

Reasons for Children Enrolment in Private Primary Schools by their Parents Despite Existence of Free Primary Education in Public Primary Schools

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Abstract

The implementation of free basic education in public primary Schools was an initiative by the government to make education available, as advocated by the United Nations under the millennium development goals (MDGs). However, not all parents took their children to the public primary schools; some opted for private primary schools. Its implementation was a cost cutting initiative in the provision and subsequent consumption of primary education especially for poverty stricken Kenyan masses. Millions of Kenyans who had been kept out of the system by cumulative cost of education enrolled in public schools irrespective of age. Development partners in the education sector were at hand to ensure smooth implementation of the new policy in line with the global concept of the Universal Primary Education (Wambua, 2004). This study focuses on identifying the reasons why some parents still enroll their children in private primary schools when free primary education is provided Primary schools. The study was conducted through descriptive research using Ex post facto design. Eight public and eight private primary schools in Kitale Municipality were used in the study. The Municipality has 18 private and 26 public, mixed schools (boys and girls) making it a focal point for the study. The study used Questionnaires, Interviews, document analysis and observation as methods of data collection. The academic performance of both public and private primary schools was computed using t-test case II while gender and type of school interactions were made using ANOVA case II. The study found that most of the parents who took their children to private primary schools were average income earners or the middle class group like; nurses, teachers, farmers, business men, pastors mechanics drivers carpenters masonry, civil servants etc. It was only one private school that acknowledged their pupils as belonging to the high-income earners like the Asian community. Most parents who took their children to public primary schools were also from the middle income earners. Few poor ones had benefited from the Free Primary Education (FPE) project.

Keywords: Children Enrolment, Private Primary Schools, Parents, Free Primary Education, Public Primary Schools.

1. Introduction

The search for a good education begins early. Parents go to a great length to ensure that their children go to good schools and later Colleges and Universities (Mbatia, 2004)

Parents' involvement can affect the general performance of a school since parents do contribute to their children academic progress and school development as a whole. Parents tend to take their children to top performing schools, this leads to congestion in these schools. Teachers find it difficult to cope with large numbers; they cannot get enough time to help weak pupils as more time is spent on marking huge piles of books. However, private schools control enrolment since they believe huge numbers will affect their general performance. Where enrolment is high pupil teacher ratio is controlled. Majority of parents who prefer taking their children to public schools do so because they would like to make use of the free services provided by the government, though for others it's because they cannot afford to pay for private services.

The introduction of free and compulsory basic education in public primary schools was a welcome move, which was applauded by all. Its implementation was a cost cutting initiative in the provision and subsequent consumption of primary education especially for poverty – stricken Kenyan masses. Millions of Kenyans who had been kept out of schools' system by cumulative cost of education sort enrolment in public schools defying the age barrier. The new policy was implemented in line with the global concept of the universal free primary education (UPE). The government consolidated every effort across the country to mobilize the parents and guardians to take advantage of the cost waver and enroll the children for formal education in public primary schools. However, pertinent issues and challenges in relation to FPE demand government intervention. The most challenging of these concerns was the quality of education provided under FPE programme.

According to Coulson (1990) school choice was not a new idea in the history of human experience. Despite decades of heroic effects to improve public schools, the institution continued to fall short of the general expectations. According to Tuttle (year), an Education Director in "School Choice, a system of schools' for a modern world". Competitive educational markets had consistently done a better job of serving the public than a state run educational systems. The reason lied in the fact that state schools systems lacked four key factors that were essential to educational excellence; Choice, financial responsibility for parents, Freedom and market

incentives for educators. School systems that had enjoyed these characteristics had consistently done the best job of meeting both our private educational demands and our shared educational ideals.

In US, studies showed that schools were near the top in spending but last or near last in achievement of their peers in other industrialized nations, despite per pupil spending that places the US third highest among those nations. About 25% of American K-12 students swapped their assigned public school for another public, private religious or home-based choice. One of the consistent findings in studies of choice programs was the high level of parental satisfaction. Research findings showed that students who attended private schools were more likely to display positive civil behaviors such as voting, volunteering, cross-racial friendships and tolerance of others. They were more likely to be in racially ‘well-integrated’ classrooms than their public school peers. Students in private schools posted higher achievement according to most studies carried out in America. It was only in a study by John F. Witte (2001) that showed “no significant effect” between public and private schooled students.

Witte found that the scores of public sponsored (voucher) students did not decline as they moved into higher grades. He also concluded that the public sponsored (voucher) schools expanded opportunities for children who would not otherwise have had them and that parents in private schools were far happier as happy with their children’s private schools as they were unhappy with their children’s former public school. Witte’s findings therefore revealed that students in private schools enjoyed greater opportunities, parents were far happier and achievement was equal to and projected to be better over the long term than public school students.

The report by Tuttle, education director indicated that parents in US were anxious over safety issues and knew that different needs and circumstances could no longer be met equally well by a centrally controlled, ‘single school’ monopoly. Parent’s desire for school choice (private) did not mean that they have given up on the nation’s times honored ideal of publicly educating all children. They merely want the ideal fulfilled through a better education delivery system, one that offers them a variety of options to meet the challenges of educating children in a complex world.

In a Wall Street Journal Editorial entitled “school choice, by popular demand”, Forstmann (1999) argued that the nation’s public school system had been changed to give all children choice:

The debate is over. The parents of more than a million children have ended it. We must meet their voices and see through their eyes. To them, the distinction that really matters is not public Vs private education, but a good education Vs a bad one. Sometimes one so bad it hardly qualifies as an education at all. By letting parents seek a good education wherever it can be found, we can breathe new life into our common ideal of equal opportunity in education. But these parents will never find what they seek unless we radically expand choice and opportunity in education.

In her dissertation (DAI,1980), “Parental Reasons for Enrolling Children in a Private School in 1979 as compared to their Reasons in 1974”, Kathleen observed that, the non-public schools had played a role in the America education system since its inception. She sought to find out why parents choose these alternatives to the public schools. In her search for parental motivation in school selection she used a 1974 study as a database for a research conducted in 1979. The study was hypothesized that parents enrolled their children in the Pennington School because they believed the academic program was stronger than that of the public school, as much as they did in 1974. It was also hypothesized that parents enrolled their children in the Pennington School because they believed the social climate was more appealing than that of the public school, much as they did in 1974. The data were also investigated in terms of the total student, male student, female student, day student and boarding student categories.

This information was then compared with the information from the 1974 study. On the basis of the data collected presented and analyzed in both the 1979 study and the 1974 study, the following conclusions were drawn;

- In both “academic considerations” were foremost in the minds of parents when selecting a school for the child. Parents in both studies perceived that Pennington School was offering a stronger academic program and therefore an attractive alternative to public schools.
- Considerable support was given to the second hypothesis while in both studies the “social considerations” played an important role in the parent’s decision for enrolling their children in the Pennington School.
- In both studies the parents of boarding students were very interested in “proper training in study habits”, absence of major drug problems and teaching a sense of moral values.
- Parents of day students in both studies placed more emphasis on academically challenging curriculum.

In the Atlanta Parent Magazine (2005), it was observed that parents wanted to spend extra money to send their child to a private school even when every child was entitled to attend public school. The main reasons given were;

- That private school provided a higher quality education with smaller teacher-to-student ratios.

- They wanted an education that offered a particular set of religious teachings for spiritual values, morals and faith development.
- Private schools addressed the needs of the child better-personalized learning.
- Private schools offered more options and flexible curriculum and textbooks compared to public schools.
- Offered stricter discipline and closely supervised the child; early admission of children; private schools were answerable to the parents of the children enrolled at that school.
- Private schools offered extended care programs or after school took care of children with learning disability.

In a report by Nzioka (2006) "Private Schools are outclassed yet again, part of the reason why parents preferred privately run primary schools is that they wanted their children to get places in top National public Schools. The students excelled in these schools, which guaranteed most slots in public Universities. This study hoped to establish reasons for continued enrolment of children to private primary schools by their parents in Kitale municipality even after the implementation of free primary education. From the reasons given by these studies parent choice of a school influenced performance because, in order to maintain children in a given school then the school had to excel in national examinations. When performance was poor whether public or private the parents would withdraw their children to another well performing public or private school.

According to Oxfam's Education report, a mass exodus of poor parents was fleeing the state sector to send their children to private school. Parents were paying fees when state schools were free because of the failure of state schools across Africa and Asia. The Indian Government Approved Probe Report after researchers called unannounced showed that, only in 53 per cent of the schools were there any teaching activity out of those randomly sampled. In 33 per cent, the head teachers were absent. There was significantly low level teaching activity even in schools with relatively good infrastructure, teaching aids and pupil-teacher ratio. According to Probe Report there was feverish classroom activity in private school. Oxfam Education Report pointed out the inadequacies of public education system as; teacher absenteeism, overcrowding and teaching using inadequate books.

The Ominde report (1964) recognized the growth of private educational institutions at all levels. The report, therefore, recommended that private schools be allowed to continue, for parents who preferred such schools and were able to meet the cost. The syllabi and curricula of these schools were to be regulated and the public was to be informed about their quality and resultant career and educational opportunities. The report further recommended that private educational institutions are required to comply with the provisions and regulations governing the establishment and management of educational institutions in order to maintain high standards of education and training.

The Kamunge report (1988), recommended the need for the government to acknowledge, accommodate and support the role of other education providers such as NGOs, religions organizations, private school developers and communities in its efforts to reach all unreached children. Their efforts should be supported within a diversified system, in which the government played its essential coordinating and standard setting role. In assessing Accessibility, Equity, Relevance and Quality of private and informal schools, the commission observed that a majority of private primary and secondary schools were increasing in number in urban areas. These schools significantly increased access to education especially at the primary school level.

A majority of the private schools had established high standards of quality education. Although they charged high fees, they had increased access and set standards in academic achievement. Such efforts needed to be supported but these efforts were not significant at secondary level. In view of the commission's definition of basic education, private schools developers should be encouraged to focus also on the secondary level and be supported in this process. It recommended that: the government register all private and informal schools and evaluate them with the view to supporting them with the provision of land, qualified teachers, funding, supervision and any other clearly identified needs as appropriate and that "all providers of private education be accountable to the ministry for quality control and to curb malpractice and exploitation. From these reports the role of private schools as education providers was quite clear. It was actually an alternative to public schools and it provides quality education. None of these reports disputed the fact that private schools provided quality education. It would have been good if they had explained in details what they meant by quality education, how it was being achieved and how it could be measured.

In Kenya there had been a fast growth in population that had never been matched by expansions in available places in government schools. There had been great pressure on the school system to absorb children in schools. Thus private schools emerged to serve the rising population of school age going children. Despite the major role of private schools in absorbing part of this population, there had been a lot of resentment towards them (Ongeti, 2005). In his paper "type of school, student performance and course placement at university in Kenya" Ongeti observed that private schools were clearly doing better by sending more students to national schools and good provincial schools. For example in the consequent years of 2003, 2004 and 2005, private schools had been on the lead. Contrary to this, Saitoti (2006) argued that students from private primary schools

were poorly taught. Even worse Mwiria (2004) claimed, “The truly best students in terms of ability and talent were largely those from public schools”. However he had no statistical evidence to those claims.

A report on “Free Education that’s the Emperors’ suit disputed the idea that “quality education is now the preserve of the rich”. Parents who took children to private schools were not all rich. They were first taxed by the government to cater for the public schools and second by the private schools for tuition leaving them even poorer. Most of these parents sacrificed their daily needs to meet their children education. It was also argued that not all private schools were high cost. Ongeti in his article “Free Education, No learning” gives examples of cheap private schools in Kibera, Langas, Huruma, Matunda and Kitale in Kenya. While in an article “Private schools can bring Education for all” argued that, private education was not only about the elites and middle classes. In the urban slums and villages in developing countries increasing number of poor parents were sending their children to private schools with fees of \$2 per month or less, run by educational entrepreneurs who wanted to serve their communities as well as make some money. Such schools could be found in battle-scarred buildings in Somali land, in the shantytowns built on stilts above the Lagos lagoons in Nigeria. They could also be found scattered amongst the tin and cardboard huts of Africa’s largest slum, Kibera, Kenya, in the crowded slums and villages across Indian and even in remote Himalayan regions of China. According to Oxfam’s Education report it was quite explicit that private schools for the poor were emerging and that these schools were superior to government schools for the poor (Financial Times, October 29, 2003). From these reports it was clear that riches did not determine academic performance nor poverty and that school choice or preference was neither based on riches nor poverty.

In a report “Has God blessed the rich pupils?” by Obbo C.O (2005), the rich send their children to private schools while the poor take their children to public schools, under free education programme. The rich in the private Schools do better than the poor in public Schools under FPE as per the results of Kenya Primary Certificate of Education examinations. According to this report private schools rig the results by conniving to get the pupils who would get low scores sit their exams in public schools. In this report universal primary education (UPE) introduced in Uganda 1986 is compared to that of Kenya introduced 2003. Previously public primary schools in Uganda like Buganda Road, Nakasero and Kitante were topping the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) but after the introduction of UPE these schools could not even appear among top 10.

The reports indicate that; poor pupils are send out of the top private schools to sit exams elsewhere while some import good ones from public schools to bolster the pass numbers. In addition parents allow their children to learn through private schools to get quality education even if later they register for exams in public schools, as they are likely to perform better. There is less financial accountability in private schools than in public schools where grants are given by the government. It was also noted that FPE does not offer everything required by pupils e.g. uniforms and meals besides free textbooks and exercise books. A large number of teachers are required which increases the weight of the cost to the government.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted through descriptive research using Ex post facto design. The ex post facto design is limited in the interpretations of relationships between variables. This study was conducted in eight public and eight private primary schools in Kitale Municipality. The target population being class 4 pupils was chosen because the district has a high population of primary school age going (6 – 13) children.

The dependent variable, academic performance was measured by the average mark obtained by each pupil in the tests conducted in the middle of first term of year 2006 and the mean mark for the two types of schools compared using t-test case II. ANOVA case II was used to determine the interaction effect of gender and type of school. Probability sampling technique mainly simple random sampling was used. For the study, all the pupils of class 4 from the eight private and eight public primary schools were involved. This sample of class 4 was selected as these were the pupils who were admitted in class one the year FPE was introduced in public schools. It was a homogeneous group that used the same curriculum (i.e. private and public).

The author used questionnaires, Interviews, document analysis and observation method to collect data.

The academic performance of both public and private primary schools was computed using t-test case II while gender and type of school interactions were made using ANOVA case II. The t-test is a measure of the difference between the mean scores of two (independent or dependent) groups. Data was analyzed at a level of significance of 95% or 0.05. The degrees of freedom were determined from the two cases. The value ($\alpha = 0.05$) has been chosen because the sample size is adopted from figures calculated on the basis of 0.95 level of confidence. ANOVA case II is a design that has two factors or more (two independent variables). In this study it was used to test variations in gender performance between private and public primary schools. It was also used as an indicator of interaction affects between, gender and type of school.

3. Results and Discussions

Reasons for Parental Preference for either public or private primary schools

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Parental Preference

REASONS	PUBLIC FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	PRIVATE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1. Good academic performance.	28	56	42	84
2. Proximity to the school.	22	44	13	26
3.High teacher discipline and hard work.	27	54	28	56
4.High pupil discipline and hard work.	19	38	23	46
5. Religious morals.	2	4	3	6
6. Available teaching-learning materials	5	10	3	6
7. Good infrastructure and environment	12	24	10	20
8. Financial	14	28	9	18
9. Qualified teachers	7	14	3	6
10.Good administrator	6	12	2	4
11. Teacher-pupil ratio	1	2	1	2
12. Good parent-teacher relationship	5	10	8	16
13.Any other	16	32	8	16

From the frequency table parents of public schools preferred them because of good academic performance as indicated by 56%. Teachers were employed by the government, were trained, disciplined and hardworking indicated by 54% of the respondents. The rest of the reasons though mentioned seemed to be insignificant, despite free textbooks and exercise books, which had led to improvement in academic performance. Quite a number of these parents preferred those schools because they were near their place of residence indicated by 44% of the sampled questionnaire, therefore were able to monitor the progress of their children. Though public schools were not expensive, they were cheap compared to private schools but did not come out as a major reason for preference. Parents who took their children to public schools received a lot of co-operation from teachers but were a minor reason for taking their kids to public schools. Many other reasons were given but not of priority. Some parents looked at the colour of the uniform if it was attractive or not while others looked at the infrastructure and did not want their children to move from one school to another.

Good performance in K.C.P.E had attracted parents to enroll their children in private primary schools as indicated by 84% of the sampled questionnaire. In addition they spoke English at an early age which was an added advantage. In terms of facilities, the private schools had advantage over public schools but did not come out as major reasons for preference as indicated by only 6% and 20% for good and spacious buildings, boarding and medical facilities respectively. Qualification of teachers and strict adherence to the school calendar was quite insignificant indicated by 6% frequency of the parents' questionnaire. However teacher and pupil discipline and hard work were quite significant, as shown by 56%and 46% respectively. Due to small pupil teacher- ratio i.e. 1:20, they were able to give more attention to weak pupils and had close supervision of their pupils but it had no influence for parental preference. Kitale municipality private schools charge reasonable amount of fees, quite affordable by most parents, ranging from Khs.1500.00-13000.00 per term and varied from one class to another and one schools to another. This had had little influence on parental preference indicated by 18% in private

schools. Some of those schools sponsored bright pupils especially from unable families and also provided good meals in some cases, which could not be provided at home but did not feature, for preference. There is high discipline and hard work among teachers providing a good role model for their pupils.

Good academic performance made pupils get desired public secondary schools. Most private schools instilled religious morals and values in their pupils, giving added value to the parents' investment but did not come out as one of the main reasons for preference indicated by 6%. They provided proper foundation and pupil exposure, a neat and good learning environment, as well as security. They held regular meetings with parents to discuss the academic performance of their children indicated by 16% over public schools (10%) increasing teacher-parent relationship. There was very close supervision of teachers' work by heads of institutions but did not also feature for influencing parental preference.

4. Conclusion

From the results of the study, it came out clearly that most of the parents who took their children to private primary schools were average income earners or the middle class group like; nurses, teachers, farmers, business men, pastors mechanics drivers carpenters masonry, civil servants etc. It was only one private school that acknowledged their pupils as belonging to the high-income earners like the Asian community. Most parents who took their children to public primary schools were also from the middle income earners. Few poor ones had benefited from the FPE project. In addition private schools could be encouraged since they also sponsored good performing pupils from poor family and one private school was mainly rehabilitating street children by education and provision of other basic needs.

5. Recommendations

The study recommended the following:

1. Private schools should be encouraged as education providers for those who can afford but the government should reduce exploitation by controlling high fee charges by the proprietors.
2. Schools should introduce and emphasize on debating competition right from class four to encourage teachers to work hard in teaching their pupils how to read and express themselves using good spoken English or Kiswahili language. This would help overcome inferiority complex and improve speech and reading skills.
3. During school holidays workshops can be in place where teachers whose performance is excellent induct those teachers whose performance is low, so as to help them gain more skills in teaching.
4. Inter school exchange programs and inter class competition should be encouraged in primary schools to boost performance right from lower classes.

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