

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND LITERACY IN UGANDAN FISHING COMMUNITIES: ACCESS FOR ALL?

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Abstract This paper explores the experience of formal schooling in three Ugandan fishing villages, highlighting through the findings of in-depth qualitative research the low educational attainment in fishing communities where very few children complete primary school and even fewer successfully transition to secondary school. The paper focuses on five areas: the reasons that children do not access formal education and drop out; the nature of the aspirations and attitudes of children and their parents towards formal education; strategies to formally educate children; the failure of those strategies; and official attempts to keep children in school. In conclusion, a nuanced understanding of the complexities of girls' and boys' everyday lives is essential to ensure that government policy is based on social reality to provide more positive life choices and outcomes.

Introduction

In Uganda, over one million people are engaged in the fisheries sector, many on an informal basis (Bahigwa *et al.* 2003). The sector significantly contributes to food security, foreign exchange, employment and local government revenue. Throughout the 1990s the sector expanded due to growth in the export market for Nile perch, and in 2002 it was estimated to be worth 220 million dollars, contributing twelve per cent of the country's GDP (Banks 2003). Fishing is a major source of livelihoods for rural and peri-urban communities situated around Lake Victoria and other smaller lakes in Uganda (Grellier 2004; Geheb *et al.* 2008).

The fishing industry hires many unskilled workers who reside in landing sites, temporary fishing camps and more permanent fishing villages on the lakeshores. These sites are dynamic centres of activity attracting different types of people – fulltime fishermen, male and female traders and fish processors, as well as service sector workers, in lodges, bars and restaurants and commercial sex workers. Many children live, and often work, at these sites (Westaway *et al.* 2007;

Walakira and Byamugisha 2008), a sub-population that is often forgotten in studies that focus on fishing sites as places of adult activity (Westaway 2008).

Fishing communities are often remote, lack infrastructure and are marginalised from governmental development initiatives (Allison 2003). Services such as water, sanitation, health and education facilities are often poor or entirely absent in lake-side villages and landing sites (Grellier *et al.* 2004; Keizire 2006). Children growing up in such places, in common with other rural areas of developing countries are often educationally disadvantaged, in terms of their access to formal education, compared to their urban counterparts (Meinert 2003; Ray 2003; Ansell 2005; Lewin 2007). The demands of the fishing industry, the strong occupational identities and incentives to remain in fishing are thought to negatively affect the educational outcomes of formal schooling in these contexts (Mad-dox 2006).

This paper explores the experience of formal schooling in three rural Ugandan fishing communities and highlights the factors which affect children's formal education, focusing on challenges to access and achievement; motivation and aspirations of parents and children; and the strategies already used to gain a formal education. Whilst acknowledging that formal schooling is only one form of education, the aim of this paper is to describe the underlying tension between the motivations of children and parents in accessing formal education and the demands and temptations of a livelihood based on the fishing industry. This is set against the background of increasing competition for jobs in Uganda where achievement in the educational system is becoming increasingly important to access job opportunities, especially for those seeking to move away from the rural areas in which they grew up (Meinert 2003; Seeley *et al.* 2009). In a situation of rising unemployment, and falling educational standards in the burgeoning numbers of primary schools, we call attention to the need for support for children in marginalised communities to gain a formal education that allows them to compete in the dwindling job market. We begin by looking at the background to education in Uganda as a whole.

Education in Uganda

Education Reforms

The Government of Uganda implemented Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and, acting on an election promise in 1996 undertook to provide free primary education for four children in every family,¹ which was amended in 2003 to benefit all children (Avenstrup *et al.* 2004). The government pledged to meet schooling costs (tuition fees and basic operational costs), while parents contributed school uniforms, meals, exercise books, local materials to build classrooms and physical labour (Nishimura *et al.* 2005). Following the introduction of UPE,² primary school enrolment increased by sixty-eight per cent, with inequalities in attendance related to gender, income and region being substantially reduced (Deininger 2003). The provision of free primary education has not been easy; Uganda has had to address the challenge of including ever-increasing numbers of children in an

already overstrained school system (Ward *et al.* 2006), with rapidly growing pupil-to-teacher, pupil-to-textbook and pupil-to-classroom ratios (Avenstrup *et al.* 2004; Jansen 2004).

Uganda's Education System

Uganda's education system includes both academic and technical training at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Ward *et al.* 2006). Formal primary schooling lasts for seven years, Primary one (P1) to Primary seven (P7), and the official age range is six – twelve years. At the end of primary school, a national examination, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PLE) is administered. Transition to secondary education depends on a child obtaining a satisfactory grade in the PLE and securing funding for all school requirements, including fees. Secondary school, which officially covers thirteen – eighteen years old, consists of two levels: ordinary secondary (Secondary one [S1] to Secondary four [S4]) which leads to the award of the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) or 'O' level and advanced secondary (Secondary five [S5] to Secondary six [S6]) which leads to the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) or 'A' level. Tertiary education includes universities, colleges of commerce, technical colleges and teachers' colleges. Both universities and colleges of commerce require the UACE as an entry qualification. Technical and vocational colleges train craftsmen/women, technicians and other skilled workers and require a UCE for entry as does admittance to primary teacher, police, soldier and nurse training.

Education Statistics

The gross and net enrolment and attendance ratios are three measures of education. Recent statistics for Uganda (UNICEF 2006) give gross primary school enrolment ratios (2000–2005) as 117 per cent for females and 118 per cent for males.³ These figures exceed 100 per cent, which is indicative of an educational system that is rapidly expanding. However, the gross enrolment ratio often overestimates the proportion of children receiving schooling, because it includes children enrolled in school who do not attend and children older than the official completion age, because they started late or repeated years (Ansell 2005). No figures are available for the net primary school enrolment ratio.⁴ The gross secondary school enrolment ratio (2000–2005) is fourteen per cent for females and eighteen per cent for males. This drops to twelve per cent and fourteen per cent respectively for the female and male net secondary school enrolment ratio (2000–2005), showing a gender disparity and that few children make the transition to secondary school. Net primary school attendance ratio (1996–2005) for females and males is eighty-seven per cent, and there are no figures available for net secondary school attendance ratio (1996–2005). Since these measures of education present a national picture, disparities between urban and rural schools are not visible.

Methods

Westaway spent ten months (December 2004–September 2005) living in Nanyolo village⁵ on the shores of Lake Kyoga in Kamuli District. Data on the daily lives of twenty-four children⁶ (aged three months to twenty years) at home, school, play/leisure and paid work were collected using surveys, focus groups, interviews, diaries and observations. Additional interviews were conducted with the children's parents; shopkeepers; service providers; traders; employers of children; fishermen and labourers; children attending school outside the village; secondary school children; recently married young women and men; school dropouts; migrating fishermen; older people; teachers; police; local councillors; and the fisheries officer. Nanyolo was selected because it is a rural, remote and bounded community experiencing high levels of chronic poverty and high HIV prevalence with a diverse livelihoods portfolio comprising fishing, agriculture and livestock, and a subsistence, local trading and export focused fishery.

Barratt spent a total of eight months (2007–2008) living in two fishing communities on the shores of Lake Victoria in Uganda. The first community, Mhinga is situated on the main shore in Mukono District, while Kitanba is located on the Ssesse Islands in Kalangala District. Data on risk perception and experience was collected using surveys, focus groups, key informant and life history interviews and extensive observations. Research participants were all adults ranging from eighteen – seventy-eight years of age.⁷ Mhinga and Kitanba were selected because they represented two different types of fishery on Lake Victoria, one focused on subsistence and local trading and the other a large scale, export focused fishery respectively.

Overall, the three fishing communities Nanyolo, Mhinga and Kitanba provide a snapshot of different types of fishing communities in which children are growing up in Uganda.

Research Context of Three Fishing Communities

We provide below a brief description of the socio-cultural context and information on the different schools that children attend in the three different fishing communities Nanyolo, Kitanba and Mhinga, and types of fishing-related jobs that girls and boys undertake.

Nanyolo

Nanyolo village is two hours by public transport from Kamuli town. People's livelihoods are diverse and include fishing and fishing-related activities, subsistence crop cultivation, livestock rearing and off-farm/off-lake activities. Nanyolo has been an important landing site on Lake Kyoga for over thirty years and has a fishing area extending six – twelve kilometres from the lakeshore. There are two landing sites in the village. The main landing site is where most boats with catches of Nile perch and Tilapia and *Mukene*,⁸ as well as the transporters, land. The smaller landing site lies to the east of the main habitation and is where boats using illegal

equipment and those with prohibited catches of under-sized Nile perch land, because the fisheries officer seldom goes there. Nanyolo is bisected by a road to Kamuli town that passes through the main trading centre and ends at the landing site, with most of the settlement lying to the west of this dirt road (Bahiigwa *et al.* 2001). In December 2004, the population of Nanyolo was approximately 500 people. By tribe, the majority of adults are Basoga, followed by Bakenyi (traditional fisherfolk), Iteso, Baganda, Baruli and Banyoro, as well as those from other parts of Uganda and Rwanda.⁹ Built in 1996, Nanyolo Primary School, which is poorly equipped, is situated on the outskirts of the village and has 600–700 pupils. There are secondary schools in Bulaya (seven kilometres away) and Kasege (fifteen kilometres away), and a Complementary Opportunities for Primary Education (COPE) centre and vocational institute in Kasege. Children undertake a variety of fishing-related jobs which are age and gender-specific. Fishing jobs are related to the type of fishing undertaken, such as hook, trap, line or net, and involve time spent on the lakeshore fishing; on the water fishing or paddling; at the landing site supervising boats, nets, fishermen and the catch; mending nets at home; and processing fish.¹⁰ For example, young children are often given the job of scaring birds/animals away from *Mukene* drying on the rocks in the sun; upper primary school-children often spend considerable time engaged in fishing-related activities: boys fish on the lake and load fish at the landing site, which are paid jobs, and girls are involved with *Mukene* processing for the household, which is unpaid work; male school dropouts often migrate inter and intra-lake as fish labourers.

Mhinga

Mhinga is in Mukono District on the shores of Lake Victoria. Although only seventy kilometres from Kampala the journey takes up to six hours in the rainy seasons due to the poor road condition. As a result, the community is quite remote. Mhinga (as defined by the local council [LC1] area) has approximately 700 residents with 250 people living at the landing site. Many people are involved in agriculture as well as fishing. It was only about ten years ago that the landing site developed. Until then people had fished from the landing site but had not lived there – the majority lived on the land they owned locally. There is a large ethnic mix in Mhinga. The largest group are Baganda but other groups include those from the north and west of Uganda, as well as some from Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The primary school in Mhinga caters for approximately 300 pupils. The nearest secondary school is approximately eight kilometres away.

Kitanba

Kitanba is located on the Ssesse Islands in Lake Victoria within Kalangala District. Approximately 700 people live at the landing site. This includes a large ‘floating population’ – men who have no home on the shore but sleep in the boats when they are out on the lake and then congregate in the open spaces or in bars at the landing site during the day. The main fishing activity is for Nile perch and Tilapia. The fish landing area, where fish are weighed and sorted on large concrete slabs, meets the European Union (EU) minimum standards for hygiene and sanitation, thus the fish can be bought by fish factories for processing and export. Seventy per

cent of the population are estimated to be Baganda and the remaining twenty-five per cent are largely other Ugandan ethnic groups. In Kitanba there is one small nursery which functions periodically. A government primary school is located next to the health centre two kilometres from the landing site. The school can take approximately 400 pupils and accepts children from six landing sites in the vicinity. Travelling overland, the nearest secondary school is thirty-two kilometres away.

Educational Attainment in Fishing Communities

Although many children in Uganda are enrolled at primary school in p1 and p2, few actually complete p7. Depending on which source is used, in Uganda as a whole only sixty-four or eighty-nine per cent¹¹ of children who begin primary school eventually reach p5, which is considered the minimum grade required to retain functional literacy (UNICEF 2006).

Each term, primary school pupils and secondary school students sit exams, which are in English. However, it is the grades they obtain in the end of year exams, which determine their progress. Table 1 shows the number of pupils by age and gender sitting the 2004 end of year exam at Nanyolo Primary School.

Table 1: Numbers of children registered at Nanyolo Primary School end of year exam in 2004

Primary school Level	Girls		Boys		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
P1	72	56.2	56	43.8	128
P2	45	44.6	56	55.4	101
P3	59	48.8	62	51.2	121
P4	41	47.1	46	52.9	87
P5	33	47.8	36	52.2	69
P6	16	43.2	21	56.8	37
P7	5	25.0	15	75.0	20
Total	271	–	292	–	563

Despite the large numbers of pupils in the lower grades (including several disabled children),¹² and the fairly equal ratio of girls to boys, at each successive grade there is a decrease in overall numbers of pupils, which is stronger for girls. This results in very few pupils (particularly girls) sitting their PLE. Fentiman *et al.* (1999) report similar findings in rural Ghana, and gender disparity is well-recognised in schools in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2000).

A poor result in end of year exams may lead to pupils repeating the school year. High rates of failure and grade repetition are common problems in sub-Saharan Africa schools (Bennell 2005). Hyde *et al.* (2001) found that over one third of pupils in Uganda had repeated a grade. In Nanyolo, of the thirteen study children attending school, nine primary school pupils are currently repeating, others have repeated previous years and several have siblings repeating. Peter (one of the study participant's who was twelve years old) says: 'I repeated p3 in 2004, because I was among the top last ones from the bottom and I was told to repeat'. A problem

with repeating is that children find themselves in a class with younger children, which can be frustrating.

For primary schoolchildren the most important examination they sit is the PLE at the end of P7, and the grade they obtain determines whether they can go onto secondary school. Hence, there is much pressure to pass the exam, as it can potentially lead to a future outside the home village.

Of the eighteen pupils sitting the PLE at Nanyolo Primary School in 2004, none passed in first grade, two boys passed in second grade and three boys and a girl passed in third grade, the remaining twelve pupils were awarded fourth grade or failed. First or second grade is required if a child is to be permitted to go on to secondary school and sit the UCE examination. The next step, for those eligible for secondary education, is obtaining support for secondary school requirements and fees.

Once enrolled at secondary school, students' progress is determined by end of year exams, but also by their continued ability to pay school fees and requirements. If they have not settled their bills by a particular date they can be expelled before sitting their end of term exams. Expulsion can have severe consequences for students if it occurs during the third term, as they will be unable to proceed to the next year.

Reasons for Not Accessing Education or Dropping Out

Children drop out of school for a variety of reasons. In Nanyolo, Mhinga and Kitanba, these include the offer of paid work, group influence (often in relation to fishing), household work, sickness of another household member, pregnancy, early marriage, lack of money, lack of ability, inheritance, long distances from school, and 'witchcraft'. These reasons for the low completion rates appear to be similar to government statistics, which found that, despite free primary education, cost is a factor for fifty-five per cent of dropouts in Uganda. Twelve per cent of pupils drop out because they need to work, twenty-five per cent because they have 'had enough school', thirteen per cent due to pregnancy or early marriage, ten per cent because of disability or illness, and ten per cent because they failed or needed to repeat a grade (GOU 2003). Although poor quality of schooling is not cited as a reason for dropping out, reasons classified as pupil-related, such as failure, having 'had enough' and disability or illness may be problems arising from the poor quality (Avenstrup *et al.* 2004).

Paid Work

The offer of paid work provides an escape, and several of the study boys in Nanyolo dropped out of school for this reason. Vincent (seventeen years) explains: 'This happened to Charles, because Patrick¹³ came with money for buying Nile perch'. Boys earn easy money working for Patrick as fishmongers, buying Nile perch from other fishermen. If a boy's relative or friend starts working for Patrick he is more likely to drop out of school as well. Charles (eighteen years) was encouraged by his friend Mudama (twenty-two years), who had no money to continue in

s2 at Bulaya Secondary School, but was offered work by Patrick. Hence, parents justifiably blame 'peer group influence' for their sons' dropping out, particularly in relation to the 'lure of fishing' and easy money.

Household Work

Most rural children in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to combine school and household work (Canagarajah and Coulombe 1997; Grootaert 1998; Bass 2004). An increased workload at home can cause irregular attendance, such as when crops are being planted and harvested, and lead to girls and boys dropping out. In Nanyolo, Vincent (seventeen years) used to miss school to look after his father's cattle. He says: 'I didn't attend school every day. I could go two days in a week'. Consequently, Vincent did poorly at school. He says: 'I used to fear exams. I could repeat if I failed the exam. I was among the last ten children'. Sickness of a parent can also lead to an increased workload at home and result in irregular school attendance. Like many fishing communities in sub-Saharan Africa, most households in Nanyolo are affected by HIV (Allison and Seeley 2004; Grellier *et al.* 2004; FAO 2005; Kissling *et al.* 2005; Seeley and Allison 2005; Keizire 2006). Teddy's mother is infected with HIV and when she is ill, Teddy (fourteen years) stays at home to do unpaid jobs, which include running the *Mukene* business, and she can miss a full week of school when this occurs. As her mother's health continues to deteriorate, Teddy's absenteeism is likely to increase and it is inevitable that she will drop out.

Pregnancy and Early Marriage

If a girl becomes pregnant she has to drop out of school.¹⁴ In Nanyolo, this happened to Peter's fourteen year old sister Harriet, who was having sex with Rogers' brother Adam (twenty-two years).¹⁵ Harriet dropped out of school in p5 in 2005 and stayed at home during the pregnancy doing household work, waiting for Adam. Since Harriet is fourteen, Adam was accused of defilement and ran off to avoid jail.¹⁶ Harriet's mother eventually forgave him and decided to press for a heavy fine (500,000 ush [15 pounds])¹⁷ and marriage instead of imprisonment. Adam returned to Nanyolo, keeping a low profile until the matter was resolved.

When girls find that they are pregnant they drop out of school and are usually forced to marry; some obtain abortions, run away or live at their parent's home with the baby and marry someone later. Yet even without becoming pregnant girls drop out of school when they marry. In Mhinga and Kitanba female respondents said that they were pushed into marriage once the money for school fees had run out.

Lack of Money

Despite UPE, lack of money to pay for school requirements, such as school equipment and to provide funds for food during the school day, is still a significant burden for some poor households. During a risk mapping exercise, where sixty respondents from Mhinga and Kitanba were asked to list and then rank the problems in their lives, 'lack of money' was mentioned by fifty-two per cent of them and was the most commonly ranked risk. The problem of paying school fees was

often mentioned during semi-structured interviews and the substantial reduction in fish catch in Mhinga meant that the number of children going to school had reduced. A local fisherman remarked: 'These years have been very bad especially in terms of getting food, clothing and children going to school. All the children no longer go to school they are just at home'. Hence, changing circumstances in the household, whether economic or through illness or death of a family member, play a major role in determining whether a child remains in formal education.

Of the limited number of children passing the PLE, many fail to make the transition between primary and secondary school, because of the cost. For the secondary school students in Nanyolo, finding 27,000 ush or 30,000 ush for fees alone each term is a struggle. Even though the boys do paid jobs¹⁸ (which are often fishing-related) after school and at weekends little money is saved, and they need parental support.

Some students obtain support from a sexual partner. In Nanyolo, Edward's cousin Suzan was twenty-one years old in s2 at Bulaya Secondary School in 2004. Suzan's parents had died of AIDS-related illness. She started having sex with Patrick, who had a wife and child in Kampala and who supported her schooling. However, on discovering that she had also been having sex with a teacher, Patrick broke off their relationship as well as his financial support during the second term. Many girls want a better life, including a formal education, and resort to providing sex to get the necessary money (Bohmer and Kirumira 2000; Nyanzi *et al.* 2001; Nyanzi *et al.* 2004; Bell 2007; Sadgrove 2007). The wider socio-cultural context of fishing communities, in which relationships between men and women tend to be very 'fluid' and the early age of commencing sexual activity may contribute to the acceptability of this behaviour among children in this context.

Distance

In Mhinga and Nanyolo, government primary schools were located in close proximity to the villages and in Kitanba the primary school was two kilometres away, although the school served other landings sites which were up to six kilometres away. The problem of distance is greater at secondary level due to fewer secondary schools in rural areas, so students have to travel longer distances, and bicycle purchase and repairs are extra costs. In addition parents who can afford private education may be motivated to send their children to schools which are further away because they are believed to be of higher quality (Meinert 2003).

Quality

In all three case studies, children and adults were aware that the quality of their local government schools was poor. Research both in Uganda and other developing countries has criticised teachers for their lack of professionalism (absenteeism, poor punctuality and failure to conform to local moral standards) (Dunne *et al.* 2003; Ansell 2005; Kremer *et al.* 2005).

In Nanyolo, children at school were frustrated at the lack of resources; frequency of teacher absences at primary and secondary school; punishment; unpaid jobs; sexual harassment; grade repetition; boredom; and irrelevant curriculum, with each of these factors providing adding to children's reasons to leave school.

Teachers' absences from class are all too familiar, as Peter's (twelve years) oral diary shows:

Monday 11th April 2005

When I reached school I was late and found the children had entered the classroom. We started with [social studies] only until break time. At break time I came home and ate *posho* and tea and went back. I found the children had entered the class but we had no teacher. We just shouted in the classroom up to lunchtime. I came back home, took dry tea and went back. We entered the evening lesson but there was no teacher who came to teach us. The bell was banged and we went to line up and were sent off home.

In Mhinga and Kitanba the parents were aware of the poor quality of local schools and this caused some households to try and educate their children privately despite the considerable cost burden that this entails. A fisherman in Kitanba stated:

The poor standard of education in the area also causes poverty ... a parent is forced to take their children to private schools which are very expensive and because parents want their children to get education they will remain poor to pay the fees.

Such is the hope of parents that a formal education will lead to a better life for their families that they prioritise expenditure on school fees, which may have repercussions on the well-being of other household members (Westaway 2008).

As these examples demonstrate, both social and systemic factors result in failure to include and formally educate all children. However, these factors are not mutually exclusive. Dissatisfaction with schooling lowers motivation to remain when personal circumstances are difficult.

Aspirations and Attitudes Towards Formal Education

In the past in Uganda, individuals who went to school and had a formal education were able to obtain jobs as civil servants in town, where they found prosperity, and some came back to their village to construct a house (Wallace and Weeks 1974; Meinert 2003). Formal education was thus a means of improving households' capital and parents could expect returns on their investment (Admassie 2003; Ansell 2005; Kielland and Tovo 2006). In Nanyolo, house or shop construction of fired bricks instead of mud bricks is an indication of prosperity, and many of the study children aspired to this dream. In 2005, some ex-fishermen were busy constructing fire brick buildings; having saved their earnings from fishing they had been able to diversify their livelihoods, for example by running a hardware shop.

Parents' Perspective

In a review of literature on education in fishing communities in sub-Saharan Africa, Maddox (2006) notes that while formal schooling is difficult to access, of poor

quality and unresponsive to the needs of fisherfolk, there is a high level of motivation amongst parents in fishing communities to send their children to school.

Many of the parents in all three case studies have a limited education, because when they were children attending primary school required fees, and if their parents were unwilling to pay they had little choice but to drop out or not attend at all. In Nanyolo, several of the children have reached a higher school level than their parents. Amuza (fourteen years) is more educated than his parents, but is less literate than his father, who ended in p3. Hence, many parents believe that educational standards have slipped, as a result of teachers becoming over-tolerant.¹⁹

In addition, the quality of the local primary schools was questioned by parents. They said that the teachers were not reliable and could not control the children. Parents felt they were entitled to free education under UPE but teachers were still demanding money for things such as lunch – so most households could not afford to send their children.

In our area what has made UPE schools to worsen is that teachers want money and yet the government said it is free education. The teachers send children home to get fees and they just stay on the way because the parents can't pay.

(Local council member, Mhinga)

Attitudes of parents, particularly mothers, are an important influence on children's school attendance (Deininger 2003; Ray 2003; Burke and Beagle 2004; Ersado 2005). In Mhinga and Kitanba the motivation to ensure children were educated was high, especially amongst mothers. This quote, taken from a very poignant interview with a fisherman's wife, illustrates how much it meant to her to ensure her children are educated: 'Whenever other children go back to school when mine have not gone, I even fail to eat, because I am not educated and I want my children to acquire education'. Parents want their children to pass exams and are proud when they do well and do not have to repeat.

Parents also considered educating their children as a source of future security for themselves, not just for the children. A woman married to a fisherman in Mhinga stated that: 'When God helps me and I get money for my children to go to school I get peace in my heart because I know that they are my ladders I can climb on in the future and get settled when I am old'. Even so, when money and food are short, children have to contribute to earning an income (Walakira and Byamugisha 2008) and money for school requirements cannot be spared.

Children's Perspective

Schoolchildren in Nanyolo indicate that they enjoy learning. Alice (fourteen years) says: 'I like to study and get knowledge for future use'. However, many school dropouts are barely numerate or literate, and the relevance of most subjects the children study is therefore debateable,²⁰ particularly in relation to formal employment skills (Bonnet 1993). At Kasege Secondary School, students must speak English (instead of Lusoga) and Florence (twenty years) can see the benefits. She says,

'I like to learn English to speak to people in offices'. With English as the national language, it is essential that rural children become proficient so as to stand any chance of future betterment.²¹ Other children emphasised the social aspects of school and having friends.

Schoolchildren have clear aspirations of what job they would like to do. Peter (twelve years) wants to become a doctor in America, Florence (twenty years) a nurse in England, Rogers (eighteen years) a policeman in Iraq and Isifu (seventeen years) a pilot in New York.

Like the children in Meinert's (2003) study, the children in Nanyolo defined educational success as proceeding through the system from primary to secondary school and then moving away from the local, rural environment into salaried employment. While having such aspirations is not a problem *per se*, the reality for these children is much bleaker, considering the level of educational attainment, financial support and sheer determination needed to succeed, as all the jobs they aspired to require s4 qualifications and above. Clearly, for children living in a rural location such aspirations are likely to cause nothing but frustration and disappointment (Meinert 2003).

It is interesting that in Nanyolo, where the children have been so enthusiastic about education, and also in Kitanba and Mhinga, that people in the community who were considered successful were often not formally educated beyond early primary level. In Nanyolo, Sarah (forty years) is the lodge-keeper and regarded as the most successful woman despite only being educated to p6. In Kitanba, the largest boat owner and most prominent figure in the community is a woman who owns over thirty boats, all with engines. She also finished her formal education in p6 due to family poverty. In that sense, schooling does not necessarily mean success in a fishing community, and fishing communities remain places where people who are not formally educated come to find work. People's success is often determined by business acumen and hard work rather than by qualifications. Even so, in Nanyolo, Patrick was making a small fortune transporting Nile perch to processing plants in Jinja and Entebbe. He is regarded as the most successful man in the village, is diploma-educated and came to Nanyolo to get rich.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm that children and parents demonstrate could be indicative of changing attitudes towards formal education as rural people are becoming increasingly aware of potential accessibility; particularly as all children are supposed to attend primary school, as a result of UPE. The fisheries officer for Kitanba remarked:

You go to a landing site and hear he [the person you are looking for] has taken his children back to school ... you see some fishermen going to Makerere [University in Kampala] to see their children graduating. I think there has been a lot of change in the way people look at things.

Strategies to Formally Educate Children

Three main strategies for providing children with an education were identified amongst households in the three fishing communities. The strategy adopted depends on a wide variety of factors, including wealth, social capital and family structure. The strategy may also change over time in response to changing circumstances which may affect the household.

Attending the Local Day School

Children attend local schools when their parents cannot afford to send them elsewhere, either for financial reasons or because of reliance on the children's work contribution, due to the lack of suitable relatives or because other options have failed. Hence, poor households engaging in this strategy may struggle to meet the relatively low economic school requirements and fees.

Attending a Less Rural Day School

The poor standard of local schools pushes some households to pursue other educational opportunities which they find very difficult to afford. Twelve of the children have siblings living in households outside Nanyolo village and attending different schools. Children are fostered with another family/clan member in a less rural area to attend a better school while also doing unpaid work for their hosts. Often girls are selected because they are more helpful to the hosting relative with domestic chores, as also found by Meinert (2003) in eastern Uganda. However, finding school fees and requirements remains a problem for parents in Nanyolo as the relative usually only offers a place to stay. Some of these children return home for school holidays and do unpaid jobs for their families.

Attending a Boarding School in a Town

This is the most costly option and only available to the richest households in the fishing community. Again, these children may return home during the school holidays and work for their families. Table 2 provides an indication of the costs incurred for each type of school.

Table 2: *Costs of different schooling options for children in Nanyolo village*

Type of school	Name/location of school	Costs (each term)
Local (Day)	Nanyolo Primary School	Exercise books, pencils, pens, uniform, four kilograms maize, 500 ush for the cook; 100 ush for the Catholic Church
	Bulaya Secondary School	Exercise books, pens, pencils, uniform, ten kilograms maize, four kilograms beans, 1,000 ush for the cook, 27,000 ush fees and 3,000 ush registration fees for the first term

Less rural (Day)	Primary school in Iganga District	Exercise books, pens, pencils, uniform, five kilograms maize, 3,000 ush motivation for teachers
	Secondary school in another part of Kamuli District	Exercise books, pens, pencils, uniform, fifteen kilograms maize, five kilograms beans, 40,000 ush fees (covers tuition fee, desk and school text books)
Urban (Boarding)	Secondary school in Kamuli town	Exercise books, pens, pencils, uniform, books 130,000 ush fees (including dormitory accommodation without a mattress), one ream of paper, slasher (large blade for cutting grass), 5,000 ush registration fees, mattress, bed sheets and pocket money of 20,000 ush

Failure of Strategies

Different strategies may be used at different times depending on household and family circumstances. Despite having the chance to leave, many children end up coming back to the landing site. There may be many reasons for this including events at home, such as sickness in the household or the death of an older sibling or parent, being taken back to live with the father following marital separation, a new husband not wanting the child around, relatives lacking funds for school fees, or running away back to the fishing village.

The cases of Emmanuel and Oliver in Nanyolo illustrate these points. When Emmanuel's (eight years) mother re-married, he was taken to Kampala to study, but things did not work out between him and the stepfather and he came back. He says: 'I could be schooling in shoes, because in Kampala children study in shoes'.

Oliver (twenty-one years) was a very promising student in s2 at Kasege Secondary School, but had to drop out when his father did not have money to pay the school fees. He was bitterly disappointed, but had 'nothing to do'.²² After trying his hand at fishing for a time, he went to Apac to bake *chapatti* in a fishing community and was successful there.

Alternatively, the child may themselves be unable to continue studying at their less rural school, for example because of pregnancy or early marriage.

As household wealth deteriorates, students may have to change to cheaper, lower quality local schools. Given the opportunity, the boys attending Bulaya Secondary School would prefer to be at a better school. However, faced with the constraints of insufficient money and long distance, Rogers (eighteen years), David (nineteen years) and Isifu (seventeen years) decided to attend Bulaya Secondary School, with David and Isifu changing from Kasege Secondary School at the start of 2005. After s4, David plans to attend Mpatonyi Secondary School for the UACE, as there is no appropriate school in the sub-county, and he will continue to be reliant on his father for support. He wants to become a lawyer. However, he is pessimistic about his future and queries the value of formal education, saying: 'There are no jobs'.

Official Attempts to Keep Children in School

Several of the children expressed views on what could be done to reduce the number of dropouts from Nanyolo Primary School. Three children felt that the government should implement Universal Secondary Education,²³ and another suggestion was that parents should be stricter at home. Curbing teenage pregnancy and preventing employment opportunities for schoolchildren were considered important. Yasin (fourteen years) suggests: 'By taking children into boarding school to avoid pregnancy', and Isifu (seventeen years) adds: 'By stopping children under eighteen years to do paid jobs in Nanyolo landing site'.

During the research period, three government initiatives relating to children were implemented in Nanyolo, two particularly addressing schooling. Early in 2005, a drive to dismiss all unqualified teachers and to remove teachers that failed to fulfil their roles resulted in Nanyolo Primary School losing the majority of its teachers literally overnight, going from twelve to eight (although only five of whom were active). Secondly, each sub-county appointed two adults to patrol the area and fine parents 10,000 uSh if their child is caught playing truant. Despite being understaffed the initiative has had a limited positive impact on school attendance. The third initiative was the distribution of *The Children Statute (1996) (GOU 1996)* by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to every LC1 in Uganda, with the task of sensitisation delegated to the police to increase villagers' awareness about children's rights.

The lure of paid work in fishing has been blamed for truancy and boys dropping out of school. A local bylaw was implemented to try and stop primary schoolboys playing truant to look for paid work as they want money for a variety of reasons, such as food, clothes, watching videos (in a place in the village) and school requirements. Now schoolchildren under fourteen can only be employed in paid jobs at the landing site after school and at the weekends. Members of the Beach Management Unit (BMU) committee were instructed by the LC1 chairman (who often chases village children to school) to cane any under-age children caught hanging around the landing site on weekdays, where the BMU is expected to monitor activities. In Uganda, caning and hitting children as a form of punishment is to a certain extent culturally accepted (McGaw and Wameyo 2005). Hence, parents, teachers, prefects and siblings resort to caning children as a means of discipline, and parents are quick to punish their children if caught playing truant.

The school curriculum has also been adjusted to try and make it more relevant for rural children who have limited life choices and are likely to have a rural life trajectory by including agriculture, but this has met opposition. Vocational institutes have also been set up, but they still require PLE/UCE and sufficient finances for fees. Hence, the government has been accused of agriculturalisation and vocationalisation and not improving the low quality of rural schools (Meinert 2003).

A Way Forward?

It is essential to recognise that in poor rural households, such as those in the villages described in this paper, it is not possible to improve school attendance simply by implementing compulsory education and preventing children from doing paid and unpaid work, because they make an important contribution to household survival (Admassie 2003). In addition, children gain valuable life skills through informal learning opportunities whilst undertaking paid and unpaid work. For example, school dropouts in Nanyolo often work as *Mukene* labourers for kin. Furthermore, many schoolchildren need to combine 'earning and learning' (Bissell 2005), to afford school requirements and, particularly for children attending secondary school, to contribute to their school fees (Nieuwenhuys 1993). Hence, secondary school children from poor households in Nanyolo often do paid work in the evenings and at the weekend. It is ironic, therefore, that any attempt at the enforcement of International Labour Organisation (ILO) child labour legislation would have deleterious consequences for many children. The challenge, therefore, is to appreciate the dynamics of how child poverty is experienced in rural contexts. Historically, few development policies have given much attention to the interests of children, although they have altered the contexts in which children live and grow up (Ansell 2005). However, there is increased recognition that in order to understand how children are affected by poverty, it is necessary to look beyond broad health and education data for indicators, particularly as greater awareness of child rights and empowerment is leading to a shift in childhood expectations (Rialp 2005). In recent years, many Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have been criticised as being neither pro-poor nor pro-child (Harper 2002; Marcus *et al.* 2002; Wordofa 2004; Jones *et al.* 2005), yet children under the age of eighteen represent sixty-two per cent of the poor in Uganda (GOU, 2001). While it would be naïve to assume that greater inclusion of children in the next Uganda Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) will lead to a significant reduction – or any reduction – in child poverty (such as in relation to educational outcomes), it is essential that data collection on children and their particular vulnerabilities should not be overlooked, in order to develop social policy based on the reality of children's lives (Witter 2002, 2004; Witter and Bukokhe 2004).

Children growing up in fishing communities confront many issues that enable or constrain their life choices. Hence, a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of children's everyday lives is important for understanding not only the inter-generational transfer of poverty, but also the transference of poverty over the life course, and to point to ways that damage from childhood poverty can be resisted or reversed (Yaqub 2002; Seeley 2008).

Conclusion

Currently, formal educational attainment in fishing communities is very low, a situation in common with many other marginalised rural communities in Africa (Bernard 2001; Bategeka *et al.* 2004; Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005). Although

reasonable numbers of children may access education initially, in the early primary school grades, very few continue to complete their primary school education and fewer still successfully transition to secondary school and obtain their UCE and UACE (Bategeka *et al.* 2004). In common with other parts of Africa there are many challenges which parents and guardians face in securing a formal education for their children and there are also challenges which the children face which may prevent them from obtaining an education (Stambach 2000). However, in addition to the challenges which children in fishing communities share with other children in Africa, we have argued that the socio-cultural context of rural fishing communities provides a particular environment which exacerbates these challenges. Children who do not do well at school or who drop out because of costs find their way to the lake – a destination where work without qualifications may be available. The geographical location of many rural fishing communities is another key factor, as they can be remote, isolated and lacking infrastructure.

Yet, despite these challenges, attitudes towards education remain positive (*albeit* unrealistic) and the importance of formal education is acknowledged by many of those interviewed in the three case study villages. The significance of education in some households is illustrated in the diverse range of strategies used by households and the children themselves, to try and gain a formal education. These strategies often go beyond just 'getting an education', showing an awareness that the standard of education is important. Some households are willing to pay a significant proportion of income in order to ensure a 'good' education because of the poor quality and lack of government interest in rural schools. Hence, the low educational attainment amongst children growing up in fishing communities does not reflect the underlying enthusiasm for education; however, there are significant barriers which prevent the achievement of better educational outcomes. Furthermore, because of the lack of options in these communities, children dropping out of school, many of whom are barely literate and numerate, must resort to skills acquired through informal learning in order to earn a living.

Notes

- 1 In families with both girls and boys at least two of the four children had to be girls and children with special educational needs were given priority over other children (Avenstrup *et al.* 2004).
- 2 UPE in Uganda is not completely 'free' because both the government and parents have financial obligations to meet in the education of children. The government has enacted legislation (The Children Statute 1996) (GOV 1996) to make primary schooling compulsory for the relevant age group (zero – seventeen years). Hence, it is mandatory for parents to send their children to school.
- 3 The primary/secondary school gross enrolment ratios are the numbers of children enrolled in primary/secondary school, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of children of official primary/secondary school age (UNICEF 2006). Primary/secondary school net enrolment ratios are the numbers of children enrolled in primary/secondary school who are of official primary/secondary school age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of children of official primary/secondary school age (UNICEF 2006). The primary school attendance ratio is the number of children attending primary or secondary school who are of official primary school age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of children of official primary school age. Secondary school net attendance ratio is the number of children attending secondary or tertiary school who are of official secondary school age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of children of official secondary school age (UNICEF 2006).
- 4 A problem with using net enrolment ratios is that school attendance may be underestimated by excluding children, particularly in rural areas, who begin school late, but may still complete the cycle (Ansell 2005).
- 5 All of the communities names included in this paper are pseudonyms.
- 6 The study included preschool, primary and secondary schoolchildren as well as school dropouts. Individuals attending school over the age of 18 are still considered as children.
- 7 Data was collected on household members, including children.
- 8 *Mukene* or *Omena* (*Rastrineobola argentea*) are small sardine-like fish that are widely traded in sun-dried form.
- 9 Of the 227 adults surveyed in December 2004, seventy-four per cent were Basoga, nine per cent, Bakenyi, six per cent Iteso, four per cent Baganda and seven per cent others (including unclassified).
- 10 Some households in the village, though none of those studied, process fish by smoking it.
- 11 According to administrative data (2000–2004) sixty-four per cent of primary school entrants reached grade five, whereas the figure is eighty-nine per cent in survey data (1997–2005) (UNICEF 2006).
- 12 Disabled primary school children were reported to have 'eye' and 'leg' problems.
- 13 Patrick (thirty-six years) is an important Nile perch transporter. He and his business partner Magino run two vehicles out of the main landing site and take the fish to Jinja and Entebbe processing plants. He buys Nile perch from fishermen and gives money to anyone willing to go and buy Nile perch, including school dropouts who buy from Teso every day and from fishermen on the water. Twice a week the fish are loaded into a vehicle from the containers in which they have been stored in ice at the landing site. A team of older boys are employed to weigh, pack and lift them into the vehicle. Ice is offloaded from the vehicle and older boys are often employed in this capacity. In addition, boys are paid to wash the empty containers.
- 14 Impregnating a girl, as well as becoming pregnant, is considered a reason for expulsion from school.
- 15 At the end of 2004, Adam separated from his wife and she took their new-born baby.
- 16 According to The Penal Code in Uganda (GOV 2000), the term 'defilement' is applied to all cases of sexual contact outside marriage involving girls younger than eighteen, regardless of consent or the age of the 'perpetrator'. Defilement carries a maximum sentence of death, or imprisonment for eighteen years with or without corporal punishment. Many boys and youths are accused of defilement if their girlfriend becomes pregnant, even when the sex was consensual. The girls' families often hope to be able to negotiate economic

compensation. Unless the boys/youths or their parents can pay the heavy fines imposed on them, they are prosecuted for committing a capital offence and sent to prison. Currently, the majority of inmates of prisons and remand homes are on 'defilement' charges Meinert, L. (2003). In rural areas 'defilement' is often dealt with informally, with the perpetrators held in the local jail until they or their families pay a settlement fine. Study children reported that in nearby villages, the families of some girls were deliberately setting up the unsuspecting boys/youths, catching the couple in the act and then demanding money. This is now a recognised form of income generation. Despite the legal age of consent being eighteen, most children in Nanyolo start having sex below this age.

- 17 In 2005, the exchange rate for one GBP, 3,200 ush.
- 18 Non-kin child employers who offered paid work included Richard (twenty-two years), Jane (twenty-eight years), Patrick (thirty-six years) and Sarah (fourty years). Richard employs children in his chapatti business and to fetch water; Jane runs a restaurant and employed children to fetch water; Patrick is a Nile perch buyer and employs children to buy and load fish, to wash containers and offload ice; and Sarah who runs the lodge employs children to sweep the huts, fetch water and to wash bed sheets.
- 19 Caning was more prolific when these children's parents were at school, as teachers followed the maxim: 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. In spite of a ban on corporal punishment in schools, teachers still resort to caning as they feel they have no other effective means of controlling and disciplining children.
- 20 Agricultural activities have recently been added to the primary school curriculum.
- 21 It is generally acknowledged that children perform better and learn faster if early education is conducted in a familiar language. Hence, the government acknowledges the importance of introducing local languages in lower primary school (p1-p3). However, if the local language itself or reading and literacy are not taught well, this can have repercussions on progress towards basic literacy, learning in other subjects and the later acquisition of literacy in English, which can affect access to education in upper primary grades and secondary school (Ward *et al.* 2006).
- 22 'Nothing to do', is a Ugandan saying, which implies that there is no choice or alternative.
- 23 In 2005, the government embarked on a one-year feasibility study into the provision of Universal Secondary Education (USE) for Ugandans who have completed primary education. The scheme targets low-income groups and children from rural families, and was implemented in January/February 2007.

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