

Analysis of Trends in Primary School Enrolment and Performance in selected rural Schools in North Eastern Uganda

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Abstract

Education is a key enabler and equalizer for livelihood opportunities and economic advancement of societies, and is indeed a basic human right. Unfortunately access to education is uneven, with rural communities especially in developing countries, having limited access to education. Hence this paper examines trends in enrolment and completion of primary school education in one rural district in Eastern Uganda. While there has been significant improvement in enrolment, the dropout rate is very high nationally ($> 60\%$), but being especially high for rural schools as shown in this paper. To avoid further marginalisation of rural communities through education divide, policy interventions are needed to enhance retention of children in school with particular attention being placed on retention of the girl child. Establishment of education infrastructure in rural areas coupled with programs such as school feeding are needed. Necessary measures also need to be put in place to enhance access to digital learning in rural areas, as there is a big divide between rural and urban areas in accessing digital learning opportunities. Communities also need to be mobilised and sensitized to play a more active role in supporting and promoting education in their areas.

Key words: Dropout, Eastern Uganda, Primary Schools

Résumé

L'éducation est un levier fondamental et un facteur d'équité pour les opportunités de subsistance et le développement économique des sociétés; elle constitue de surcroît un droit humain essentiel. Malheureusement, l'accès à l'éducation reste inégal, les communautés rurales, en particulier dans les pays en développement, bénéficiant d'un accès restreint à l'éducation. Ainsi, cet article se penche sur les tendances des inscriptions et des achèvements scolaires dans l'enseignement primaire de un district ruraux de l'Est de l'Ouganda. Bien qu'une nette amélioration des taux d'inscription ait été observée, le taux d'abandon reste extrêmement élevé au niveau national ($> 50\%$), et il est encore plus prononcé dans les écoles rurales, comme le démontre cette étude. Pour éviter une marginalisation accrue des communautés rurales par le biais de la fracture éducative, des interventions politiques sont nécessaires afin de renforcer la rétention des enfants à l'école, avec une attention particulière portée sur la rétention des filles. Il est essentiel de développer les infrastructures éducatives dans les zones rurales et de mettre en place des programmes tels que la cantine scolaire. Des mesures doivent également être prises pour faciliter l'accès

à l'éducation numérique dans les zones rurales, compte tenu de la grande disparité avec les zones urbaines concernant l'accès aux opportunités d'apprentissage numérique. Enfin, il est crucial de mobiliser et de sensibiliser les communautés à jouer un rôle plus actif dans le soutien et la promotion de l'éducation dans leurs régions.

Mots-clés : Abandon scolaire, Est de l'Ouganda, Écoles primaires

Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 agenda call for action to ensure access to education for all. Accordingly, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all Target 4.3 states that, by 2030, countries should provide equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and higher education. Achieving this target will facilitate the achievement not only of SDG4 but also of all other SDGs. In line with the above thrusts, countries have and are putting in place measures to increase enrolment at various levels of the education value chain. This is particularly critical for Africa where less than 20% of young people have access to education, with fewer women than men accessing education.

In response to the above need Uganda in 1997 launched the Universal Primary Education Program, to broaden access to basic education for all across the country. To cope up with the anticipated high enrolment in Primary Schools, which provides the pipeline to Secondary School education, Uganda also in 2006 launched the Universal Secondary School Education Program (see Wandera Otyolo *et al.*, 2022). However, while significant increases in enrolment are reported especially for Primary School Education, recent statistics indicate very high dropout rates with only 35-40 % of the students completing Primary School education (Table 1). Moreover other statistics indicate very low levels of rural children accessing higher education and other tertiary education opportunities. Hence, the main objective of this study was to examine the trends in Primary School enrolment and academic performance in one of the rural areas of Uganda (Kalaki District in North-Eastern Uganda), assess prospects for progress to Secondary School Education, and participation of the girl child in Primary School education. It is hoped that the information generated will help inform policy design and stimulate Community engagement to improve education access and quality in the study district, and hopefully beyond.

Table 1. Primary school dropout rates in Uganda

Years Enrolled in P.1	Year of Sitting PLE	Number of Pupils enrolled in P.1	No. of Pupils sat P.7	Dropped Out	% Dropout rate
2013	2020	1,875,553	736,942	1,138,611	60.7
2012	2019	1,876,565	683,302	1,193,262	63.6
2011	2018	1,839,714	659,663	1,180,081	64.1
2010	2017	1,943,552	631,282	1,312,270	67.5

Source: NTV

Study Approach

Kalaki district was selected for the study because it is located in North-Eastern Uganda, one of the most impoverished regions of Uganda and consistently recording poor performance in the National Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), Secondary Leaving Examination and Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (pre-University) Examination. Moreover, poverty and poor access to education are intrinsically linked. Five Schools (four boys and girls mixed Schools, and one Girls School) were sampled. The Schools provided School Students enrolment and PLE Performance data. Information on staffing and infrastructure were also recorded.

To gauge trend in enrolment, students' gender disaggregated enrolment data were collected for 5-6 years. The number of students in Primary 7 was used as a proxy to estimate the number of students that dropped out of school since enrolling for Primary 1 (first year of study). In the Uganda education system students start at Primary education level (seven years), proceed to secondary Education level (four years) and then to Higher School (two years) before joining university education if they qualify and so desire. This paper analyses trends in Primary Education enrolment only. A separate paper (Adipala *et al.*, 2023) examines enrolment at secondary school education level, while Adipala and Ekimwere (2023) provides insight into overall education access and enrolment trend for Uganda. Ekimwere and Adipala (2023) also discuss issues related to access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Findings

For all the five Schools, Kakure (Table 2), Lwala Girls (Table 3), Kakuya (Table 4), Kalaki (Table 5) and Opungure (Table 6), there has been significant increases in enrolment, especially for Primary 1 education. Notably, however, there continues to be very high dropout as one progresses from P1 to Primary 7, with Primary seven recording the lowest number of students. This is true for both boys and girls. Also significant to note is that the number of girls and boys were basically similar, even though overall there were more boys than girls.

At Kakure Primary School in 2019, there were 981 children in School, and this number rose to 1100 in 2023 (12.1 % increase) with similar numbers for boys and girls (Table 2). For Kakuya (Table 4), there were 628 children in school in 2018, and the number rose to 1157 in 2023 (a 84.2 % increase in enrolment). Notably there were again similar numbers for boys and girls. Kalaki Primary School had 980 students in 2019 which increased to 1222 in 2023 (24.7 % increase) but with overall fewer girls than boys (Table 5). In the case of Lwala Girls (Table 3), there were 1042 children (girls) in school in 2019 but the number declined to 1001 in 2023. At Opungure Primary School (Table 6) there were 864 children in School in 2018 and the number has since risen to 1161 in 2023 (a 34.4% increase). Notably for this school there were more female students than boys. Thus, there has been an overall trend of increase in students' numbers. It should be noted that these schools have old infrastructure that were constructed to accommodate at most 400 students. There is therefore gross deficiency in classroom space and also shortage in staff houses. Also the Schools (Except for Lwala Girls which is a boarding School) do not provide lunches for the children

The Performance of the Schools in the National Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) are shown in Table 7 for Kakure, Table 8 for Kakuya, Table 9 for Kalaki, Table 10 for Lwala Girls and Table 11 for Opungure. Overall there has been very poor performance with hardly any students passing in Division 1.

For example Opungure Primary School has had no Student passing in Division 1 since 2018. This trend is true across Kalaki district and to some extent in the neighbouring districts of Kaberamaido and Amolatar. As such many students from these schools fail to join Secondary School education. Part of the reason for the poor performance, apart from limited infrastructure facilities, is the low number of teachers in these schools (Table 12)

A primary purpose of this study was to not only establish the trend in enrolment but also to assess the students completion rates (See Table 13). Sadly the data indicate that while there has been increase in students' enrolment for both girls and boys, the dropout rate has remained very high, >70%, and this is across all the five schools studied. The dropout rate is higher than for the national figures (Table 1).

Table 2. Kakure Primary School Enrolment Trend for the last Five Years

Class	2019			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
P.1	99	110	209	99	111	210	90	115	205	185	175	360	110	121	231
P.2	110	71	181	112	76	188	108	82	190	112	83	195	98	119	217
P.3	78	77	155	82	87	169	81	84	165	124	98	222	102	65	167
P.4	91	82	173	90	89	179	89	82	171	90	109	199	62	81	143
P.5	66	57	123	68	60	128	67	58	125	99	107	206	73	87	160
P.6	46	58	104	48	59	107	44	53	97	83	77	160	56	58	114
P.7	10	26	36	10	25	35	15	23	38	35	54	89	33	35	68
TOTAL	500	481	981	509	507	1016	494	497	991	728	703	1431	534	566	1100

Table 3. Lwala Girls Primary School Enrolment Trend for the last Five Years

CLASS	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	F	F	F	F	F
P.1	200	206	205	393	265
P.2	149	151	152	191	182
P.3	144	169	170	221	168
P.4	225	22	225	252	176
P.5	155	170	170	257	90
P.6	126	81	81	119	72
P.7	43	45	45	63	48
TOTAL	1042	1048	1048	1496	1001

F=Female, i.e. Number of girl students

Table 4. Kakuya Primary School Enrolment over a six year period

Class	2018			2019			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
P.1	82	67	149	77	87	165	72	82	154	190	170	360	162	142	304	145	136	281
P.2	41	42	83	55	53	108	55	51	106	112	83	195	107	93	200	98	95	193
P.3	58	46	104	62	54	116	67	72	139	120	102	222	132	137	269	89	86	175
P.4	47	43	90	57	69	126	70	50	120	99	100	199	136	144	280	98	87	185
P.5	33	55	88	76	62	140	61	64	125	99	107	206	122	132	254	71	64	135
P.6	46	35	81	61	52	117	39	52	91	83	77	160	69	92	161	63	49	112
P.7	18	16	34	28	22	50	21	19	40	35	54	89	57	33	90	35	41	76
TOTAL	325	304	629	424	383	817	385	390	775	738	693	1431	785	773	1558	599	558	1157

Table 5. Kalaki Primary School Enrolment Trend for the last Five Years

Class	2019			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
P.1	101	109	210	122	87	209	128	117	245	122	127	249	109	106	215
P.2	110	71	181	70	67	137	104	111	215	114	102	216	118	119	237
P.3	78	77	155	56	70	126	95	102	197	105	122	227	135	124	259
P.4	91	80	171	112	95	207	122	115	237	103	115	218	97	81	178
P.5	66	57	123	60	62	122	88	83	171	95	80	175	60	50	110
P.6	46	58	104	48	50	98	82	75	157	85	62	147	56	65	127
P.7	16	20	36	19	25	44	-	-	-	23	20	43	48	54	102
TOTAL	508	472	980	487	456	943	819	613	1232	647	628	1275	623	599	1222

Table 6: Opunure Primary Shool Punure Primary School enrolment trend Over six years

	2018			2019			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
P.1	94	110	204	98	106	204	102	114	216	155	148	303	155	148	303	155	148	303
P.2	40	83	123	52	64	116	78	65	143	62	81	143	62	81	143	62	81	143
P.3	79	57	136	44	74	118	52	74	126	70	83	153	70	83	153	70	83	153
P.4	60	96	146	86	75	161	85	99	184	56	85	141	56	85	141	56	85	141
P.5	48	60	108	53	78	131	47	75	122	93	108	201	93	108	201	93	108	201
P.6	43	57	100	43	58	101	64	60	124	59	67	126	59	67	126	59	67	126
P.7	27	20	47	32	26	58	23	24	47	44	50	94	44	50	94	44	50	94
TOTAL	397	467	864	407	481	888	451	511	962	539	622	1161	539	622	1161	539	622	1161

NB: 2021 enrolment was not clear

Table 7. Kakure Primary School Comparative PLE Results for the last Five Years

YEAR	1ST GRADE	2ND GRADE	3RD GRADE	4TH GRADE	U GRADE	ABSENT	TOTAL No. students
2022	02	45	01	00	00	00	48
2020	03	27	00	00	00	00	30
2019	00	27	09	00	00	00	36
2018	00	26	10	03	00	00	39
2017	00	34	07	03	00	00	44

Table 8. Kakuya Primary School Comparative PLE Results for the last Five Years

YEAR	1ST GRADE	2ND GRADE	3RD GRADE	4TH GRADE	U GRADE	ABSENT	TOTAL No. students
2022	00	07	15	11	07	00	40
2020	00	26	13	01	00	00	40
2019	00	19	23	06	01	00	49
2018	00	07	18	07	02	00	34
2017	00	06	15	06	01	00	28

Table 9. Kalaki Primary School comparative PLE results for the last five years

YEAR	1ST GRADE	2ND GRADE	3RD GRADE	4TH GRADE	U GRADE	ABSENT	TOTAL No. students
2022	00	17	12	03	00	00	32
2020	00	19	15	05	00	00	39
2019	01	13	09	07	00	00	30
2018	00	13	15	11	01	00	40
2017	00	10	16	07	01	00	34

Table 10. Lwala Girls Primary School PLE Performance

YEAR	1ST GRADE	2ND GRADE	3RD GRADE	4TH GRADE	U GRADE	AB- SENT	TOTAL No. students
2022	02	27	02	00	00	00	31
2020	00	29	07	03	00	00	39
2019	00	33	09	01	00	00	43
2018	01	43	08	00	00	00	52
2017	00	25	11	01	00	00	37

Table 11. Opungure Primary School comparative PLE results for the last five years

YEAR	1 ST GRADE	2 ND GRADE	3 RD GRADE	4 TH GRADE	U GRADE	ABSENT	TOTAL No. students
2022	00	14	26	19	09	00	68
2020	00	15	22	09	01	00	47
2019	00	16	28	11	03	00	58
2018	00	13	16	16	02	00	47
2017	00	12	24	19	00	01	56

Table 12. Pupils and staff enrollment for sampled primary schools in Kalaki district for the year 2024

Name of School	Pupils' Population			No. of Teachers (On Gov't)			No. of Teachers (On PTA)		
	Male	Female	T.T	Male	Female	T.T	Male	Female	T.T
KALAKI	1026	1010	2036	09	03	12	00	00	00
KAKURE	735	765	1500	08	03	11	00	03	03
OPUNGURE	741	729	1470	05	06	11	00	02	02
LWALA	00	1642	1642	05	04	09	01	01	02
KAKUYA	691	599	1290	04	05	09	00	00	00

PTA=Parents Teacher Association

Discussion and Conclusions

The above findings point out to a number of critical issues in terms of access to education (see Ekimwere and Adipala, 2023), enrolment, retention, and performance and subsequent progression to Secondary School education. First, there is increased enrolment of students country-wide (see Adipala and Ekimwere, 2023) including in rural areas (this paper) implying that a) more students are able to access primary school education, and b) both girls and boys are joining primary school education but still with girls being fewer than boys. However, the increase even though showing positive trends is still low considering Uganda High population growth rate (3.8%). But even more startling is the high pupils' dropout rate with less than 30% of the students joining Primary 1 completing Primary 7 education (Table 13). These figure are higher than for the national average reportedly around 60% (Table 1). A number of reasons have been postulated for the high school dropout including lack of school feeding programs, cultural barriers that especially prioritize boys' education over girls' education, escalating cost of education, and high poverty levels in rural areas especially in North-Eastern Uganda.

Second, the poor performance of the rural schools in the National Primary School Examination, where passing is a prerequisite for joining Secondary School Education and progression to Higher Education levels.

Table 13. Relative Dropout rates (%) for five primary Schools in Eastern Uganda

School	2018			2019			2020			2021			2022			2023		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Kakure	-	-	-	89.1	77.4	82.8	89.1	77.5	83.3	83.3	88.3	81.5	81.1	60.1	75.5	70.0	71.1	70.6
Kakuya	78.0	76.1	77.2	63.6	74.7	69.7	71.8	69.4	74.0	81.6	69.2	75.3	64.8	76.8	71.4	75.9	69.9	73.0
Kalaki				84.2	81.7	82.9	84.4	71.3	78.9	-	-	-	81.1	84.3	83.0	56.0	49.0	52.6
Lwala Girls				-	79.5	-	-	78.2	-	-	78.0	-	-	84.0	-	-	81.9	-
Opungure	71.3	81.8	77.0	67.3	75.5	71.6	77.5	78.9	78.2	-	-	-	71.6	66.2	69.0	71.6	66.2	69.0
Average	74.7	79.0	77.1	77.0	77.8	76.8	80.7	75.0	78.6	82.5	78.5	78.4	74.7	74.3	74.7	68.4	67.6	66.3

Foot Note: Proxy values calculated from data for each school based on number of students in Primary 7 (Y, Completion Year:) as a percentage of number of students in Primary 1 (Starting class for Primary Education:X). Thus, children spend seven Years for Primary School education. M=Males; F=Females; T=Total number of students Percentage dropout calculated as; $(X-Y/X) * 100$

There are a number of reasons for the poor performance but notably low numbers of teachers in the rural Schools against high students numbers (Table 12). Action is therefore needed to increase significantly the number of teachers, and to create/provide incentives to retain teachers in rural areas. Moreover, most rural schools lack infrastructure to accommodate the increasing number of students, most are depilated, and with limited education materials. Only one of the five schools had a computer (one laptop), meaning that the schools are not able to attend or access online learning. Similar issues and challenges have been noted for the Universal Secondary Education Program in Uganda (Wandera Otyolo *et al.*, 2022) .

Third, the number of female teachers are significantly lower than for the male teachers, even in Lwala Girls Secondary School (Table 12). Uganda and indeed for Africa at large, more targeted effort and support is needed to increase the number of female professionals, who would amongst others serve as role models and mobilise policy support for strengthening inclusivity in development process.

Finally, the implication of the findings is that only few pupils in rural areas will continue to Secondary School education, implying that the majority of the young people in rural areas will remain uneducated, not skilled, and therefore unemployed. As such, the rural areas will remain uncompetitive and more likely underserved. Hence policy interventions are needed to a) further mobilise local communities and political leaders to invest in inclusive education programs, b) increase education infrastructure in rural areas, c) improve quality of education in rural areas, and d) increase the number of both female and male teachers.

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