

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGIES IN TANZANIA: THE ROLE OF FAMILY'S SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CHILDREN'S PRIMARY SCHOOLING

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Abstract

This paper derives from a pilot study. The study explored how family's forms of social capital owned by parents who live in poverty account for children schooling. Based on qualitative approaches, the study covered one school located in the Coast region. Data were collected through unstructured interviews, children's stories, observation and documentary guides. The study involved 20 participants, including teachers, pupil, parents, a Ward Educational Officer (WEO), and a District Education Officer (DEO). The findings indicate that the parents possess various amounts of social capital (financial, human and cultural). These resources affect the children's schooling both positively and negatively. The findings reveal that these resources are partially used, not used at all or used in a way that affects the children's schooling. The parents have been either doing nothing or playing a peripheral role in their children's schooling. In some cases, the children are not enrolled, enrolled but with irregular attendance, attend school in very poor condition or drop out of school. This tendency denies children access to quality education, and hence, limits the government's efforts to eradicate poverty through the provision of basic education for all. On the basis of these findings, it is concluded that the role of ensuring that children have access to quality education is the joint responsibility of the parents, community members and schools. Schools should become a condominium of families and teachers. Hence, there is a need to develop a concrete home- school partnership that clearly specifies the roles of each partner.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tanzania, like several other countries in the South, has introduced poverty alleviation strategies. The aim is to empower people against what Julius Nyerere¹ referred to as the 'enemy of development' i.e. poverty. For decades now, there have been various initiatives for eradicating poverty. Education, among other factors, is widely acknowledged as instrumental in poverty alleviation. The literature would appear to suggest that the provision of education alone will not automatically results in poverty eradication. Education has to go hand in hand with other measures, like the modernisation of agriculture, job creation and the provision of loans and credit. However, the pertinent questions here are: How can the illiterate population become able to use modern agriculture technology? Can the illiterate population become able to secure jobs in the job market? How can the illiterate population become able to use loans and credit effectively and efficiently? In this paper, the author argues that despite the controversy about the relationship between education and poverty reduction, education remains the only way to strengthen human capabilities. Hence, it is key to other means that can help to reduce poverty.

Tanzania supports the idea that education is key to poverty reduction. As a result, in the 1960s and 70s, the government democratised education. Recently, in 2002 the government introduced the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP). Through PEDP, the primary education sector underwent major education financial reforms, resulting in the rejuvenation of primary education. PEDP contributed significantly to increased enrolment, teaching and learning resources, number of

¹ Julius Nyerere was the first president of Tanzania.

classrooms and the teachers' quarters. Indeed, the programme opened doors for more children especially those from disadvantaged households. Such efforts are further reflected in the 2005 National Strategy for Growth and the Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP). Within this remarkable strategy, the main agenda is education for all school-age children especially those from less privileged households.

Despite these efforts, however, the primary education sector is still besieged by numerous problems, *inter alia*, the perpetuation of the tendency toward non-enrolment, low attendance rates, dropout, truancy, a low level of participation and poor learning outcomes. These problems are common among children from poor households (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2005). Unsurprisingly, children from poor households would appear to suffer most from the consequences of these problems. Consequently, they under-utilise the public education services. Certainly, this tendency subjects them to the shackles of poverty. Statistics reveal that a total of 375,367 pupils dropped out of school between 2000 and 2006, 301,245 through truancy, 19,384 through pregnancy, 20,495 through death, 3970 through illness or parent/ guardian illness, 9375 through lack of school needs and 20,898 through other unknown reasons (Basic Education Statistics (BEST), 2007). Dropout, truancy and low completion rates are further evidenced by the differences between the number of pupils enrolled in year one and those who sit the year seven leaving examinations. According to BEST (2007), 1,140,554 pupils were enrolled in 2000. Among these, 749,102 sat the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 2007. It was further revealed that 391,452 (34%) failed to attempt the PSLE. The number of pupils who dropped out of school adds to the illiterate poor population a factor which, in a way, limits government efforts to reduce poverty.

The above-identified hindrances to education call for an inquiry that examines household resources in relation to quality primary education. Like Coleman (1990), this study uses the idea of social capital to describe the resources located in the family and in the schools. Hence, social capital in the context of this study refers to the supportive relationships between adults and children at home or school in order to promote the children's positive schooling behaviour and attitudes. The amount of social capitals allocated in a particular family and the extent to which they are effectively used determines the parents' involvement, which further determines the pupil's schooling.

The literature suggests that any discussion of how social capital affects behaviour must take into account the resources within the network as well as the potential resources that can be drawn upon from outside the network (McNeal, 1999). Family's resources (physical, human, cultural and social capital) are necessary in enhancing children's education. These forms of capital are the determinants of the children's schooling behaviour (Coleman, 1988; McNeal, 1999; Wong, 1998). Hence, in this study, the family's social capital (parental involvement) is described in terms of the family's resources (physical, cultural and human). The family's resources determine the pupils' attitudes, perceptions, aspirations, learning behaviour, school achievement, school outcomes and school commitment. Parents' involvement in education is widely cited as an important strategy for improving pupils' schooling behaviour outcomes, effective learning and education quality (Wong, 1998; McNeal, 1999; Driessen, *et al.*, 2004). Arguably, schools that operate in isolation cannot afford to improve the children's education development. However, while much is written about other countries, little research has focused on the impact of the family's resources on children's schooling in Tanzania. This study explores the influence of the different forms of capital, possessed by poor households, on children's access to quality primary education in Tanzania.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study was to examine the influence of the family's social capital on children's access to, and the quality of, primary education. In particular, the study sought to attain three specific objectives:

- a. To examine the contribution of the family's social capital to children's access to primary education
- b. To examine the role of the family's social capital in facilitating children's quality education
- c. To explore the possibilities of strengthening the family's social capital to enhance access to quality primary education for children from poor households.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The data in this paper was gathered from pilot study conducted in the Coast region, Bagamoyo district. The study was conducted over two months from September to October, 2007. It covered one primary school and employed qualitative research methodologies. The focus of the study was on pupils from extremely poor households. Data were collected through unstructured interviews, observations, documentary analysis and the children's activities and stories. The study sample consisted of twenty participants. Before getting the participants involved in the study, the researcher met them individually, explained the purpose of the study and asked for their permission to participate in the study. All of the participants agreed to have their conversation recorded on a voice recorder and video camera, and for still pictures to be taken.

The pilot study was intended to improve the research design. Firstly, before the pilot study, the researcher planned to use mixed methods. The arrangements were to use a qualitative approach during the pilot study and a survey during the data collection stage. However, during the pilot study, the researcher discovered that most of the parents were illiterate. This had implications for the use of questionnaires. Hence, it was decided that the study would be purely qualitative. Secondly, the pilot study further helped to improve the instruments. It assisted in the preparation of structured interviews for the data collection stage. The unstructured interviews assisted in the selection and preparation of more focused research questions. Thirdly, prior to the pilot study, the researcher arranged to use activity maps and children's diaries as part of the children's activities. However, the children were not good at drawing so it was decided that during the data collection stage the researcher would draw the pictures, leaving spaces for them to fill in. With the children's diaries, it was revealed that some of the children were unable to write. It was very surprising that some of the pupils in class three were unable to write. As a result, it was decided that the research would involve class seven pupils and employs a household chores chart. Fourthly, through the pilot study the researcher saw the need to expand the study sample to involve children who had dropped out of school because of poverty and pupils from poor households who displayed positive schooling behaviour. It was assumed that the changes would provide a clear picture of the parental resources in relation to schooling.

4. KEY FINDINGS

The research findings are presented and discussed under two major research issues, reflecting the research objectives discussed elsewhere.

4.1. Contribution of the family's social capital to children's access to, and the quality of, primary education

To examine the contribution of the family's social capital to children's access to primary education and its role in facilitating the children's quality education, the researcher held interviews with the

parents, pupils, teachers, and education officers. For consistency, the findings are presented and discussed according to the kinds of family's social capital as follows:

Family's social capital

Regarding the social capital of families, the research findings revealed that there were weak relationships between parents and school children. Such relationships would appear to have significant implications for the pupils' schooling. Firstly, several children came from economically poor single parent families, so often, poor mothers had to shoulder the family responsibilities, including the provision of basic amenities (food, clothes and shelter) for the whole family. As most of their time was spent on the means of survival, they were unable to find out what went on with regards to their children's education. This problem is further exaggerated by the weak relationship that exists between families and other community members. There is no cooperation in reinforcing the pupils' schooling behaviour. There is little doubt that such low social capital leads to truancy, poor academic performance, and a high dropout rate. Secondly, children who live with guardians² were more affected. This is because the guardians were too old to provide the basic needs of the family. Instead, the children supported the family by engaging in petty business or child labour. Thirdly, there is poor communication between the parents and/or guardians and the schools, except when problems arise. However, the findings suggest that, even amid problems, such as poor attendance or truancy there was no communication. Certainly, poor communication between the parents and schools interfered with the children's opportunity to access schooling.

The Family's Financial Capital

The findings indicate that poor family's financial resources affect the children's schooling in various ways. Firstly, the children attended school either without school uniforms or in torn, dirty ones. The interviews with the educational officers revealed that the lack of school uniforms triggers the pupils' dropout. They noted that children who attended school without school uniforms were psychologically affected. They included pupils who were bare-foot or wearing slippers. Secondly, the pupils were physically unprepared to participate in the learning process. It was discovered that the pupils attended school without having any breakfast, and stayed there for eight hours without any lunch which, affected their ability to learn. Thirdly, the children lived in very poor houses. Through observations, it was found that children interviewees slept in poor beds made of ropes and mats which served as a mattress. Indeed, the home environment was neither safe nor secure. In this regard, it is difficult for pupils to make good academic progress.

Fourthly, the pupils studied in dilapidated classrooms that were poorly furnished. The Head teacher acknowledged the government's funds for constructing classrooms, but these had to be supplemented by community resources. However, given the socio-economic status of the communities, the parents were unable to supplement government funds. As a result, the children's schooling suffered significantly. Fifthly, the pupils' school attendance was irregular as they had to help with the household chores, so often, the children assisted in the field, helped to baby-sit, fetched water, collected firewood, and engaged in winnowing.

The Contribution of the Family's Human Capital

The findings suggest that parents in poor households were not only poor financially but also in terms of their knowledge, awareness and interest in schooling. This affected the children's schooling. As a result, some children were either not enrolled in school, or even if they were, were not motivated to attend school. On the whole, low human capital affected the children's schooling in various ways: Firstly, the parents were not serious about their children's education. During the interviews it was noted that financial ability was not the only problem. They had enough financial capital but they did

² At the research site, guardians comprised grand parents who were indeed too old to support their dependents.

not see the point of spending money on their children's education. Secondly, the children were not given home works because they would not have time to do it due to their household chores. Thirdly, the problem of low knowledge or value in education was more likely to be transmitted to the children. Certainly, the children were likely to copy what their parents did. This may result in a vicious cycle of poverty where by poor and illiterate parents raise poor and illiterate children. Fourthly, the findings reveal that the parent interviewees had higher aspiration regarding their children's schooling. Each parent wished that their child would proceed to high level of education.

The Contribution of the Family's Cultural Capital

The interviews held with the parents suggest that the majority of them did not converse with their children about the importance of schooling. Children's socialisation into traditions and customs was more important to the parents' than their schooling. The parents assume that the children would automatically be interested in schooling. As a result, there were no efforts to made to acquaint the children with the schooling culture. Instead the families transmitted traditions and customs which had a significant impact on schooling. All of the teacher and education officer respondents indicated that the parents in the Coast region followed tradition of socialising girls into adult roles, a process which interfered with the school calendar. Consequently, girls missed school in order to attend the ceremonies. Further the education officer respondents attributed early pregnancies to these ceremonies. Through the ceremonies, the children were taught how to handle their husbands when they marry. Certainly, what was taught was far above their age, a factor which motivated them to practise what they learned. While the children were well prepared for their adult roles, they were not prepared for schooling. In this respect, the question is related to the need to include issues about schooling in the initiation ceremonies' curriculum.

The findings indicate that the initiation ceremonies affected the girls' schooling in various ways: Firstly, girls regard what is taught during the ceremonies as more important than their schooling. This is borne out of the fact that the parents spend a lot of resources on conducting these ceremonies, suggesting that they are more important than schooling, so it was a question of priority. Secondly, the parents were not used to buying educational related materials for their children. None of the parent interviewees had bought any exercise books or text books for his or her school child, so the children depended entirely on books provided by the school.

4.2. Strengthening the family's social capital towards accessing quality primary education

Given the nature and character of the parents in the different communities at the research site, the question worthy of pursuit is related to the possibility of strengthening the family's social capital. The aim is to enhance access to quality primary education for children from poor households. To this effect, the parents and Education Officers were asked to indicate the school norms regarding the parents' involvement in education. The findings are summarised to reflect the foregoing kinds of social capital.

School norms regarding parental involvement

The findings disclosed that there were no rules or laws in schools to explain how the parents should be involved. It was discovered that while the government circulars and laws stipulated that enrolment and attendance were compulsory, they were silent on parental involvement. In the light of the foregoing findings the following possibilities about *Family's Social Capital* are hereby presented.

Firstly, most of the parents mentioned that they would like to be involved in education related issues. This suggests the need to strengthen the home- school partnership by delineating the parents' educational responsibilities. Schools should be provided with official documents that describe how

to get parents involved Furthermore, there is a need to encourage parent to attend the annual parents' meetings. In the same vein, school should establish a reliable means of communication, encouraging the parents to visit the school. Likewise, the teachers whenever possible, should visit the parents.

Secondly, the parents should be educated about how best to use the few financial resources that they have to support their children's education. The study revealed that the parents attached a low priority to education and were reluctant to provide their children with their basic school needs.

Thirdly, the findings suggest that the parents' low involvement in education is an outcome of their lack of awareness of the benefits of schooling. All of the interviewed parents mentioned that, despite their illiteracy, they understood the importance of education. They obtained news about the benefits of education through the radio and the lives of educated people. Despite this, the parents did nothing to promote their children's education. Hence, there is a need to sensitise the parents about the importance of reinforcing their children's schooling. Moreover, there is a need to educate the parents about the necessity of education; and encourage them to be aware of their roles regarding their children's education.

Fourthly, as initiation ceremonies were common in all communities in the study's geographical area, those responsible should use initiation ceremonies as forums for imparting positive schooling behaviour to children.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the foregoing discussion, three observations are made. Firstly, most parents from poor households own small amount of social capitals (financial, human, cultural and social). This affects the children's access to, and the quality of education. Secondly, although for centuries and across continents, families and parents have been recognized as vital partners in their children's schooling, they are less well recognised in the studied school. Until recently, there has been no official documentation, which explicitly explains how the school should involve the parents. Hence, parental resources are rarely used to enhance the children's access to, and quality of pupil's education. Thirdly, given the significant roles that parents play in their children's education, it is high time to strengthen the home- school partnerships in order to ensure that the family resources are effectively and efficiently used to enhance the children's schooling.

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