

Primary school performance within the public and private sectors: The Kenyan experience

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Abstract: *Kenya has made significant gains in both primary and secondary schools' enrollment in recent years and literacy levels have increased considerably from 10 percent in 1960 to 60 percent in 1998 for women and from 30 percent to 82 percent for men. Demand for private provision of education has also increased at all levels. At the primary level, this can be attributed to population growth, the fiscal constraints faced by the public sector and the high individual test scores on school examinations. The choice between a private and a public school is one of the main decisions that families and individuals have to make in Kenya today. Parents and students consider many factors in making these choices such as tuition cost, discipline, racial mix and the religious and moral values of the school. However, the first concern is the effectiveness of the school in producing academic achievements (Sifuna, 2003). Developing countries have been quite successful at expanding enrollments in education, especially at the primary school level. But, for schools to produce all round students, increased enrollments require increased resources. If these resources are not forthcoming, the increase in educational quantity may come at the expense of quality. Based on this background, this paper undertakes an evaluation of public and private primary school achievement in Kenya drawing on data from the national examinations.*

Introduction

There are two categories of primary schools in Kenya, namely public and private schools. The public primary schools are funded by the Government or communities and are managed through Parent Teacher Associations. The private schools, on the other hand, are established and managed by private individuals or organizations. Before 2003, primary schooling was a big burden to many parents. Actually, many children of school-going age were out of school. This is part of the reason why president Kibaki's NARC party swept into power by promising to make primary education free. True to their promise primary education was made free. However, no other infrastructure was put in place to facilitate the implementation. This gave rise to many problems that the government had not anticipated. First, over 2 million children joined the primary schools. The schools were overwhelmed by the numbers since the classrooms were not expanded or added (Too, 2004). Teachers were few and there were no desks or chairs for the newly enrolled pupils. Some classes still have over 100 pupils to date yet the average number expected in a class is 40. The teacher-student ratio was too big it did not make sense. The problems have never been solved to date. After realizing that the quality offered in the public schools was low, some parents transferred their children to private schools. As of now these private schools have more children than they did before the free education. This is where people can find uncompromised quality education for their children. In the public schools, pupils in some schools still sit on the floor or learn under trees. In other schools the teachers cannot master all their faces due to their great numbers. Maybe the situation will come to improve when the government expands the facilities and employs more teachers, though as to when is highly debatable (Aduda, 2005).

Literature review

The effects of class-size and pupil teacher ratio

According to (Boy, 2006) over enrolment has caused poor performance in public primary schools in Kenya. This is evident from the comparison by the Kenya national examinations results for 2006 and 2007 as presented below. The reality of teachers trying to teach over 100 pupils has become too common in public schools and has raised concern about academic standards and therefore questions the effectiveness of public schools. Teachers have complained of increased pupil teacher ratio. Many primary schools are understaffed as a result of the free primary education program. This therefore affects their performance (Too, 2005). The problem of high student teacher ratio is not unique to Kenya. When Uganda established the free primary education in 1997, they increased training and recruitment of teachers (Vreede, 2003). Enrollment in public primary schools have increased from 5.8 million in 2002 to about 7.2 million in 2003 following the introduction of free primary education and by 2004 it stood at 7.5 million. The number of teachers remained unchanged in these schools at about 180,000 and could even be less because of natural attrition (MOEST 2005). A recent survey by UNESCO (Daily Nation, 2005 p19) shows the average ratio in 162 schools sampled is 58:1, against the required 40:1. Such class sizes in public schools make it difficult for the teachers to teach lessons effectively as compared to their counterparts in private schools who handle a smaller number of pupils.

School inputs

The quality of education offered in a school is determined by the level of material inputs allocated to the school and the efficiency with which these materials are organized and managed to raise student achievement. Private schools provide good facilities to their students and teachers for instance; libraries and computer facilities. On the other hand in public primary schools teacher ratios did not keep pace with the rapid increase in pupils. Sifuna (2003) notes that free primary education in public schools has stretched teaching and learning facilities as a result of high number of influx of new pupils. In Tanzania the experience is quite instructive because the government had to construct additional 14,000 new classrooms countrywide so as to cater for the new enrollments. Lack of physical facilities in public schools remains the major impeding factor to the achievement of overall effectiveness in public schools. Private schools continue to administer periodic continuous assessment tests and regular examinations to achieve good academic results. Since the introduction of free primary education in public schools student assessment especially in continuous assessment tests have stopped. This can clearly explain why these schools continue to perform poorly. Large classes make it impossible for teachers to administer and grade their work and provide feedback on performance. Teachers working morale has remained low in public schools in Kenya due to low compensation.

Summary of candidates in top 100 positions in public and private primary schools in selected provinces in Kenya

Province	No. of candidates in public schools	No of candidates in private schools
Coast Province	20	93
Central Province	17	101
Nairobi Province	16	97
Rift valley	29	101
Western Province	57	66
Nyanza Province	59	55
Eastern Province	29	94

Source: KNEC Examinations 2007

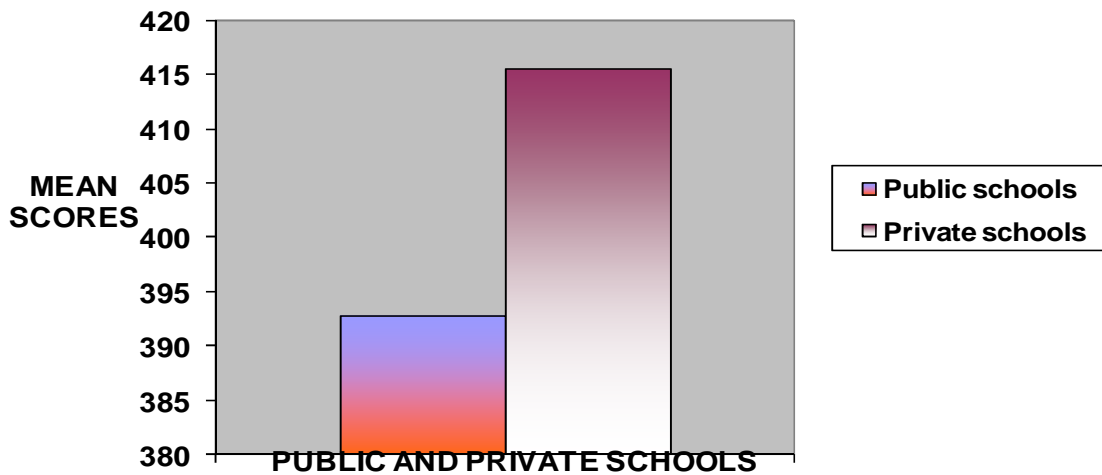


Figure 1: KCPE Results for Top Schools

Source: KNEC Examinations 2006

A comparison of the examination results released by the Kenya national examination council for the years 2007 and 2006 respectively clearly reveals that public primary schools have continued to perform poorly academically as compared to their private counterparts.

Recommendations

1. To ensure efficiency and effectiveness of the public and private schools, the quality of school inputs should be assessed and improvements made. Whereas teacher qualification is the most significant quality determinant in the private and public schools, other school inputs should also be considered.
2. Private schools should be allowed to compete fairly with public schools in student admission. All the secondary schools should appear on the choice list given to KCPE candidates. Admission of students with good academic background could improve the level of performance in the private and public schools thereby facilitating competition amongst the schools.
3. Individuals establishing private schools in urban areas should consider establishing educational institutions concentrated at one point so as to reduce the effect of other businesses on learning.
4. The question of teacher salary and pupil performance should be pursued especially in private and public schools where competitive terms are expected. The schools should endeavor to acquire excellent school inputs in order to improve their performance.
5. The Ministry of Education should carry out regular inspection of the private and public schools. This would enable the schools to improve on the state of their school inputs and hence better their effectiveness of instruction. Inspection should not be used to threaten the private schools into closure but to provide relevant information and solutions.

Conclusion

It is evident that privately managed schools achieve greater performance or academic value added than publicly managed schools. The reason behind this argument is that decision making in privately managed schools is less bureaucratic, more localized, and closer to the locus of information about school processes. Parents now fight to secure a chance in one of the expensive private schools which tend to limit class sizes in order to post better averages for exam rankings. The expectation from parents is that in return for their sacrifice, their children will score highly in their exams. Others highly question the quality of education offered in these public schools. As they say, even dirty water can quench your thirst, any education is better than none. They make do with what they are provided. Private schools have become very popular in Kenya in the recent past, especially in the primary education level. This is because since the introduction of free primary education, parents have been moving their children to private schools to access "better" education in terms of teachers' attention and the number of students in the class

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