

POSITION OF THE PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NAIROBI AFTER THE GOVERNMENT REINTRODUCED FREE EDUCATION FOR EVERY KENYAN CHILD

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Abstract

It has been 20 years since the government of Kenya reintroduced free primary education for every Kenyan child in the country. How has the position of formal private schools changed? Did they manage to find their position in the education market? Furthermore, is it the truth that public schools are free of charge? The study was conducted with founders, principals, headteachers, teachers, and parents from private primary schools in formal settlements. Data for the research were collected during six months of field research in urban and rural areas of the city in the years 2022 and 2023. The methodologies used were a combination of qualitative data collection, such as in-depth interviews, observation and focus groups. The research showed that after implementing free primary education, almost any formal private school felt a significant dropout of the pupils. In the period of the fieldwork, the significant dropout was only due to covid pandemic, and a slight decrease was in the upper grades due to different reasons. On the other hand, many parents have been returning to formal private schools in recent years.

Key words: Kenya, primary education, private schools, formal education

JEL Codes: A20, I21, I25

Introduction

Universal primary education was first introduced in Kenya in the late 1970s 20th century. However, this program was shut down in 1988 due to the Structural Adjustment Program to reduce the financial burden of the educational system. Repercussion meant parents had to contribute more to their children's education through cost sharing. (Although it should be noted that even when the government of Kenya decided to reduce the cost, Kenya was still among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa that spent the most on education (World Bank Group, 2020).) The state's role remained only to recruit and pay salaries to teachers. Parents

became responsible for buying school uniforms and textbooks for their children and had to help construct buildings and provide other equipment for the school. (Muyanga, 2010). This shared cost system has led to a high waste of primary education. The government registered a significantly lower enrollment to school, an increased number of children leaving the school, frequent repetition of the class and significantly lower transition of children from primary to secondary level. To reverse these fading trends, the government of Kenya reintroduced free primary education for every Kenyan child in January 2003. (Bedi, et al., 2002).

It is undoubtedly that Kenya was open and willing to provide education for their citizens. However, it is essential to mention that a considerable impact must have United Nations with Millenium Development Goals, where one of the eight goals was to achieve universal primary education. One of the proof is Children Act (2001) introduced by Kenyan Law Report, which calls for the right to education. The act says that every Kenyan child should have access to affordable and quality education based on Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Formal settlements are described by the United Nations as officially recognized by the government. In return, they must provide management, administration and reporting. To open and run a formal private school in Kenya means to have a registration permit and other permits to meet all requirements. Examples of the requirements are cleanness, size and type of classes, qualification of teachers, all facilities needed for the curriculum activities and others (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology - MoEST, 2015).

Kenya was one of the countries whose syllabus was criticized for being low quality and irrelevant. Therefore, in 2017 the government of Kenya implemented a new curriculum for the primary level, the Competency-Based Curriculum (later on as CBC), which replaced the former 8-4-4 system. Compared to the former system, the new curriculum has immense potential due to its focus on holistic education and skills, and the old approach was only examination-oriented. Instead of five to six subjects, children in primary schools currently have between nine to eleven subjects, including agriculture, craft and art, computer science, etc. The new system offers innovation and practical knowledge and supports lifelong learning. The new teaching style includes and requires using smartphones and other ICT technology (Bunyi, 2013). However, with new subjects and learning systems also come reskilling and retraining of the teachers, the need for new classrooms and other facilities, and possibly more teachers. Therefore, every school needs more financial resources for all the changes. To underline the statement about the potential of the new curriculum, the previous 8-4-4 system

provoked and stimulated corruption, cheating and unhealthy competition between public and private schools, and between each school in general, regarding the national examinations (final exams in the last grade of the primary level). This cheating process has been running for many years and is considered one of the country's most significant well-known corruption incidents (Amutabi, 2021). Compared to the CBC, the examination is based on pupils' talents, and cheating will not be easy. However, the first pupils doing new exams were in December 2022; thus, the real impact and possible positive changes will show the time. It is soon to tell if the cheating stays in the past since there are still concurrently running the last classes of the previous learning system (until the end of 2024). Therefore, the old examination processes are also running, again showing vast cheating cases (MoEST, 2022).

It has been 20 years since the government of Kenya reintroduced free primary education for every Kenyan child in the country. It is also six years after the beginning of the new curriculum. What is the current position of formal private schools? What was and still is the impact of free primary education on formal private primary schools? Does it change over time? Did they manage to find their position in the education market? Furthermore, is it the truth that public schools are free of charge?

1 Methodology

The research is focused on private primary formal schools in the city of Nairobi. The study was conducted with founders, principals, headteachers, teachers from private primary schools in formal and informal settlements, and parents. Asked parents had their children in public and private schools also. The methodologies used were a combination of qualitative data collection, such as in-depth interviews, observation and focus groups. Focus groups were organized only with teachers.

Data for the research were collected during six months of field research in urban and rural areas of the city over an eight-month period in the years 2022 and 2023. Schools were picked randomly from each county. There is no official website with a list of the private schools in the country or the city. Schools were mainly found on the map or by passing them. First visits to each school were always unannounced. Before coming to the country, I tried to contact many private primary schools. I wrote them an e-mail, but none of them responded.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 private primary schools; and 134 people. Schools can be divided into 13 formal and 23 informal private primary schools. Interviewed people can be divided into 33 owners and or directors, 11 headteachers, 27

teachers, and 65 parents. To each school and all respondents, I have promised anonymity and confidentiality. The research was not focused on international schools and big old Kenyan schools, which focus on prosperous communities and families within the country.

2 Results

Results are divided into three sections. The first one is right after the implementation of free primary education in 2003, the second one is between the years 2013 and 2020, when the new president won the election, and the new curriculum came into effect, and the last one after 2020, when global pandemic started until April 2023.

Position of the formal private schools between the years 2003 - 2013

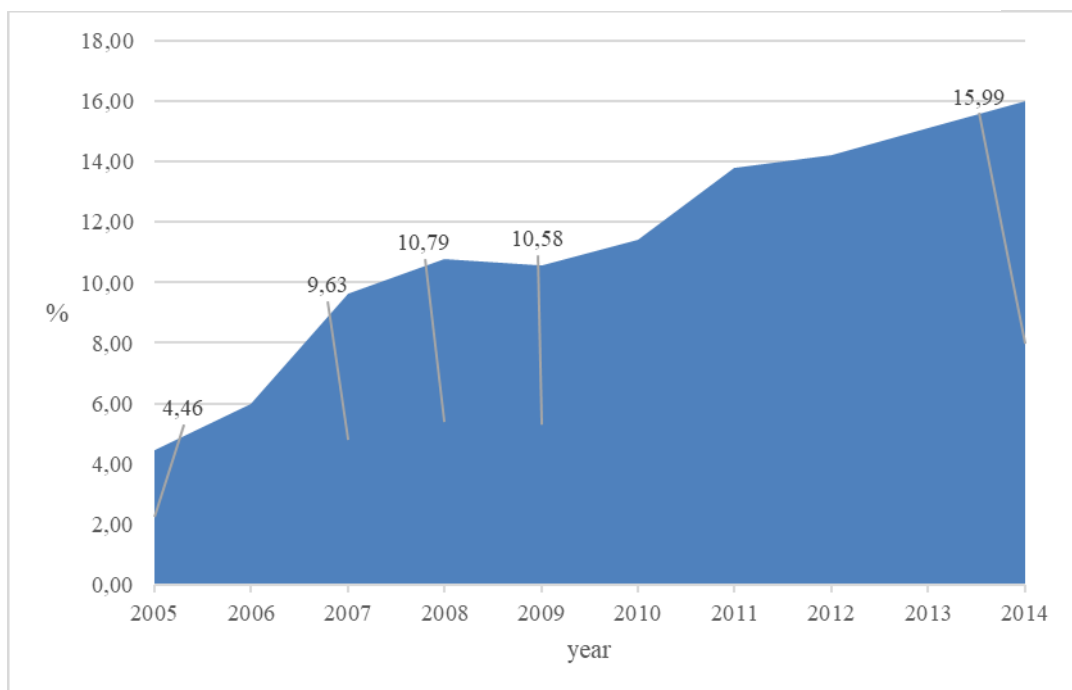
In 2003 and a few years after the implementation of free primary education for every Kenyan child, none of the formal private primary schools felt a significant dropout of pupils. One of the main reasons is that most parents whose children attend formal private schools are from the middle class, and before transferring their children, they wanted to see how public schools handle the changes. Most children who transferred from private to public school right after the implementation of free primary schooling came from poorer backgrounds, and their parents or guardians wanted to save some money. Most of them struggled to pay school fees fully and on time. Thus, they took the opportunity of free education for their children. However, the number of those pupils was negligible.

After a few years of observation, formal primary schools did not feel significant dropouts because the public schools were unprepared for such enrollment. They struggled with overcrowdedness, limited facilities, and the number of teachers. Most public schools did not build new classes and did not hire new teachers. The level of sanitation and hygiene significantly fell. Classes needed more desks, chairs, stationaries, and textbooks. Only a limited number of public schools were rewarded for all their needs. The situation arose where parents had to chip in and provide the missing and necessary equipment and other teaching materials. Many parents had to buy their children a desk, a chair, and books and give some money to the fund for missing stationaries. Pupil-teacher ratio rapidly grew. The higher number of children also influenced the motivation and activeness of teachers. Due to increased expenses in the education sector, teachers were not given higher salaries, even though they had double or more pupils in classes. The literacy rate and, overall, children's performance vigorously diminished. The situation escalated into a spiral, and children's

performance decreased yearly. Due to this reason, parents and guardians, who had the financial possibility to keep their children in private schools, were not interested in public schooling.

After a short period, many parents decided to reallocate their children to the private sector. Also, many new parents did not consider public school an option for their children anymore. The World Bank collected data in some specific years on the enrolment of pupils in the primary level, focusing on enrolment in the private sector. As is seen in Figure 1, the number of pupils who entered private schools was snowballing.

Figure 1 School enrollment, primary, private (% of total primary)



Source: World Development Indicators, 2023

The main reasons were worries and apparent differences in the performance and quality of education. With the increased pupil–teacher ratio, teachers did not follow each child's progress in the class or give their parents information. To have individual and active cooperation between the learner and the teacher, parents and guardians had to pay unofficial "motivational payments" to teachers. Those payments are still active today.

The overcrowdedness and low motivation of teachers made children from private schools perform significantly better than public school pupils. Therefore, more and more

children were reallocated each year from the public to the private sector because the performance of the pupils is one of the key elements for parents in deciding.

However, it is undoubtedly that the quality of education in public schools was significantly decreasing after the implementation of free education. Many pupils who entered the school would not have the opportunity in the case of mandatory school fees. Moreover, many of these children did not attend the school before 2003.

Position of the private formal primary schools between the years 2013-2020

In 2013 there were elections for the new president of the country. President Kibaki, who implemented free primary education, and whose second presidency was ending, was strongly criticized by the opposition and new president Kenyatta due to the situation in public primary schools. Considering the high outflow of children from public to private schools, the government of Kenya had to step in. Their solution was to prioritize children from public schools in admitting them to the public secondary school. Both public and private secondary schools in Kenya are still paid, and some of the public secondary schools are considered one of the country's best high schools. The amount of school fees in each school (nevertheless public or private) is different and based on the student's performance. The vast corruption and cheating environment started.

Parents experienced that their children from public schools with lower performances in national examinations were admitted ahead of children from private schools with significantly higher performance levels and vice versa. Secondly, only a few children from private primary schools were admitted to high-profiled public high schools. Thus, some parents and guardians were convinced to transfer their children to public schools, specifically for the last grades of primary school.

During this period, cheating cases started to develop, and they are one of the most significant issues for the Ministry of Education until today, as mentioned in Chapter 1. The schools found ways to see the exams and were teaching those questions directly. Another way of examining malpractices was and still is the allowness to use smartphones. (MoEST, 2022). A further reason for preferring public primary schools was and still is the possibility of scholarships in secondary schools. Public secondary schools are costly for many families. Children and their parents from the private education sector are considered as families with financial resources who can pay for education. Therefore these children are not eligible for

most of the scholarships. Nonetheless, any of the mentioned practices significantly impacted formal private primary schools. However, some pupils in each school were transferred.

In 2017, the new curriculum was officially implemented and had to be used in all primary schools. Despite this, no significant changes in the position of the schools started immediately since schools, parents, and guardians had first to understand and experience the real changes.

Position of the formal private primary schools after the year 2020

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the new curriculum brought new responsibilities for the schools, and new facilities and equipment were needed. As a result, the private schools' facilities are better established than the public ones and offer extra-curriculum activities. CBC also requires cooking, tailoring and needlework, agriculture projects, and animal care. Many public primary schools ask parents to provide all those materials, which means another financial burden and a limited version of the projects. (Each interviewed or mentioned school have one project per class per term. Each academic year has three terms).

With the new curriculum, a further national examination was invented. There is no grading, and each child has a written report from each subject. Secondary schools also have new admission processes where children must write essays and show their talents. Thus, the old system of admitting children to secondary schools is no longer possible. Many private schools consider it as their advantage and possibly lower the outflow of children and even inflow. However, this year, in January 2023, the first classes in secondary schools were open after changes in the system. Therefore, there are no yet experiences and opinions with the admissions process. Secondly, in January 2023, the first classes of secondary students were learned by the new curriculum.

Lastly, during and after covid pandemic since the year 2020, formal private schools experienced a significant outflow of children. Interestingly, the main reason was the outflow of families from Nairobi and moving to cheaper counties. Nairobi became expensive for many families and especially after losing a job. Any of the interviewed formal primary schools noticed tremendous outflow to public schools. The most significant decrease in demand schools experienced in the year 2021.

2 Conclusion

The position of the formal private primary schools after reintroducing free primary education in 2003 did not have very significant changes in Nairobi. Most parents and guardians whose children attended formal private schools were not attracted by free education since there was a significant decrease in the quality of public schools and overcrowdedness. Public schools even felt a significant outflow of children in a short period. To attract more pupils to public schooling, the government of Kenya started favouring children from public schools in the selection process to secondary schools and in scholarship requests. However, even this behaviour did not significantly impact formal private schools. Since 2017, Kenya has implemented a new curriculum, which requires using and teaching ICT technologies, new necessary classes were needed to be built, which also favoured the private schools since the Ministry of Education until today is not able to provide them for all their schools. The only significant impact on formal private primary schools was covid pandemic, where many families were forced to move from Nairobi to another, cheaper county.

However, research on formal private schools did not find significant changes; research on informal private schools should be examined. Pupils, who used to attend informal schools, are generally from poorer backgrounds, and the possibility of free education might have a massive impact on them. Furthermore, it is essential to mention that the CBC has only six grades, and the previous syllabus was made for eight primary-level grades. Therefore, all primary schools could soon struggle with significantly fewer pupils and lower income. Primary schools will be filled with only CBC pupils from the year 2025. Nonetheless, public primary schools have a lot of flaws and insufficiencies; it is undoubtedly, that providing free primary education was the right decision, and it has improved the standard of living for many of their citizens.

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