WHAT DID YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL TODAY? A STUDY OF LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT
Education for all is universally seen as an end and a means for poverty eradication and for societal development in general. However, the present investment in education in many poor countries is far from meeting the expected outcomes: dropout, absenteeism and low learning achievement are problems and many leave primary education as functional illiterates. In this article the situation in Namibian primary schools is presented and school internal and external reasons for the low and uneven outcome of primary education investment are discussed. The main findings are that learner achievement in primary education in Namibia is generally low. In addition, there are striking differences between schools, regions and learners. Learners from the lower socioeconomic quartiles are far behind those coming from richer households. The Namibian primary education system is not able to reduce social inequalities; on the contrary, it amplifies inequalities that are already there. For a large number of children in Namibia enrolment in school does not mean that they achieve even the basic reading competence that is a key factor for development of other capabilities.

Key words: Learning achievements, primary schools, Namibia, development, poverty eradication.

INTRODUCTION

Development discourses have always shifted in terms of topics and priorities. However, education was always among the more prioritised areas in any development strategy and even more so today (Tarabini, 2010). Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that there are different discourses which address the role of education in societal development, namely, the human capital approach, the poverty reduction approach, the human rights approach, the capability approach and the social justice approach. So education is both an end and a means for societal development.

For the individual participation in education is a value in its own right as well as a means to becoming economically productive. It is seen as part of the universal human rights as demonstrated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The importance of this was underlined in the Jomtien declaration of 1991 which stated the aim of Basic Education for All (Närmann, 1998). Literacy enables individuals to take part society and is therefore very crucial in a social justice perspective and thus for human development (Smith and Barret, 2011). Amartya Sen has launched the concept of capability as an alternative concept to the concept of poverty. Sen looks at education as the means to expand human capabilities, freedom, choice and agency (Ahmed ,2010). Thus access to universal education for all can be argued from many perspectives: a human rights perspective, social justice perspective and capability perspective.

Since the theory of human capital was formulated, universal education has been seen as an important and necessary investment in order to achieve economic growth and development (Tarabini, 2010, Dale, 1982). The catching-up process, in other words, needs an educated population. Since the Post Consensus there has also been established a link between education and the eradication of poverty. Today we find this argument in all World Bank documents on education and there seems to have been established a global consensus on the importance of investment in education as a means to fighting poverty and stimulating economic growth (Preston and Green, 2003).The Millennium Development Goals see universal primary education as a basic investment in human capital and a necessity in the fight against poverty (Ziai, 2011, UNDP ,2003). In this discourse education plays such a central role in the eradication of poverty because it creates conditions for empowerment and participation of all groups in defining developmental goals (Dhillion ,2011).

According to Tarabini (2010) the World Bank prioritises primary education in order to reduce poverty and literacy and sees the ability to read for understanding as the first and fundamental basic skill to be achieved. Nevertheless, universal quality education for all is far from being reached. In Africa alone, only 51 % of the children complete primary school according to Birdsall et al. 2005. The problems are non-enrolment in some countries, dropout and low achievement in all countries. The consequence is that many children never become literate. The present investment in education in many poor countries is therefore far from meeting the expected outcomes when so many get so little out of their years in school and leave primary education as functional illiterates(Smith and Barret, 2011, Broch-Utne, 2010).

Education results in Namibia are no exception from this general picture. Even though the country has an enrolment rate of 92 % they have severe problems with dropouts and low achievements (Miranda et al. 2011). The aim of this article, based on secondary and primary data, is to describe the situation in Namibian primary schools and discuss school internal and external reasons for the low and uneven outcome of primary education investment.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Most researchers see learners' school achievements as a result of a complex relationship between background variables at household level, school and classroom internal factors and national contextual factors (Howie, 2008, Colclough et.al, 2003, Eie, 2003). The socioeconomic character of the household has a profound bearing on school results, enrolment, absenteeism and dropout. Children from poor households tend to succeed less often in primary education than children from more well-off households (Colclough et al. 2003). There are many reasons for this: lack of fulfilment of basic needs, need to earn an income, help with reproductive work and lack of money (Bostad, 2000). In Smith and Barrett (2011) study of 14 southern African countries they find a significant correlation between numbers of meals a day and reading scores and they argue that hungry children are more likely to achieve lower because they cannot concentrate (Avila & Gasperini, 2005). They furthermore find that absenteeism is negatively correlated with reading performance and that the main reasons for absenteeism are "need to work "and lack of paid school fees. This finding is in accordance with other research findings (Roby et al., 2009, Winger, 2003). The cost of school participation includes the direct cost of schooling – such as expenditure on books and uniforms- as well as opportunity cost of the child's time One common argument is that poor households do not send their children to school every day because they either need their labour or that the direct cost of sending them to school is too high (Mostert and Wikan, 2008, Arunatilake ,2004, ,Al-Amarrai and Zaman, 2002.) Late school entry is prevalent in many developing countries, especially in poor households, and Wils, 2004 claims that this is positively correlated with early drop out, repetition and low achievement. Parental support and educational background is also of importance for pupils' learning outcome (Smith and Barret, 2011). A characteristic of poor households is that they seldom have resources like educational level or time to support their children's homework. In addition, they less often follow up by taking part in meetings at school or taking direct contact with the teacher. Learners from poor households have a number of handicaps when starting their education compared to learners from more well-off households and it is documented that for instance the reading competence of pupils from lower socio-economic groups tends to be much lower than that of pupils from higher socio-economic groups (Makuwa, 2004).

An alternative explanation for low achievement is the lack of quality and relevance of the education offered in schools (Dale 1982). Unqualified teachers is a problem in many poor countries and more so in rural schools and schools in poorer urban suburbs. There is modest evidence indicating that learners attending well-resourced schools are likely to perform better, irrespective of their background. A positive relationship has been found between the quality and quantity of school resources and pupil performance (Colclough et. al., 2003; Zuze, 2008). The attitude of the teachers to children from poor households might add to the decision not to send or to drop out from schools. Eie (2003) noticed that teachers paid little attention to learners from poor households and sometimes treated them badly. Researchers have also observed that teacher absenteeism is a general problem in schools in poor countries and this has consequences for learning outcome (Reeves et.al.2013). Another problem Winger (2003) points to is the lack of relevance of the curriculum offered. She claims that this might be one factor affecting parents' attitude towards education. Ames (2012) also documents how indigenous children in Peru achieve lower due to a school curriculum and language policy that excludes their language and culture.

Learning achievement is also a related to the language of instruction. The majority of individuals in Africa tend to live in a multilingual setting. Many live their lives handling many languages on different levels of familiarity. According to Wolff (2010) one might talk about a multilingualism pyramid: local languages, local linguae francae, regional linaguae francae, national languages and official language. Most researchers seem to agree that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue (Cummings, 2010, Molosiwa, 2005). Governments, however, have stated the need for a uniting language and have often chosen the language of the former colonial power (Williams and Cooke, 2002). As a result of these policy decisions, 700 million children are taught in English, a language that is not spoken in their home or in the

school playground (Gleghold and Rollick, 2002). English as a medium of instruction has in most cases favoured the better-off and/or urban elite who have the economic means to choose high- quality education. There is support in the literature that learners who are not taught in their mother tongue have more difficulties in mastering reading skills and performing well in school (Wolfaardt, 2004, Ramasamy, 2001, Harlech-Jones, 1998, Rivera, 1990).

To sum up; low learning achievement is a result of a number of factors and these factors are interlinked, and they must all be taken into consideration when explaining why many children never attend school, never fulfil basic education and have low learning outcomes. Their individual contribution to the complex situation of general low school performance will vary according to context. For poor households the direct and indirect costs mean that they often do not send all their children to school and they do not have resources to support their children's homework. Children from better-off households have none of these problems and they command resources that make it possible for them to buy a good education. A poor country will provide insufficient school places and low and variable school quality. The multilingual context in many countries adds to the problems. Nevertheless, few policy documents recommending investment in education as a remedy towards poverty does not appreciate the unfairness of educational opportunities in poor and unequal societies. Access to quality education is not for all, not even in those countries where most children enrol in school. The unfair access to quality education amplifies social inequality. In order to uncover this effect of educational investments it is necessary to look into how it is manifested at household, individual and school levels.

THE NAMIBIAN CONTEXT

Namibia is a middle-income country located in the south-western part of Africa. Since Independence from South Africa in 1990 it has had a positive economic growth and a reduction in poverty levels (World Bank 2014). In 2010, 28.7% of its population lived below the poverty line. In addition, inequality in standard of living is huge as Namibia is one of the most unequal countries in the world with a Gini-index of 63.9 (World Bank 2014).
Namibia has a population of 2.1 million comprised of different ethnic and language groups. Under South African occupation Afrikaans was the official language and lingua francas. After Independence English was chosen as the official language and medium of instruction from grade 4 although only 7 % of the populations speak English as a home language (Miranda et al.2011). There are 13 recognised national languages and these can be the language of instruction in lower grades. According to the language policy, the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction for grades 1 to 3 (Banda et. al, 2012). However, in practice, many classes have learners with different home languages and only one of these can be the medium of instruction, resulting in many pupils not being taught in their mother tongue in the first years of education.

According to national statistics there are quite large variations between the language groups with regard to home-language instruction; for example of the English speaking pupils, 80% are taught in English, whereas the figure for Oshiwambo is 64 %, for Afrikaans it is 63%(Ministry of Education 2007, Makuwa 2004). Many parents are negative to mother tongue policy in Namibia (Banda et. al 2012). They argue that English must be the language of instruction from grade 1 because this is more efficient when the aim is to be fluent in the official language. This is a view shared by parents in many other multilingual African settings (Muthwii, 2004, Mutorwa 2004, Deidre, 1997). In reality, English seems to be the only language of instruction in an increasingly number of schools, especially in urban areas. As a consequence learners from homes where they are not exposed to English are disadvantaged. Due to the colonial heritage Afrikaans is still the most common lingua francas, and in most households Oshiwambo is the most spoken language. However, an increasing number of learners are exposed to English outside school (Miranda et al.2011).

Access to quality education remains a priority in the development policy of Namibia. Primary education is 7 years and compulsory and 92% of the children enrol. Official policy documents states that "quality formal general education builds the foundation skills required for employment of trainable people who are adaptable to labour market changes, increase capacity intake to Vocational Education and Training (VET) for the development of skilled workers, and increase the number of school leavers able to enter tertiary education and training" (Miranda et al. 2011 pp 26). As this quotation demonstrates investment in primary education is agued along the human capital discourse.

THE DATA

The findings are based on two sources: the SACMEQ III results and data from two surveys conducted by researchers from the University of Namibia and Hedmark University College.The Southern and Eastern Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) has collected data on reading and mathematics levels among grade 6 learners in three

periods starting in 1995. The survey gathers data on learning achievement, learners' background, and characteristics of schools and teachers. The present analysis is based on data collected in 2007.Two surveys were conducted in selected areas of Windhoek and in Oshakata region in the north. We used different information sources. One study was carried out as a household survey, the other one at schools surveying grade 6 learners.

In the household case study 120 households were interviewed. We used clustered sampling in four areas of Windhoek, Namibia. The settlement pattern in Windhoek is clearly stratified, mainly following income levels. Because one purpose of this study was to find out how the socioeconomic background of learners influences their progress and performance at school, we selected one very poor, one poor, one middleclass, and one wealthy area for the household interviews. For each area 30 households were selected. However, on closer investigation after data collection, it was realised that the very poor and poor areas were very similar and for the data analyses these two groups were combined and thus consists of 60 households, referred to as "poor". Only households with school-aged children were chosen, using the snowball method. After conducting the first interview, the interviewer asked to be directed to the next household within the selected area which qualified
The data was gathered using structured interviews with heads of households. All information gathered from this research is thus based on parents' or the heads of the households' points of view.

The term *achievement is* operationalised as follows: The learners' progress from one grade to the other and thus the repetition of one or more grades will be an indicator of low achievement. "Doing well or not well in school" is another indicator of achievement. The norm in Namibia is automatic progress through grades without repetition. Only in cases where the class teacher is absolutely convinced that a learner would not benefit from progressing to the next grade, should a learner repeat a grade. The promotion requirements stipulate, *"In some cases where learners do not achieve the basic competencies, repetition might be part of the solution"* (Ministry of Education 2007 pp 42). Repetition is therefore a valid indicator of the learners' achievement level.

In the school case study four schools, one rural and one urban in each district were selected. It was decided to include one school from an affluent urban area and one from a disadvantaged rural area to attempt representation of two extremes - advantaged and disadvantaged. All schools were Government schools. A total of 115 grade 6 learners were included in the sample. The method of selection was random sampling of full class groups. A quantitative survey using questionnaires was used for data collection.

The data was analysed using SPSS statistical package. Since the questionnaire contained few sensitive questions there was no reason to believe that the interviewees did not answer truthfully and thus we can claim that the data reflects high levels of reliability and validity. A limitation of both case studies is that households and classes are not selected randomly and the sample sizes are small. Thus we cannot claim that the findings are representative. Therefore one should be careful not to generalise the research results or to draw firm conclusions from these. Nevertheless, despite the limitations, the findings analysed together with the national survey give a picture of the situation in primary education in Namibia and point to some factors that might have a bearing on the results.

FINDINGS

Drop out, repetition, and low learning outcomes are common in Namibian primary schools. The official drop-out rates to subsequent phases remain high and only 75% survives to grade 7 (UNICED 2008). Figures for repetition rates are not reliable and they vary from 43% according to the Ministry of Education (2007) to 15% according to for instance Cameron (2005). Both dropout and repetition are indicators of low learning outcome. In a regional research programme SACMEQ III the Namibian school results are among the lowest in the region. 39% of the grade 6 learners were so weak readers that they could not read for meaning and only 20% reached advanced reading levels. This result implies that maybe as many as 80% were functionally illiterate. In mathematics the situation is even worse: 76% were below the level of beginning numeracy (Miranda et.al 2011).

There are regional differences, with the capital area and other urban areas getting higher scores than the rural parts of the country. For instance, in the urban region of Erongo 13% of the learners could not read for meaning, in the rural region of Omusati the corresponding figure was 55%. The pattern for mathematics skills is the same (Miranda et al. 2011).
The socioeconomic background of the learners influences the results, with learners from poorer families getting lower scores than learners from rich families (Miranda et al. 2011). In SACMEQ III the average score for the whole region is 500 points. Grade 6 learners from the 25 % poorest households got the score 458 with SD 2.87. Learners from the 25% richest quartile got the score 558, SD of 5.37. 70 % of the grade 6 learners from the richest quartile read sufficiently well that they can be said to be functionally literate: the corresponding figure for the poorest quartile is 15 % (Miranda et al., 2011, Möwes ,2004).

Table 1. Learners' background and repetition of class in primary school

Repeated class	
Ed level head	
Less than primary	49 %
More than primary	25 %
Socioeconomic background	
Poor	53 %
Rich	20 %
Occupation head	
Blue collar	54%
White collar	24%
Problems paying school fees	
Yes	49 %
No	24 %

N=120

The case study data confirm that the learners' background explains the variation in school achievement (table 1). The most notable factors influencing repetition is learners' background and parents' attitude towards education. In addition, the language of instruction seems to be a factor explaining variations in repetition between learners.

The educational level of head of household is correlated with repetition. In terms of repetition, 49% of the learners had repeated class if they came from households where the head had not fulfilled primary education (table 1). Only 13% of learners coming from homes where the head had fulfilled higher education repeated class. In the school survey 10 % had repeated if their father's educational background was higher education. Learners from rural schools more often repeated class than urban learners.

Socioeconomic background and occupation of head of household are other factors which are correlated with repetition. Learners coming from poor and blue collar background were more likely to repeat class than learners coming from richer and white collar background (table 1). Parents from the lower socioeconomic end and with low educational level also reported that few of their children were doing well in school. Findings from the school survey confirm that learners from poorer households more often repeated grades. Financial barriers are also a factor influencing school repetition. Parents who reported problems paying school fees more often also had children that repeated class. Some parents said that they sometimes had to keep their children home from school because they had not paid school fees; other said that they could not send their children to better schools because these schools had higher fees which they could not afford. The same parents also more often claimed that their children in general were not doing well in school.

A close relationship between home and school is considered to have a bearing on how well learners do in school (Cummins, 2000; Ziai,2008). Parental participation is highly encourage in Namibia and their role is institutionalised in the Education Act 16 of 2001.The parents must be the majority on school boards and parent-teacher meetings must be held at least once a year. According to SACMEQ III study 75% of the reading teachers met with parents more often than that (Miranda et al.,2011). We looked at parents' attitudes with regard to education and how that may influence achievement. We considered "help with homework"; if "parents have spoken to the teachers"; and "have been in their classrooms" as indicators of how much the parents were involved in the children's schooling. 82% of the parents claimed that they helped their children with homework. This is higher than what is reported in a national study which found that 60% of the parents make sure that the homework is done (Mukuwa, 2004). Furthermore, 82% of household heads said that they have spoken to their children's teachers but only 58% have been inside their classrooms. Parents with children not doing well in school were more likely to have spoken to their teacher than other parents. This shows that schooling matters for most parents. Further data analyses revealed that the attitudes of parents also differed across income levels. While 100% of children from both average and well-off areas received help with homework, this was the case for only 65% of those from poor households. It was also found that 67% of poor households had never been in their children's classrooms as opposed to 10% and 27% of average and well-off households respectively. In a study in Windhoek, Möwes (2004) confirms these conclusions: he found that large classes, lack of learning material, low student performance and low parental involvement are causes of low achievement.

Even though many learners are not doing well in school the parents are in general satisfied with the education their children are getting and believe that further education would benefit their children. 75 % of the parents interviewed said that they thought their children were getting a good education and 100 % wished they could continue after finished primary education. It is interesting, however, to notice that whereas 33 % of the parents with less than primary

education said that their children were not getting a good education, the corresponding figure for parents with more than primary education was 11 %, and none of the parents with higher education complained about the quality of the school. It is plausible to draw the conclusion that these findings are due to the fact that in Namibia there are quality differences between primary schools. Partly this is reflected in the cost of attending these schools. So children from better-off homes are sent to better schools where they stand a better chance of getting quality education.

Language seems also to be a factor effecting achievement but the correlation is complicated. Learners with English as their mother tongue and also learners attending English medium schools did better in school than average. Furthermore, learners with an English or Afrikaans background less often repeated class if they were instructed in their mother tongue. But learners with Oshiwambo repeated more often it they were taught in their mother tongue than if they were instructed in English or Afrikaans. This is contrary to the general idea that mother-tongue instruction is the best. In general Oshiwambo speaker were more likely to repeat than the other two language groups (table 2). Results of the schools' case study confirmed this. This might be because the best schools had either English or Afrikaans as the medium of instruction from grade 1 and many of the schools offering other mother tongues were schools of lesser quality. Data indicate that this is in accordance with parents' perception of school quality. 95% of the richer and average rich households sent their children to schools with either English or Afrikaans as a medium of instruction from grade 1 compared with only 57% of the poor households.

Table 2. Language of instruction and repetition of class

	Repeated class	
English mother tongue		
Taught in mother tongue	14 %	
Afrikaans mother lounge		
Taught in mother tongue	25 %	
Taught in English		40 %
Oshiwambo mother tongue		
Taught in mother tongue	54 %	
Taught in English		41 %
Taught in Afrikaans		43 %

N=120

The education system encounters both quantitative and qualitative problems. Investments have not been able to keep up with population growth of 2.6%, and thus the resource situation in the school has deteriorated. For instance learning materials like textbooks are less available in government schools. In 2000, 47% of the learners reported that they had their own reading book; in 2007 it was only 32 % (Miranda et.al 2011). Doing homework is difficult without textbooks. The number of unqualified teachers is another problem: the majority of grade 6 learners in 2007 were taught reading by teachers who had only up to secondary education. And 10 % were taught by teachers who had only primary education (Miranda et al., 2011).

To sum up, learner achievement in primary education in Namibia is generally low. In addition, there are striking differences between schools, regions and learners. Learners from the lower socioeconomic quartiles are far behind those coming from richer households. Another factor which might explain some of the variation is the language of instruction. It is a fact that many children are taught in a language they do not understand or speak and this puts them at a disadvantage and explains the low achievement of many Namibian learners. Often these children come from poorer families (Wikan and Mostert 2011). The fact that not only does the richest quartile get higher reading scores but the standard deviation is wider than in the poorer quartile, which indicate that richer learners are offered better education.

CONCLUSION

The factors affecting school achievements are interlinked and are furthermore correlated with the quality of the school the learners are attending. We see that learners from rural areas achieve lower than those from urban areas and we know that rural school more often have fewer resources and less qualified teachers than urban schools. Wealthier and better educated parents can afford to send their children to the better schools and they more often tend to live in urban areas. Parents in this sample mostly saw education as very important and all wanted their children to continue after primary level.

Another conclusion is that unequal access to quality education reproduces inequality in Namibian society. It is a result of a number of background variables that work to the disadvantage of children from poor households. Children from poor households repeat more often and also achieve lower than children from wealthier households. This is not only

because they attend different schools; richer parents more often speak English at home and the children therefore stand a better chance to do better in school because they are more exposed to the language of instruction. This conclusion is supported by national studies as well as case studies (Miranda et al., 2011, Wikan and Mostert, 2011, Möeves, 2004). In fact many learners from lower socioeconomic background are functionally illiterate in grade 6. Thus inequalities in access to quality education in Namibia persist despite efforts to eradicate them and this is evident in the distribution of access, learning outcomes and resource inputs to education (Marope 2005). While a small percentage of privileged children enjoy a high standard of education, the majority of children in Namibia do not receive an education of such quality (Garrouste, 2011, Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2007).

The Namibian primary education system is not able to reduce social inequalities; on the contrary, it amplifies inequalities that are already there. For a large number of children in Namibia enrolment in school does not mean that they achieve even the basic reading competence that is a key factor for development of other capabilities. This is a loss for the individual. For Namibian society it means that the return on educational investment is low and investment in education is not a motor for economic growth or poverty eradication. The situation in Namibia seems to be in line with findings in a cross-country study of poor countries done by Pritchett (2001). He concludes that educational quality has been so low that years of schooling created no human capital.

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