

Reflections on the bright and dark sides of free education in sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa have, over the years, acknowledged school education as the driver through which the achievement of their countries' development goals can be accelerated. Indeed, as Amaele (2004) puts it in the Nigerian context, 'education has ranked as the best legacy any conscious leader, government or parent could leave for his/her people ... the quality of education given to a people determines the standard of growth achieved'. Thus, education is seen as key to the development needs of the region.

In this light, many countries in the region have abolished primary school tuition fees as a means of removing financial impediments to a child's access to education. In Malawi, for example, Riddell (2003) reports that the government has since 1994 been responsible for all primary school-related costs in the country. Kenya also introduced a free education policy in 2003 that abolished school fees to reduce parental expenditure on their children's education. Similarly, the United Republic of Tanzania's Primary Education Development Plan eliminated tuition fees and other mandatory cash contributions to schools. In Nigeria, the government has since 1976 placed much attention on the promotion of universal primary education as a tool for 'correcting the age long imbalance in the spatial distribution of educational opportunities and provision in the country', leading to a 'reduction in dropout rate among students' (Aina et al., 2010).

In Ghana, the government is constitutionally obliged to provide free education: Article 26(a) of the 1992 Constitution explicitly states that 'basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all'. Hence, successive governments have, in diverse ways, demonstrated commitment to making basic education free through the institution of a capitation grant, introduction of a school feeding programme, supply of free textbooks and free uniforms, etc.

These provisions notwithstanding, one wonders whether the policy of free education as it is being implemented in sub-Saharan Africa has really been helpful in addressing quality issues in education. In what ways can we boldly say 'fee-free' education is or has been an asset in the delivery of education for all in the region?

The bright side of free education

The bright side of free education connotes the notion of 'asset'. From this perspective, I argue that whether or not free education

is an asset depends on the particular context within which we examine the phenomenon. If our focus is on access, then free education is unquestionably an asset in the region and therefore constitutes the bright side of the phenomenon.

Obviously, abolishing tuition fees removes financial barriers to school attendance and therefore increases both the gross and net enrolment rates in schools. In Malawi, for example, Ripple Africa (2012) reports that after the first year of the introduction of free primary education in the country, primary school enrolment increased from 1.6 million students to over 3 million. Ghana's free education policy has also led to considerable increases in school enrolment. The country's 2012 National Education Sector Annual Review report shows that the nation has hit a commendable record of 99.4 per cent gross enrolment ratio (GER) for kindergarten, 96.5 per cent for primary, and 80.6 per cent for junior high school. In terms of access expansion, therefore, free education has a very bright side.

Owing to the quantitative achievements associated with the phenomenon of free education, promises of further such initiatives continue to dominate the manifestos of political parties in the region as they campaign for power. While some promise the electorate free education from primary up to the secondary level, others promise access to free education up to the tertiary level. The big question though is 'Is free education just a matter of ensuring that children gain access to schools?' And this raises questions about the extent to which free education policies implemented by governments in the region have addressed quality issues. The perspective of quality education evidently provides a less positive aspect to the phenomenon of free education.

The dark side of free education

The dark side of free education in this paper simply connotes devalued quality in education. My position is that, in sub-Saharan Africa, free education tends to imply quality devaluation. It increases enrolment in schools to the detriment of quality and creates a two-tier school system: one for poor parents, whose children are provided with free education at the expense of quality; the other for rich parents, who patronise fee-paying schools with the benefit of quality in education.

In this perspective, I associate myself with Riddell's (2003: 11) argument that although,

Access to education is highly coveted, and can be achieved rapidly by various combinations of policies – building more schools, lowering the costs to parents, supplying instructional materials, etc. ... Quality education is what keeps pupils in those schools to which they've gained access. Unless quality is attended to from the beginning, high enrolment rates will not necessarily lead to an educated population (my emphasis).

This is an argument that should attract the priority attention of ministries of education in the region. Admittedly, there is evidence of policy documents that clearly outline government strategies for addressing quality issues in education. For example, Nigeria's Free Universal Basic Education Act No. 66 (2004) demonstrates the government's commitment to addressing quality education lapses in the country, with the development of literacy, numeracy and communication skills as priorities (UNESCO, 2012). Similarly, Tanzania's Primary Education Development Plan emphasises the government's obligation to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes (Riddell, 2003). In Ghana, the 2012 National Education Sector Review Report makes obvious the country's plans to address quality issues in education through proposed increased investment in teacher development, supply of textbooks and exercise books, etc. On paper, all these policy initiatives are encouraging. Yet, in terms of policy implementation, it appears politicians are more concerned about the quantitative rather than the qualitative benefits of free education. In practice, least attention is given to what happens to the pupil in the classroom. The dark side of free education is often thus taken for granted in the action plans of some governments.

This context, perhaps, explains why sub-Saharan African countries continue to grapple with the challenge of achieving quality in education. Available evidence, for example, suggests that 'millions of children drop out of school early and fail to complete a full cycle, or graduate without basic reading and math competency' (ONE, 2012). In Nigeria, the results of the country's most recent Monitoring of Learning Achievement tests in literacy, numeracy and life skills suggest a generally poor performance (with 25.1, 32.2 and 32.6 per cent scores, respectively), and that pupils exhibit less competence in English language skills (UNESCO, 2012). In the same vein, Ghana's 2011 National Education Assessment results show that only 18.2 per cent of Primary 3 and 16.1 per cent of Primary 6 pupils tested in mathematics obtained the minimum proficiency score of 55 per cent; while just 24.2 per cent of Primary 3 and 35.3 per cent of Primary 6 pupils tested in English obtained the minimum proficiency score of 35 per cent (Ghana Education Service, 2012).

This situation should remind us that achieving quality in education goes beyond mere provision of fee-free education, quantitative expansion in the number of school buildings, changes in the structure of our school system and increases in pupil enrolment. No matter the quantum of investment we make in access expansion, if the educational provision and delivery processes lack quality, then such an investment becomes worthless. Free education should provide opportunities for children to not only be in school but also participate meaningfully in the process of learning at school. What matters most in quality education is what happens to the child in

the classroom, and it is in this context that ministries of education and politicians across the region should re-conceptualise the phenomenon of free education.

Making free education more meaningful in the region

An encounter with one poor parent in my town, Agona Asafo in the central region of Ghana (see Box 1), perhaps sums up where our focus in the provision of free education should be directed. We need to be concerned about why this poverty-stricken parent would prefer taking out a loan to send her child to a private basic school and pay fees rather than patronising a fee-free public school. Obviously, a clear message from this scenario is that free education in sub-Saharan Africa is meaningless unless it is linked to the provision of quality education. What we need therefore is not the consolidation of fee-free education policy that only aims at access expansion and its extension to the secondary school level – as some politicians keep promising in parts of the region – but a free education policy that seeks to bridge the quality gap between endowed and deprived schools.

It is essential that governments in the region move beyond perceiving free education merely from the dimension of access expansion. They should redirect their free education implementation policies towards quality issues by ensuring the provision of support in terms of effective supervision of teaching and learning, well-planned professional development for teachers and head teachers, availability and accessibility of teaching and learning materials, well-equipped libraries and other quality-related provisions, prompt supply of logistics to schools, irrespective of location, and the promotion of a classroom environment that is learner friendly.

In sum, free education can be properly managed to benefit people in sub-Saharan Africa if the focus is on balancing access and quality in its provision, creating equity in access to quality education without geographical discrimination, and ensuring positive outcomes of such educational provision within the context of the socio-economic needs of countries in the region.

Box 1

An encounter with a poor parent

During a visit to my village in 2010, a poor extended family member and a single mother of three approached me for financial assistance. She needed money to pay the school fees of one of her daughters, who was attending a private school in the village. I was surprised that this parent, though very poor, would want to borrow money to support her child's education in a fee-paying private primary school when there were five public fee-free primary schools in the town. When I curiously asked why she would not want her child to attend any of the public primary schools, where she would be relieved from the burden of paying fees, she desperately responded (in our local language, Akan): "Uncle, the children in the public schools don't learn, the teaching there is of low quality."



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