Original Article

Role of the Community in Influencing Enrolment of Children in Schools in Juba County, South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

The government of South Sudan introduced free primary education for all to ensure children go to school and attain basic education. This study assessed community involvement in children`s enrolment and learning. Through their responses using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, it was established that there were wide range of community members that influenced children's schooling and learning. This was captured in past studies which typically focused on structured forms of community engagement that take place within the schools. The pupils' reports on their perceptions of the community members' influence on learning and schooling were mainly positive. They included: dispute resolution, health care, financial and material support, political advocacy, and infrastructure development. The negative influence by the community members were reported as holding back learning from attending school, insecurity, distractions such as noise; land disputes with schools. Although this study generated a lot of positive responses on the role of the community members in influencing children schooling and learning, resource mobilization as the key aspect of engagement is worth considering.

INTRODUCTION

The enrolment of children in schools has increased significantly in the last 20 years in Africa (Abadzi, (2007). However, this has not been followed by corresponding improvement in learners' performance and academic skills

(UNICEF, 2021). Over 70 of primary school children do not achieve the minimum proficiency in writing, speaking, and reading skills (Beattie et al., 2017). Children in Sub-Saharan Africa have been reported to most lag-behind in terms of skills acquisition. Children living in the rural areas are the most affected (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, the rate of school dropout in both primary and secondary schools is very high (UNICEF, 2023). So, there is learning crisis due to low level of academic performance, and this has resulted in the long-term consequences for children in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF, 2023).

Learning crisis has been commonly driven by poor economic conditions of the countries, poor system of education, unskilled and de-motivated teachers, unfair cultural practices that victimize girls and ineffective school management in promoting teaching and learning (WHO, 2023). These factors vary from one country to another, and without comprehensive structural adjustments, learning crises cannot easily be overcome by different stakeholders through concerted efforts

Previous studies on community engagement in relation to children's school enrolment have focused more on educational involvements by parents (Butcher et al., (2004). Some studies on community engagement in children's schooling focus on a specific type of school such as community Centers Centres in developed countries like the USA (Leah & Ashley, 2022).

The studies on community engagement in relation to children's learning in low- and middle-income countries have been inadequate (de Hoop et., 2019). Efforts by community members to support children's schooling have been put forth in many countries in Africa, Asia, and South America (Spider et al., 2016). For example, many countries adopted the use of modern technology to support children's schooling following school closure after the outbreak of covid-19 (Power et al., 2021). Several research studies on the effectiveness of community engagement in supporting school enrolment and learning in developed countries

have shown inconsistent findings (Acheampong et al., 2021). Most evaluation reports have focused on learners' test scores or adult perceptions (Abadzi, (2007)). So, there is scarcity of research on children's perceptions of the community members' influence on children' enrolment in schools.

The government of South Sudan has introduction free primary education for all to ensure children go to school and attain basic education (Butcher, 2003). As a result, more girls and boys from under-privileged family backgrounds have enrolled in schools. The enrolment has tripled in the recent years (Butcher, 2003). As result, the number of learning facilities continue to be overstretched. In addition, there is a nationwide shortfall in the qualified teachers and learning materials (UNICEF, 2023). In rural areas, many children remain out of schools, and those at schools tend to perform poorly. School learners in South Sudan perform poorly in comparison to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Cornwall, (2008). In addition, South Sudan is reported to be experiencing the highest level of school dropout worldwide (Alexiadou, 2019). There is a policy by the government of South Sudan that encourages community engagement in school learning "South Sudan acknowledges the universal human right to education and is working to achieve the Education for All (EFA) goals and objectives by 2022 through several means including community engagement" (deHoop, 2019). Such a policy is crucial for the effectiveness of increased enrolment and quality of learning. It has been realized that low community participation in school learning impedes the realization of the quality primary education in South Sudan.The aim of this study is to addresses the gap in understanding the role of community engagement in shaping the perceptions of students learning in schools in South Sudan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Context

The study adopted qualitative approach in which the study focused on understanding the role of

community engagement in shaping the perceptions of students on learning in schools in South Sudan. The study was carried out in two schools in each of the two Bomas -Rejaf and Mangalla - in Juba County, in Central Equatoria State. This study area was chosen because of the persistent low school enrolment and performance level. In the last three years since 2020, schools in rural areas of Juba have consistently achieved poorer results in Primary Leaving Examination than in urban areas. Rural areas mainly experience poor socio-economic conditions. Individual interviews were purposively carried out with Twenty-two (22) primary school learners who had been in rural schools in the last three years since 2020, from primary four to primary eight. Out of 22, fifty percent of the participants were female. Two focus groups were interviews with ten participants each: one for boys; and one for girls. These groups were selected to ensure they give accounts of their lived experiences and perceptions of their community involvement in school enrolment and learning.

Ethical Considerations

If some children, during the interview, showed signs of emotions, they would be referred to specific teachers who had been given guidance on counselling. Distribution of consent form was facilitated by school teachers. Learners who agreed to participate in the study got their consent forms translated in local Arabic widely spoken in South Sudan, and were asked to carry them to their parents or guardians. All the participants participated fully, though they were free to withdraw if they wanted.

Data Analysis Procedure

Interviews were audio recorded and later translated and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All the transcripts were sorted and cross-checked to make sure they are accurate and complete. All the general thoughts and accounts in the data were documented. Statements that represented the emerging meaning units were noted. Using these statements, codes were developed by deductive and inductive processes. Some codes were derived out of transcripts, while

others from previous studies. After that codebooks were developed, where the data was synthesized by clustering and relating the meaning units into themes. Thereafter, themes are given descriptions representing their interpretations. Nvivo11 professional software helped in the process of coding and identification of themes.

FINDINGS

Positive Perceptions by Students on Community Members' Influence on Schooling

Dispute Resolution

Students gave accounts of different situations in which individual community members settle dispute that arise in school. For example, it was reported that a community leader indirectly handled disagreements among teachers that hinder school progress and learning.

> *"When our community leader hears of any dispute within the school, he intervenes to bring the teachers together, and mediate their individuals they conflict so that the progress of the school is not affected (FGD1)".*

This community leader also had a direct role in resolving land-related cases between the school and neighbours. One of member of the focus group discussion 1 stated,

> *"...there was a time when a neighbour came to our school and confronted our school head master, complaining a school had encroached on part of his land. The community leader came in settle the dispute. Since then, we have not seen any confrontation".*

The students also acknowledged their head master also played significant roles in settling disputes:

> *Pupils fight at school, and we see the fighting students being taken to the office of the head master where conflict is handled. Some are punished by caning and others are suspended. Those innocents are left free.* FGD1

Some other comments point to the community leader's role in protecting schools from attacks, land grabbing and theft.

Health Care Support

The study also established that nearby NGOs, primary health care units and dispensary provide health care service to the learners such as vaccination against cholera and hepatitis b; and free supply of sanitary pads. They mention that health workers and promoters come to the school and take care of them. This has made their learning and schooling conducive.

Two students in FGD1 stated the following:

"...Nurses come to our school every Friday from a near primary health care centre to vaccinate against Cholera. This is good because our parents feel happy whenever we tell them this.

Another also state*:*

"...we the girls of adolescent age in upper classes from P.5 to P.8 have always been attended to by well-wishers who have always distributed to us free sanitary pads. We no longer worry

The learners acknowledge that health care services have helped them in speedy recovery and wellbeing. And this has had significant influence in their schooling.

One learner stated that,

"... Now that there are free health care services we longer worry about our sickness. We stay in school and learn uninterrupted"

Considering the health aspects still, students' leaders played a significant role in raising awareness and educating learners about personal hygiene to guard against contracting diseases. For, example, student leaders, teach young learning how to brush their teeth, wash their face, and wash their clothes regularly, etc. one student stated, "

"Our head girl is a good leader. She moves from class to class teaching us how to keep ourselves clean". (FGD2)

Students also reported that there is always wider health awareness campaign that includes their school. This has significantly influenced their schooling positively.

Providing Food and Financial Support

Community members play a crucial role in extending their helping hand in terms of financials to some school children in need. Nearby church organizations provide food stuff to the schools. Some pastors, teachers, politicians, and businessmen in the community help to pay school fees for some needy children. Some public schools initially supported by the church continue to support by providing food donations. One pupil stated,

"We have generous relatives, pastors, businessmen, and teachers who offer to pay school fees to some of our needy pupils. Most of the needy pupils do not dropout because of this financial support.

Another pupil echoed the same statement,

"Yes, it is true we have generous people who pay school fees for some us. Some organizations also donate foods, and we now have feeding scheme in the school. This has made our learning very comfortable" (13-year-old boy)

Collective Work by Communities

In the literature, studies about the role of community members in ensuring that pupils have conducing learning environment by putting in place good infrastructure has not been adequate. This study finds community members have played a crucial role in mobilizing effort to ensure basic infrastructure, such as villages' roads. Most of the pupils in rural areas commute from home.

One pupil stated, "Members of community are mobilised to slash roads so that learners can move to school easily".

Advocacy by Area Politicians

The role of the area politicians in the development of infrastructure was acknowledged. Some community politicians including an MP reported to have been advocating for improved road network in the area so that school children move to schools without hindrances.

> *"...there was a time when our MP appealed to the President to provide money to improve to schools…"*

Other local politicians such as councillors have been instrumental in advocating for good roads. This has somehow improved the access to schools.

Local politicians had also been instrumental in providing infrastructure necessary for school attendance:

> *"...local councillor hold meetings at our schools to listen to our needs so that they can lobby the government to fulfil those needs like rehabilitation of road network in the area.*

DISCUSSION

It was established that there were wide range of community members that influenced children's schooling and learning. This was captured in past studies which typically focused on structured forms of community engagement that take place within the schools (Makoni& Makoni, (2019). A wide range of community members were identified because students' conceptions were broader; members of the community were within the schools, community and outside the community.

The pupils' reports on their perceptions of the community members' influence on learning and schooling were mainly positive. They included: dispute resolution, health care, financial and material support, political advocacy, and infrastructure development. The negative influence by the community members were reported as holding back learning from attending school, insecurity, distractions such as noise and land dispute with schools.

Students mainly emphasized school meal program as one good incentive to learning. Many past studies have highlighted the importance of adequate nutrition for learning among students in low- and middle-income countries (Rai, 2019)

Roekel (2008) wrote, "…It takes a village to raise a child is a popular proverb with a clear message: the whole community has an essential role in the growth and development of its young people" The potential benefit of community engagement appears greatest when children perceive this to be positive (Onyango, 2020).

This study shows that community engagement can be a good driving strategy for children's schooling and learning because it can contribute to emotional, moral and material support (Acheampong et al., 2021). In addition, although learners have described wide range of positive influence by their community members, they make any mention of some forms of engagement that have been the focus of research in developed countries. These include: story telling by elders, and inspiration through music and sports. This suggests that there is scope for the expansion of community engagement in the communities in which this study was conducted. It seems likely that this is also true in other contexts in low- and middle-income countries. Thus, interventions that increase the level, breadth, and effectiveness of community support for students' schooling and learning appear to hold the potential to improve the sustainability, equity, and inclusiveness of access to basic education in rural communities in Uganda and other low-resource settings.

Nonetheless, previous studies have also shown that community engagement programs can have negative effect as it can increase learners' vulnerability (Beattie, 2017). Some culture, or religions within the community promote discrimination-based gender or ethnicity (Ball, A. F. 2000)

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Although this study generated a lot of positive responses on the role of the community members in influencing children schooling and learning, resource mobilization as the key aspect of engagement has been the focus of the previous studies (Muhangi, 2019).

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CONCLUSION

Most schools in rural areas in developing countries have low access to teaching and learning materials. However, communities can be an effective tool to improving school enrolment if the necessary support is provided. It is also important to acknowledge that communities can have a limited role in overcoming school enrolment challenges as most of them are poor with limited human and financial capacity.

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