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Primary School in the Global South: A Case Study of Uganda

Abstract

Attending primary school is a key part of a child's typical biography in Uganda, as outlined in the free Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. However, the transition to secondary education is often financially out of reach for most families due to the high cost of tuition fees. Poverty frequently forces many children, especially those in rural areas, to work, negatively affecting their ability to attend school and succeed there. Furthermore, numerous students fail their final examinations because these assessments require proficient English skills. This significant educational inequality undoubtedly results in social disparity and hinders social mobility. Despite these challenges, there is a growing awareness of the necessity for reforms within the education system. For instance, primary schools teach English alongside regional languages, and Kiswahili has recently been introduced as a second foreign language. There is increasing recognition of the importance of multilingualism. Also, this analysis explores the perceived barriers to educational access and progression in Uganda, drawing insights from transcribed dialogues. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, the study systematically examined discussions surrounding the costs of primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as the broader socio-economic context of families. Findings reveal that financial hardship stands as the primary and pervasive barrier to education across all levels.

Parents encounter substantial termly costs for primary schooling, further compounded by the presence of multiple children. The article highlights that, despite existing educational initiatives, the significant and increasing financial demands of schooling in Uganda create a tiered system where economic status has a profound influence on educational opportunities. This necessitates systemic interventions to alleviate the financial strain on families and enhance equitable access to education for all Ugandan children.

Keywords: Primary education, Uganda, transition, social disparity, teacher

1 Introduction

The article provides a comprehensive overview of the Ugandan education system. It traces its history and current setup, with a particular focus on the crucial transition from primary to secondary school. Uganda is confronting significant socioeconomic challenges and high levels of educational attrition, particularly in the primary education sector (Kabay, 2021). For students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, completing primary education often marks the end of their formal academic journey. The training of primary school teachers has improved considerably, evolving from college programmes to bachelor's degree-level university curricula. Despite numerous national policy documents related to primary education and teacher training (e.g., Uganda National Examinations Board), there is a notable lack of comprehensive national and international scholarly research on primary education in this East African country (Nakabugo & Oonyu, 2018). The Universal Primary Education Act of 1997 guaranteed free primary education for all children (De Kemp et al., 2008, p. 13; African Population and Health Research Center, 2016, p. 7). As of 2008, approximately 90 % of Ugandan children between the ages of 6 and 12 were enrolled in primary education (De Kemp et al., 2008, p. 40). Nevertheless, the country still grapples with substantial illiteracy rates (Kabay, 2021). Unesco's goal of achieving inclusive education for all children by 2030 (Unesco, 2017) makes it essential to closely examine primary education in Global South contexts, such as Uganda. This article presents a detailed examination of the historical factors that have shaped Uganda's educational system. It adopts historical and systematic perspectives (Section 1). It then proceeds to analyse the current structure of primary education in Uganda (Section 2) and the training of primary school teachers (Section 3). Section 4 focuses explicitly on the critical transition from primary to secondary education, where stark disparities in educational progress become evident. Concrete case studies in Section 5 illustrate the challenges of this transition. Three research questions guide these case studies.

The article explores how socio-economic inequality contributes to high drop-out rates in primary school and identifies the obstacles that prevent pupils from low-income backgrounds from advancing beyond primary education. It also investigates the lived experiences of those who completed only primary education and examines how these experiences reflect the impact of socio-economic factors. Selected excerpts from two narrative interviews (Witzel, 2000) with primary education graduates support a critical literature review in this study. These empirical insights deepen our understanding of the current state of primary education in Uganda and its related challenges, affirming the validity of the findings. Primary education is a fundamental pillar for societal development and is a pressing issue, especially in the Global South, where

significant challenges concerning access and quality persist (Kabay, 2021). In Uganda, a nation that exemplifies these complexities, the pursuit of universal primary education has made notable progress alongside ongoing challenges. Analysing primary education in Uganda provides a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities in the Global South, offering valuable insights for developing effective strategies to enhance educational outcomes and promote equitable development. Considering the demographic development in Uganda and across the African continent, it becomes evident from the demographic figures that the future of the world population will largely constitute Africa rather than Europe. By the end of the century, Africa's population is projected to grow from approximately 1 billion today to around 3 billion, primarily due to high birth rates (United Nations, 2017).

The starting opportunities for children in Uganda vary, such as access to the educational language, English. Pupils who have not previously attended nursery school do not begin with the educational and official language of English until they reach primary school. At the start of compulsory education, English is taught in primary school as either a first foreign language or a second language, alongside the respective regional language in which lessons are conducted. Recently, Kiswahili has emerged as the second foreign language regulated by national curricular requirements and is now taught in primary schools across the country (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Sports, 2016). In recent years, there has been a growing awareness in Uganda of the benefits of reflecting on one's East African roots and languages, rather than merely perpetuating an education system influenced by post-colonial ties to the British system. Furthermore, there are curricular developments at the university level that allow for a high degree of freedom in teaching and research. However, a significant level of control persists through educational policy guidelines that have characterised the same stakeholders for decades. This tension is not easily resolved.

2 Influence of the History and Prehistory of Uganda on the School System

2.1 General Information

Uganda is a landlocked country in East Africa, bordered by South Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, Tanzania to the south, Rwanda to the southwest, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. The borders with Kenya and Tanzania run partly through Lake Victoria. Uganda covers an area of 241,040 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 36 million, resulting in a population density of around 170 inhabitants per square kilo-

metre (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024; World Bank, 2022). Although forty-three languages are spoken in Uganda, the official languages are English, Swahili, and Luganda, particularly in the autonomous kingdom of Buganda. According to the 2023 UN Human Development Report, Uganda ranks 159th out of 193 countries, having transitioned from the lowest to the medium human development category, with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.550 (World Population Review, 2022). This improvement indicates progress in life expectancy, education, and national income. The HDI incorporates gross national product per capita, life expectancy, and education levels. Despite being one of the least developed countries, Uganda's gross domestic product (GDP) stands at approximately \$48.77 billion, while Germany's GDP reaches around \$4.5 trillion (World Bank, 2023). Over the past twenty years, the percentage of the population living on less than \$1.90 per day, equivalent to less than \$60 per month, has decreased from nearly 70 % to just over 40 %. However, approximately 90 % of the population is still expected to live on less than \$5.50 a day, or less than \$160 a month in 2024 (The World Bank, 2019). Despite its current economic growth, Uganda therefore remains one of the poorest countries in the world. In concrete terms, this means that half of the population lives in rural areas and has no secure daily access to drinking water, and just under 5 % of the population can use electricity (Harnisch, 2005; UNESCO, 2017c).

2.2 Brief History of the Ugandan School System

Located on the equator, the landlocked East African country of Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894. In 1907, Winston Churchill, a British politician and later Prime Minister, was highly impressed with Uganda's landscape that he named it the "Pearl of Africa" (Churchill, 1908).

This name described Uganda's stunning scenery, tourist attractions, and equatorial climate. The "Pearl of Africa" remained a British Protectorate from 1894 until 1962, when Uganda gained independence. Before the introduction of missionary education in 1877, Uganda had its own educational system. This indigenous education aimed to impart native culture, promote ethical conduct, teach the local language, and develop numeracy skills. It also equipped Ugandans with practical skills, techniques for environmental survival, and self-defence. Hanson (2010) noted that the Ugandan educational system differed significantly from the British missionary schooling. Prior to the missionaries' arrival, formal schools and classrooms were non-existent (Ssekamwa, 1997). Most Ugandans, including kings and chiefs, were illiterate by English standards and communicated using local dialects for governance.

With the arrival of British and French missionaries, learning centres were established to teach reading and writing in English and French (Hanson, 2010,

p. 160). Ofcansky (1996) reported that the first primary schools were built around missionary residences, with secondary schools opening between 1900 and 1920 to educate the children of kings, clan leaders, and government officials. The British introduced a Western-style curriculum that focused on English literacy, arithmetic, social studies, religious knowledge, and science. Alongside English literacy, considerable emphasis was placed on African geography and history (Musgrove, 2012). For many years, the Bible and the Prayer Book served as primary literature in these schools, broadening Ugandans' cultural knowledge and understanding of neighbouring countries. Ssekamwa (1997) revealed that Makerere College was established in 1922 to prevent Ugandans from travelling abroad for higher education. Due to the fear, that they would assimilate Western ideas which could incite native rebellions. This educational institution was later renamed Makerere University, and it is currently the largest university in Uganda.

During the colonial period, a curriculum centred on European and Christian values was enforced, which was significantly influenced by missionary organisations (Paige, 2000, p. 34). Consequently, the enduring impact of Great Britain and Christian churches is still apparent today. For instance, school-children wear uniforms and learn English from their first school year. However, students have had the option to choose between Christian and Islamic religious education since 2010 (National Curriculum Development Centre, 2010). Following the end of colonial rule, the Ugandan government gradually assumed control of the education system and secularised it. The first post-independence government, led by Kabaka Muteesa I and Milton Obote, upheld the British educational system but placed emphasis on promoting an African perspective to foster a Central African, specifically Ugandan, identity (Thomas, 2023). The political upheaval that began with Idi Amin's seizure of power in 1971 led to a period of instability, during which the government significantly reduced state funding for education. The expansion of the education system during this period largely depended on overseas private initiatives, which often retained European Christian influences. Thus, a post-colonial-missionary pedagogy emerged (Paige, 2000, p. 21).

In 1986, the National Resistance Army appointed Yoweri Kaguta Museveni as the new president, a position he has held since. Under his leadership, 80 % of primary education was returned to state control (Ahmad et al., 2006, p. 208f). The Ugandan school system is deeply rooted in the British colonial era. School uniforms are mandatory, with each school designing its own. Teachers conduct lessons throughout the day and assign homework. The school year is divided into three terms, each followed by short holidays. The terms are as follows: first term (February to May), second term (May to August), and third term (September to November). Students receive a report card at the end

of each term and the school holds promotional examinations at the conclusion of the third term. A two-month holiday follows the third term, ending in early February. Parents or guardians typically pay school fees for private or semi-private schools at the beginning of each term. Studies show that higher student-teacher ratios in public schools negatively impact students' learning, resulting in lower student performance (Tsimpo & Wodon, 2023, p. 2).

3 Primary School System

3.1 Overview

Uganda's primary education system comprises state-run schools, private institutions, and non-formal learning centres (MoES, 2010). Government schools represent the majority, accounting for approximately 64 % of the total, while private schools, including community, entrepreneurial, faith-based, and NGO-owned establishments, comprise the remaining 36 % (EDUFINANCE, 2023). The official primary education cycle lasts seven years, catering to children aged 6 to 12 years old, as outlined by the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy. The curriculum is divided into three levels: lower primary (P1-3), middle primary (P4), and upper primary (P5-7). Core subjects include English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, that are taught by teachers. Supplementary subjects, such as Arts and Craft, local languages, Physical Education, and Music, are also included, but are not formally assessed in school. Students must complete the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) at the end of P7 to progress to secondary education, which leads to the awarding of the Primary Leaving Certificate.

Before attending primary school, children aged 3 to 6 can attend preschool or kindergarten. In kindergarten, both the respective regional language and English are used as the language of instruction. The nursery stage of education is not part of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme (Juuko & Kabonesa, 2007). Since the government of Uganda is not obligated to fund preschool or kindergarten education, the financial obligations fall directly upon the parents of the children. To ensure the smooth operation and success of pre-schools, the government of Uganda provides guidelines and minimum standards for school buildings, equipment, and teacher curricula (Musika, 2019). The government also provides teacher training programmes to ensure that teachers meet the requisite eligibility criteria and have necessary tools for teaching (The Education, Pre-primary, Primary and Post Primary Act, No. 13 of 2008). However, primary education is still regarded as the first level of formal education in which pupils follow a standard basic curriculum. Consequently, between 2007 and 2017, an average on slightly more than 11 % of

children within this age group attended preschool (Najjuma & Kibirige, 2019). The global average for preschool facilities during the same period was almost 67 % (Unesco, 2020). This stage of education appears to be out of reach for the majority of children, particularly those in poorer regions, such as rural areas. The significance of early childhood education for a successful school career is well recognised and is, therefore, already limited for almost 90 % of Ugandan children (Ezati et al., 2018).

Uganda was one of the first African countries to propose the implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. The UPE policy was a Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG 2) aimed at ensuring that every child in Uganda, both boys and girls, would complete a full course of primary schooling (Burnett & Felsman, 2012). At its implementation in 1996, the UPE plan eliminated tuition fees for all school-going members of families, as well as the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) charges (Grogan, 2008). Nevertheless, the government committed to providing academic facilities and facilitating teacher training and salaries. The removal of primary schooling fees led to a substantial increase in gross enrolment from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003 (Bategeka et al., 2004). By 2013, total pupil enrolment in primary schools reached 8.4 million, and by 2016, it increased to 8.7 million students (Namirembe et al., 2017).

One of the most positive effects of universal primary education is the enhancement of childhood literacy, which effectively extends childhood and therefore delays early adulthood, particularly in terms of child labour. Seven years of school attendance have contributed to a significant increase in literacy rates among 15- to 24-year-olds, rising from just under 70 % in the early 1990s to over 90 % in 2022 (OECD, 1980-2024).

The general phenomenon of school attendance prolonging childhood and delaying early entry into adulthood has also been observed in Uganda. Recent research indicates that girls from rural areas are marrying and bearing children later than previous generations (Nagashima & Yamauchi, 2023, p. 600; Unesco, 2022). However, there are various factors that need further improvement, as the quality and content standards of public primary schools remain inadequate and, in some cases, are declining, despite state support. Specifically, this means that various pupils still leave school with only primary education or perhaps none at all (Hedger et al., 2010).

Education has direct and indirect costs for families. There are e.g. the costs of school uniforms in primary schools, one for everyday life and one for sports lessons. Children in poorer families can receive support at school, such as free school uniforms. However, children at state schools also wear everyday clothing, because the school uniform is not affordable for many. Kindergarten facilities partly use school uniforms as well as some universities. The financing

of school uniforms is already perceived as a big investment for many families in Uganda.

Table 1: School System in Uganda

Age	Educational level	Cycle	Award
21	University	3-5 years (ages 19-21)	Diploma Degree
20			
19			
18	Upper Secondary (A-level)	2 years (ages 17-18)	Uganda advances certificate of Education (UACE)
17			
16	Lower Secondary (ordinary level)	4 years (ages 13-16)	Uganda Certification of Educa- tion (UCE)
15			
14			
13			
12	Primary	7 years (ages 6-12)	Primary Leaving Examination (PLE)
11			
10			
9			
8			
7			
6			
5	Pre-Primary	2 years (ages 4-5)	-
4			

3.2 Private, Public and Rural Primary Schools

According to the Education (Pre-primary, Primary and Post-primary) Act of 2008, Uganda's primary education landscape is diverse, comprising various types of schools. It features a dual system that includes both state-funded and private schools. State-funded schools are government-run and typically offer free or subsidised education, particularly under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programmes (Republic of Uganda, 2008). This system includes government-maintained primary schools, as well as numerous church-affiliated and independent private institutions.

Among the private schools, there are strictly Islamic primary schools as well as mission schools operated by various Christian denominations, some of which are organised as single-sex schools (Muhumuza, 2018).

The Ministry of Education enforces a standardised national curriculum across all state schools. In contrast, private schools may follow other educational frameworks, particularly in international schools, such as English, Canadian, or Dutch curricula. Like many low-income countries, Uganda faces significant challenges regarding school infrastructure, which hampers its ability to adequately serve the student population. This infrastructure deficit is primarily due to ambitious educational targets and rapid population growth. The average pupil-classroom ratio in primary schools is exceptionally high, especially in impoverished and rural areas. This ratio is typically higher in state schools than in private and NGO/religious schools (World Bank, 2016). As mentioned, Uganda operates a parallel education system that spans from nursery to university, dividing facilities between state and private schools. Most state schools frequently have classrooms that lack windows or adequate lighting, with many students crammed into small spaces.

According to the study by Brunette et al. (2017), the repetition rates of 30 % to 40 % beginning in Primary 1 are regarded as relatively high by parents and teachers. Grade repetition and student dropout in public schools present a significant challenge (Kabay, 2016, p. 580; DHS, 2011). Disparities between state and private schools extend beyond facilities to encompass human resources. The average pupil-teacher ratio in a typical primary school is approximately 53 (UBOS, 2021), though it can rise to as high as 100 in certain cases.

Rural schools face particularly challenging conditions (Tsimpo & Wodon, 2023, p. 2). For instance, many school buildings are in poor conditions or are entirely absent, leading to lessons being conducted in tents or outdoors. Electricity is not guaranteed, making it difficult to prepare teaching materials and necessitating face-to-face, oral instruction. Traditional teacher-led instruction predominates in these large classes, although state schools are gradually incorporating project-based learning and group work, where students document their findings on posters. Democratic teaching or participation (Ranson, 2019) and learning methods are scarcely present. Cooperative learning approaches exist to some extent, but they are difficult to implement due to a lack of space and human resources (Ngaka, 2006). Class sizes are substantial, averaging approximately 84 children (UNU-WIDER, 2014). Standard classroom layouts in Ugandan primary schools typically feature desks arranged in rows facing the teacher. Given the large number of pupils, there is a significant emphasis on structure, classroom management, and discipline (Miiró & Ahmed, 2021). Since English is taught as a foreign language from P4 at the latest, following local languages such as Luganda can be an almost insurmountable hurdle for children in rural areas, where the local language is often used in daily life. Large classes are viewed as a key issue here. There are roughly 43 pupils per teacher at the elementary level, which significantly exceeds the

world average of 23 and even surpasses the sub-Saharan African average of 38, according to UIS data.

Families who can afford to send their children to private schools typically do so because of the declining state investment in public education and inadequacies in the public education system (ISER, 2023).

In these schools, class sizes are smaller, more educational materials are available, and there is greater support from teachers. This environment makes it more likely for students to progress from primary to secondary school. However, the proportion of smaller classes stands at just 13 % and is limited exclusively to private schools (Nannyonjo, 2013; Bruns et al., 2013).

4 Teacher Training in Uganda

Access to tertiary education is not granted to all students who finish secondary education. While primary school attendance is standard for pupils in Uganda, secondary school attendance is not assured until the end of primary school, and university or college attendance remains exclusive. It is still reserved for only a select few. After a few years of secondary school, the academic careers of most pupils come to an end. Maxinomics (n.d.) also indicates a tertiary school enrolment of 5.06 % of all eligible children in 2016, placing Uganda globally low (171st). The international average, as reported in 2016, is 46 %. Therefore, the goal of increasing academic participation across society is still a long way off (Unesco, 2016).

The government regulates university admissions in Uganda. Makerere University, home to the College of Education and External Studies (CEES) in Kampala, is the largest university in the country and the primary institution for teacher training. To enrol in university, students must obtain the “Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education” through final examinations at the end of 13th grade. After years of offering short and less rigorous training for professionals and teachers in preschool and primary education, recent initiatives have focused on professionalisation and academic enhancement. For instance, the training of primary school teachers has been upgraded from a two-year college programme to a bachelor’s-level university education (Republic of Uganda, 2016; Geoffrey & Tumweboneire, 2021).

Furthermore, the importance of early childhood education for a successful academic career has become increasingly recognised, underscoring the need for professional development (Ezati et al., 2018). In Uganda, many teachers have completed basic teacher training; however, a significant portion of the teaching workforce still requires further professional development (MoES, 2018). According to the national teacher policy (Ezati et al., 2018), primary school teaching can only be pursued at universities, with a bachelor’s degree be-

ing the minimum qualification required for the profession. Teachers trained prior to this policy who are currently employed in primary schools must further qualify by obtaining a bachelor's degree from a university within the upcoming years to continue teaching. There is a concerted effort to improve teacher quality through training and development, as outlined in the National Teacher Policy (NTP) (MoES, 2018). The NTP aims to professionalise the teaching profession to a level comparable to other fields, such as medicine, engineering, law, and accounting. Implementing the NTP has led to significant changes, including the phased closure of 22 primary teacher training colleges. This decision was made thoughtfully to ensure these institutions could be repurposed in a manner that contributes meaningfully to the evolving educational landscape. In line with these changes, the Ministry of Education and Sports has reviewed the Primary Teacher Education Certificate programme, which now emphasises pedagogy and effective teaching methods. A digital inspection tool called the Teachers' Effectiveness and Learners' Achievement (TELA) has also been introduced. This tool aims to reduce absenteeism among headteachers and teachers in public schools, ensuring that educators are actively engaged in teaching. The push for primary school teachers to upgrade their qualifications to bachelor's level presents particular challenges for those working and residing in rural schools. According to Uganda's Premier Online Career Guidance Portal (The Student Hub, 2025), primary school teacher training can be completed through a six-semester programme leading to a bachelor's degree at Nkumba University or a four-semester programme leading to a diploma at either Nkumba or Ndejje University.

As of 2024, the average monthly salary for a primary school teacher in Kampala, the capital, is projected to be \$192, with an additional anticipated support of around \$16. This indicates that teachers earn more than the average population and more than individuals who have completed secondary school but have not pursued further studies, who earn approximately USD 130 per month (Unesco, 2023).

To date, there have been few comparative studies on teacher training in African countries. One notable study, conducted by Nkengne et al. (2021), examined teacher satisfaction and its determinants from a comparative perspective, focusing on teachers from Catholic schools in Nigeria and Uganda. The role of language in education in Uganda is of particular importance, as the entire population has to learn to read and write in English while English is not the first language for most children in Uganda (Nankindu, 2020).

The education system emphasises proficiency in English and is modelled after English-speaking systems. With the introduction of compulsory education, English is taught in primary school alongside the regional language of instruction (Akello et al., 2015). Unfortunately, children who have not attended

kindergarten or learned English adequately are at a disadvantage from the outset. The country's educational language policies are closely linked to the prevailing political philosophy and ideology, reflecting the power structures within society (Nankindu, 2020). These language policies are thus intertwined with politics and grounded in the nation's ideology and societal dynamics (Mukama, 2024). Historically, Uganda has followed a pattern similar to other African nations under British colonial rule. The prominence of English in Uganda dates back to 1894 when the British government assumed control of the region from the Chartered East African Company and established a British Protectorate (Nankindu, 2020). This historical context explains why English remains the common language in Uganda. However, at the pre-primary level (ages 3-5) and in lower primary schools (Primary 1 to Primary 3), the official language of instruction is the local language. From Primary 4 onwards, English becomes the official language of instruction and teaching material (UNICEF, 2016). The regional languages include Luganda and other Bantu dialects. Uganda features approximately 30 native languages, including widely spoken tongues such as Luganda, as well as Hamitic, Sudanic, and Nilotic languages (Lübbert et al., 2015, p. 584). Teacher training in Uganda primarily focuses on the primary and secondary levels. The secondary education system is divided into S1-S6 and S6-S7. As in Germany, the subject teacher model prevails in the secondary sector, whereas in primary schools, the class teacher instructs all subjects.

5 Transition to and from Primary School in Uganda

The Education Act - Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education No. 13 of 2008 stipulates that all children of school-going age must enter and complete the seven-year primary education cycle (The Education Act, 2008). The transitions from preschool to primary and secondary education represent significant milestones in children's lives. The organisation and support for these transitions primarily depend on whether the schools are private or state-run. Currently, Uganda has a gross enrolment rate in primary education of 99 %, but the transition rate to lower secondary school is only 59 %, reflecting a 23 % decrease. The primary net enrolment rate (NER) in Uganda was 77.9 % in 2023/24 (UBOS, 2024), while the primary completion rate in 2022 was only 32 % (UNICEF, 2023). These indicators highlight the progress Uganda is making towards achieving universal primary education (Sewamala et al., 2011), a key goal set by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. However, they also suggest that Uganda has not yet achieved universal primary education.

5.1 From Elementary to Primary Education

The pre-school system (pre-schools) belongs to the elementary education sector. Preschools are often located on the grounds of primary schools. However, some preschools operate independently. This sector is divided into two main areas: a nursery for children aged three to five, which is further segmented into age groups, the baby class for three-year-olds, the middle class for four-year-olds, and the preschool class for five-year-olds preparing to enter primary school. Additionally, there is a kindergarten area for children aged three months to three years. Due to both parents often working and the high cost and uncertainty of hiring a nanny, many children are cared for from an early age, with some even starting boarding school at the age of four.

The elementary school curriculum, equivalent to the German understanding of kindergarten and preschool, is based on European standards and encompasses five learning areas that are taught in a spiral manner. Secondary subjects include arts and crafts, local languages, physical education, and music. Even though only a few children attend kindergarten and preschool, clear guidelines have been established in recent years. The government has established standards for the kindergarten curriculum, facilities, and school construction, emphasising the need for qualified specialists (MOES, 2009). The Education Act - Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Education No. 13 of 2008 serves as a crucial political instrument (Musika, 2019).

The Education Act - Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education No. 13 of 2008 is a significant legislative instrument (Musika, 2019). From the age of approximately six to twelve years, most children in Uganda attend primary school (De Kemp et al., 2008, p. 40). Although starting primary school is typically associated with the age of six, the focus is less on the beginning of school and more on the completion of nursery school. While attendance at kindergarten is not compulsory, an increasing number of children, compared to previous years, are enrolling in either private or state institutions at the elementary level before graduating from primary school (Kan & Klasen, 2021). While primary education is free and compulsory, three out of every four children of primary school age attended school (75.2 %), and 41.6 % of children aged 3 to 5 participated in early childhood education (ECE) in 2024 (UBOS, 2024). Primary school occupies a special position here, as new educational initiatives are being launched to enable all children to participate. In many families, both parents must work, and there are often large distances in rural areas; thus, a boarding school system exists from the preschool level onwards. Many children spend a significant amount of their time in educational institutions and are cared for by their primary school teachers not only in the mornings but also in the afternoons, evenings, and on weekends. In addition to teaching, primary school teachers also assume family responsibilities. Some

of the teachers live on the primary school grounds with the children, share meals with them, and are responsible for their care before and after lessons, as well as on weekends.

5.2 From Primary to Secondary Education

In Uganda, primary school concludes in Year Seven with a nationwide examination known as the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE). A student must pass the PLE to gain admission to Senior One (S.1) in a public secondary school. According to The Education Act - Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education No. 13 of 2008, a passing score is seven on a scale of 1 to 9. At the end of Primary Seven, candidates are guided in selecting secondary schools they wish to attend for ordinary-level education after completing their primary education. Students can choose up to four schools based on their preferences and ranking order. Individual institutions determine the entry qualifications for private secondary schools and government-aided schools with religious affiliations. The average rate of successful primary school completion in Uganda was approximately 52 % until 2017. This figure has remained relatively unchanged over the past decade (Okurut, 2018, p. 192; Unesco, 2017a). The National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) initiated a review of the lower secondary curriculum in 2018. The Ministry of Education and Sports adopted the revised syllabi and assessment guidelines in January 2019. The new curriculum is founded on clear values and principles. It encompasses a set of subjects, syllabi, and generic skills, along with cross-cutting issues (a competence-based curriculum). This shift is evident in the transition from learning outcomes that primarily emphasise knowledge to those that prioritise skills and deeper understanding. This change in the lower secondary curriculum presents a transitional barrier from primary education, which is knowledge-based. The Ministry of Education and Sports is promptly implementing a competency-based curriculum for advanced secondary education. Access to secondary education has improved over time. In the early 2000s, only about 10 % of pupils could access secondary education. This percentage has since stabilised at approximately 25 % over the last ten years (Unesco, 2017b).

6 Transition as a Risk

As part of a research stay, interviews were conducted by the visiting scientists from Germany with various stakeholders in teacher training, along with former pupils whose biographies serve as case studies illustrating the challenges of transitions from primary school. The selected passages from the interviews are presented as case studies to highlight the challenges encountered during the transition from primary to secondary education.

6.1 Problem-Centred Interviews

Problem-centred interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2022) were conducted with two young men who each had to drop out of school in order to gain their perspective on the topic. The following interviews with Dylan and Ronald, two young adults living in Kampala, exemplify the risks associated with transitions and dropping out of the educational system. The researchers conducted these interviews to address the following research question: socioeconomic disparities undeniably contribute to high dropout rates. We must identify the barriers that prevent students from lower-income backgrounds from advancing beyond primary education. It is essential to understand the lived experiences of individuals who have completed only primary education, taking socioeconomic factors into consideration. The primary objective of conducting biographical interviews is not to achieve representativeness. The focus here is on the processes of understanding and everyday interpretations of meaning by those directly involved (Witzel & Reiter 2022, p. 43). During the research stay at Makerere University, the visiting scientists had daily interactions with two local men. This engagement led to both direct and indirect discussions about the education system in Uganda and its impacts. Dylan (born in 2001) and Ronaldo (born in 2002) were interviewed in March 2024 as part of a qualitative study regarding their educational experiences. The problem-centred interviews took place at the homes of the two young men, located outside the university. They lasted for approximately two hours. We analysed the content of the transcribed interviews with Dylan and Ronaldo in an exploratory manner. We achieved this by summarising the content and developing categories. Our approach was informed by qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). The evaluative basis form of content analysis was employed to present their responses, which referred to the problems and challenges they encountered during the transition from primary to secondary education. The literature review in this area is supplemented by selected excerpts from two narrative interviews (Witzel, 2000) with two graduates of primary education.

6.2 Challenges of Transitions

Dylan M. (D) comes from a family of twelve siblings: nine brothers and three sisters. His mother tongue is Lhukonzo. Like his cousin Ronaldo, he hails from the Kasese district in northern Uganda and is a member of the Bakonzo 'tribe' (ethnic group).

Ronaldo V. (R) grew up with seven siblings. Dylan and Ronaldo are cousins, and their two Extended families belong to a 'tribe'. They have left their northern village to earn money as housekeepers in the capital, Kampala, in the Kingdom of Uganda, to support their families.

At the beginning of the interview, Dylan recounts his school career in relation to his social background as a boy from a large family who grew up in the countryside and completed his education within the limitations of the opportunities available.

I: [...] Did you finish school? The secondary level?

D: Yeah, the secondary level. All levels. I scored on all levels.

I: But you did not go further?

D: I did not go further.

I: What was the reason why you did not go further? Only the money?

D: Yeah.

I: The marks were good?

D: Yeah, they were good, but they were not excellent.

I: But the money is...

D: The problem. I explained to you. We are farmer children (#0:08:52-4-#0:09:36-8).

The research question here is: What are the perceived barriers to accessing higher education (beyond secondary level)? The dialogue explores the reasons why an individual, despite successfully completing secondary education, did not proceed to higher levels of education. The analysis reveals a clear central theme: financial constraints as the primary barrier to higher education. Two main themes emerge:

First, educational attainment and potential: The individual (D) confirms completing 'the secondary level, I scored on all levels.' This indicates a successful completion of the secondary education cycle, suggesting academic capability. The interviewer (I) probes, 'The marks were good?' and D confirms, 'Yeah, they were good, but they were not excellent.' The nuance suggests that while the individual's academic performance was satisfactory, it was not necessarily outstanding enough to potentially qualify for scholarships or highly competitive, fully funded programmes, which might have mitigated the financial barrier. Nevertheless, the overall impression is of a capable student.

Second, there is an overwhelming financial barrier to further education. The core reason for not continuing is immediately identified by the interviewer: 'What was the reason why you did not go further? Only the money?' The respondent's unequivocal 'yeah' confirms that money was the sole, decisive factor. The interviewer's follow-up, 'but the money is...', is left incomplete, but the implication is clear: the money is the problem. The respondent completes this thought, 'The problem I explained to you that we are farmer children.' This final statement is profoundly significant. It directly links the inability to afford higher education to their socio-economic background as 'farmer children.'

This implies that their family's income, likely from subsistence or small-scale farming, was insufficient to cover the costs of tertiary education, regardless of academic merit. It highlights a systemic issue where an individual's economic background dictates their educational opportunities beyond a certain level. Therefore, the dialogue powerfully illustrates that for this individual in Uganda, the primary and overwhelming barrier to pursuing higher education beyond secondary school was financial hardship. Despite having good academic marks, the individual's background as a 'farmer child' meant that the cost of further education was prohibitive. This exchange underscores a critical challenge in educational access in Uganda, where economic status can significantly limit an individual's ability to capitalise on their academic achievements and pursue higher learning opportunities.

With reference to "We are farmer children", it becomes clear that he recognises how social background significantly influences the course of education and educational success, and that the financial issue is not solely an individual concern but one affecting many farming families. In several key passages of the interview, the interviewee Dylan highlights the insufficient money within a poor family with multiple children. The fees for primary school, even if they are not high, already constitute a burden for a family that must distribute its finances across various needs.

I: But all the time, parents have to pay lots of money for primary school.

D: So, you find that for ten years now.

I: If you have six, seven, eight children, ...

D: You find that in their children there are like two in the same class. Now you divide that money, and you add it to two people. Now you find that a parent per terms pay 600. And now 600 for the two, two children go in the same class, now you add on this bill. You find that the parents pay a lot of money. So, a better way is to leave school here for the parents because it is a lot of money. You find that the one who is paying is buying food at home, is buying new clothes, and is paying for everything at home. So, you cannot put much blame on your parent because even you can see. Money for school, food, and fulfilling household duties (#0:42:45-7-#0:42:48-3).

The primary research question here is: What are the main themes and concerns expressed regarding the financial burden of primary education in Uganda? The central theme of the dialogue is the considerable financial burden of primary school on parents. The conversation is straightforward and focused on the high costs and challenges parents encounter in managing these expenses. The three main themes that emerge from this central theme are:

The overwhelming cost of primary education: The interviewer (I) begins with 'parents have to pay lots of money for primary school', establishing the

tone. The respondent (D) reinforces this with a specific hypothetical sum: 'a parent per term pays 600' (implied currency, like Ugandan Shillings, although not specified). The repetition of 'you find that parents have to pay lots of money' emphasises the scale of financial demand. The burden is compounded by the reality of multiple children in the same class (e.g., 'two children go in the same class, now you add on this bill'), illustrating how costs multiply within a family unit.

Competing household financial demands: The dialogue highlights that school fees are not the sole financial strain. The respondent (D) explicitly lists other essential expenses: 'buying food at home,' 'buying new clothes,' and 'paying for everything at home.' The concluding phrase, 'money for school, food, and fulfilling household duties,' effectively summarises the overwhelming and often conflicting financial obligations that parents juggle. This paints a picture of a household budget stretched thin by multiple, non-negotiable needs.

Parental strain and a call for relief: There is an implicit understanding and empathy for the parents' struggle. 'You cannot put much blame on the parents because even you can see.' This suggests that the financial issue is systemic rather than a result of a lack of parental effort or commitment. Furthermore, the statement 'So, a better way is to leave school here for the parents because it is a lot of money' serves as a direct plea or suggestion for external relief. This implies a desire for education to be less financially demanding on parents, possibly through more substantial government support or reduced school charges, given the current 'a lot of money' they are already paying.

Therefore, this brief dialogue powerfully conveys the severe financial pressure experienced by Ugandan parents regarding primary school education. It underscores that even with initiatives such as Universal Primary Education (UPE), significant costs remain, forcing parents to prioritise between education and other basic necessities like food and clothing, especially for larger families. The dialogue expresses empathy for parents' predicament and suggests a need for systemic changes to alleviate this burden.

Dylan emphasizes the existence of private and public schools, particularly during the transition to secondary school. He underscores the presence of a range of costs within each group, highlighting the financial burden on families. He further highlights the challenge of families unable to cover the costs of an entire academic year, which can result in the interruption of their children's education.

I: And the upper secondary? How much does a term cost in the upper secondary?

D: It depends. It depends for the central region. Some pay 1 point. It depends on the type of school.

R: It depends to the services of school.

I: Yeah, yeah. There are cheaper and more expensive schools. But normally 1000 per term?

R: Yeah.

D: But the cheaper second schools nowadays is 300.000 and above.

I: Per term?

D: Yeah. Starting in senior one. The cheapest is 300.000. But when you go to another class. Senior one cannot stay the same amount of money (#0:41:44-6-#0:42:29-3).

The primary research question here is: What are the perceived costs of upper secondary education in Uganda, and what factors are identified as influencing these costs?

The dialogue centres on the financial costs of upper secondary education in Uganda, establishing that it is not uniformly priced and involves substantial sums. Three key themes emerge from the conversation:

High and variable costs of upper secondary education: The interviewer's initial query, 'How much does the term cost in the upper secondary?' is met with immediate emphasis on variability: 'it depends.' The respondent (D) introduces '1 point' (likely referring to 1 million Ugandan Shillings, a common way to denote millions in local parlance) as a potential cost, highlighting significant expenses. Even for the 'cheaper' schools, a substantial minimum is stated: 'The cheaper secondary schools nowadays are 300,000 and above.' This establishes a high baseline for what is considered affordable secondary education. The clarification 'per term?' by the interviewer and the affirmative 'yeah' from the respondent emphasise that these are recurring, termly payments, compounding the financial burden.

Influencing factors on cost: The dialogue identifies several key determinants of school fees: First, the geographical location: 'it depends on the central region' suggests that schools in the central region (often including Kampala) might have different fee structures, generally perceived as higher due to better infrastructure or demand. Second, the type of school: 'It depends on the type of school' is a broad category that implicitly refers to distinctions like private vs. public, boarding vs. day, or schools with different reputations or academic standards. Third is the service offered: The respondent (R) explicitly states, 'it depends on the services of the school.' This indicates that the quality of the facilities, extra-curricular offerings, teacher qualifications, and overall school environment directly influence the fee structure. This suggests a direct correlation between perceived quality/offering and cost.

Progressive cost increase with grade level: A critical insight provided by the respondent (D) is that fees are not static: 'Senior One cannot stay the same amount of money.' This indicates that the cost of education increases

as students advance through their senior classes (Senior Two, Senior Three, etc.), contributing to the long-term financial commitment for parents. The 300,000 UGX is explicitly stated as the starting point for Senior One in affordable schools.

Consequently, the dialogue reveals that upper secondary education in Uganda is viewed as a significant financial commitment for parents. The costs are not fixed but rather highly variable, shaped by factors such as location (e.g. Central Region), the particular type of school, and the array of services it offers. Importantly, the costs are perceived to rise as students advance through their academic years. This suggests a tiered education system where access to potentially higher-quality or more comprehensive services is directly linked to a family's financial means, raising concerns about equity and accessibility for many Ugandan households.

The currency in Uganda is the Ugandan Shilling (UGX), 1 Euro corresponds to about 4,000 Ugandan Shillings depending on the exchange rate. In the interview, Dylan also clearly points out that there are not only direct costs for the school, such as the school fee per schoolchild, which is to be paid on a termly basis, but also indirect costs such as those for the school uniform, for food, for transport, for school materials, etc.

I: And you have to buy the school uniform?

D: Yeah, school uniform. Better way, when they forgot behind when we studied almost our primary level some of used it to go to school while we were barefoot. You are just getting your uniform, you put on a shirt and a trouser and you move to school without the shoes.

R: That's why most Africans, not Africans, and most of Uganda are not...

D: You find that long distances, you move distances, 5 kilometres. And you are barefoot. In the morning you are walking on foot along the road. You find that schools are very far (#0:44:07-0:44:41-1).

The research question is: What are the historical and present-day challenges of attending primary school in Uganda? The interview begins with an open question about school uniforms and swiftly transitions into a reflection on past challenges linked to primary education in Uganda. Two primary themes emerged from this exchange:

First, the lasting cost of school uniforms (and related items): The initial question 'and you have to buy the school uniform' and the affirmative response 'yeah, school uniform' confirm that uniforms are a compulsory and on-going expense for parents. This subtly links to the earlier discussion regarding the financial burden of schooling. Although not explicitly referred to as a 'cost' in the reflective part, the absence of shoes ('Without the shoes,' 'barefoot') suggests that footwear is also a necessary item, whose cost, or lack thereof, affects school attendance.

Second, historical hardships and barriers to primary education: The respondent (D) introduces a stark contrast between a 'better way when they grew up and when we studied at our primary level', and potentially current expectations. This 'better way' describes a past where students went to school barefoot, simply wearing a uniform (shirt and trousers/skirt/dress). This highlights a level of material deprivation that was once common. The challenges are amplified by the mention of long distances to school: 'you move distances, 5 kilometres', and 'schools are very far.' This vividly portrays the physical endurance required to access education. The image of 'walking on foot along the road' in the morning further emphasises the arduous journey. The incomplete thought by R, 'that's why most Africans, not African and most of Ugandans are not ...' strongly suggests that these hardships (lack of proper attire, long distances) contribute to exclusion or difficulty in fully participating in education for many Ugandan children. The unfinished sentence implies a shared understanding of pervasive socio-economic barriers.

Therefore, the dialogue reveals that school uniforms represent a current financial necessity for parents. More significantly, it provides a poignant reflection on the historical realities of primary education in Uganda, characterised by substantial physical hardships (walking long distances barefoot) and a basic level of material provision. This historical context implicitly frames contemporary discussions about educational access, suggesting that while the requirement for uniform persists, the underlying challenges of poverty and distance remain deeply embedded in the experience of schooling for many, potentially hindering full participation.

In the second interview with Ronaldo, the motive of failure is clearly rooted in social background, highlighting the challenges faced by poor families in providing a continuous educational biography for their large family due to financial constraints starting from kindergarten.

The primary school sector here comprises classes 1-7, and the secondary sector includes lower and upper levels. The cost of primary school is lower than secondary education, but 1000 Ugandan shillings per child per school year is still a lot of money for primary school, especially for families with six or seven children.

The school enrolment rate in primary education is over 90 % (Unesco, 2018), and the constitution stipulates general compulsory schooling. However, until ten years ago, less than a quarter of all children (completely) went through secondary education (Lübbert et al., 2015, p. 587), and the drop-out rate remains very high. The distinction between primary school and secondary school is crucial, especially because the seven-year primary level is typically completed in full, while the secondary level is not. This is clearly demonstrated by the two problem-centred interviews.

- I: We have primary school, four, then we have secondary, eight or what?
D: Secondary is in two sections.
I: How much does a primary school cost?
D: Primary school that depends on...
I: As you take, where do you go. How much does your school cost in primary school?
[...]
R: Yeah, it is having three terms. And a term is three months. Now a term up to secondary you have to pay 300. Now 300 times 3 for a year.
I: Is 1000 (#0:40:04-6-#0:41:04-9).

The research question here is: How is the structure of the Ugandan education system described, and what are the perceived costs associated with primary and secondary schooling, particularly regarding the payment structure? The dialogue primarily focuses on clarifying the structure of Uganda's education system before transitioning to the financial aspects, specifically the payment schedule. Two main themes emerge:

First, clarification of the education system structure: The interviewer (I) initially attempts to confirm the structure: 'We have primary school, four, then we have secondary eight, or what?' This indicates a lack of clarity or a need for confirmation regarding the length of each educational stage. The respondent (D) clarifies the secondary level: 'Secondary is in two sections.' While not fully elaborated in this snippet, this suggests a more complex structure than a single eight-year block, likely referring to O-level and A-level sections. The primary school duration is not explicitly corrected, but the conversation progresses.

Second, perceived costs and payment structure: The conversation quickly shifts to the cost of primary school: 'How much does a primary school cost?' and 'How much does your school cost in primary school?' This highlights the immediate and pressing concern about educational expenses. The respondent (R) introduces the concept of terms as the payment unit: 'Yeah, it has three terms. And a term is three months.' This crucial piece of information establishes the frequency of payments. A specific substantial figure is then given for a term: 'Now, a term up to secondary, you have to pay 300.' While the context is 'up to secondary', the preceding discussion was about primary costs, implying this 300 (likely 300,000 UGX) serves as a baseline for a term's payment that applies to both primary and secondary. The interviewer's calculation, 'now 300 times 3 for a year is 1000,' confirms the annual cost (900 UGX rounded to 1,000,000 UGX or '1 point' from a previous snippet indicating a significant annual expenditure). This collaborative calculation highlights the substantial financial commitment over a year.

This dialogue offers a snapshot of the perceived structure of Ugandan education, highlighting the division of secondary education into two distinct sections. More prominently, it emphasises the significant financial costs, which are structured around three terms per year, each lasting three months. This discussion shows that even at the primary level, and indeed 'up to secondary,' parents face a substantial termly payment (e.g., 300,000 UGX), leading to a considerable annual financial burden (around 900,000 to 1,000,000 UGX). This reinforces the theme of education being a costly endeavour for families in Uganda.

Ronaldo's words perfectly capture the reality that many students cannot finish school due to financial constraints, highlighting a crucial issue in Ugandan society.

R: But the most... School dropouts are the most financial problem (#0:45:05-3).

7 Conclusion

The analysis consistently depicts an education system in Uganda where a family's financial capacity heavily influences access and progression.

The high and rising costs across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, combined with competing household demands and the persistent legacy of socio-economic disparities, create significant barriers for Ugandan children, particularly those from rural farming backgrounds, limiting their ability to fully capitalise on their academic potential. The dialogues implicitly advocate for systemic interventions to alleviate this profound financial burden for parents. Upper secondary education presents highly variable and escalating fees, influenced by factors such as school type, location, and the services offered. Crucially, financial constraints are identified as the sole reason preventing academically capable individuals from pursuing tertiary education, directly linking their inability to afford higher learning to their socio-economic background, particularly as "farmer children." The analysis also highlights the historical and ongoing challenges of poverty, competing household demands (such as food and clothing), and long distances to school, which further exacerbate the financial burden on parents.

While primary school attendance is standard for all pupils in Uganda, there is no compulsion to continue beyond this level. The main reason for dropping out of school during the transition to secondary school is financial: families are poor and schools are underfunded. State UPE is free and has been evaluated positively as a reform initiative (Kan & Klasen, 2021). However, parents still incur hidden costs for their children's schooling. These costs amount to around 40 euros per year for a village school and around 140 euros per year for a day

school in the city. These costs include school uniforms, teaching materials such as exercise books and stationery, and examination fees. If all-day schooling is compulsory, especially in the higher grades, additional costs are incurred for meals. School attendance becomes even more expensive if children attend boarding schools, as they also have to pay for accommodation and food (Okurut, 2018, p. 200; Klein, 2024).

The school dropout rate is high, and the educational resources available are not being used to break the cycle of poverty. Poverty is the main reason why a quarter of all school-age children are forced into child labour. This is particularly true of older children who are still of school age. In many cases, parents prevent their children from attending school in order to support the family. Children in rural areas are particularly affected. Girls are expected to help with household chores, while boys must tend the cattle. If this happens regularly, the pupils will no longer feel part of the class community. This will lead directly to dropping out of school (Nannyonjo, 2013; Okurut, 2018, p. 199; Ahmad et al., 2006, p. 209; Moyi, 2013, p. 3). The case study of Dylan and Ronaldo confirms the problem mentioned in the literature and surveys. In Uganda, the primary enrolment rate is 91 %, and the primary completion rate is 51 %. This rate drops to 23 % in lower secondary, with a student transition rate to secondary school of 59 % (Unesco, 2018). These indicators definitively show the progress a country is making towards universal primary education. The examples of the two young adults illustrate that young people's educational biographies are still heavily dependent on their social background and that economic inequality makes upward mobility biographies impossible.

The prioritisation of social inequality in political agendas suggests a recognition of its fundamental role in perpetuating educational inequality, as socio-economic factors continue to shape access to and success within educational systems.

The number of primary school pupils attending secondary school is increasing, but a high number are dropping out, especially in the lower years. Economic inequality in this country is clearly having an impact on educational inequality. The fact that children and young people from lower social classes must work to earn a living is causing educational inequality.

In terms of future and comparative studies, the national guidelines must be analysed in terms of the relevance of language support and the promotion of multilingualism, as well as the underlying understanding of multilingualism among children and families. Further comparative research is needed on questions like: Mastering the language of education is of the utmost importance when starting school. Tell me what discourses exist in the respective countries concerning school enrolment and educational success in connection with mastering the language of education. Tell me what approaches exist for

promoting language and multilingualism. The questions listed are interesting since they highlight the different approaches in the two respective countries concerning the promotion and maintenance of children's family languages. In Germany, the focus lies on promoting the language of education, German. In Uganda, the focus is on English, to ensure a successful educational career.

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