

Support to School Dropouts as a Result of COVID 19 Pandemic in Uganda

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Abstract

Currently Uganda is one of the countries with the longest school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools closed down in March 2020, as the world came to the realization that the COVID-19 had spread. Schools then resumed in October 2020, ending a seven-month unprecedented holiday. It was then that the education system noticed an increased number of school dropouts over and above the already high school dropout rates of over 45% by 2019. Students in a survey taken, indicated that they had not returned to school for the following reasons: Early marriage and pregnancy for the girls, child labor for both the girls and boys, loss of interest in school for both boys and girls, lack of economic ability to pay for education anymore and transfers or migrations of families from the urban to the rural. A survey identified that students of all grades had dropped out and that a number of them were now faced with a dilemma of how to support their families and themselves economically. The survey further indicates that most youth are now into petty trade and manual labor for money for survival. This paper looks into the causes for school dropout as a result of the long school break, the different economic activities the students have taken up in order to survive and how they can be supported to manage the dynamics of the world of work without being exploited because of their ages and lack of a trade, experience or qualifications.

1. Introduction

This paper will explore the options for school dropouts with emphasis on primary and secondary levels. Looking at the Ugandan education system before and during the pandemic, a number of issues are highlighted below as to why there are currently more students likely to drop out of school. Struggle, and be exploited when they try to earn a living.

The Uganda education system is highly academic, and students are forced to internalize and cram a lot of theoretical content which has not been related to real life experiences. So if a student at any one point in the Uganda formal education journey, drops out of school

they are most likely unable to support their entry into the world of work.

This goes for both practical and soft 21st century skills which they have not been taught and as stated by ASIGMA [6], schools are so busy covering the content and preparing students to pass exams rather than finding time for curricular activities that enhance practical and soft skills. Now that they are faced with a dilemma of earning a living due to the long span of time they have not been in schools and the economic pressure that COVID-19 has placed on families. It is only prudent that a plan is made to skill them throughout their formal education and more so there is need to support the students dropping out as a result of the pandemic, with skills so that they can blend in well in the world of work and make meaningful contributions to their societies.

Students are more likely to complete primary school in urban areas (approximately 91%) as opposed to rural areas (approximately 85%). Research by Human Rights Watch found out that school closures caused by the pandemic exacerbated previously existing inequalities, and children who were already at risk of being excluded from quality education have now been most affected [4].

The inequalities in education between rural and urban students in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic range from lack of medium through which students can assess home learning to lack of sources of power to run these mediums, lack of funds to access different learning platforms, lack of internet connectivity, generally the social economic background of the children played a big role in determining their continued learning during the school break. This dictates whether or not they can concentrate on studies or have to work to contribute to the family livelihood or are affected by cultural and traditional practices that threaten their safety like child marriages, coupled with this is the lack of lighting and space to do their study. Only 20% of the children had access to enabling technology for online learning while most of the remaining 80% couldn't even access the reading materials which were posted to the schools. Only approximately 8% of households in rural areas have access to the national electricity grid, compared to 71.2% in urban areas (Lighting Africa).

Electricity is critically important in the age of the pandemic, as electricity is needed to power the technologies used for remote learning. [2].

Looking at the social economic background of the rural areas, in the study area, 74.6% of the population are dependent on agriculture and 41% of people in Uganda live on less than \$1.90/day[10]. This further explains some of the challenges parents have in returning students back to school.

The Uganda Education system consists of seven years of primary education following which students have a wide range of options for both public and private education institutions depending on their aptitude, ambitions and resources. This is still considered the first level of formal education in which pupils follow a common basic curriculum. This is followed by a secondary cycle of six years (four at lower secondary and two and higher secondary).

On successful completion of primary school, the pupils had a number of options. Students could either go to secondary education; or take a three-year crafts course in technical schools. Those completing Uganda Certificate of Education have four possible outlets: successful candidates can either proceed for an advanced certificate of education; join a two-year advanced crafts course in technical institutes; join a two-year grade III primary teaching programme; or join any of the government's departmental programmes. After the completion of the advanced certificate of education the students can either: proceed to university; join a two-year course leading to ordinary diploma in teacher education, technical education; business studies or join departmental programmes. However, these levels of achievement are never met to enable transition from one level to the next, as a result students drop out after each of these levels of formal education. For example the national average for the transition from primary level to secondary level of education in Uganda, stood at 58.95% as of 2016. (UNESCO : Institute of statistics, 2019), The higher the level of education the less the number of students, however these students do not drop out to pursue other knowledge or skills i.e in informal or vocational education, but usually fall completely out of school and are forced to offer hired labor.

Currently, the Grade III certificate is the minimum qualification for primary school teachers, Grade V certificate for Secondary school teachers, while Early Childhood Development-ECD teachers and caregivers are certificate holders. As part of the initiatives to raise the quality of teachers and teacher education in Uganda, the education ministry through the 2019 National Teacher Policy resolved that all teachers from pre-primary should have a minimum qualification of a Bachelor Degree [9]. However with

the policy changes and current need for qualifications for universities, tertiary education is shunned and in the case of teacher education the government has raised the bar, expecting every teacher to become or be a graduate to qualify to teach. Hence this leave out a number of potential teachers who will now drop out along the formal education journey and yet before could have access to teacher education, which initially did not required to have scored highly.

A new Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy 2019 is currently in implementation by Government The government has also undertaken to release the long awaited lower secondary curriculum which replaces the old subject-based curriculum with a new thematic or competence based curriculum. This will enable students graduate with both the Uganda certificate of education (UCE) Certificate and one skill. However, there is need for craft man ship certificates and other short skilled trainings of 3-6 month, which can be taken up by any student at whatever level of education they drop out, This craft man ship should be taken up in all schools both primary and secondary as a qualification but more so as an alternative to the mainstream formal school.

With the long years of formal school, high grade expectations as per the new policies mentioned above and lack of enough money to pay fees, most students and parents are opting for shorted, cheaper courses that they are able to pay for and also have their students quickly join the work force in order to support their families economically.

2. Methodology

The approach to methodological enquiry for this study is based on both primary and secondary research using daily attendance data of students, filling questionnaires on form stack and use of grey literature, reference harvesting and discourse analysis, with weighted critical balanced viewed on the most suitable way forward. In this vein, the research is focused on the current state of the country's education dilemmas in relation to the COVID-19, prolonged school holiday.

The time period under consideration is from the reopening of schools for candidates on October 15, 2020 to June 2021 when schools had to be closed again as a result of t because of the escalating numbers of persons contracting the COVID-19 virus including the students in boarding schools.

Before the closure of schools, the school management was aware of the number of students they had in each class. This was then used as the baseline indicating the school enrolment before the start of the pandemic. The schools were provided with

a data sheet to make entries on the reasons for failure by students to return to school

The school management took daily records of the student’s attendance against the then reach out to every student who had not returned to school and provide whatever support was required to encourage them return to school.

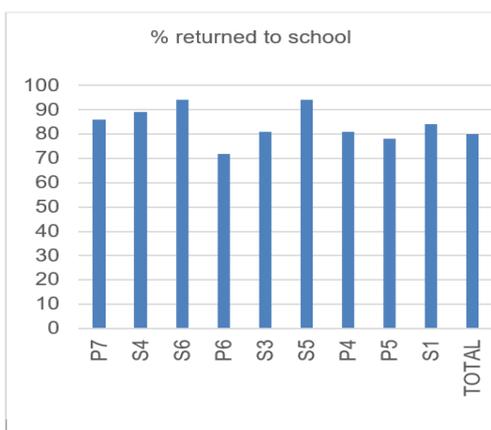
2.1. Objectives

- Identify how many students who were in school as at March 2020 in the identified school, returned to school?
- Identify the factors that will cause students to fail to return to school after the lockdown in October 2020.
- Identify ways of supporting these students still become meaningful citizen despite the different class level they drop out from school at.

3. Results and Findings

From the statistics on attendance for 17 primary and secondary schools in greater Masaka, it was evident that a number of students had dropped out of school and even failed to come back to sit their final level exams. From the statistics on daily attendance, in the 17 school, it was evident that 80% of the students were able to return to school as seen in the Table 1, below for the classes that reported back during the phased reopening of schools.

Table 1. Data on school return in 17 school in greater Masaka region

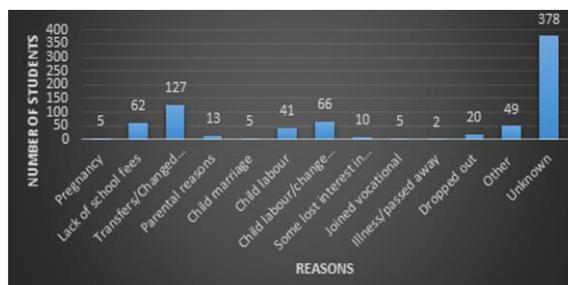


The data showed variation in classes, and this was explainable. The candidate classes P.7, S4 and S6 were having higher return statistics because they had their exams at stake and so come back to do them.

However, classes P4 – 6 and S1 to S3 didn’t have any push factor and hence showed lower numbers of enrollment on return to school. The bigger the children the more likely they are to have a poor attendance pattern which eventually leads them to drop out of school after missing out on many lessons and failing their exams. Children in classes P1 –P3 ages 6-10 years are rarely used to support the family livelihood and were sent to school immediately as a way of getting them out of the way. Whereas students from P4 to P6, who are approximately 11 -13 years can be used to supplement family income, the table shows 77% drop out on average for this level, since they make up part of the family labor force. These students miss lessons as and when they are required to do family chores or work in the farms. As pointed out earlier Masaka practices substance farming hence these students are a big part of the workforce tending the gardens with their parents.

The research went on to identify the causes for school dropout as a means of getting to know the challenges the parents/guardians are facing. See table 2 below. It also looked into supporting the communities get the students back into school. There were 6% of the girls recorded as pregnant , 14% of students did not return because they did not have enough money to cater for the school fees, 27% of the students have moved out of the district due to several reasons which range from transfer of workstations of the parents, children going to stay with relatives elsewhere, students changing schools, 6% were out of school because the parents felt they were too big to continue school, the parent preferred they learn vocational skills so students taken for apprentice in hair care, tailoring and motor mechanics. 24% of the students fall out because they were being asked to repeat a class, they could have lost the father who as the “bread winner” in the home, and they are indisciplined and refuse to come back to school, 23% of the students’ whereabouts were said to be unknown by the parents and relatives.

Table 2. Reasons why children have not returned



Indeed, the findings of the survey released by the Twaweza in the presence of the Health Ministry

officials indicate that eight out of ten citizens (79%) say teen pregnancy has become a bigger problem during the Coronavirus pandemic, and half say physical (51%), emotional (51%) and sexual (46%) violence has got worse. All this helps to explain other and unknown causes of school drop out by the students in the table above.

4. Discussion

Egessa et al. in their research pointed out that Uganda is already faced with a high youth unemployment which increased from 12.7% in 2012/13 to 13.3% in 2016/17 and that education, gender, residence, and age are all critical in driving youth unemployment.[3] It is evident that these figures will be higher as a result of the pandemic, as more youth are leaving school and trying to enter the world of work.

From the research done above in the 17 schools, it's evident that in the 7 months of closure of schools, we saw an approximate drop out of 20% students in the sample schools. The longer the students stay out of school the more the dropout will be. This was reiterated by Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, in a speech captured below by CNBC [12].

The disruption to schools caused by the pandemic constitutes a "global education emergency" that threatens to derail the education of at least 24 million students projected to drop out of school as a result. This was confirmed by a snapshot survey by UNICEF which indicated that 1 in 5 children in the schools surveyed did not come back during the phased reopening of schools and are at risk of dropping out completely from school, 52 % of the dropouts being girls [8].

With the schools in Uganda having been closed for over a year for most classes and over a year and half for the early childhood classes and lower primary classes, reports indicate that school dropout will be much higher approximated at 50% or higher. The main barrier causing failure to return to school in the phased opening of schools were in line with these identified in the snapshot survey carried out by Save the Children in Uganda. These included economic, social and cultural barriers like labour to support their families, Marriage, loss of interest in school and lack of the necessary requirements for schooling like fees, uniforms and stationary [8].

Reports indicate that a high number of girls have been identified to have been defiled and had babies, It is even reported that some girls that had babies during the first lockdown have gone on to have a second baby during the second lock down period. According to a UNFPA report on teenage pregnancy in Uganda

during and post COVID-19 lockdown Eastern Uganda (Busoga) had the highest reported cases with Luuka district alone reporting more than 600 cases. In the Buliisa district, teenage pregnancy stands between 25-30% of all adolescent girls [11]. The question here is as to how these young girls are going to be able to provide for themselves and their children, if they do not have the enough or the necessary knowledge and skills to work.

Looking at the different class level as per the dropout rates above, it is clear that at the ages of 10-13 years we have the P4-P6 students dropping out. One can then ask what can be done with the different class levels of students to support them either get back into formal school or gain a skill to understand how to grow into meaningful citizen ready to face the world of work at these tender ages. The introduction of both soft skills for example in handling money, business, negotiations, bargaining, sales and marketing A new range of vocational skills that befit their ages and the moving trends in the locality, country and the world, like IT skills to manage the repair and reprogramming of phones as a trade, mobile money trade to mention some. In his article in The Redpepper daily, Arinaitwe Ruyendo stated that opportunities for the younger generation today are changing. Things kids are doing today in order to secure their prosperity in the future are changing as well. As time passes, what is changing in our world today is more and more related to processes that require creativity and problem-solving skills. Many professions are vanishing quickly from the labour market [7].

Schools can run two different schedules so as to integrate life skills into formal education and adjust the academic content to encompass practical skills. The students that are no longer in school can then attend these after school classes and be supported alongside their peers who can also benefit from these skills. As per the recommendations by UNESCO there is need for competence-based curriculums, which should be around a set of key competences/competencies that can be cross-curricular and/or subject-bound. Schools as mentioned above are so focused on content delivery and hence students never get enough time or support in developing skills to manage life after school. Uganda has introduced the thematic curriculum for primary level and the new O Level curriculum which will have the integration of both academics, soft and vocational skills. These curricula are pointed to changing competence based curricular which are focused on what the learners are expected to do rather than mainly focusing on what they are expected to know. In principle, Competence based curriculum is learner-centered and adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers, and society.

Government through the vocational education stream provides for alternative ways in which students can be supported to easily transition into the world of work, through business and vocational education training, through its 2 examining bodies Uganda examination Board (UNEB) and Directorate of industrial training (DIT), which is the body mandated to develop occupational standards, regulate work based training schemes, apply and expand the Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework, accredit assessment centers, Assess and Award Uganda Vocational Qualification as provided for in the BTVET Act Of 2008.

DIT has important functions of interest to this paper, and these are to:

- Identify the needs of the labour market for occupational competencies that fall under the Uganda Vocational Qualification Framework (UVQF).
- Regulate apprenticeship / traineeship / internship schemes.
- Foster and promote entrepreneurial values and skills as an integral part of the UVQF.
- Secure adequate and sustainable financing for the operation of the directorate.
- Accredit training institutions or companies as UVQF assessment centers.
- Assess and award Uganda Vocational Qualifications.
- Develop, apply, expand and improve the purposeful application of UVQF.
- Promote on the job training in industry for apprenticeship, traineeship and indenture/agreement training and other training such as further skills training schemes.
- Prescribe the procedure for the making training schemes.

UNEB offers certificate courses and expects students to join after achieving at least primary leaving and Uganda certificate of education levels of formal education to access vocational education. However, DIT supports the training of students in work related qualifications in a wide range of career areas this enables students enter vocational education institutions with no certification and be able to attend 3-6 month trainings in basic skills to master a specific trade of their interest. The aspect of apprenticeship/traineeship/internship is critical here however there is limited access to these opportunities, making it harder for the youth to get employed or start a meaningful trade and be successful.

On the other hand, for one to enter vocational training courses for periods of a year or two, students are required to have passed specific subjects and in

particular have a credit in English and Math. These courses should be none academic and generally unconcerned with theory or the traditional academic skill and knowledge. The courses may or may not be delivered in on modularized basis. The courses should be designed to enable learners to acquire knowledge and skills that meet recognized standards necessary to perform a particular job and on mastering this skill they should be able to use it to trade. This will then cater for the different drop out levels of the students. The Vocational education in Uganda has been shun as a career path because of its identification as a path for failures from the formal Education system. The courses offered too are very traditional and, in some cases, not applicable to the students in the rural setting and current globalization. On the other hand, these courses need very expensive equipment for use by the students after training. DIT should open up to trades that are very simple and resonate with the lives of the students/youth today and there should be a mindset change that vocational education is not a sign of failure or a last resort but a choice.

It is evident in Uganda today that most youth are into petty trade which include beautician related trades like painting nails, plaiting hair, road side vending of food trades like making 'Chapatti', 'Rolex and Kikomando', selling roasts, and clothing, the transport industry, in particular "Boda Boda" as bikes for transportation are known, and bike mechanics. Computer, phone and internet technology i.e. mending phones and computers, mobile money transactions and internet banking. These trades may seem petty but have of late been able to engage a large number of youth /school dropouts in Uganda today.

Uganda is an agricultural country and most of the students have access to land. In greater Masaka where the research was done students reported doing their small projects and this entails planting perennial crops like vegetable's like Nakati, Sukumawiki, dodo, carrots, Ntula, and Katunkuma. And fruits like jackfruit, and pineapples. The students are also venturing into rearing of pigs, rabbits and goats for cash. It would only be prudent that these students have access to good agricultural practices to enhance their production and also skills to manage the marketing and sales of their produce. These can all be done through short term courses in under a month or so and in modules.

5. Conclusion

The Ministry of Education in Uganda should first make every effort to support ALL students return to school. This can be done by making changes to the school calendar, curriculum and also fee payments. There is need for a flexible school day/ time and

terms, to accommodate time for students to be able to continue to run their businesses and work for a living alongside receiving formal education.

Formal school should have a component of vocational education right from Primary School, similar to the current new Ordinary level curriculum change which Uganda has just adapted. The Ministry of Education should see to it that the new curriculum is implemented to enable the students in formal education receive skills early in their education.

TVET should emphasize the importance of supporting the short courses for students, to absorb the current large numbers of students who have entered the world of work with no basic skills for any trade. 3-6 month training in a variety of new trades should be identified and centers set up to cater for the rural areas.

DIT as the regulator of quality will be a very important player directing support to the students that have dropped out of school. Due to the lack of enough centers that support vocational education, emphasis should be placed on supporting the growth of apprenticeship/traineeship/internship to support students in areas where access to vocational education is challenging. DIT so far has 506 courses assessed, and over 272 centers with a range of courses from which students can choose from. DIT should open up more centers.

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