

Schooling All Children: The Policy implications of Mothers' Educational Decision-making

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Abstract:

This policy brief reports on a research project Educating Daughters, Educating Sons: mothers and schooling in rural Kenya (Lukalo, 2010). It describes research findings about the conditions in which 32 mothers living in Bungoma District in Kenya make decisions about which child to educate, to what level and with what expectations. In this community, mothers have different levels of schooling, and different recollections of their struggles to be educated. They are raising many children with different kinship and legal relationships to them. The decisions they make about these different children's schooling highlight the complexities of the relational cultural world in which the mothers are positioned and signal the importance of bringing mothers and the family-education couple into the policy framework.

Views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

Context

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) recognized that the education of mothers would benefit the growth of poor nations. The two educational targets (Goals 3 and 4) concerned with gender parity and universal primary education reflect thinking within the World Bank and many international agencies that women's education has a causal link with other development outcomes and a direct effect on a reduction of poverty. The 1994 United Nations Conference on population and development welcomed the power of schooling to transform women's lives, stating that 'Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process' (*ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2*).

The schooling of girls in poor nations is a practical means of increasing their status and autonomy (*State of the World's Mothers Report*, 2009), but it is, as mothers,

that women are assumed to have the most impact. The EFA Global Monitoring reports (2003/4) centre women [mothers] as key to the process of poverty reduction through their involvement in family/household decisions.

'Women seem to spend more on education, health and household services than men' (UNESCO 2002), and 'children work less where mothers have an influence in decision-making' (UNESCO 2003/4). Therefore, through their actions as nurturers, making fertility decisions, encouraging the health and education of their children, the role of mothers within EFA is defined as critical to the welfare of families.

In practice, the assumptions made about about the centrality of motherhood by global monitoring Reports, international declarations about girls' schooling and poverty reduction appear not to have been used to shape educational policy. For example, the *EFA Global Monitoring Reports (GMR)*, 2010, 2007 and 2003/4 were relatively silent about the role of mothers in the delivery of education, how they can help ensure the successful implementation of FPE and the conditions for social transformation that need to be put in place to ensure mothers' support for all their children's education. The 2010 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* does not address the local context and gendered conditions in which mothers live and which shape educational decision-making. This lack of attention to the needs of mothers in relation to their children's schooling is an important omission that is likely to restrict the successful achievement of gender parity and equality in education. Mothers' exclusion from this policy agenda and from local and national policy-making makes it unlikely that the conditions affecting large families, especially those living in rural poverty, will be addressed. Schooling decisions will be assumed to be made on the basis of 'the child' rather than the many conditions of childhood, child rearing and children's education.

The introduction of free primary education (FPE) in 2003 reflects the Kenyan government's commitment to children's schooling and has become the central tenet of its scheme of educational reform (Palmer, Wedgewood, Hayman, King & Thin, 2007). Primary schooling is aimed at every child, irrespective of gender and ability. However, this initiative assumed certain levels of

poverty and degrees of marginalization and made assumptions that family units would be small; that *all* parents would be well placed to ensure *all* their children attended school; that health care would be provided; and that inadequate schooling could be 'overlooked' as children scrambled for free primary education. The government expected parents (as 'consumers' of education) to use this opportunity, especially since families did not have to pay for their children's education. The policy which was in line with its 2030 Vision initially received a positive reception with substantial increases in pupil enrolment in primary schools - rising from 5.9 million learners in 2002 to 6.9 million in 2003 with a 104% rise for girls and 97% for boys (RoK, 2007).

Lewin and Sabates (2009) note that, in 2003, there was a 140% enrolment of children in Class 1, apparently made up of a combination of over- and under-age students (ibid, 2007). Despite these numerical increases, the overall enrolment of girls over the years has been significantly lower than that of boys: in 2007, 4,217,100 boys to 4,012,200 girls were enrolled in schools (204,900 girls less). In that year, a further 1.7 million children were out-of-school (RoK, 2007). The gender equity, access and outcome debates that surround the FPE policy reflect an incomplete understanding of how discussions and activities within family homes influence the patterns of children's schooling. Lewin and Sabates argued that Education for All envisaged or assumed:

1. Increased primary school enrolments;
2. Increased participation in basic education, particularly from children from the poorest households in absolute terms and relatively to those in wealthier households;
3. A reduction in the numbers of overage children enrolling into primary schools and then moving on to secondary school (e.g. lowering age in Forms 1-2 in Kenya);
4. Curbing the ripple effect of overage enrolment in terms of increasing students' levels of achievement, avoiding premature dropouts, and gendered differences for students in levels of school participation.

The FPE initiative became a political campaign pledge for the new government which may have tacitly strengthened its public perception as a '*bure kabisa*' (a free commodity), potentially leading some parents to neglect their own role in the schooling decisions of their children (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). In 2002, this politicisation of schooling saw parents, especially those in socially marginalised communities, seeking economic relief, by holding their children back from enrolling in primary school. Wealthier parents, fearing the rush of the masses into free primary schools, enrolled their children in high-cost private schools

Researching Mothers' Role in Schooling

The study entitled *Educating Daughters, Educating Sons: Mothers and schooling in rural Kenya* was part of the Research Consortium on Poverty outcomes (RECOUP) research programme (2005-10). It focused on the experiences of mothers' engagement with their children's schooling in Bungoma District where the level of absolute poverty is experienced by 56% of the total population (Republic of Kenya, 2002-2008). The village was one in which the Elders and community were proud of the school they had built and put pressure on all families to make sure their children attended school. A household survey was conducted in 147 households to establish the gender educational patterns and interviews were conducted with 32 mothers (between 24 to 65 years). The main research questions were:

1. How do parents especially mothers living in rural communities make schooling decisions that encourage initiatives like FPE to succeed?
2. What are the effects of the numbers of children per family in poor rural areas on schooling decisions in the context of FPE?

Of significance was the number of children for which the mothers were responsible. Six children was the average family size with some families raising 12 children. This pattern which reflected polygamous marriage practices meant there were as many as 8 different mother-child relationships:

1. A biological child
2. An orphan
3. Fostered (belonging to immediate or extended family)
4. Adopted (for brief stays)
5. Child carer (relative)
6. Illegitimate or step-child (belonging to husband).
7. Paternity elsewhere
8. Child born of incest.

Case studies of 25 mothers - using biographical, semi structured interviews and observations- included those (a) with no or little primary schooling, (b) who had completed basic schooling only and (c) who had secondary schooling and had progressed into higher education (one mother was the teacher in the village school).

Maternal Shaping of Children's Access to Schooling

The findings of this Kenyan study concur with Johnson-Hanks's (2006: 11) view that, '...at issue in decisions about education, sex, and motherhood is the remaking of socially structured relationships'. Mothers' pedagogic values and their approval of schooling only for some children stemmed from their positioning within different family contexts, their aspirations in the family, cultural practices etc..

Janerose's situation described below demonstrates how many factors shaped her decisions. Janerose's situation reveals the need for educational policy approaches to address the real conditions of motherhood, the gender politics within households and recognition of differential child status in traditional communities.

Janerose, a mother living in poverty with her 8 children (2 sons and 6 daughters; aged 19-4 years old) had to make crucial decisions on *which* child attends school, *when*, *how* and *where*. Janerose had faced these schooling and everyday decisions for the past 12 years since her husband Wafula, a '*jua-kali*' artisan, migrated to work in Nairobi. Wafula remits little financial support and came home only during the Easter and Christmas holidays. Free primary education did not address the realities of Janerose's life. Her eldest daughter Brenda (19 years) was still in Class 7 and her two sons in Class 3 were living with her younger brother in Kericho where he worked in a tea factory. Janerose's decisions for her eight children were shaped by cultural rationalities of fostering, by the gendered relational world of her marriage and the community, by the poverty of her community and the lack of local educational provision. Her own sense of autonomy, domestic power and the level of support she received from fathers and husbands, from other women, and from her community determined the options she had to school her children.

Table 1 below offers a typology which distinguishes between four different types of maternal decision-making in Bungoma. The vertical columns indicate the resources available to mothers through their childhood education. The horizontal axis indicates mothers' aspirations particularly those they nurture for their

children. There are two groups of mothers with high aspirations - the so called 'climbers' and 'searchers', and two types of mother who, although different, have 'low' aspirations for their children: these two categories are the so-called 'disconnected' and 'resister' mothers.

Table 1: Maternal Engagements with their Children's Schooling

		Higher levels of schooling of the mother	Lower levels of schooling of the mother
		Aspirations	Higher schooling aspirations for their children
Lower schooling aspirations for their children	<p><i>'The Disconnected'</i></p> <p>Children's schooling Uses neighbourhood school. Supports children's schooling <i>when and if</i> possible. Generally exercises agency in blocking schooling; schooling is overcome by poverty, food shortages and entrenched cultural attitudes Tends to reserve schooling mainly for sons. Considers family circumstances before approving children's schooling.</p>		<p><i>'The Resister'</i></p> <p>Children's schooling Uses neighbourhood school. Largely negative in outlook towards schooling. Generally lacks her own agency or relatives to assist them; schooling is overcome by poverty, food shortages and entrenched cultural attitudes. If agency is exercised, it is against children's schooling. Does not care when children miss school to engage in subsistence agricultural work.</p>

Source: Lukalo, 2010 p.271

Although simplified, this typology demonstrates the different associations between a mother's life story (the personal level) and their valuing of children's schooling. It confirms Wolf and Odonkor's (1997) findings from Northern Ghana that mothers' styles of facilitating their children's schooling typically reinforce gender norms, the distribution of economic goods and personal preferences. Similarly Colclough et al., (2003) argued that gender, context and parental authority determine which child accesses schooling.

The typology also indicates the choice of school that would be considered relevant to that type of mother's decision-making and the level of educational support likely to be offered to children once at school. The decisions she makes in terms of which child is to be

educated out of some 6 – 12 children will vary according to her own sense of agency, her aspirations for the child and the family, the use of resources in the family, the choices of school in the locality, and her commitment to local cultural/gender traditions.

Policy Implications

Supporters of FPE tend to construct mothers in ways that imply they would be either 'the climber' or 'the resister', without recognising mothers with low levels of schooling who nevertheless wish to educate their children through personal ambition for their family to escape poverty and consequently push their children to school, thereby challenging gender conventions. They

do not recognise that mothers may have had a relatively high level of schooling themselves but because of strong cultural traditions, they might choose schooling for their children only when it is possible, and perhaps only for their sons – (i.e. disconnected' mothers).

Policies such as EFA stand to suffer if their assumptions are at odds with the impulses and priorities of parents in educating their children. In the case of Kenya, 'far too little is still known of the consequences, especially for pupils from poor families, of this major initiative of free primary education' (Palmer et al., 2007: 61). Arnot (2002: 130) notes that ignoring the 'family-education couple' marginalises women's educational roles as mothers and teachers.

Policies that recognise maternal pedagogies as having educational value and making a difference to children's lives can assist in supporting equality targets. Initiatives such as USAID 'Mothers for Children's Education' in Benin take the view that by supporting mothers, communities will promote gender equality and that whatever their status, 'every mother matters'. The Kenya findings reported here suggest the following strategies are needed to reinforce the family-education couple:

1. The linkage between education, health and environmental concerns affecting rural families needs added attention.
2. Poverty has grossly affected the lives of mothers and hence any policy must target the livelihoods of mothers.
3. Mothers must be seen to be educators themselves.
4. Policy makers must consider mothers as having the right to be educated themselves
5. Mother-child relationships are asymmetrical - therefore not all children will access schooling even in the context of FPE.
6. The numbers of children vis-à-vis the gender of sons and daughters will continue to affect who attends school, when and where.
7. The numbers of children in terms of disability and infirmity and the schooling decisions made for them.

Although parents are expected to partner schools in driving through the EFA target of schooling for all¹, such partnerships do not always work. There are continuing concerns about the level of parental participation, gender disparities and gross enrolments especially in Kenyan primary schools (Chege & Sifuna, 2006). These concerns raise the following questions about the conditions² in which schooling decisions are understood and actualised for sons and daughters at the family level:

1. What role can the government play in enhancing the participation of parents, especially disadvantaged mothers living in rural

communities in the educational decisions of their children?

2. How should mothers living in rural communities respond to educational policies like FPE?
3. To what extent are fathers involved in the schooling decisions of his family and how can schools most effectively work with fathers?

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¹ The 1990 Jomtien Conference promoted the Education for All (EFA) in Africa. However the role and expectations of parents as central agents in implementing the vision of Jomtien is not clearly spelt out.

² Poverty, subsistence agriculture and the culture of subsistence farmers are understood as 'conditions'; and the 'context' of schooling decisions refer to the gender and number of a mother's children.