

The Incidence of School Dropout in Bungoma County, Kenya: Factoring the Language of Instruction

by

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate the role of language of instruction in the school dropout phenomenon at Siuna in Bungoma County in Kenya. Hence, it was discovered that English as the language of instruction did not appear to be a significant factor in school dropouts in the study location, and that the majority of the participants and their dropout siblings consisting of youth and young adults in the Siuna area dropped out of school for economic reasons, because their parents were not able to raise money for school fees and or for the purchase of school uniform. Thus, the study argues that English as the language of instruction does not facilitate the acquisition of meaningful literacy, the use of English for instruction in schools conveys a wrong message to students – namely that their African languages are deficient, underdeveloped and not of worth suggesting that education is only possible in English. And specifically, the use of English for instruction and as the official language of Kenya should be criticized and overall in Africa, English as the language of instruction and lingua franca does not give students a chance to grow and develop their competence in their mother tongues.

Key words: language, school, dropouts, instruction, policy, education, English, Kenya, Africa

Introduction

This paper presents and discusses findings of research about the possible role of language of instruction in school dropout incidence. The research was conducted at Siuna, Bungoma County in Kenya between June and August 2016.

The motivation for conducting this research was the scarcity of research data that support the claim that the use of foreign languages (e.g. English) for instruction in schools is implicated in learning difficulties, and the eventual dropping out of school by students in Africa.

It has been observed that this problem and related language problems in African schools and in society generally have their origin in the language policies that were adopted by governments of independent African countries (Adegbija (1994), Alexander (2000), Bamgbose (2000), Muthwii & Kioko (2003), Owino (2002), Parry (2000) and Prah (1998).

The problem of low literacy levels in African countries is also attributed to poor language policies. For most African countries, literacy is acquired at school. Muthwii (2004) observes that levels of illiteracy in Kenya are quite high. According to her, the high levels of illiteracy in Kenya have persisted because of the ineffective language policies that are enforced in schools. The policies make it almost a certainty that many students graduate from schools in Kenya without attaining meaningful literacy levels. While it true that there are significant problems with language policies in Kenya, it is not clear that the problem of illiteracy is entirely a function of these policies as claimed by Muthwii (2004).

Muthwii (2004) did provide data to support her argument that language of instruction in school is a factor in ineffective acquisition of literacy, but she does not link ineffective acquisition of literacy to dropping out school by students.

To the best of my knowledge, scholars have not provided sufficient data to support the claim that language of instruction is a factor in the school dropout problem. This study set out to help fill this data gap. Although the role language of instruction in the acquisition of literacy is important in its own right, it is not addressed in this research. The present research focused primarily on the why of dropping out of school by students. I was mainly interested in figuring out the role, if any, of language of instruction in dropping out of school. As will be shown later in this paper, language of instruction has a very minimal, and therefore insignificant role in the school dropout problem.

Previous Work on School Dropouts in Africa

Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham (2015) have provided a detailed discussion of out-of-school youth in Africa south of the Sahara. A disturbing finding of their work is that approximately half the youth population in Africa south of the Sahara is out of school... (p.26). However, there is variation in the magnitude of the problem of out-of-school youth from country to country. Franco-phone countries (e.g. Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire) have the highest incidence of out-of-school youth. The incidence is lower in Anglo-phone countries. There is also variation between countries regarding out-of-school youth who have never attended school and those who have. Franco-phone countries tend to have a larger percentage out-of-school youth that have never attended school than Anglo-phone countries (Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham 2015).

This observation notwithstanding, the number out-of-school youth (who drop-out of school) in Anglo-phone countries such as Kenya is quite substantial. In Kenya about 30% of youth drop out of school (Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham 2015). This figure is consistent with to the 2014 *Daily Nation* statistics: only 880,486 pupils sat for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations in 2014 out of 1,312,206 pupils who enrolled in Standard 1 in 2007 (*Daily Nation*, 2014).

This school dropout problem in Kenya has attracted the concern of educators, policy makers, and scholars among others. In this regard, there have been attempts to understand factors responsible for the problem. In a (2004) report on education in Kenya, the World Bank discussed school dropout incidence among other educational issues. This report quotes the 1998 Primary School Census (MoEST 1998) which listed the following as reasons why students dropped out of primary school: (i) lack of interest in school (19% of dropout cases), (ii) poverty (13% of the cases), (iii) marriage and pregnancy – for girls (13.5% of the cases). These causes are consistent with the World Bank's (2004) own findings.

Similar, Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham (2015) list poverty, marriage and pregnancy and disinterest as reasons for dropping out of school. But they also identify the following additional reasons: (i) parental educational achievement (i.e. level of education of parents), (ii) lack schools nearby schools (i.e. greater distances to available schools), (iii) lack of academic or remedial support for poorly performing students, and (iv) repetition (i.e. grade retention or detention).

Two questions that arose for my research are: (i) Do students at Siuna drop out of school for these same reasons? (ii), Does language instruction have a role in the school dropout incidence at Siuna?

Research Description and Methodology

This study set out to investigate the role of language of instruction in the school dropout problem at Siuna in Bungoma County in Kenya. This is an agricultural rural area and is served by Siuna Primary School, Chebukwabi Primary School, and Chebukwabi Secondary School. Other schools that are a bit far (but within reasonable walking distance), include Nasianda SA Primary School, Kibingei RC Primary School, Kimilili FYM Primary School, Kuywa Primary School, Kimalewa Primary School, Kuywa Girls Secondary School, Kimalewa Secondary School, and Kimilili Girls Secondary School.

The Siuna area is linguistically homogenous. People residing in the area speak Lubukusu natively, but in addition, they also speak Kiswahili (the national language) when necessary.

The subjects of the study were youth and young adults in the Siuna area who had dropped out of school. I defined a school dropout as someone who did not complete the secondary cycle of education in Kenya (i.e. someone who did not complete Form 4 and/or did not sit for the secondary school national standardized examination, the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE)).

Since the exact number of school dropouts in this rural village is not known, it was not possible to do any meaningful sampling. For this reason, I accepted in the study any person who dropped out school and was willing to participate in the study. I interviewed the identified willing participants about their backgrounds, school experience and reason(s) why they dropped out school. I conducted the interviews using a questionnaire that I filled out as I interviewed them. In total, I interviewed 24 subjects who also offered information about their siblings who dropped out of school. The total number of dropout siblings whose information the subjects shared with me was 107.

Research Findings

The following table (table 1) presents relevant information about participants: the grade at which they dropped out, parent education (highest level of education attained by parents), number of siblings that the participants have, number of siblings who completed Form 4, number of siblings who dropped out in primary school and secondary school.

Table 1: Educational achievement of participants, their parents and their siblings

Subject # and Gender	Drop-out grade	Parent Education		# of siblings	Siblings who finished Form 4	Siblings who dropped out in Primary	Siblings who dropped- out in Sec. Sch	Siblings still in sch or never started	Total drop-out siblings	
		Father	Mother							
#	G									
1	M	Std.7	F3	No info	7	1	5	1	0	6
2	M	Std.7	F4	No info	5	1	2	0	2	2
3	M	Std.7	No Sch	No Sch	8	5	2	1	0	3
4	F	Std.8	Std.7	Std.7	11	2	8	1	0	9
5	M	Std.7	Std.8	F4	2	0	2	0	0	2
6	M	Std.8	No info	F4	4	2	2	0	0	2
7	M	Std.7	F2	Std.8	8	0	8	0	0	8
8	M	F3	College	F2	15	11	0	2	2	2
9	M	Std.8	F4	F2	5	5	0	0	0	0
10	M	Std.8	College	Std.7	19	7	8	4	0	12
11	M	Std.5	No Sch	No Sch	1	0	1	0	0	1
12	M	Std.6	No Sch	Std.7	5	0	5	0	0	5
13	M	Std.7	F4	No info	4	4	0	0	0	0
14	M	Std.8	Std.8	No Sch	5	1	2	1	1	3
15	M	Std.4	Std.2	No info	12	0	12	0	0	12
16	M	Std.6	F2	Std.8	8	0	8	0	0	8
17	M	F1	Std.7	F2	12	0	9	3	0	12
18	M	F1	Std.4	Std.6	7	4	2	1	0	3
19	F	Std.8	Std.8	No Sch	9	2	3	2	2	5
20	M	Std.5	No info	Std.5	6	0	6	0	0	6
21	F	Std.7	Std.8	Std.7	3	0	2	0	1	2
22	M	Std.6	F4	No info	11	3	2	0	6	2
23	F	F3	F4	No info	5	1	0	0	4	0
24	F	Std.8	Std.7	No info	8	3	2	0	3	2
					180	52	91	16	107	21

As shown in the table, the 24 participants had a total of 180 siblings. Of these 180 siblings, 52 (28.9%) completed Form 4, 21 (11.7%) are still in school and 107 (59.4%) dropped out of primary and secondary school. Thus the total number of school dropouts in the study was 131 (24 participants and their 107 dropout siblings). Notice that most students drop out in primary school. As shown in the table, 20 participants out of 24 (83.3%) dropped out in primary school. Only 4 participants out of 24 (16.7%) dropped out in secondary school.

Similarly, more siblings of the participants dropped out in primary school than in secondary school. Thus, of the 107 dropout siblings, 91 (85.1%) dropped out in primary school, and only 16 (14.9%) dropped out in secondary school. These findings are consistent with Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham (2015) who also found that most dropout cases happen in primary school in Africa south of the Sahara countries.

Notice also that there seems to be a correlation between education achievement of children and the level of education of their parents. Thus heads of households (who in the Siuna area are fathers) with a college education and those who completed Form 4 are more likely to have children who completed F4. Fathers who had no child complete F4 dropped out of primary school themselves or did not complete F4. However, this does not mean that there are no fathers with a primary education whose children completed Form 4. There definitely are such fathers. A good example is participant #3's parents who did not attend any school, but had 5 children who completed F4.

Why Participants in the Study and Their Siblings Dropped Out of School

The participants identified various reasons why they and their siblings dropped out of school. The reasons they gave include lack of fees, misuse of money by the head of the household on 'luxuries', need to quit school to help parents improve farm productivity, unwillingness of parents to educate girls, illness, pregnancy, lack of interest in school, and need to pursue vocational training. But by far, the most common reason identified was lack of fees. The following is the complete list of reasons given by the participants. The numbers and percentages indicate participants and their siblings for whom the reason applies. As pointed out earlier, the total number of participants and their dropout siblings was 131.

- (i) Lack of fees: 17 participants and 89 siblings (80.9%)
- (ii) Misuse of money by head of family on 'luxuries': 0 participants and 8 siblings (6.1%)
- (iii) Need to quit schools to help parents use their farm better: 1 participant and 0 siblings (0.8%)
- (iv) Unwillingness of parents to educate girls: 1 participant and 1 sibling (1.5%)
- (v) Illness: 1 participant and 1 sibling (1.5%)
- (vi) Pregnancy: 2 participants and 3 siblings (3.8%)
- (vii) Lack of interest in school: 1 participant and 4 siblings (3.8%)
- (viii) Need to pursue vocational training: 1 participant and 1 sibling (1.5%)

Lack of fees (reason (i)) is clearly a reflection of poverty. The fact that families of the 17 participants and 89 siblings were unable to buy school uniforms and/pay fees levied by primary schools just shows how so much the families were mired in poverty. Even before the Free Primary School Education Program was introduced in Kenya in 2003, fees levied by primary schools were modest.

According to the 2004 World Bank report, the average annual cost of sending a child to primary school was 1,200 Kenya shillings (12 USD). The average annual cost of secondary school was higher. On average it cost about 10,000 Kenya shillings (100 USD) to send a child to secondary school.

Given the bad economic fortunes of families of the research participants, some parents required their children buy their own school uniforms. To do this, children were expected to work on other people's farms to earn money. One participant (participant #7) described how so difficult it was for him to find time to work in order to buy his school uniform. Working meant he either cut school or didn't concentrate on school work. His family was also perpetually late at paying building and activity fees for him. For this reason, he was often not allowed in school, and when he reported to school, he was sent away –a common method used by schools to force parents to pay up. The consequence of this was disastrous to his academic performance, he was held back in each of the grades that he attended, sometimes for as many as 3 times per grade.

Reason two and three are closely related to reason one (and hence poverty). The parents of one participant claimed wasted money on luxuries were not poor. They had money, but the father chose to spend it on women (who were not married to him). The end result was an inability to pay fees for some of his own children, a result that is similar to what poverty does. Reason three –dropping out of school to help parents run the farm better is a consequence of poverty. The participant who gave this as his reason for dropping out school explained that his parents were not getting the best economic results out of their farm. They were underutilizing it, and they were leasing most of it out to other people regularly. The result of such poor usage of the farm was the unending vicious cycle of poverty, which the participant thought was a threat to the well-being of the family. By dropping out, the participant thought he would turn around the economic fortunes of his family thereby ensuring that none of his younger siblings drop out of school on account of lack of school fees.

An interesting but unfortunate reality that I found was the tendency of some parents to discriminate against some of their children. Such parents used gender and wife preference in polygamous families as the basis of discrimination. On the basis of gender, they chose not to pay fees for the education of their daughters. Fortunately, such parents are in the minority. As indicated above, only 1.5% dropout cases happened for this reason. However, it is possible that this form of discrimination is far much common in the Siuna area (and many other rural areas of Kenya), but we just were not able to capture it in our study where females are underrepresented. Discrimination on the basis of wife preference was evident in some polygamous families. There were 5 participants from polygamous families in the study (participant #8, #10, #13, #15 and #22 in table 1 above). There is a caveat though, not all of these polygamous families exhibited discriminatory biases. Some of the polygamous families showed no discriminatory tendencies at all. For example, participant #8 indicated that his father paid fees equally for his brothers and sisters as well as for his step-brothers and step-sisters. And indeed, there is equal representation of children who completed Form 4 from both his mother and step-mother.

But for participant #10 whose father had three wives, there were glaring biases in favor children of wife 2 and 3 to the disadvantage of the first wife – the mother of participant #10. As shown in the table and notes that I recorded during my interview with him, he (participant #10) and all his sisters dropped out in primary school because of a lack of fees. But his step sisters completed Form 4. Clearly, this is discrimination: his father had money for school fees of wife 2's and wife 3's children, but none for the first wife's children. Similar discrimination is evident in the family of participant #13. This participant had a stepmother and four step brothers. These four step brothers completed Form 4, but participant #13 dropped out in primary school in Std.7 for lack of the payment of fees. There seem to have been enough money to pay for secondary school education for his step brothers but none to pay for participant #13's education.

Participant #15 also indicated that his father had three wives – but his case was different from that of participant #10. For him, the large family (on account of its polygamous nature) equally affected him and his siblings including his step brothers and step sisters negatively – there was no money to pay fees for anyone in the family.

A surprising finding of this study is that nobody gave language of instruction as the reason for dropping out. This was my initial motivation for conducting the study – but it turns out that it is a non-issue when it comes to the school dropout problem. Why is this the case? There are several possible ways of explaining this. First, it is possible that language of instruction is a 'hidden, behind-the-scenes' factor such that when a person thinks about why he/she dropped out, it does not come to mind right away. If this is the case, it is possible for language of instruction to still lead some people to drop out of school. To better get at the role of language of instruction, it might be more revealing to look at its proxies – the learning process and outcomes. If some students find it hard to keep up with studies, or if they find learning difficult – it is possible that language of instruction is a contributing factor. Students who find learning difficult usually perform poorly in continuous assessment tests and end of term tests – and in many African countries, such poorly performing students are retained in a class/grade. That is, they are made to repeat a class. This problem according to Inoue Keiko, Emanuela di Gropello, Yesim Sayin Taylor and James Gresham (2015) is very common in Africa south of the Sahara. We can therefore use grade repetition or retention as proxy to poor performance that can in part be attributed to language of instruction.

In the interviews that I conducted for this study, I asked participants about their academic performance in school and whether or not they repeated grades. 7 out of 24 participants (29.2%) indicated that they repeated once or more than once. Some explained why they repeated. For example, one participant named sickness as the reason: she was unable to take end of third term examinations because of sickness. Another participant identified transfer to another school as the cause. Yet another participant said she repeated because she was in the same class with her older sibling. Therefore, there was need for her to repeat in order to make paying fees possible (if two siblings joined Form 1 the same year, it would have been difficult if not impossible for parents to pay fees for two children in Form 1).

By repeating a grade, it was possible to spread paying Form1 fees to two years thereby lessening the school fees burden. And finally, one participant explained that he performed poorly (and hence was made to repeat) because he was out of school most of the time due to lack of fees. Because fees remained unpaid for most of the school year, he was frequently sent away from school. This particular participant's case particularly stood out because he repeated many times: he repeated 3 times in Std.3, 3 times in Std.4, 2 times in Std.5, and 3 times in Std.7.

It is interesting that none of the participants said they were retained in a grade because they found lessons difficult or that they could not keep up with school work. All the participants (both those that repeated grades and those who didn't) emphasized they repeated a class and/or dropped out school not because learning was difficult. Here, an issue that arises is that of truthfulness. Is it possible that they were not admitting to facing learning difficulties or not being able to keep up with studies to preserve face? Is there a chance that they were not being entirely truthful because they thought I would think they were not smart? This is possible, but they all seemed truthful and sincere to me. I had no reason to doubt them.

Another possible explanation as to why language of instruction is not cited as a reason or factor in dropping out of school is the level of dropping out and the location of the study. Most of participants and their siblings in this study dropped out in primary school. Teachers are required to start using English as the language of instruction starting from Std.4 (Kioko and Muthwii 2003, Kembo 2000, Kimani 1985, Oburo 1984, Nabea 2009 among others). But in rural schools such as the area where this study took place, this is usually not possible because the level of proficiency in English is usually low in Std.4 and indeed in all classes (grades) of primary. Therefore, teachers usually use Kiswahili and mother tongue (in addition to the required English) to teach. They would say or present a point in English but would use Kiswahili and mother tongue to explain and help students to understand. It is safe to conclude that in primary schools in the area of study, learning wasn't difficult because teaching was happening mostly in mother tongue and Kiswahili. The use English was minimal because at this stage in education, teachers were still using Kiswahili and mother tongue to help students comprehend lessons. Language of instruction can therefore not be a factor in dropping out of primary school in rural areas such as Siuna.

What Then?

As shown in this study, English as the language of instruction does not appear to be a significant factor in school dropout incidence at Siuna in Bungoma County. It is possible that the use of English makes learning difficult or challenging, but the difficulty that arises is not responsible for school dropout incidence by learners. So then, does the use of English for instruction in Kenyan schools get a clean bill of health? Is English as the language of instruction in Kenyan schools off the hook for language related problems evident in the country? The answer to these questions is no. English as the language of instruction is problematic for reasons other than the school dropout problem.

Although the use of English as the language of instruction is not named by school dropouts as the reason for dropping out of school, there are a number of objections that can be raised. Participants in this study may not have named it as a reason for dropping out of school, but this does not rule out the possibility that learning is indeed made difficult when English is used to teach.

It is also not far-fetched to claim that the use of English for instruction negatively affects the quality of education and the amount of education that students receive. A student who goes to school and starts learning science in his/her mother tongue (first language) is more likely to learn faster and build a strong science foundation earlier than a student who starts learning science in a second or foreign language that he/she is still learning. Without doubt, it takes longer for students such as those at Siuna who learn in English to internalize scientific facts and to build a firm science foundation upon which to create new knowledge or create new inventions. Use of Lubukusu and other indigenous languages can promote learning by helping students access scientific facts more easily and more directly.

It has also been shown that use of English as LOI in Kenyan school is a factor in poor educational outcomes, particularly literacy. In a study that was jointly organized by Kenya's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the Southern Africa Consortium Management of Educational Quality (SACMEQ), it was found that most standard 6 pupils did not attain the desirable level of reading in English (as quoted in Muthwii 2004). In this 1998 study, Kenya's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the Southern Africa Consortium Management of Educational Quality administered a criterion-referenced English reading test to a representative sample of standard 6 students in Kenya with the aim of measuring 2 levels of reading mastery: minimum and desirable. The minimum level was defined as the level of mastery necessary for recognition of letters of the alphabet and simple words, while the desirable level was defined as the level of mastery necessary for successful learning in standard 7 (Muthwii 2004).

Similar poor performance on literacy tasks in English by Kenyan students is reported by Eisemon (1998). Eisemon found that students on the Kenyan southern coast (Kwale and Msambweni) performed poorly on comprehension tasks in English, but they performed better on comprehension tasks in Kiswahili.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that English as the language of instruction does not facilitate the acquisition of meaningful literacy. English should be criticized for this (and for other reasons discussed below), but not as a cause or factor in the problem of dropping out of school by students.

The use of English as the language of instruction should also be criticized from the viewpoint of language attitudes, identity and linguistic rights. The use of English for instruction in schools conveys a wrong message to students –namely that their African languages are deficient, underdeveloped and not worth being proud of, and that education is only possible in English.

Students are more likely to conclude erroneously that their own languages are useless and not worth speaking. They might think: if my language is not good enough to be the language of instruction, and if only English (and not my language) can enable me get a good job, what is the point of speaking my language and developing it?

Such thinking clearly undermines the rights of indigenous African languages and people who speak them. If every person has the right speak his/her own language, it must be wrong for people to be made to conclude that only English (and other European/foreign languages) are worthy languages. Moreover, use of English as the language of instruction, and the ever present efforts to promote it at the expense of indigenous African languages that are neglected, is likely to crowd out African languages, and lead them to extinction.

Moreover, use of English as the language of instruction and lingua franca does not give students a chance to grow and develop their competence in their mother tongues, hence killing or impeding their creativity.

African children need their mother tongues for identity purposes. It is unfortunate that many African people, especially the educated do not seem to care much about identity. Language is an important aspect of identity, yet some seem to think that English is a universal language that no one can claim to own, forgetting that English indeed belongs to Britain, America and Australia. There is a need to have a language that you can claim is your own. English belongs to someone; it not ownerless.

The use of English for instruction and as the official language of Kenya should be criticized for the reasons and consequences highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, but not for being a factor in the school dropout problem, because it is insignificant when it comes to the school dropout phenomenon in the Siuna area.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine reasons that lead students to drop out of school in the Siuna area of Bungoma County. I was particularly interested in determining whether language of instruction is a factor in the school dropout phenomenon. As shown and discussed in this paper, no research participant interviewed named language of instruction as the reason for dropping out of school. The majority of participants and their dropout siblings dropped out of school for economic reasons: their parents were unable to raise money for fees and/or for purchase of school uniform, and a small percentage dropped out because they became pregnant.

The fact that language of instruction was not named as a reason for dropping out of school does not necessarily argue for the maintenance of the current educational language policy that mandates the use of English for teaching from as early as Standard 4 in rural schools.

The use of English as the language of instructions has other serious problems which include, but not limited to: poor quality education, low literacy rates, acquisition of bad language attitudes, identity problems, undeveloped creative abilities, refusal to support and develop indigenous African languages, and the increased possibility for their extinction in a not so distant future. These are serious problems, and they require Kenyans, and other people in Africa to rethink their educational policies in respect to language.

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