Introduction

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Education Provision to Everyone: Comparing Perspectives from Around the World

Abstract

The provision of relevant and meaningful education to all, particularly but not exclusively to marginalised groups and in challenging settings, is essential for better and sustainable futures. Although access in the first place implies that education must be provided physically to all children in schools across the world, such education must be meaningful. In this paper I ask the question: To what extent is education meaningfully provided to everyone? Following a literature study, I specifically look at the reality of access and progression in River State, Nigeria and in Lesotho. Many challenges exist, and I argue that Comparative Education provides the academic platform to study these, towards improving the situation.

Keywords: education provision, access, secondary schooling

Introduction

The provision of relevant and meaningful education to all, particularly but not exclusively to marginalised groups and in challenging settings, is essential for better and sustainable futures (Alikor, 2014; Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010). Although access in the first place implies that education must be provided physically to all children in schools across the world, such education must be meaningful. Lewin (2007, p. 21) argues that access to education is only meaningful if it results in the following:

1. *Secure enrolment and regular attendance;*
2. *Progression through grades at appropriate ages;*
3. *Meaningful learning which has utility;*
4. *Reasonable chances of transition to lower secondary grades, especially where these are within the basic education cycle;*
5. *More rather than less equitable opportunities to learn for children from poorer households, especially girls, with less variation in quality between schools.*

While there are many commonalities, the education systems that are supposed to provide education in the different countries are influenced by settings and circumstances in different contexts. Education policies and practices and thus, also those that provide directives with regard to education provision are, in particular, influenced by local cultural, political, socio-economic, historical, geographical, demographic and religious factors, amongst other things (Steyn, 2015).

Over the past few decades, specific drives have supported education access and support for learners with particular barriers to learning (e.g. Salamanca Statement of

1994). While some barriers are the impediments within learners themselves (i.e. physical disabilities, limited intellectual abilities, sensory and neurological limitations, mental and other health problems, and so forth), other factors, such as unsafe and inadequate facilities, the curriculum, circumstances at home (such as poverty and illiterate parents), language barriers, cultural differences, war and conflict, and many other realities also prevent learners from making progress (Alikor, 2014; Jacobs, 2005; Ntlhokoe, 2013). Thus, when education provision is reflected upon, we need to recognise these external barriers in order to improve access, retention and success.

Findings from different countries

At the *Annual International Conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society* aspects related to education provision are regularly reported on, and challenges are explained. Meral (2015) for instance, reported on the situation in Turkey where learners with intellectual disabilities are marginalised in special classes, even though the claim is made that there is one inclusive education system. In particular, a relatively small number of girls are found in special education settings, raising the question if this is really a case of "a higher prevalence of disabilities for male individuals, or due to the possible effect of cultural and religious factors as well as social indicators in Turkey" (Meral, 2015, p. 151).

Genova (2015) highlighted the gap between the performance of Bulgarian pupils and those in other European countries in the 2012 PISA, with Bulgarian pupils lagging behind on all indicators. This has the potential to negatively impact on their employability within the Eurozone countries. Furthermore, within Bulgaria, a significant difference exists between the performance of less privileged children and those of their more privileged peers – vulnerable groups were identified as "pupils from Turkish and Roma origins, and pupils from lower income families" (Genova, 2015, p. 189). Furthermore, it seems that one out of every seven children do not complete secondary education in Bulgaria.

Shej (2014) argued that a greater commitment and a stronger political will is needed in Mexico to combat child labour, and to eliminate other hindrances that prevent migrant children from completing school, and thus potentially breaking the cycle of poverty. To overcome sociological factors, such as the cultural level of parents, social class, gender and circumstances, such as unemployment, crime and marginality, dialogic learning implemented in learning communities was, based on his study in the context of Spain, proposed by Roblizo Colmenero (2014).

It is clear that in many countries meaningful education provision to all groups is still an elusive goal.

Focusing on access to secondary education

Many other studies worldwide, focus on access to primary education and access for learners with disabilities. While I acknowledge that this is essential, the reality is that in the current global context, progression and access to secondary and tertiary education is as important, particularly for breaking the cycle of poverty. Yet, access to secondary education is not guaranteed after primary school education. Al-Samarrai (2009) for instance, found that in Bangladesh, children from more affluent

households are twice as likely to enter secondary education that their poorer peers. In Kenya, fewer than half of the children enrolled for primary education reach secondary education, inter alia because they do not complete the primary education cycle (Lewin & Little, 2011). In Kosovo, a large number of Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian children in particular, do not complete school, and specifically girls from these groups often leave school prematurely (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011). Less than 50 percent of children in India reach grade 9 (Lewin & Little, 2011) and in South Africa just more than 40 percent of students who enrol in primary school education, successfully complete secondary school education (Engelbrecht, 2016). These findings are in line with the argument by Maharaj and Siyakwasi (2013, p. 217) that race, class and gender "prevent the lower classes from acquiring upward social mobility". It is thus important to consider the state of the world, and in particular the situation in so-called developing countries, with regard to access and progression to, secondary education. In this paper, I specifically look at the situation in two parts of Africa, namely in River State, Nigeria and in Lesotho.

Rivers State in Nigeria

Rivers State is one of the 36 Nigerian states. It is situated at the southern tip of Nigeria, and its capital is Port Harcourt. It covers an area of approximately 21,850 km², has about three million inhabitants, and its economy largely depends on the oil industry. Large parts of the state are situated in the Delta area with typical mangrove swamps, while the rest can mainly be classified as being a tropical forest climatic zone (Wike, n.d.).

In Nigeria, the *Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act* was enacted in 2004, with the aim of open access for the first nine years of schooling and thus ensuring appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy and life skills for all upcoming citizens. Alikor (2014) points out in her study that while this policy obliges the state to provide free primary education services in primary and junior secondary schools, with the financing of this being the joint responsibility of authorities at federal, state and local levels, it is the responsibility of parents and guardians to ensure that their children are "registered and attend and complete their schooling" (Alikor, 2014, pp. 83-84).

Rivers State has 23 local government areas, and while there are more than 2800 primary schools, there are fewer than 250 secondary schools. The secondary schools are situated mainly in and around the capital, as well as in the Local Government Areas (Wike, n.d.). Furthermore, empirical data collected in the Rivers State show, that while education opportunities are provided, the environment is not always conducive to teaching and learning (Alikor, 2014). Alikor's mixed methods study amongst teachers, parents and students (between 12 and 19 years old) shows that schools are often understaffed, classrooms are overcrowded and because of the humid and hot conditions in the classrooms, students habitually do not pay attention. One teacher participant in this study pointed out the following out (Alikor, 2014, p. 118):

The environment is not conducive for both the staff and the students. I'm talking about my school presently because you can see the environment, when it is hot, you just cannot find comfort any place here ... the students are lacking concentration ...

most of them [the students] are always found at the gate wanting to be allowed out of the school premises ...

Furthermore, teacher resources are either lacking or outdated, and basic equipment, such as enough chairs for the learners to sit on, are in short supply (Alikor, 2014). Teachers and principals who took part in this study, indicated that the funding that is provided by the authorities are not enough to enable the implementation of free education to all learners. Contrary to the policy statements, parents are thus compelled to pay school fees, the feeding scheme is not working (learners are supposed to get three free meals a day) and teachers seem to believe that their salaries compare poorly with those in other Nigerian states, such as Lagos and Sokoto.

Even though teachers are well qualified and able to provide quality education, they struggle with large number of students in their classes, with less that twelve percent of the teachers who teach less that forty students at a time. One participant (Alikor, 2014, p. 119) explained that because of the widening of access to primary education, without expanding infrastructure, "the population of the school has greatly increased and is really affecting the classroom situation".

Alikor (2014) found that there are a large number of students who do not progress to senior secondary school. While the participants were convinced that girls do not have equal access to basic education, many boys also do not complete their schooling. One participant pointed out (Alikor, 2014, pp. 119-120):

You will see most [boys] running up to become Boko Haram and that is what we are now experiencing in this nation. It's as a result of decision of these drop-outs.

From the above, it becomes clear that there are many factors that negatively affect success in the first nine years of schooling in Rivers State, Nigeria. The progression of learners to senior secondary school education becomes less likely, and for those that do, notably fewer secondary schools are available, thus restricting opportunities to complete the school path.

Lesotho

Very different from the River State in Nigeria, Lesotho is a small mountainous country in southern Africa (30 355 km²), landlocked by South Africa, and with the third highest average altitude in the world. It has a precarious ecosystem, with extremely cold winters, hot dry summers, very little natural fauna and flora and many parts are unproductive due to shallow soil and severe temperatures. It has just over 2 million inhabitants, with the lowlands being more densely populated than the highlands (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015).

Lesotho's education system is largely supported by Christian churches, where most schools have a particular church group as proprietor. The country is divided into 10 administrative districts (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015; Lerotholi, 2001). The *Free Primary Education* policy was launched in 2000, and similar to the situation in Nigeria, this opened up access for children. Education is free for the first seven years of schooling, causing the enrollments in primary schools to increase notably. However, specific challenges exist to continue with schooling after this; Ntlhokoe (2013, p. 3) views secondary education in Lesotho as one of the "most inaccessible systems in the world".

In her qualitative study, Ntlhokoe (2013) found wanting an organised system to provide access and admission to junior secondary school in Lesotho. While parents apply to different schools, the majority struggle to secure admission for their children. One of the reasons for this situation is a problem with the administration of the application forms. Many applications do not reach the schools, and parents blame the primary teachers for this. Furthermore, there seems to be no clear directives from the education authorities on selection and admission, and feedback to parents. Schools seem to select the "best" learners, and do not give feedback to the parents of those who are not successful. Thus, parents often find out too late that their child has not been accepted at any school. Schools, particularly the minority of schools that are perceived to have good discipline and to obtain good results, receive numerous applications and can thus pick and choose. As one principal explained (Ntlhokoe, 2013, p. 60):

> *Our criterion is that we only admit learners who have obtained a first class pass within all the subjects.*

On the other hand, schools that are perceived to be performing ineptly, keep on admitting learners who performed badly in primary school, thus sustaining the cycle of poor performance. One principal expressed the frustration that comes with this, as follows (Ntlhokoe, 2013, p. 60):

> *The disadvantage is that we admit weak learners who have only passed three subjects who are quite weak. Sometimes we admit learners who scored F in English. This is problematic because at secondary schools, English is a medium of instruction. In Form E* [the final year of secondary school in Lesotho]*, English is a core subject but at primary school it is not.*

Another problem is the limited number of schools, and the capacity of the schools. Schools will often turn learners away, and request them to apply the following year. Yet, when the learners try to apply again, they are informed that they are too old.

The amorphous system of admission, and the limited access to secondary education negatively impacts on the communities. Parents spend many hours trying to get their children enrolled at schools. One parent explained (Ntlhokoe, 2013, p. 63):

> *We went there for several weeks going daily. I had to stop going to work so that I had to go to that school waiting for the response.*

Teachers on the other hand find themselves being blamed and even victimised in the community, because many children cannot be admitted to a particular secondary school due to limited capacity (Ntlhokoe, 2013). Some parents, moreover, believe that schools accept bribes from parents in order to gain access for their children to some schools.

Contrary to what is happening in most developing countries, the relative number of boy children who are admitted to secondary school, is notably fewer than their female peers. Two significant reasons for this exist. Firstly, many boys are expected to herd cattle on behalf of the families, and thus they are not able to attend school (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015). Secondly, boys are perceived to be unruly, and thus schools do not want to admit them. In particular, many boys go to traditional initiation schools, after which they are regarded by the community as "men" and not "boys".

Schools refuse to accept these boys into secondary schools, because they are perceived to misbehave. One parent exclaimed (Ntlhokoe, 2013, p. 62):

> *Even if [a boy] has passed Standard 7 well, if they can go to initiation school, they do not admit them.*

A challenge for girls, on the other hand, is that if they fall pregnant, they are not allowed back into the secondary school system, and thus they drop out.

Another aspect that negatively impacts on progression to secondary education is the challenge in Lesotho of orphans and child-headed households, inter alia, due to the high prevalence of HIV and AIDS (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015). One principal explained "Many children are orphans at the moment. In several instances you will find that there's no one to pay fees even if they have passed" (Ntlhokoe, 2013, p. 64). Although such orphans are supposed to get social grants for school fees, it seems as if many orphans do not further their school career, partly because of fees.

Taking into account all of the above, as well as the fact that secondary schools have space only for less than 14 percent of the learners who enter Standard 1, the situation in Lesotho is critical.

Conclusion

While claims are made in terms of widening access to education in many countries of the world, there is a need to explore the nature and meaningfulness of education provision and the restraining factors. It seems that a particular need exists to focus on access, progression and success in secondary education. Still, ground-breaking work towards relevant and meaningful education provision at all levels needs to be acknowledged. Clearly, many challenges exist, and these can only be addressed by researchers who will provide authentic information about the situation and from which policy makers can draw. Voices on innovative teacher training, significant teaching practices and reforms in school and higher education spheres need to be heard. Transformational leadership and appropriate education policies are necessary in order to respond to the challenges. More research towards relevant and meaningful education provision is essential, and needs to remain part of the international Comparative Education discourse. For many decades, Comparative Education, and conferences, such as the *Annual International Conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society*, have been providing a platform for such studies, and will continue to do so in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

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