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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY THROUGH EARLY LITERACY SUPPORT AND TEACHER EMPOWERMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Abstract

The majority of people in Southern and Eastern Africa (SEA) including Zimbabwe, Kenya and Uganda live in rural areas on less than two dollars a day. The countries however share education values based on the conviction that education will transform society and as a result have embraced the Millennium Development (MDG) and Education for All (EFA) Goals as benchmarks for their educational reform agenda. SEA countries are largely faced with a situation where families are saddled by and cannot break from the cycle of poverty partly because of lack of children's sustainable school access. Sustained access to meaningful learning is critical to long term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women and reduction of poverty. This paper argues that this will depend very much on constructive early years teacher pedagogical practices among other factors. An expanded definition of education access includes concerns for attendance as well as enrolment, progression at the appropriate age, achievement of learning goals, equitable access to opportunities to learn and availability of an adequate learning environment. This paper uses the UNESCO Millennium Development Goals as its framework to advocate early years teachers' further in-school training and development. It utilizes a descriptive analytical methodology to contribute to the reflective discussion on educational reforms for transformation based mainly on examples from three countries in SEA given above. It mainly focuses on the role that teachers can play in enhancing sustainable access to Early Literacy through adequate training. The paper utilizes findings from studies in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Uganda as the backdrop of the challenges facing the education systems. The paper concludes that every effort is required to promote early years pedagogies that will lead to more sustainable school access and the escape from the poverty cycle in Southern and Eastern Africa.

Using education and human capital as drivers of transformation and development

According to UNESCO (2010), Sub Saharan Africa currently has all the most negative statistics ranging from poverty, school dropout rates, gender inequalities in school, incidence of HIV and AIDS and some of the most undemocratic governments of the world. Currently however, many SEA countries are implementing several initiatives to transform the social and economic conditions of their populations. Education is one of the key drivers of socio-economic reform and this paper focuses on the early school years sector (Grades one to four) herein referred to as early years to discuss how the situation of perennial failure to meet educational targets can be salvaged. The paper advocates for quality early years literacy development for the sustainable schooling of children from low-resourced

communities. Quality early literacy development is central to sustainable schooling and long term educational outcomes that will enable families to break the cycle of poverty (World Declaration on Education for All, 1990; World Education Forum, 2000). The focus is on education because it empowers people and strengthens nations as it is, to a great extent, a powerful "equalizer", opening doors to all to lift themselves out of poverty. Education is critical to the world's attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, http://www.developmentgoals.org/) and most SEA countries share the Vision to get their economies into the middle income status by 2025. Education has proven benefits for personal health, as much as it strengthens nations' economic health by laying the foundation for sustained economic growth. For individuals and nations, it is key to creating, applying, and spreading knowledge and thus to the development of dynamic, globally competitive economies (The World Bank Report, 2011, http://go.worldbank.org/F5K8Y429G0). At a political and governance level, education is fundamental for the construction of democratic societies. Two of the eight MDGs pertain to education—the universal primary completion and the gender parity in primary and secondary schooling. Moreover, education—especially girls' education—has a direct and proven impact on the goals related to child and reproductive health and environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 2010). Education additionally promotes economic growth, national productivity and innovation, values of democracy and social cohesion. Without the knowledge and various skills developed through schooling and other basic education programmes, the opportunities for individuals and the ability to act independently are greatly reduced (UNESCO, 2010).

SEA countries need to remain alert and take cognisance of the fact that access to schooling has continued to improve in low-income countries over recent years, even so especially for girls, but still widespread problems with school quality remain. Acute teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, lack of materials, and inadequate contact time are endemic (UNESCO, 2008). Ironically, the very gains in school access have exacerbated the quality issue. The influx of children following successful enrolment drives has in many SEA countries put added pressure on already under-resourced schools. The impoverished background of many new learners explains why, just providing more school inputs, can fail to show any effect (Banerjee, Cole, Duflo & Linden, 2006). Further, significant barriers to the achievement of basic competence is created by high rates of malnutrition and ill health; low rates of parental literacy and an absence of pre-school education in combination with poorly trained teachers and under-resourced schools. This paper reiterates that early literacy teachers require special in-school training since currently Literacy is the most neglected of the EFA goals as most children in low achieving countries are unable to comprehend grade-level texts. UWEZO East Africa 2012 Report highlights:

> Two out of three pupils in Standard 3 across East Africa are not able to pass basic tests in English, Kiswahili or numeracy at the Standard 2 level. This is the headline finding of a new report by Uwezo at Twaweza. By the time they reach Standard 7, two in 10 pupils still do not have Standard 2 level competencies.

According to the Regional Manager of Uwezo East Africa, "Despite significant gains in expanding access to primary schooling, actual literacy and numeracy outcomes remain significantly deficient across the region". (p. 1). The EFA Global

Monitoring Report (2008) points out that these challenges are widely recognized to be greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, where both access and quality remain critical problems. The region has the highest proportion of out-of-school children, the greatest gender disparities, the highest ratio of pupils to teachers and the lowest primary completion rates. Less universally recognized is the widespread disregard, worldwide, for the earliest years of schooling (Colette, 2008). Focus on the role of early years teachers training is pertinent and overdue because an expanded definition of education access includes concerns for attendance as well as enrolment, progression at the appropriate age, achievement of learning goals, equitable access to opportunities to learn and availability of an adequate learning environment (Fataar, 2011, p. 64) which teachers are in the best position to leverage.

Teacher empowerment for children's sustainable access to schooling

Given the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics in the SEA countries, early literacy teacher development is one educational node that can be exploited to influence change. While recognizing the efficacy of parental involvement in children's literacy development, (see Ngwaru, 2012), this paper deliberately focuses on early literacy teachers because they receive, teach and 'parent' pupils from all backgrounds and home environments. Teacher practices in low-resourced and socio-economically disadvantaged communities need to be honed for effective early literacy development because well trained early years teachers will train children to learn effectively in turn. Teacher and pupil empowerment requires deconstruction and reflection.

This paper uses Donald Schon's (1983) view of reflection described by Usher et. al. (1997, p. 143) as an alternative epistemology of practice 'in which the knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing'. This is opposed to technical-rationality, a positivist epistemology of practice described as the dominant paradigm which has failed to resolve the dilemma of rigour versus relevance that confronts professionals (op.cit.). Based on this view of reflection, teachers will be trained to take cognizance of and apply transformative reflective pedagogy and avoid being constrained by age-old practices based on coercive relations of power (Ball, 2000; Cummins, 1997; Apple & King, 1983; Shor, 1992) and will be encouraged to consider themselves as connoisseurs and critics of pedagogy (Eisner, 1985; 1998). In this view Early years teachers will then use Schon's (ibid) notion of reflection-in-action, sometimes described as 'thinking on our feet' (Smith, 2012) which would involve looking at their experiences and practices, connecting with their feelings, and attending to the theories in use at the same time. This way, their training will enable them to build new understandings to inform their actions in the situation that will keep unfolding.

Deconstruction on the other hand is the de-centring of a fixed truth so as to make room for alternate realities and experiences (Giblin, 2006). It involves taking something that is seemingly static and rigid (like a word we use all the time, or a way of doing things that people take for granted) and giving it your own voice and perspective in order to make it your own via your life experiences (ibid). Teachers and students must therefore be empowered to shift educational experiences from the consumer perspective to the producer or inquisitor, in the process, giving all parties more authority, freedom and flexibility. Empowered early years teachers will ensure

that as children grow older, they learn to manage their emotions—to shake off feelings of anxiety, sadness, or frustration, and to delay gratification in order to achieve a goal (Goleman, 1994).

Teachers will be encouraged to remember that based on current research, literacy development begins long before children begin formal instruction in elementary school (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Clay, 1991; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). It develops on a path where children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages. Teachers need to be aware that early behaviours such as "reading" from pictures and "writing" scribbles (Sulzby, 1989; Sulzby & Teale, 1996, p. 728; Morrow, 1997) are an important part of children's literacy development. They need to know and ensure that social interactions and consistent exposure to literacy materials such as storybooks nourish literacy development. Above all, they need to remember that when they receive children from home, they have to make children feel that the school is an extension of home by offering daily, extended conversations about topics that are meaningful and of interest to children. It is essential that they value children's social and cultural experiences since they are among the adults who have a lasting influence on children's literacy development.

Early years literacy teachers are therefore expected to create pedagogical and literacy rich environments that ensure that children engage in one-on-one conversations about everyday life – activities, people, or events children find interesting. Such environments will include daily reading, extended discourse (talking or writing), experimentation with reading materials, book talk (discussion of characters, action, and plot), and dramatic play. In this environment, children have many opportunities to see how printed words are used for many purposes (Burns, Griffin & Snow, 1999). They become familiar with print and language, and these are both integrated into everyday activities. Teachers must strive to create Literacy-rich environments at school and home to ensure that:

- ❖ Parents get involved in their children's literacy development at home and school.
- ❖ Various reading and writing materials are available throughout the school and home for children and adults.
- ❖ Adults share their ideas and feelings with children and encourage them to express themselves.
- ❖ Children see adults reading for pleasure and for practical and specific purposes, such as paying bills or learning about the news.
- ❖ Families consider children's emergent reading and writing to be real, valuable experiences. They accept children's efforts without correcting mistakes or providing direct instruction.
- ❖ Families talk with children about the print they see around them and explain how it provides information (e.g., signs on buses and streets, labels on food packages, and coupons).
- ❖ Teachers provide the experience of group learning and design their classrooms to encourage reading and writing.

How feasible this is in the socio-economic environments of Sub-Saharan Africa will depend on policy alignment to the educational needs of the countries concerned. For example, Ngwaru (2010), recounts the tenuous relations between parents and school teachers in a study on Literacy practices at home and school (p. 144-5):

… parents perceived that they had no role to play in the formal schooling of their children, believing and convinced that this was the sole responsibility of the school. Similarly, teachers saw parents as having no part to play in the school believing it was adequate to meet only the Parent Teacher Association.

The East Africa Quality Early Learning (EAQEL) study in Kenya and Uganda (Ngwaru & Njoroge, 2011) had similar findings when teachers confessed to having had no clear awareness of the importance of paying attention to details of their pedagogical practice. The EAQEL study was based on a pedagogical intervention that trained teachers to prioritize key pedagogical practices in early literacy classes including critical pedagogy, good preparation for classes, provision of adequate suitable learning materials, creating conducive learning environments, and taking interest in learners, among other things. It was found that when teachers embraced these, pupil participation and learning outcomes improved significantly (Ngwaru & Njoroge, 2011, p. 28). The EAQEL study demonstrated that when teachers are given in-school training and embrace improved pedagogies, children were by far more relaxed and engaged with higher outputs as recounted by one project officer:

The EAQEL Project has registered successes and achievements in the various outcome areas. On the first outcome (improved teacher practice): most teachers now go to class more prepared than before the inception of the Project; most teachers now have schemes of work and lesson plans. The use of the 5 RtL (Reading to Learn) steps in teaching literacy has resulted in greater mastery of reading by pupils in lower primary levels. Class 1 pupils can re-tell a story told to them. They can also read texts with their teachers, identify words outside texts and write words and sentences in the texts.

Cues from EAQEL illustrated that if teachers invested in making pupils feel valued, the young learners will genuinely enjoy the learning process and excel as further evidence came from a report from a Maths class observation.

The Maths lessons went on like a workshop with pupils routinely turning to the abundant learning materials in the form of counters in sticks, pebbles and plastic spoons as they solved the problems practically. There was evidence of understandable enthusiasm, genuine learning practices and constructive engagement of teacher-learner, learner-content, learner-learner and learner-learning materials.

In separate classroom observations in Zimbabwe (Ngwaru, 2010) and in Ghana (Ngwaru & Opoku-Amankwa, 2010) pupils were often found to be subdued and stranded especially in English as a Second language (ESL) classes. These pupils revealed how teachers alienated them through selective attention, derogatory remarks and apparent disregard to professionalism (Ngwaru & Opoku-Amankwa, 2010, p. 295).

Conclusion

While Sub Saharan Africa currently has all the most negative statistics ranging from poverty, school dropout rates, gender inequalities in school, incidence of HIV and AIDS and some of the most undemocratic governments of the world, something can still be done. All these are not likely to go away soon but working towards their

reduction and complete reversal can begin now with early literacy development and pedagogical innovations. Children are not only the future of the world, but educated children are indeed the guarantors of a future that can ensure that the sub-region will compare to other regions of the world. A child's ability to learn and to function as a contributing member of society rests heavily on the development of social competency and emotional health that begins at birth and is greatly influenced during the early school years. While governments may see in-school teacher development programmes as difficult and costly, the benefits will far outweigh the costs. This paper calls upon governments to value the future of children and families genuinely to ensure a sustainable future for the countries of the region.

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