society or community through the process of learning, whether formal or informal. The main purpose of education system is to mould the peoples to become useful (to have good morals, productive life skills and to be culturally upright) members of their respective societies (Anguma et al., 2012). The learning outcomes are determined by observing and appraising the performance of students while handling real-life challenges (Anguma et al., 2012). The education system is mainly formal in nature and starts with primary level and is controlled by the existing regime in a country. According to Ocheng (2004), primary education is typically the first stage of formal education, coming after pre-school/ kindergarten and before secondary school. Primary education takes place in primary school, the elementary school or first and middle school, depending on the location or country. Primary education in Uganda covers a formal span of seven years and is managed by Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). A child is expected to commence at the age of six or seven and continues for seven years. However, Ssekamwa (2000) states that in the colonial period, primary education was initially managed by the missionaries but was later taken over by the colonial government. This was after the discovery by the colonial government that what the missionaries were offering was inadequate in terms of addressing community needs. Also, the missionaries had no proper primary education policy to operate primary education in Uganda.

The overall purpose of primary education is to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and computational skills) and other skills and understandings that prepare

young people to take part in the development of society. These other skills and understandings include skills in science, social sciences, community studies, agriculture, art, music, and physical education that are important for development. However, in Uganda, schools put much emphasis on examinations (exam-oriented learning) and students are trained to pass exams and miss out on other life-sustaining skills. This is supported by Kalinaki (2016) who says that in Uganda, there is too much schooling with less or no learning. This contrasts sharply with the colonial period where schooling was purposeful and more practical. For instance, junior leavers were able to immediately start work because they possessed the necessary practical skills. Today's primary school graduates possess no practical skills but theoretical knowledge and, therefore, remain unemployed, for there is a mismatch between the labour market demands and the skills attained.

Primary education in Uganda has changed over time following policy reforms to address the common needs of society to foster development. Furthermore, primary education is the only rudimentary education that such Ugandans can, in most cases, ever be exposed to (Education Policy Review Commission Report, 1989). The cardinal objective of primary education is to equip students with skills to live as good and useful citizens in society (Education Policy Review Commission Report, 1989) besides it being foundational to post-primary education. Furthermore, primary education helps children to gain and maintain sound mental and physical abilities for development. It is also helpful as it instils values of living and working cooperatively with others, and ensures cultural, moral, and spiritual values of life (Mwesigye & Kitagaana, 2015). This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the views of a common man on the quality of education in Uganda focusing on UPE (1997-2022).

UPE was launched in 1997 following recommendations of the Education Policy Review Commission – EPRC (1989), and the subsequent relevant stipulations of the Government of Uganda White Paper (1992) and the development of Children's Statute (1996). The promise was that government would pay tuition fees (statutory fees) for four children per Ugandan family, to cover the entire primary cycle of P1 to P7 (for a start). Government was also to provide textbooks and other instructional materials for both the pupils and teachers for all subjects taught, and to meet the cost of co-curricular activities, i.e. sports and clubs for all children in the lower and upper classes, as well as school administration expenses and maintenance, including utilities, such as water and electricity (Okware & Omagor, 2014). Other costs government accepted to meet included payment of salaries of teachers and support staff, training

of teachers and contribution to the construction of classrooms. However, the free education for the four children could not be sustained as it appeared the government later on withdrew the ceiling (whether formally or quietly), and made access to UPE "open" so that every child who was interested in schooling was allowed to enrol (Okware & Omagor, 2014).

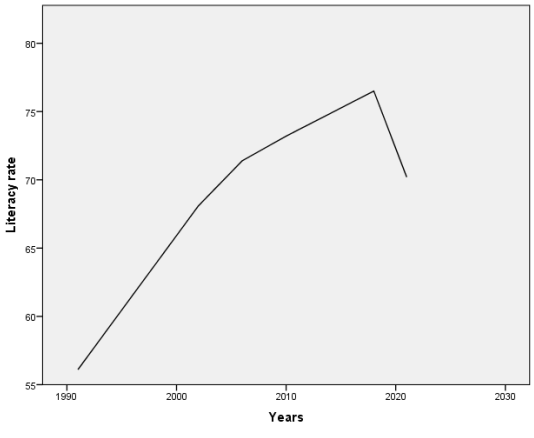
Grogan (2008) succinctly argues that the rapid elimination of school fees at the primary school level was likely accelerated by the first direct elections for the president of Uganda which took place in 1996. As a campaign strategy, President Museveni made a promise to provide free primary schooling. An enumeration and advertising campaign was undertaken and the new school entrants began learning within a few months of the presidential announcement. At the district level, the programme was supervised by Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), some of whom had no technical know-how of education issues. This greatly affected implementation of primary education policy reforms in the country. Furthermore, there are fears that perhaps, with the massive number in primary school enrolment without commensurate expansion in facilities, teachers as well as teaching and learning materials may have compromised the quality of education. The MoES has raised this concern in its reports which say that the quality of teaching has probably been affected by the adverse pupil-teacher ratio after the introduction of UPE.

In all countries of Africa in which UPE was instituted, the elimination of the direct costs of schooling created an instantaneous large increase in school enrolment. Grogan (2008) notes that enrolment increased nearly by 70% in Malawi, 75% in Lesotho, and 22% in Kenya. However, the aggregate increase in primary school enrolment in Uganda was far beyond service delivery. In reference to Uganda, Aguti (2002) argues that UPE quality may have been compromised by the low morale of teachers. There is an overemphasis of increased number of enrolments to the detriment of quality education. Issues to do with quantity and quality of primary education cannot be addressed or achieved in isolation from each other. Expanding accessibility is relatively meaningless unless the education provided contributes to the acquisition of knowledge and skills for development. National commitment to improving the quality of primary education remains unclear since current country success is measured by achievement levels of universal access to school by boys and girls. Unfortunately, appropriate primary education policy reforms are overlooked, and this does not favour development in the country.

In an attempt to explain the quality of UPE in Uganda, this paper is premised on the Human Capital Theory (HCT) which is

deemed applicable to the Ugandan context in which the development of quality human resources is still an evolving process. HCT assumes that formal education is highly instrumental and even necessary to improve the production capacity of a population. Also, the theory assumes that an educated population is a productive population. In his discourses, Schults (1961) argues that population quality and knowledge constitute the principal determinants of the future welfare of mankind. Adding to this argument, Harbison and Hanushek (1992) contend that a country which is unable to develop the skills and knowledge of its people and to utilise them effectively in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else, while according to Pascharopoulos (1985), education is widely regarded as the route to economic prosperity, the key to scientific and technological advancement, the means to combat unemployment, the foundation of social equity, and the spread of political socialisation and cultural vitality. It is, therefore, argued that the theory emphasises that quality education increases the productivity and efficiency of workers. HCT is most responsible for the wholesome adoption of education and development policies. There is evidence that the need for human capital development has a strong influence on educational policies, with statements to this effect being found in the goal and mission statements of many educational agencies and jurisdictions. Simply put, this theory forms the basis for educational policy. Virtually, all major policy statements in education begin with reference to the knowledge society and the importance of education for individual, state, or provincial prosperity. In Uganda, the Human Capital Development theory is illustrated by literacy rates as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Trend of literacy rate (%) in Uganda



From the graph, Uganda's literacy rate since the 1990s has been consistently progressing (largely because of the UPE policy) but after 2018, literacy rates reduced. The several challenges associated with UPE policy (e.g., teacher absenteeism, limited funding of UPE from government and associated effects) could explain the high dropout rates.

Importantly, the HCT expounds broadly about manpower development resulting from education development and beyond. However, HCT has been criticised by a number of scholars, development experts, and academicians for its

inherent weaknesses. One major limitation of HCT is that it assumes education increases productivity in the workplace, resulting in higher individual wages, but it provides little insight into the processes through which education and training are translated into higher wages. In statistical models, education and training account for about 30% of the variance in individual wages, which suggests HCT leaves a significant percentage of wage variability unexplained. A variety of "middle range" theories (e.g., screening and credentialism) attempt to explain the other 70% of individual wage variability, and some of these theories examine the relationship between educational credentials (e.g., a bachelor's degree) and earnings. Many of these "middle range" theories focus on the social and cultural contexts in which employment decisions are made and suggest numerous factors besides productivity (e.g., cultural and social capital) are involved in the relationship between education and higher wages. It is thus critical for policy makers to consider alternative frameworks in conjunction with HCT to better understand the relationship between education and private economic returns, such as higher wage (Netcoh, 2016). Researchers (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1975) have raised the question of whether there is a positive net return for human resource investment from education. For example, schooling increases worker productivity through increasing individuals' cognitive capacities. But, because learning abilities differ, the theory is substantially incorrect. The above provides a foundation for onward analysis of the views of a common man on the quality of education in Uganda and UPE in particular.

Concept of a common man

These are people who largely work in the informal sector. The informal sector as a concept emerged in the 1970s and refers to a multiple and meaningful reality for productive units and workers who are outside of regulated economic activities and protected labour relations. The informal sector has become very important not only because of its expansion in many countries, Uganda inclusive, but also because this expansion has brought about new manifestations that are increasingly recognised as ways to promote growth and reduce poverty. Informal economic activities are apparent within both developed and developing countries and have been examined through a range of different theoretical frameworks: dualistic, structural, legal, and voluntary. As the global economy has been restructured, permanent, full time work has been replaced by non-conventional contract work or by informal jobs, and the neoliberal era has dramatically reduced worker benefits, such as pensions or healthcare. The informal sector is important as a source of employment

and for the production of goods and services (Adrian & Flor, 2020).

Aguilar and Campuzano (2009) argue that women are more likely to be involved in the informal sector than men. The informal sector allows them to work fewer hours and combine their income-generating activities with domestic household tasks. Also, women usually take this kind of work as a response to a reduction in household income.

Many informal workers in developed and developing countries state that one of the principal factors that drives them into the sector is the desire for autonomy and flexibility in their work. They find the informal sector more flexible and autonomous than the formal one; hence, they have more freedom to do their own business, to establish their schedule, and to combine their work with other activities. In the context of Uganda, the informal sector includes boda-boda riders, saloon operators, vegetable vendors, and metal fabricators, among others. For the purpose of this paper, a common man is defined as a person who does his/her daily business in the markets, on streets struggling for daily survival including payment of school dues for their children.

Implementation of UPE in Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities

In 1997, following the introduction of UPE policy in Uganda, gross enrolment in primary schools increased from a total of 3.1 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997, an increase of 73% in one year (Komakech, 2017). This compares with an increase in gross primary school enrolment, in the decade preceding the introduction of UPE, of just 39% (from 2.2 million in 1986). By 2003, gross enrolment in primary schools had reached 7.6 million and the national gross primary school enrolment ratio in 2003 was 127%, indicating that children beyond standard primary school age had re-joined the primary education cycle, (MoES, 2003). In FY 2013/2014, total enrolment increased by 0.3% from 8,459,720 (4,219,523 boys; 4,240,197girls) in 2013 to 8,485,005 (4,235,669 boys; 4,249,336 girls) in 2014, (MoES: EMIS, 2014). By 2017, the number had reached 8.7 million (NPA, 2018).

The above increase in school enrolment is mainly explained by three reasons. Firstly, natural population growth rate estimated at 3.2%, the backlog of school age children who had not been accessing school are now able to do so, while more of the children who had attained the school age but would not have afforded education prior to UPE were now able to enrol (UBOS, 2010). Government has noted that the number of children joining primary schools seems to be increasing every year.

One of the achievements of UPE has been increased access and construction of more physical facilities (classes, teachers' houses, etc.). As Okware and Omagor

(2014) state, to facilitate easy access to schools, the MoES embarked on building of more primary and secondary schools. For example, by end of 2008, there were 114,441 classrooms for primary school children, while by the end of 2012, a total of 144,513 classrooms were in use. It is important to note that in some instances, there is a creative response by parents to the UPE opportunity by sending their children to school. This, therefore, has influenced parents and management to improvise by constructing additional facilities and/or open space learning (Okware & Omagor, 2014).

On the other hand, however, UPE has been associated with many shortfalls. For instance, the UPE policy normally subsidises tuition fees only, leaving other direct and indirect costs to be borne by parents and families. Thus, the equality and equity of education remain as a concern under the UPE policy (Nishimura et al., 2005). Furthermore, a government report indicates that numbers of teachers and schools increased by 41%, while enrolment increased by 171% between 1997 and 2004 (MoES, 2005). This raises concerns of deterioration in the quality of public primary schools.

NPA (2018) stresses that UPE in Uganda is subsidised education rather than free education for all since the amount paid by government is below the required amount for education. Government cannot and should not provide an illusion that it can pay the required UPE costs for the desired outcomes. Indeed, overall, households are spending more than government on education. Besides, government expenditure is largely on teacher's wages at the expense of other expenses that aid learning; thus, improving learning outcomes. Juuko and Kabonesa (2007) state that although it would seem that government has attempted to play its role in the provision of basic education, the details on the number and quality of buildings, sanitation facilities for males and females, trained teachers who are well remunerated, the availability of teaching materials and modern facilities, such as computers, show that the state has not adequately met its obligation for the provision and protection of the child's rights to education.

Some of the problems in the schools are related to corruption in the system or the misappropriation of funds meant for such activities (Juuko & Kabonesa, 2007). In 2006, the Inspectorate of Government (IG) highlighted the challenges of realising UPE objectives in a paper entitled *Tackling Corruption in UPE* as follows: ineffective/non-existent Finance and School Management Committees; failure to properly account for UPE funds on time by headteachers; instances of shoddy work in the construction of classrooms; embezzlement; and the diversion of UPE funds to unauthorised expenditures, among others.

NPA (2018) established that teacher training has not been effective in equipping primary school teachers/trainees with the critical skills to address the challenges presented by UPE. Teachers still struggle to manage large classes, undertake continuous assessment, fit into the class-teacher system, and produce instruction materials from locally available materials. From the evaluation, although 83% of the trained primary school teachers have full masterly of subject content that they teach, they were found to be pedagogically weak and unable to transmit such knowledge to the students. For instance, 57% of the teachers could not plan for teaching; 40.4% of the lesson plans were unfit for purpose; 37% assessed students without reference to the curriculum; and the majority could not teach vocational skills. In some instances, teachers use assessment to exclude students from continuing with their education when they do not perform academically as expected by the teachers. These are symptoms of poor teacher training and threaten the effective implementation of UPE (NPA, 2018). Hence, this has resulted in high rates of school dropout leading to early marriage and teenage pregnancies among school dropouts. The public cry to the government is that in order to limit on the numbers of school dropouts, schools and vocational institutes should be extended from sub county level to parish level.

As Uganda's primary education system grew, pressure was exerted on the country's post-primary sector, specifically secondary education, to accommodate primary school graduates (Jessica, 2011). The boost in primary school enrolment created what is referred to as the "UPE bulge" (MoES, 2008a). The large numbers of children and adolescents who benefited from UPE policy were not being readily absorbed into secondary education or the job market. Transition rates from primary to secondary school were less than 20% in 1997 (MoES, 2006), meaning 80% of primary school graduates did not move forward in the system and into secondary school.

Komakech (2017) asserts that USE schools are money-minded and they admit more students than they can handle yet some of the schools lack adequate teachers; lack or have inadequate quality assurance services due to a combination of factors, such as shortage of quality assurance and standards officers, inadequate relevant training on quality assurance and shortage of resources, such as motor cycles, vehicles and quality assurance units for carrying out the work; difficulty attracting and retaining a skilled teaching workforce; difficulty providing a breadth of subjects and a range of education models to suit all learning types; and students are taught on how to pass examinations through comprehensive revision of examinations past papers and reading of pamphlets; hence, making them

totally lazy to read textbooks. They duplicate what they have crammed from the pamphlet and they find it difficult to interpret and analyse the questions.

This is an indication that, the inspectors of school no longer do their work rightly due to high corruption tendencies within the education system which have led to poor education service delivery for example headteachers keep on enrolling more students even if they do not have enough teachers to teach and school infrastructures to accommodate these increasing numbers of students.

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based was carried out in Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), central Uganda. In Kampala, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 50 and 60 common men, respectively, who do jua kari. "This *jua kali* sector encompasses small-scale entrepreneurs and workers who lack access to credit, property rights, training, and good working conditions". From the five divisions which make up KCCA, the study selected 10 people from each of these divisions to undergo interviews, making a total of 50 interviews. Further, the study conducted an FGD of 12 people in each of these divisions, making a total of 60 respondents. In all, the study involved 110 respondents. All the respondents were adults of 18 years and above. Respondents were drawn from Kalerwe Market, Wandegeya Market, Wandegeya Trading Centre, Bwaise Taxi Park, Bwaise Market and Bwaise Trading Centre in Kawempe Division; Lubaga Market, Lubaga Trading Centre and Lubaga Taxi Park in Lubaga Division; Owino Market, New and Old taxi parks in Central Division; Nakawa Market, Nakawa Trading Centre and Nakawa Taxi Park in Nakawa Division; Makindye Market, Makindye Trading Centre and Makindye Taxi Park in Makindye Division.

The 50 *jua kari* men and women were selected using purposive sampling techniques in that any respondent who was 18 years and above, and who was willing to be interviewed was recruited until the quota of 50 respondents was reached. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide had two parts. The first part captured the demographic and background information which was essential in describing and profiling the study respondents. The second part collected information concerning such issues of the *jua kari* on the quality of education in Uganda particularly on the implementation of UPE, focusing on the opportunities and the challenges the programme presents.

The 60 respondents who took part in FGDs were too purposively selected but during interviews, they were grouped into 12 members each. Using an FGD checklist, the researcher and his assistant moderated and guided the discussions about issues of the *jua kari* on the quality

of education in Uganda, particularly on the implementation of UPE, focusing on the opportunities and the challenges the programme presents.

The data from the interviews and FGDs was analysed using content analysis. Primary qualitative data obtained from interview transcripts were sorted and imported into NVIVO vision 12 Plus. NVIVO software was used to organise, re-arrange and manage the interview data for analysis. A multi-stage coding process was used to understand important common issues (Charmas, 2006). Data was coded at three successive stages out of which themes relating to the study objectives emerged. Afterwards, thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret emerging themes. The validity of the findings was assured by identifying appropriate quotations for the issues under discussion and cross-checking with secondary literature. Some of the quotations were used in the results and discussion sections. For secondary qualitative data obtained from a review of documents, such as journals and newspapers was analysed and interpreted using content analysis method. The researcher coded, or broke down, the data into manageable code categories for easy analysis. Then, the codes were further categorised into "code categories" to summarise data even further to generate meaningful insights of the issues pertaining to the common man's views on the quality of education in Uganda.

Results

To gain insight into issues pertaining to the quality of UPE and the views of a common man, *jua kari* men and women were asked what their views were in regard to the quality of education particularly UPE in Uganda. Below are some of the excerpts that demonstrate UPE quality from some of the common men and women interviewed:

> The introduction of UPE in 1997 was seen as a blessing to the pupils of Uganda by giving all of them an opportunity to access quality education in the country. However, the programme was associated with a sudden drop in education quality indicators, such as the pupil-teacher ratio, the pupil-classroom ratio, and pupil-textbook ratio (50-year-old restaurant attendant in Old Taxi Park).

> The introduction of universal primary education (UPE) in Uganda in 1997 greatly improved access to education, but it did not improve quality. As the enrolment numbers increased, more and more children started dropping out. Children drop out of class for several reasons. Among poor families, the cost of school uniforms, books, stationery, and saving funds becomes too much to bear, pushing children out of school or leading families into debt. Illness and domestic work keep many children from attending school on a regular basis. Children with disabilities, orphans and other disadvantaged

> children are especially at risk of school exclusion (31-year-old hairdresser in Namayuba Bus Park).

From the above narratives, some of our interviewees were emphatic on the issue of quality in UPE schools arguing that the policy was a blessing in the initial stages of implementation but did not address quality issues very well. We cannot, however, base on a few narratives to determine whether UPE led to a decline in quality or not. This study, therefore, will delve into the many narratives as given by the common man to understand how they view the quality of the programme.

A 29-year-old matooke seller in Bwaise Market revealed that the introduction of a new primary education curriculum in Uganda is aimed at improving and increasing the quality of education. He said: "This is a proof that the existing curriculum had a lot of gaps in it which needed immediate modification to match the classroom realities in primary schools."

This is supported by several studies which have investigated the quality of education and the success of curriculum implementation in Uganda. These studies raised questions about the quality and fitness of a previously existing curriculum in accordance with the classroom reality (Penny et al., 2008; Ward, Penny, & Read, 2006). The appropriateness of the curriculum that preceded the thematic curriculum was doubted following a report of a special task force. This report (see Read & Enyutu, 2005) concluded that the overall performance of pupils at primary level had not significantly improved, and that literacy levels in English and in local languages were unacceptably low, especially outside Kampala and in rural areas. Furthermore, the report suggested several reasons for the lack of quality improvement, namely: the curriculum was overloaded; it emphasised the acquisition of facts in various subjects; and the teaching and learning focused mainly on recall of these facts and other lower cognitive skills. Moreover, teaching skills in literacy and numeracy in lower primary grades were seriously inadequate. The pupil's failure to develop early literacy skills led to poor performance in all curriculum subjects, which subsequently led to loss of interest by both parents and pupils with high dropout rates as a result (Read & Enyutu, 2005). Furthermore, Adrian (2015) argues that the primary school education curriculum in Uganda being theoretical ends up producing job seekers rather than job makers.

Likewise, a 37-year-old fruit vendor and a 30-year-old charcoal seller in Owino Market narrated that corruption and poor governance are major impediments to realise the objectives of UPE. Corruption not only distorts access to education, but affects the quality of education. Corruption can be found at all levels of our education systems, undermining the right to quality education. From ghost schools and fake diplomas, to shoddy works in construction

projects, the cost of corruption is high ranging from stolen resources from education budgets leading to overcrowded classrooms and crumbling schools, or no schools at all. Books and supplies are sometimes sold instead of being given out freely. Schools and universities also sell school places or charge unauthorised fees, forcing students to drop out. Teachers and lecturers are appointed through family connections without qualifications. Grades are bought, while teachers force students to pay for tuition outside of class. In university education, undue government and private sector influence can skew research agendas. The end result will be poor quality education.

Relatedly, a 40-year-old boda-boda rider and a resident of Bwaise reported that the massive increased numbers of pupils in schools without commensurate expansion in facilities, teachers and learning materials may have compromised the quality of education in the country. In addition to that, the researcher also noted that although no thorough studies have been carried out on massive increase in numbers of pupils in schools without commensurate expansion in facilities, the MoES (1999) itself voices this concern thus: "The quality of teaching has probably been affected by the adverse pupil-teacher ratio after the introduction of UPE in 1997."

The other issue related to pupil-teacher ratio is the morale of the teacher. Prior to the introduction of UPE, most schools used to charge additional fees through the Parents Teachers Association (PTA). Some of this money was used to supplement teachers' salaries. This is no longer the practice and so, teachers must rely on the extremely low salaries. This seems to have affected the morale of the teachers. The fear, therefore, is that UPE may have indeed compromised the quality of education in the country.

According to a 23-year-old saloon attendant, UPE policy is not bad in itself but the challenge is ill-trained teachers most especially in rural areas. This finding is backed by Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development (2004) when it asserts that in 2003, there were 145,703 primary school teachers, of whom 54,069 (37%) had no formal teacher training. An additional 7,960 had just a teaching certificate obtained after training on completion of primary education. Most of these had retired but had been recalled into the teaching service due to shortage of teachers after the introduction of UPE. The majority of these unqualified teachers were deployed in UPE schools in rural areas. However, it has been established that under the school facilities grants, the government has devoted a lot of resources to procure textbooks, construct classrooms and teachers' houses, and purchase of furniture for pupils. The increase in education inputs explains the gradual improvement of some education quality indicators

from the time UPE was introduced. Nevertheless, these improvements may not always translate into better education performance by pupils. Results of a national assessment of primary education performance taken between 1996 and 2000, for example, suggest that education performance in terms of pupils' numeracy, reading, science, and social studies knowledge and skills deteriorated following the introduction of UPE (MoES, 2003).

A vegetable seller in Wandegeya Market, a widow in her early 40s reported:

> In Uganda today, just like in any other African countries, jobs are a big problem, partly, because of the theoretical approach of learning in our schools. For instance, there is a mismatch between what is taught at school and what happens in real life.
>
> This respondent further narrated that we must demand for a commitment to high quality education accessible to all. She said we need policy information that is clear and easy to understand. For instance, at national, district, and school levels, budgets- and other finance-related information needs to be published in detail so that stakeholders are able to monitor how resources are allocated for one to be able to report suspected corruption cases without fear of retaliation. It is important to have clear regulations controlling education finance and management. These will give guidelines on how new schools, exam processes, and fees will be controlled. Regular external audits must take place to detect and deter fraud.
>
> Furthermore, she reported that frequent school inspections will help to prevent corruption in teacher management and behaviours. Consistent penalties for abuse are needed to streamline the education sector. No teacher should be appointed without proof of their qualifications, past background, and experience. Stakeholders should also push for examination regulations to be widely published and grading monitored, so that students do not have room to buy good marks.
>
> Similarly, a 24-year-old business man in Wandegeya Market said:
>
> Uganda has made impressive progress in securing access to basic education for its children. However, the quality provision remains low and pupils achieve lower learning outcomes than their counterparts elsewhere in the region.
>
> He particularly made reference to our neighbours in Kenya and Rwanda where he thought primary education outcomes were better than in Uganda.

Developments in the Ugandan education sector since 1996 paint a picture of increased enrolment, but little or no improvement in quality, despite several policy initiatives to guide and direct the education sector. Studies on education reforms in Uganda tend to take the education

policy process for granted, fail to deal with how improved education becomes part of a political agenda or the politics behind how initiatives are implemented and sustained once they are introduced.

Kamya (2019) argues that compared to countries in the East African region, Uganda has the lowest education spending as proportion of GDP. However, despite its early challenges, the government was able to score on the provision of free primary education (UPE) which has given a wider number of students a chance to access education although the quality of primary education attained, as earlier mentioned, is still of low quality as it is shown in the work of Kamya (2019), NPA (2019), and Aguti and Fraser (2005). Therefore, there is a need to reset the education system through public discussions on the critical matters that are hindering the development of primary education service delivery in the country.

UPE, according to our participants in Lubaga Division, has emphasised quantity at the expense of quality. As such, there has been constant surge in the number of pupils enrolling in schools because of a number of issues (e.g., limited sitting space, few textbooks, limited number of teachers against the many pupils, etc.) that have affected quality learning. In connection to this, many reports show that much as children go to school, there is little learning in these schools. The likely possibility is that government will have half-baked graduates that may not cause a transformative change in Uganda. For example, study findings show that the teachers' union in Uganda (UNATU) has attempted to lead the push for higher quality education, but has largely failed to push through the initiatives that would be significant. Accordingly, a *boda-boda* rider who surprisingly holds a bachelor's degree from Kyambogo University and operates from Lukuli Boda-boda Stage, Makindye Division asserted that within UNATU and within school bodies, the struggle for salary increments is always cleverly manipulated by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government. This, in essence, means that a poorly paid teacher cannot offer quality services because he/she lacks motivation and a favourable working environment. To support his claims, the *boda-boda* rider argued that in 2013, the MoES issued a statement threatening to sack teachers involved in the quality education campaign, and also called upon the security agencies to investigate the NGOs behind such campaigns.

It should, however, be noted that on the side of the government, from its inception, UPE had realised its objectives since emphasis was on numbers (quantitative increase) and this has been achieved over the years as one of the participants, a garment dealer in Jemba Arcade, downtown Kampala stated thus:

> The political dividends of the UPE initiative were clear. Any service improvement, such as expanding access to primary education to those previously disadvantaged, would be credited to the NRM government, whose popularity would increase as a result.

According to a 41-year-old maize miller in Kisenyi Business Centre, Central Division:

> The introduction of UPE and the abolishment of school fees also coincided with the country's first elections under the new constitution. UPE became an important campaign pledge for the government.

The implication is that public funding that was pumped into the primary education sector after 1996 was basically to improve access (such as payment of capitation grants, building schools, or recruiting teachers), with little attention paid to the quality of primary education (e.g., improving inspection and monitoring, co-curricular activities, provision of materials or training of teachers).

Similarly, a 53-year-old metal fabricator in Kisenyi Business Centre, Central Division argued that the abolition of PTA's financial contributions in schools effectively signalled a fundamental change in power relations between the government, school management, and parents. As such, the NRM government and President Museveni, in particular, could now take credit for broadening access and the inclusive delivery of primary education services. However, the financial contributions from government in most of the cases remained insufficient to bring about the desired quality in schools. Cullen (2007) and Bukenya (2018) argue that in most developing countries, primary school systems have persistently failed to deliver quality primary education to children, which has resulted in approximately 100 million primary-age children either failing to enter or completing primary school level.

Furthermore, a 36-year-old tailor and a mother of two in Owino Market narrated that UPE serves as a political weapon for the NRM government to win over voters especially from the countryside. She argued that while it has become increasingly clear that UPE is not entirely free, contrary to the general misperception, local government leaders at different levels continue to promote it as a free service for political advantages. For example, chairpersons in the lower local governments continue to use UPE as a mobilising tool for the NRM arguing that services under the programme are entirely free. However, government officials are aware that cost-sharing by parents in schools is already practised to meet the hidden costs of primary education under UPE. Government officials are also aware that the schools that perform well rely on the support and input from the parents and other supporting organisations (e.g., NGOs) and not the government. However, these facts are never publicly acknowledged,

particularly in the lead up to general elections where UPE is quite often used as a campaign strategy for the NRM to win votes.

Additionally, quality in UPE schools has been hampered by inadequate or non-existing inspection activities by the district inspectors of schools. A 20-year-old hairdresser in Wandegeya Trading Centre noted:

> In Uganda, the current state of primary school inspection is weak and unable to facilitate the provision of quality UPE. There is limited and poor inspection in primary schools which cannot enable the achievement of UPE quality objectives.

Mutabaruka et al., (2018) argue that the central role of school inspection in Uganda is to promote and assure the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of educational provision. The main goal concerns setting systems, defining and reviewing standards and quality of primary education and sports and to monitor the achievement of such standards and quality to ensure continually improved education in Uganda. Importantly, primary school inspection encompasses the following: monthly school visits to supervise the progress on teaching and learning, general school hygiene/sanitation, collection of information/data on teachers and students' attendance, conferencing with teachers for improved teachers and students' performance and to ensure policy implementation (MoES, 2012; MoES 2006). This implies that regular school inspection should not only monitor effectiveness of teaching/learning but also ensure quality of primary education indicators. Currently, there is irregular school inspection, low funding, limited staff, and unreliable means of transport, lack of internal support supervision, and low motivation. All these raise serious concerns about the quality of teaching/learning in Uganda.

There was a general agreement among the *jua kali* in all the five divisions that form Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) about the lack of quality in primary education since independence evidenced by the lack of progress on numeracy and literacy indicators, persistent absenteeism among pupils, teachers and school managers and unnecessary political unrest. However, government reform efforts to improve the quality of education have been piecemeal, which is due to the combined features of decentralisation and liberalisation of the primary education sector and weak pressure to improve quality education from the different stakeholders (CSOs, NGOS, the media, and the general public, among others).

In helping us to understand why UPE has eroded the issue of quality as envisaged by many in the initial stages of implementation, a 49-year-old shop attendant in Bwaise Business Centre stated:

> There are weak political drivers to improve the quality of primary education. It would take very large budget

> allocations to launch general programmes, for example, improve teachers' salaries or strengthen inspection and monitoring systems. In a clientelist political settlement, a system of decentralised rent management renders quality improvements arbitrary; they depend on whether there is a particular donor project or, at the local level, whether there are resourceful and politically well-connected schools and individuals.

Respondents wondered why the government was rushing into introducing USE without first evaluating and addressing the loopholes in the implementation of UPE programme. A maize mill owner in Kisenyi Business Centre and area local council one (LC1) chairperson stressed:

> The problems that are affecting UPE are most likely the same problems that will hinder the full implementation of USE programme. Our leaders never learn from past experiences.

Therefore, from the above arguments, we note that as the government continues to expand universal education through the introduction of universal secondary education and vocational training programmes, it is clear that without addressing quality as matter of urgency at all levels of primary education, quality of education is likely to remain a dream. As Kamya (2019) argues, Uganda's UPE system faces significant challenges with the majority of children receiving low quality or no education, and are unprepared to be self-reliant and Uganda's future leaders.

It should be noted that substantial investments are required to improve the quality of primary education compared to quantitative expansion. It is argued that in addition to the financial investment to recruit, train, monitor and evaluate teachers, the government would need to address other structural issues underpinning primary education service delivery in the country. For example, the curriculum would have to be overhauled to make it more relevant, school environments made secure, particularly for girls, as well as addressing the lack of leadership and management skills among the majority of school managers. It is further argued that the comprehensive reforms needed would arguably require the re-introduction of some form of user fees for parents as it was the case in the previous regimes and before the introduction of UPE under the NRM government. This would threaten the government's base, political support, and weaken its electoral advantage.

The government's lack of progress on quality has meant that solutions to quality deficiencies in schools have largely been left to district local governments and school administrators to handle. A 28-year-old metal fabricator in Nakawa Business Centre, through an interview with us argued that the district and school responses to

the decline in quality of education present an interesting departure from the UPE policy as it was introduced and has been implemented for more than two decades. Furthermore, a 40-year-old florist in Nakawa Business Centre argued that there is a popular argument that parents misunderstood their role under UPE. For example, although government made it clear from the outset that School Management Committees (SMCs) were to assume all functions previously carried out by parents in schools (PTAs), local leadership and school administrators are again increasingly relying on parents to make financial contributions to ensure that schools function. The other participants in Nakawa Business Centre confirmed this assertion arguing that parents feel overburdened by what they would think is free education when in actual sense, its cost-sharing. Parents are, for example, required to pay money for school lunch, uniforms, scholastic materials and other fees termed *development fees*.

In the words of a garment dealer in Nakawa Business Centre:

> For the most part, the directive that parents should not make financial contributions in school has been ignored and, in practice, local leaders are actively mobilising parents to financially support schools. Furthermore, parents' financial contributions have facilitated linkages with local political leadership to effect the sort of changes parents want in their schools. The result is an unofficial cost-sharing policy that is not officially condoned, but in practice is allowed to continue.

Study findings further show that the classroom pupil ratio is high in UPE schools. Accordingly, minimum standards require that a class should not have more than 60 pupils. However, findings established that in some districts, some classes accommodated more than 60 pupils and, in some places, the numbers could double. A 24-year-old shoe repairer (cobbler) in Kawempe Tura, Kawempe Division argued that because of constant surge in pupil numbers, some pupils in some schools still study under trees as they cannot be accommodated in single classrooms. To make matters worse, in schools where teachers' quarters are limited or non-existent, school managers have turned classrooms into teachers' houses; thus, worsening the problem of classroom space.

With massive numbers of pupils enrolled without commensurate expansion of facilities, increased number of teachers, and adequate teaching and learning materials, the quality of education has been compromised. For instance, pupil-teacher ratio rose from 40, pre-UPE to 60 in 1999, while pupil-classroom ratio jumped from 85 to 145 over the same period. Although it has dramatically improved, the situation remains far from ideal.

Although direct evidence on learning is scanty, available evidence gives cause for concern. For instance,

in tests administered to national random samples of primary three pupils, the number of pupils who achieved a satisfactory score 8 declined from 48% from 1996 to 31% in 1999 on the mathematics test, and from 92% to 56% on the English oral test. (Tamuzadde, 2011). Furthermore, Aguti and Fraser (2005) argue that in Uganda, with the introduction of UPE policy, there was massive increase in pupil numbers which immediately created a problem of classroom space. It is, therefore, feared that the persistent increase in the numbers of students in schools without corresponding expansion in school infrastructures, teachers and scholastic materials will compromise the quality of education which ultimately might impact greatly on the future of the human resources development in the country.

Study findings further reveal that UPE implementation is greatly hampered by limited finances. Government receives both capitation grants (recurrent expenditure) and school facilities grant (for development expenditure). The capitation grants are computed based on school enrolment, with each pupil getting over shs7,000 a year in addition to a block grant of shs100,000 per term. According to the capitation grants expenditure guidelines, 50% of the grant is supposed to be used on instructional materials; and 30% on co-curricular activities. The UPE implementation guidelines further note that 15% is spent on school management, maintenance, payment for utilities, such as water and electricity, whereas 5% is spent on school administration. The funds are released on a quarterly basis in any given financial year.

Tamuzadde (2011) asserts that another constraint that Uganda faces in the implementation of primary education policy is the lack of sufficient funding to build schools at the reach of every child of school-going age and thus, the poorer localities are left out. There are still a number of schools that need to be rehabilitated and the government has limited funding. Aguti and Fraser, (2005) argue that Uganda, as a developing nation, has a vast number of pressing needs that draw funds from its budget annually. Some of these include: infrastructure development, public health care provision, trade promotion, industrial growth, and obviously, education, among many others. Because of these competing priorities, the education sector usually gets a less than sufficient portion of national budget, causing government schools to barely survive in a dire infrastructural state, with poorly paid and unmotivated teachers and pupils.

It is important to note that the money allocated to UPE is insufficient when compared to the needs of the students and the cost of living in the country. As such, the limited funding has affected the quality of education attained by school children. In such instances, pupils are able to read but cannot understand because they

at times go on empty stomachs. A 59-year-old female vegetable vendor in Kalerwe Market, Kawempe Division, wondered whether government is sincere and wishes well to its citizens. In her own words:

> In the Uganda of today where the cost of living and inflation are very high, what can the 7,000 shillings per pupil per year actually do. President Museveni is taking Ugandans for a ride. Can himself spend that money on his own child for a day; let alone a year? This government doesn't focus on the important sectors of the economy which, in my view, would be education, health, and agriculture. Instead, emphasis has been on security which ideally President Museveni rides on to keep his grip on to power.

A 30-year-old *boda-boda* rider and a former primary school teacher in Bwaise, Kawempe Division, stressed that the limited funds to the UPE implementation programme coupled with late disbursement of capitation funds, negatively affects the implementation of the programme. As a result, many UPE schools are struggling with budgetary shortfalls by either passing on the burden to their pupils in form of asking for development fees, or reduce spending on essential services and supplies, such as scholastic materials. This compromises the quality of the programme. He further highlighted that the majority of UPE schools already suffer from severe budget deficits every term and delays in receipt of UPE capitation grants makes schools' daily survival even more precarious. This makes planning by school administrations very unpredictable and headteachers find themselves in difficult situations through the school term(s). Some head teachers informed the study team that they normally find themselves on a collision course with school suppliers who, for one reason or another, think it is a deliberate policy by the head teachers not to pay them on time. In his own words, a former primary school teacher and now a *boda-boda* rider said:

> UPE schools are frequently forced to incur debts with local suppliers while waiting for the disbursement of UPE capitation grants. This not only results in a reduction in quality and quantity of services but also limits schools' ability to organise and track their spending. As capitation grants are spent before disbursement, balancing of schools' budgets become sincreasingly difficult if not impossible.

However, it should be noted that not all schools have the social capital to receive credit from local suppliers. As such, those without are forced to go without essential supplies. What they do, in most cases, is to pass on the fiscal burden to parents through increases in development fees. Yet, in many UPE communities, especially in rural areas, poverty inhibits families from contributing to school budgets through development fees and the fees increments result in an even

lower incidence of payments and increase in dropout rates. In other words, the delay of UPE capitation grants results in the deterioration of the quality of education in UPE schools due to failure to access essential supplies, such as scholastic materials, food stuffs, and sanitation.

A middle-aged matooke seller and a single father with children in UPE schools was very critical of the automatic promotion policy in schools. According to him, the automatic promotion policy in primary school has negatively affected UPE. This practice of allowing school pupils to progress from one class to the next irrespective of their academic performance affected the quality of UPE programme although there are forces that believe the policy is beneficial for the government, households, and individual students. According to this parent:

> The automatic policy negatively affects the overall quality of education since it eliminates competition, de-motivates students and teachers alike; hence, lowering teaching and learning outcomes. Besides, those who have reported academic gains attributable to repetition have gone on to add that the gains are short-term and as a result, eventually retained students end up lagging behind, which affects their self-esteem and increases the probability of dropping out.

Although the policy is supported by the MoES and development partners (donors) operating in the country, one wonders why previous governments or other neighbouring countries faced with similar challenges in primary education sub-sector never thought of such a policy. It is important to note that the adoption and subsequent implementation of automatic promotion came on the back of high internal inefficiency prevailing within the primary education sub-sector. Coupled with low quality of education, this might exacerbate the already existing challenges in UPE implementation policy.

Study findings further reveal that UPE policy is greatly affected by corruption. Multiple narratives from Kalerwe Market vendors and those from Bwaise came to an agreement that UPE would be a good policy but the implementers embezzle, divert, and generally misuse funds meant for its implementation. As such, money disappears from point of release from the central government, through the districts and even at schools by headteachers. Adrian (2015) argues that the capitation grant that is sent to UPE schools dwindles before it reaches the schools because it is embezzled at every level where it passes. Grogan (2008) posits that of the money remitted by government to UPE schools, only about 13% reaches schools. He adds that, most of the grant is absorbed by local politicians and administrators. That suggests that schools in Uganda which were dependent on revenue from school fees collection have suffered greatly, for there is little operational capital. That is even worse in rural areas

because, as Reinikka and Swensson (2004) intimate, schools in better-off communities, such as is the case in urban areas, receive larger fractions of the original grant money because less is embezzled.

Ugandans need to stand firm right from the top to the lowest levels if corruption is to be eliminated. But it is abetted by the very people who claim to abhor it. Such hypocrisy keeps the vice much alive in the country. Graft, therefore, is discouraged only in theory, while in practice, people in public office embezzled public funds at all levels. Measures against corruption are but mere lip-service, with a few junior officers tried and released on a bond paid using the embezzled public funds. No measures are imposed to ensure due return of stolen money.

CSBAG (2020) sums it up when it says the biggest challenge with the implementing agency (Uganda government) is corruption and nepotism. Kavuma et al., (2017) stress that the main form of corruption prevalent in most districts in relation to UPE is identified as inflating students enrolment numbers to obtain much funding. Corruption, through submitting false enrolment records, is facilitated by the fact that government remits money directly to school bank accounts and the money allocated to each school depends on the learner enrolment numbers.

Drawing from multiple narratives among second-hand clothes dealers in Owino Market, Central Division, UPE policy has been severely affected by high levels of both pupil and teacher absenteeism which ultimately affects quality learning outcomes. The two problems are intertwined in that teacher absenteeism demoralises students who also decide to absent themselves because there is nobody to attend to them at school. The reasons for high teacher absenteeism were not easily established but what came out clearly from the interviews is that headteachers, teachers with higher qualifications and the older teachers were quite often absent from schools. Thus, the reasons could be that highly qualified teachers' do part time work in other schools or institutions of high learning as some of these teachers have advanced degrees (e.g., masters) and can ably teach in higher institutions of learning. Some could be fatigued as the case may be with particularly older teachers or just taking on other jobs outside the teaching profession. Others could just be demotivated by either the little salaries they get at their work stations or the general work environment. Aguti (2002) argues that UPE quality may have been compromised by the low morale of teachers and this could explain why they absent themselves.

Additionally, it was revealed by the respondents in Owino Market that female teachers absent themselves more than their male counterparts. The reasons given for this is that women play both productive and reproductive roles in society and, therefore, they, in most of the cases, keep home either to take care of the

sick children, serve their maternity leave or do other home chores that may be critical. All this means that they cannot be at school all the time.

A 49-year-old tailor in Owino market Central Division, whose wife is a teacher in one of public primary schools in Muyenga Bukasa stressed thus:

> My wife teaches in one of the primary schools in Bukasa Muyenga but she misses school quite often. The reasons she gives to absent herself from school range from either taking children to hospital, but most importantly when she is serving her maternity leave.

Conclusion

The main point of this paper is that the well intentioned UPE policy by government of Uganda and other stakeholders such as UNESCO, UNICEF among others has been affected by a number of factors that have compromised its quality. Museveni's government has been affected by corruption where money meant for UPE projects has disappeared with no trace, shoddy works have been done on school projects, diversion of funds, ghost teachers and pupils. The problem is manifest at both local and national level as even ministers have been implicated in the vice. Important to note is that the NRM regime has been at the forefront of fighting this social evil through setting up an elaborate legal and institutional framework, for instance the office of the IGG, the police, the Auditor General, the state house anti-corruption unit, the courts e.g. the anti-corruption court etc. Despite the efforts, corruption rate is increasing in the country. There is therefore need for further research to understand the reasons why despite the efforts, corruption still thrives in government institutions and how best this social evil can be dealt with outrightly.

From the beginning, government was ill-prepared for the implementation of UPE as the policy emerged from a campaign platform during the 1996 elections. As the implementation process went on after 1997, many unforeseen circumstances emerged that government was not ready to instantly address. Thus, the policy witnessed an upsurge in pupil numbers with no commensurate classroom space; no teachers to match the increasing pupil numbers; insufficient houses for teachers; and a poor working environment with meagre salaries, among others. In order to address the quality issues in UPE policy, there is a need for government to review the entire UPE policy with a view to understanding the implementation challenges in detail and seek for solutions. The curriculum too needs to be reviewed to match the community needs. Importantly, government needs to increase the education budget and fully fund the education sector.

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