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Educational inequality and quality of life: A comparative study of secondary schools in Central and Northern Uganda

Winfred Naamara[1]*, Sylvia Nabasumba[2] and Christine Nabadda[3]

[1]*Masters of Social Work, Lecturer, Department of Social work and Social Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Uganda Christian University, P.o.Box, 4, Mukono, Uganda*
[2]*Masters in Development Economics, Lecturer, Department of Social work and Social Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Uganda Christian University, P.o. Box, 4, Mukono, Uganda*
[3]*Bachelor of Business Administration & Management, Administrative assistant Postgraduate Programmes, Faculty of Social Sciences, Uganda Christian University, P.o.Box, 4, Mukono, Uganda*

Abstract

Objective: Drawing on a comparative analysis from central and northern regions of Uganda, we identified the factors that are associated with educational inequality and quality of life in secondary schools in both regions.

Methods: Our sample comprised of 358 students and 72 key informants, primary data were mainly collected through interviews and structured questionnaires. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was done by identifying common themes based on the objectives of the study, while quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results: Most of the factors that were identified applied to both regions as the central region has a significant number or people from other parts of the country including the northern region. However, some factors were more prevalent in the northern region. Among the factors that were found to bring about inequality in both regions included gender-based inequality, family economic status and policy related factors.

Conclusion: Overall, the study concluded that the central region is better equipped to offer quality education due to availability of a better infrastructure and staff remuneration, however, efforts are being made to improve the quality of education in the northern region as well.

Keywords: Educational inequality; Gender; Quality of life; Secondary schools, Comparative study

Introduction

Despite the availability of free Universal Secondary Education (USE) in public schools in Uganda, some children of school-going age are not accessing education at all, while some of those who have accessed it have experienced educational inequalities due to a number of factors, and the drop-out rate has been noted to be high in many schools around the country. South African literature discusses a number of different determinants of dropout of school factors such as family structure, financial constraints, and shocks including loss of employment, death and pregnancy among others [1-3]. High levels of inequality and dropout rates being registered in a number of schools around the country, contradicts the UNESCO report, which suggests that there is hope that fewer young women in Uganda will be left lacking skills for work in the future because of having attained primary education [4]. In Uganda, according to the education system, after primary education one is supposed to continue to secondary education as no skills can be attained at this level, thus the introduction of USE. It is after secondary education that one can enroll for a practical course such as carpentry, hairdressing or tailoring depending on ones' interest and ability. The Ugandan education system follows a 7-4, 2-4 patterns: seven years of primary education, followed by four years of lower secondary or "Ordinary" level, two years of upper secondary or "Advanced" level, and four more years of tertiary education for those who can afford [5]. However, due to factors such as financial constraints, or early marriage, many students drop out of school along the way. Poor educational outcomes at the school level are a result of a series of complex and interrelated factors, both within and outside the school system For those students who have attained secondary education, but have experienced inequality in education while at school, getting employment after school has been hard, resulting into a poor quality of life. The socio-economic backgrounds of the students and parents in South Africa, contribute significantly to underperformance leading to inequality [6]. Research has established a base of knowledge about the harmful effects of disadvantageous circumstances on education and health [7]. For most parents, it is their dream to see their children succeed in life by getting suitable employment after years of hard work in school and for that matter, a parent in Uganda may incur a lot of costs including selling valuable commodities such as land in order to see their children go through school. It should be noted that land as a commodity is becoming more and scarce in Uganda as the population increases and cases of land conflicts even among family members are on the rise. Therefore it is disheartening if a student completes school and fails to get employment having incurred a lot of costs. Moreover, families in Uganda tend to have a number of children as the fertility rate stands at 5.8 [8]. Just like in other parts of the world, Europe inclusive, employers, when screening potential candidates for vacant positions, are more interested in their educational qualification and skills and not any other characteristics such as cultural background or social connections [9]. Accordingly, employers are likely to ,evaluate additional 'signals', such as field of study, type of institution or program

***Corresponding author:** Winfred Naamara, Masters of Social Work, Lecturer, Department of Social work and Social Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Uganda Christian University, P.o.Box, 4, Mukono, Uganda, Tel: +256 772957576; E-mail: naamara2012@gmail.com

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level in potential candidates for vacant positions [10-12]. It is for this reason that most families in Uganda, prefer to send their children to privately owned schools which are highly rated in terms of educational standards while, for low income families their children mainly go to government owned schools whose educational standards in most cases do not match the privately owned schools. For the poor families who cannot afford to send their children to school, the option is to stay at home and engage in different activities some of which generate income to supplement on the family expenditure. This has accelerated educational inequalities between the rich and the poor. Research in Uganda indicates that in poor families girls lag behind boys by 20% in enrolment at secondary level and the gap widens further at tertiary and university levels where cost and gender become important factors in determining access to education [13]. Girls have also remained strongly disadvantaged in education, in other parts of the world such as sub-Sahara Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa [14,15]. In the United States, information suggests there is a wide rift between top and bottom and inequality is increasing as a consequence of a growing premium on college and postgraduate education [16]. Accordingly, enrolment, accomplishment, and achievement rates at primary level are higher in the central region than in the northern region of Uganda [17]. A broader approach, could help in better understanding of the ways in which education systems relate to the production of inequality in complex and contradictory ways. Educational research is needed to address these needs to ask questions on the governance, coordination and management of the education sector as well as its content, teaching and outcomes [18].

Methods

Inequality and quality of life after school were identified by interviewing both respondents and key informants. In this study, primary data were mainly collected through interviews and structured questionnaires. The sample consisted of 358 respondents who were current students from different levels in secondary schools in both central and northern region. Key informants included, 15 parents of respondents, 18 former students of the schools where respondents were still students, 26 class teachers and 9 head teachers from the selected schools, 4 district local leaders giving a total of 72 key informants. Ten (10) secondary schools were sampled from Mukono district in central Uganda, and Gulu in northern Uganda, with each district being represented by five (5) secondary schools. Of the schools selected, 40% were private, while 60% were government owned. Purposive sampling was used to select all the study participants, both respondents and key informants. Data were collected by the third author with the assistance of trained research assistants. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was done by identifying common themes based on the objectives of the study, while quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

We begin by presenting the views and responses of all participants from selected schools in both central and northern Uganda regarding educational inequalities and quality of life. Most of the findings are presented in a qualitative form, while others are in a quantitative form as percentages. Demographic characteristics of the current student respondents and the findings helped to explain the differences in the regional educational inequalities and the quality of life. Schools in northern Uganda were found to have more students in class, totaling up to 199 students (56%) as compared to those in central Uganda with 159 (44%). In the study girls were 148 (41%) and boys 210 (59%), and the ratio of boys to girls was relatively higher in all the schools. The average age for students was 17 years, and majority of the students commuted to school while others resided at school. Only 11% of the students had ever attempted to drop out of school, majority of them being from Gulu in northern region. The major reasons for dropping out or attempting to do so included lack of school fees, scholastic materials, looking after siblings and forced marriages, among others. Such factors were also identified to be associated with school drop-out in South Africa [6,19]. With regard to parents' or guardians' level of education, 43% of the students noted that their parents/guardians had attained secondary education. In Italy, people who have attained good education and from better families have an advantage over those who do not have such opportunities and as a result get good employment opportunities and send their children to good schools where they acquire better skills thus minimizing social inequality in a way [9].

Forms of Educational Inequality at Different Levels

Family factors

Over 86% of the respondents and key informants in both central and northern Uganda alluded to the fact that the family economic status is responsible for educational differences in terms of attainment and completion. In this regard, lack of school fees was identified as the key factor responsible for dropout rates in schools. The number of family members who depend on the family head to provide for their necessities was also identified as an impediment to attaining quality educational. Over 82% of the respondents identified this factor by stating that the more the family members, the more family expenditures are divided among many competing demands, leaving less for quality education. This factor was more common in Gulu where families are relatively larger compared to those in Mukono. The education level of the family head was also a key catalyst to educational inequality, and it was noted that the family head made most of the decisions regarding who should go to which school, and the quality of support given to the student in terms of scholastic materials. Research indicates that family factors have an immense significance on educational inequality as one's family background and socio-economic status can be a means to predict educational success or failure of achieving or completing quality education [20,21].

Environmental and cultural factors

Social class inequalities in different schools, was also identified to bring about educational inequality, as stated by 81% of respondents from both regions. One key informant from Gulu, agreed with the respondents, and gave the following response:

Here student leaders are given special privileges, for example any function outside school, is only attended by leaders.

Findings state that chances of children going to school in the Democratic Republic of Congo are heavily influenced by whether they live in a conflict zone, and whether they are rich or poor [22]. Both respondents and key informants (81%) indicated that government support and involvement in school increases its achievement and performance. In Mukono, 73% of the key informants reported to have been supervised by the District Education Officer or any other member from the ministry as compared to only 41% in Gulu who reported to have been supervised by government authorities. Moreover, private schools were more highly monitored and supervised by both ministry staff and communities compared to government schools. Other factors related to educational inequalities included gender, ethnic and social cultural factors, and these were reported to have been experienced by

students in both Mukono and Gulu. Respondents reported gender-based educational inequality to be at 60%, however, key informants denied existence of any form of gender educational discrimination, as one of them stated:

In our school girls are more than boys but equal treatment is provided to all irrespective of their gender.

This contradicts what one respondent in Mukono said:

…girls are discouraged from taking on science subjects like Physics and Mathematics and instead encouraged to do art subjects especially Fine Art, Literature and History.

Overall it was found that gender inequalities are catalyzed by traditional beliefs and socialization at the family level where girls are brought up to do most of the domestic chores in the home which may even affect their time for learning. According to gender role socialization, children acquire the gender stereotypes and norms prevalent within families and educational institutions in the course of developing a gender identity [23]. Parents and educators may have gender biased perceptions of children's abilities and performance, for example that boys have a better grasp on technical questions or mathematics [24]. Such agrees with similar findings, in other countries where 14% of the women (7-16 years old) had never been to school [4]. One key informant gave this response:

In some communities people still consider education to be for boys and not girls. So, if there is not enough money, the boys will go to school first and the girls will sit and wait until when the parents get money or end up getting married, thus contributing to the differences in performance between boys and girls and also increased early marriage for girls.

A study by UNESCO, indicates that in Congo among the poor families in Katanga region, 44% of the girls, had never been to school, compared with 17% of boys in the same region [4]. However, contrary to this, research indicates that gender inequality in western societies has recently started to reverse; in particular, girls are overtaking boys in all stages of the educational career [25].

Educational inequality and quality of life after school

Economic status of a family in both northern and central regions had a–ve Beta of 0.563, implying a unit increase in educational inequality will decrease economic status by 56% thereby reducing the quality of life. Accordingly, inequality in education achievement and earning inequality are correlated, within the United States and across countries [26,27]. Majority of key informants in the study agreed that in both regions, there is a high level of educational inequality in most schools in form of economic status. Students from poor families generally felt that they were not treated the same way as those from rich and moderate families. One respondent from Mukono said that:

I was insulted by a classmate that we are poor and I am always sent back home for school fees and simple things like brooms and toilet papers. I felt so bad and I didn't want to study in the same school with the student who insulted me.

Additionally, over 86% of the respondents said that rich students have better scholastic materials such as textbooks as compared to their counter parts from less privileged families, and as such, perform better at school. Research findings state that students from poor families are likely to perform poorly compared to those from rich families [4,22]. In Europe, parents from upper social classes take advantage of the best educational options to make the transition to the labor market with better rewarded credentials [9,28]. Interviews with key informants from both regions, found out that even when a student misses some days to attend school because he or she has been sent back home due to school fees, such a student may not compete favorably with one who has not missed school at all. A key informant in Gulu said:

Because of income problems, feeding at school are also challenging since the fees is fixed and the prices of food keep fluctuating. Even the Parents' Teachers' Association fund is inadequate and the differences in income levels limit children from low income families from progressing on to upper classes.

The poor afford lowest performing schools and achieve poorest outcome and poverty is strongly associated with low attainment. Therefore, education has not transformed the life of the poor and disadvantaged but has only brought about some modest improvement in some families [29]. On the other hand, in Gulu findings revealed that some parents engage their children in domestic chores such as rearing of domestic animals, which leaves them no time to attend school while, in Mukono, the study found out that children near fishing areas usually drop out of school and opt to engage in fishing so as to as to get quick money. Overall, the dropout rate was found higher in northern Uganda than in central Uganda. According to 68% of the respondents, the quality of education and the type of school attended determine the job one does and thus impact on the quality of life, which implies that there is a positive correlation between the school attended and the job one does. Results from other studies indicate that parents who are financially well off, take their children to good (normally private) schools that offer quality education and as such, give students better chances of finding more employment opportunities [8,20]. Quality of life depends on economic ability, therefore, children of the poor receive inferior education and consequently, are condemned to lesser professions and lower employment status [9,20].

Educational inequality in Gulu was found to be higher compared to Mukono, and this greatly affects the quality of life of the student after school. At primary level, achievement rates and completion rates are lower in the northern region of Uganda as compared to the central region [17]. Key informants indicated that in northern Uganda, not many students take on science subjects which may give them opportunities to compete favorably for highly skilled jobs such as doctors, and engineers which are also related to attainment of a higher quality of life and increased income. Majority of respondents (77%) indicated that the quality of education and the level attained determine the social class of an individual and this can be explained by the fact that some highly rated schools have strong associations that even extend beyond school life thereby increasing social networks and thus improvement in social capital [8]. In Italy, similar findings cite the importance of social-networks in providing a wide range of opportunities for finding employment [9]. A key informant from Gulu reported:

If someone went to a poor school, they are likely to continue associating with a class of poor people and even the social network will be of people from a poor class compared to those from highly rated schools with no inequalities and a wider net-work.

Educational inequality was further found to have an impact on the self-esteem of students who experienced it as revealed by a key informant from Mukono:

In case of young girls, they are easily deceived by men and they have no choice but to accept and the cycle will continue. This is mostly common in village schools where the girls do not have assertive skills.

According to the study findings, more schools in Mukono as compared to those from Gulu had well established old students associations which help students from their former schools extend their interactions and networks beyond different places resulting into higher social capital. This has not only benefited the members through connecting them to employment opportunities, but also helped in pooling of funds that have helped them engaged in small-scale businesses for improved standards of living. Old students associations in Gulu are still small and some schools did not have such associations, thus it was somehow difficult to truck former students of those schools. The findings are in agreement with earlier studies which indicate that the education system reproduces the class system [30].

School based factors

Contributing significantly to student performance are, preschool education, and the availability of reading textbooks among others [31]. In the current study, both respondents and key informants stated that a number of school based factors such as a good infrastructure in form of laboratories, improved and well stocked libraries tend to motivate and enable students to read more and comprehend what has been taught in class better than their counterparts who lack such facilities. In South Africa, indicators of quality of education and organizational capacity available to perform effective change management functions have been identified [32]. Schools are classified into high-functioning, low-functioning, and non-functioning institutions, and research concludes that schools that are either low or non-functioning, have a low performance of the learners. Furthermore, in South Africa, where the infrastructure and other facilities are lacking, educational inequalities are likely to increase [32]. In relation to this factor, facilities such as laboratories, libraries and washrooms, among others, were found responsible for educational inequalities in Gulu despite having good classroom and administration blocks. The study further revealed that in the exams of (2014), 15% of the students who sat for Ordinary Level exams (O-Level) got U-Grade compared to only 6% in Mukono. While on the other hand, findings also indicated that at Senior Six, (A-Level) about 3% of those who sat in (2014) in Gulu got no principal pass compared to only 1% in Mukono, giving a mean of 11 and 5 in relation to performance for Gulu and Mukono, respectively. One key informant also observed that availability of teachers improves student performance as well and as such, teachers need to reside near the school premises such that students find it easier to consult whenever necessary.

He gave this response:

In our school, only five teachers stay within the school and the majority rent outside. This limits the time available for students to consult with their teachers since most teachers disappear immediately after teaching. A student who consults a teacher outside classroom time tend to comprehend better what they have been taught in class.

Schools that lack facilities such as reading materials produce students with poor reading habits and culture and this affects their quality of education [29]. About 86% of the study respondents also affirmed that the differences in class sizes are also responsible for the educational inequalities in secondary schools. According to findings from the study, schools with inadequate numbers of teachers perform poorly compared to those that have adequate numbers. This leads to incomplete syllabus coverage as one teacher in Gulu noted:

You cannot expect a student who has not finished the syllabus to compete favourably with one who has covered the whole syllabus and even has done some revision with the guidance of the teachers.

Another school based factor identified regarding educational inequality was motivation and payment of the teaching and non-teaching staff. Much as it is expected that teachers in, government owned schools are to be paid uniform salaries, the study found big deviations in this. Teachers in Gulu based government schools were found to earn less than their counterparts in Mukono. It was also revealed that government has contributed to these differences in teacher remuneration by paying science teachers relatively higher than arts teachers. Key informants also stated that many people believe that science subjects are better taught in the central region due to better infrastructure and facilities, and as such, some parents from the northern region who can afford, prefer to take their children to study in the central thus leading to differences in performances between northern and central Uganda. Individual school administration policies and management of the school, was also related to educational inequality as stated by a key informant:

If the school is not properly managed, it leads to some form of educational inequalities and more specifically if the founders of the school or directors lack knowledge on proper management of an educational institution.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed at comparing inequality in secondary schools in the central and northern regions of Uganda which were represented by Mukono and Gulu respectively. Findings revealed that schools in northern Uganda have more students as compared to those in the central region. This could be due to the factor that there are fewer schools in the northern region spread over a distance as compared to the central region where due to a better infrastructure schools are much closer to each other, so the few schools in the northern region have to accommodate larger population of students and the bigger the class size, the bigger the teacher-student ratio which limits participation of students, especially the academically weak ones. As the study revealed that schools that are nearer to the central government structures such as those in the central region are highly supported by the government, and this opportunity gives them a chance to identify bottlenecks in school management and performance, thus prompting practical and immediate actions than those schools that are far and hardly monitored thus improving the quality of education in those schools nearer to the central government. Family economic status as a factor associated with education inequality featured in both regions. Generally, Uganda is a low income country and the standard of living of most families is still low. In the central region, the standard of living is high and this has been made worse by increasing urbanization, high population growth, and increased food insecurity. In the northern region, the situation is no different for urban based families, and for rural based families, unstable incomes from agriculture and the prolonged rebel war that disrupted family life in that part of the country for many years left many families in poverty. Moreover the type of families in northern region is still dominated by the extended family structure which is much bigger compared to those in the central which are dominated by a nuclear family. The government policy of promoting science based subjects has also favored urban based schools especially those in the central region thus increasing inequality in upcountry areas which may not have certain privileges. Even those schools in the northern region that attempt to offer science subjects, still fall short of the required standards by the regulating bodies both local and international. Regarding gender based educational inequality, the study found out that the boy-child is given more priority when it comes to education opportunities and although this was more prevalent in the north, it is believed that as the

central region is composed of residents from different parts of Uganda some families living in the central region who still cherish their cultural norms, such as investing in the boy-child to carry on the family name and legacy and care for their parents when they age. Some parents also state that it may not be productive to educate a girl who will grow up and get married and leave the home. This therefore justifies the reason for some form of gender-based educational inequality in the central region, contributed to increased school drop-out rates, as well as early marriage for the girl-child. Moreover, Parents are also known in some cases to decide for their children the subject combinations to be studied especially at advanced level (A Level), a practice that has widened educational inequalities related to gender, and has also made children to opt for subject combinations especially sciences that are not their choices, leading to biases and thus poor educational performance. Although the government has put in place a system known as the quota system whereby students who perform very well from every district in the country, and currently Uganda has more than 101 districts, is supposed to receive free university education, students from the central region-based schools and more so boys still dominate admission to public universities because of better performance in science subjects which are highly promoted by the government. This gives boys an advantage over girls thus creating some form of gender-based inequality. In both central and northern region, there is some form of child labor, however, it is more prevalent in the northern region and this could be due to the fact that many children lost their parents during prolonged rebel war and the HIV pandemic living many children as orphans who have to fend for themselves and pay for their education. Teachers from the central region are believed to be more equipped to teach students and more up to date with information as a result of a better environment where they easily access information through different sources such as the internet, a privilege which may not apply to teachers in the northern region but also better remunerated which motivates them to work harder leading to better student performance. This factor is not only common in secondary schools, but even in tertiary institutions including universities especially public universities where sit down strikes due to poor payment are a common occurrence. Well motivated staff tend to concentrate on their work as compared to poorly motived ones who may even go out during school hours to do part-time jobs so as to 'make ends meet'. On-sport checking in many government owned schools has caught teachers unaware doing other activities such as farming and other income generating activities during school hours, and such teachers have been expelled from teaching. Moreover, in the short run, educational inequality in the northern region is likely to continue for some time as the situation of recent has been worsen by the influx of refugees fleeing the war in South Sudan. Over one million refugees have entered the country since the beginning of this year 2017 and the number keeps on growing as time goes by. Uganda being a hospitable country, but also with weak policies in most sectors including education has become a fertile ground for some of the refugees to share the country's meager resources including education and health care, thus increasing educational inequality. It has been reported that refugees are attending same schools with students from the host country and the teachers in these schools are reported to be overwhelmed by the numbers of students. Educational inequalities have a negative impact on people's quality of life after school which also affects productivity and development of the country as majority of these people are in the productive age group and expected to contribute to the economy of the country.

In conclusion, the study found both the central and northern regions of Uganda to have a number of similar factors that bring about educational inequality in schools, although most of them are more prominent in the northern region. While previous studies consistently indicated a wider discrepancy in school performance, this study revealed that a number of factors leading to educational inequality in both regions are similar as a result of urbanization which is widely spreading in many parts of the country although they are more prevalent in the northern region. The factors in the northern region could be attributed to the prolonged rebel war which affected that part of the country for a long time and destroyed the infrastructure. However, efforts are being made to improve the quality of education in other parts of the country and this is seen in a way that both government and privately owned universities have been opened in other parts of the country and the infrastructure such as roads and communication networks are being worked on. Meanwhile, if the political situation in the neighboring countries such as South Sudan improve, and some of the government weak policies are addressed, it is hoped that with time, educational inequality across Uganda and more so in the northern region will cease to be, leading to higher school performance and improved quality of life.

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