

Global Perspectives in Education – Uganda

When looking at the education system it can be easy to forget that not all children in the world have access to the same education that we have in Wales. In Wales it is normal for children to start school at the age of three to five years old and remain in education until they are between sixteen and eighteen years old. Many children around the world do not have the opportunity to access the same levels of education or for the duration that Welsh children do, this could be due to many factors, for example, war, lack of quality education, or disability. “The UN recognises education as crucially important in helping people escape poverty and giving them the tools to build a better life for themselves” (BBC, 2024). The UN believes that access to quality and consistent education is essential in helping people to lift themselves out of poverty however many children and young people do not have the access to quality education that the UN deems essential. This Essay will look at the education in Uganda and what barriers the families in Uganda may face with sending their children to school.

Uganda was colonised by Britain in 1894 as Britain wanted access to Africa’s natural resources. Uganda was once known as ‘The Pearl of Africa’ due to it being a land of great beauty and because of its fertile soil (Emourt, 2019). This led to the exploitation of the African people, it led to them losing their freedoms and traditional spiritual values (Deejay Allah, 2012). This had a devastating effect on Uganda that still impacts the people of Africa today (Big Think, 2012). In 1958 Uganda was given its own government although it remained under the control of the British Empire until 1962 when Uganda gained independence (BBC, 2018). When Uganda gained independence, it became the 17th country to join The Commonwealth (The Commonwealth, 2024).

Uganda has a population of around forty-nine million people, with a steadily increasing population of approximately 2.8% each year (Worldometer, 2024). In Uganda, 29.3% of the population live in urban areas of the country. Uganda has a young demographic of the population with the median age being 15.9 Years old (World Economics, n.d). Uganda took on the UNCRC in 1990, showing a commitment to children’s rights and in 2002 signed two optional protocols, one on

the sale of children for sexual exploitation, and another putting a stop to the use of children in conflict, strengthening their commitment to the safety of children and supporting them to reach their full potential (UNICEF, 2019).

Despite Uganda taking on the UNCRC (1990) there are still many barriers that impact families and especially children's ability to access education. For the purpose of this essay, some of the barriers will be focussed on, however there are many varied factors that impact on children's education in Uganda.

In 1997 the Government of Uganda introduced the Universal Primary Education policy. The main aims of the policy were to enable children to stay in school until their primary education was complete by providing facilities and resources, to reduce poverty by educating all children with basic skills and to ensure that education was affordable for all children (UK Government, 2006). The Government of Uganda did however put a cap on the number of children that they would provide free education for to four children per household. If families had more than four children at home then they would need to pay for the additional children to attend education (Burlando and Bbaale, 2022). This in turn could have led to families having less children to ensure that they could all access education, or alternatively prioritising the male children as they could be seen to be the providers of the family according to societal traditions. This changed in 2003 when the Government of Uganda reversed the four children limit to free education.

Despite the Universal Primary Education policy, the national average of completion of primary education is 67% with some regions having as few as 14% of children completing their primary education (UNICEF Uganda, 2017). According to UNICEF (n.d.) four out of ten children aged between three and five access education in Uganda, however this rises in the age group of six to twelve years where eight out of ten children attend primary school. "Although Uganda's economy has gradually been growing in the last couple of decades, poverty levels have actually increased during that time and almost 20% of the population live below the poverty line" (Mothers Union, 2024). With almost 20% of the population living under the poverty line this will influence the children being able to access quality education and how long they can access the education for. Nagashima and Yamauchi (2023) wrote that the Universal Primary education made a monumental impact on the education in Uganda as the

scheme provided sufficient funding to cover private education costs. This would mean that for the poorest families in Uganda who may have struggled to pay the costs involved in sending their children to school, there was funding available to support the children to attend primary education.

This however does not resolve all the issues for the families in Uganda to allow their children to access education. Children in Uganda often work and so bring in an income to the household, for the poorest families this would be essential to help with the costs of living. VOA Africa (2022) explains how since the covid pandemic this problem has grown. During the pandemic, the schools in Uganda were closed for two years and so many children were sent to work, when the schools were then able to reopen, they found that many children did not return as the families could not afford to lose their income from work. This is also the difficulty for children leaving primary and moving into secondary education, the child could be seen as old enough to gain a wage from working and so they are more beneficial to the families working than they are in education. This can be seen in the disparity between the uptake of secondary school education with the wealthiest 20% showing an uptake of 41.3% compared to the 8.2% uptake from the poorest 20% (UNICEF, n.d).

When looking at how poverty affects the children and young people of Uganda to access education then you can look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). This is the understanding that for children to be able to reach the self-actualisation stage, where they are in the best possible position to learn through creativity and to realise their inner potential, then all the other stages of Maslow's hierarchy need to be met (McLeod, 2024). This would include the psychological stage, where the basic needs of the child need to be met, for example access to water, food and rest. The level of safety and security, where children and young people must feel they are in a safe environment and in good health. The stage of love and belonging, where children and young people need to feel like they are part of something and are loved, for some children, for example those who are orphaned or who may not have a good family or community life, or young brides who may have married into an abusive situation they may not be fulfilled at this stage in order to move further up the hierarchy of needs. The next level to meet in Maslow's hierarchy is self-esteem which includes confidence and achievement, this need could be met for the child by regularly accessing education, however if a child does not attend school, then they

would need to reach this stage in their community. Maslow (1943) believed that for a child to reach the top of the hierarchy, where they can learn and thrive then all the other needs would need to be met (Sprouts, 2017). For some of the children in Uganda who are living under the poverty line the two first stages of psychological needs and safety and security need would not have been met meaning that if the child does attend education, they would still need these elements to thrive. In some circumstances however these needs can be met at the school through the support of the Government of Uganda and outside agencies who are able to fill the gaps in needs that the children may have to help them reach their full potential.

For some, community's education in Uganda also does not hold the same value as it does in more western countries, with some people blaming education for the rising unemployment in the country (CGTN Africa, 2017). Some argue that the education that children and young people are gaining in school are not relevant skills for the country and that the education system needs to be changed to allow for the pupils to learn skills that the communities need. However, others argue that by teaching the pupils to this level of education that these children and young people can compete on an international level with other countries and that in the longer run that will bring additional skills and opportunities to Uganda, helping them to rise out of poverty. This can be seen in the Uganda Government's strategies to reduce poverty through education which includes "(a) increased access to education and better retention, (b) improved quality of education and (c) employment generation through education" (Datzberger, 2018).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) showed how the child's surroundings can impact the child (Rutherford, 2014). Bronfenbrenner showed how every connection and interaction in a child's life can have an impact on them, even if it does not affect them directly (Guy-Evans, 2024). For children in Uganda their microsystem, who would have the biggest impact on them, as they are the closest people to the child, would be their families, friends, and local communities. It could be inferred that if people in the child's microsystem have a negative view on education, the education of girls or continued schooling past primary level that this could be a barrier to the child accessing education through their influence on the child and the family.

Alongside poverty the gender difference in education levels is a substantial barrier to education for girls and young women in the country. "Child marriage, teenage pregnancy, abuse at schools and school fees keep many teens, especially girls, out of secondary schools" (UNICEF, n.d). In Uganda, young women can be expected to enter a marriage or union from an early age. According to UN Women (n.d) 7.3% of young women enter a marriage before the age of fifteen with a further 34% by the time they reach eighteen years old. United Nations Foundation (2017) show that the number of students in the girls' school is a lot less than in the boy's school. They need to have regular contact with the parents of the female pupils to stress the importance of education, as the social norm would be for the girl to drop out of school and get married, as many as 37% of girls drop out of school early because of marriage. Building good relationships between the families of the children and school supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which found that "teachers and parents should maintain good communication with each other and work together to benefit the child and strengthen the development of the ecological systems in educational practice." (Guy-Evans, 2024)

Girls also face the challenge of gender bias in society, The World Bank (2024) states that girls face gender bias, even in education settings, which reinforce social stereotypes that in turn affect a girl's ambition to succeed and continue with their education. This is contradicted by UNICEF Uganda (2023) who believe that even though the education of girls is still taboo in society that by allowing girls to attend school you are giving them the best opportunity for their future and improving the future of the community, The 'Protect the girl, save the nation' campaign are supporting the communities through peer-to-peer guidance to try to stop the taboo of girls being educated. The campaign is also reaching out to pregnant and child mothers to encourage and support them to return to education and to get their qualifications (UNICEF Uganda, 2023). This is in line with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child (1999, p12), Article 11-6 which states that the schools should "take all appropriate measures to ensure that children who become pregnant before completing their education shall have an opportunity to continue with their education on the basis of their individual ability".

The taboo of educating woman can be seen in Smith-Hefner and Inhorn (2021, p73) research where one young man was quoted as saying that "Today's women cannot

be trusted, especially if they have been to school. They know their education makes them desirable marriage partners because they can contribute to the family income, and they use this to their advantage.” (Smith-Hefner and Inhorn, 2021, p73). From the quote it implies that however much they see an educated woman as more desirable as they can contribute to the household, it comes with the association that because a woman is educated, and therefore desirable, that she will be untrustworthy or deceptive. This could be seen to be showing the mix of both the inherent taboo of females being educated alongside the more modern perspective that by educating a woman you are allowing her to provide for the household alongside her husband, and therefore making her a more desirable prospect.

Girls also face challenges due to menstruation when going to school. NTV Uganda (2016) reports that due to the stigma and the management of menstrual hygiene, many girls have dropped out of school. State Minister for Primary Education Rose Mary Seninde (2019) expresses her concern about the amount of school that girls miss due to their menstrual cycle (cited in NTV Uganda, 2019). On average girls who are menstruating are missing twelve days of school every term due to the lack of menstrual hygiene products available to them. Minister Seninde goes on to explain how she would like to have menstrual hygiene products available for all girls however the money involved needs to be prioritised to other things. This is putting girls at a disadvantage when it comes to their education as they are having to miss school due to their periods and this could be making them fall behind the peers in their class.

Another barrier to education for children and young people in Uganda is issues related to health. One such issue is the maternal mortality rate for younger mothers. Matovu (2024) wrote that “infants born to teenage mothers account for 35 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 25 deaths per 1,000 born to mothers aged 20-29 years”. This demonstrates the risk involved in younger mothers having children. This is not however the only health issue that Uganda has faced. In the 1980's Uganda faces a HIV pandemic which affected between 18 and 30% of the population of Uganda (Vithalani and Herreros-Villanueva, 2018, p524). The rate of infection has declined since then to around 6.5% but HIV still plays a part in the lives of the children in Uganda today.

Tearfund (n.d) states that “Up to 20 per cent of Uganda’s children aged six to 17 have lost at least one parent, mostly to HIV and conflict”. This would have an impact on the families of the children and in some cases could be a barrier to education as the children and young people may be needed to function as caregivers for family members who are unwell, or of their siblings. Ozturk (2021) believed that this was especially prevalent in the more rural areas of Uganda where young girls would not attend education as they would have a caring role within the family. Although in some cases the boys also take part in domestic duties, a survey by UN Women (n.d) found that 14.6% of girls support the family by caring or carrying out domestic jobs, compared to 8.8% of boys who take on the same rolls. From this you could imply that these students may be missing school or not be registered because of the needs of the family.

Although there have been improvements in the management of HIV in Uganda, there are still approximately 1.6 million children under the age of fifteen in Uganda with HIV (UNICEF, 2021). This could have a significant impact on barriers to the children receiving education due to illness, treatment, or the risk of catching other illnesses, for example Tuberculosis, which could be fatal to a child or young person with HIV. As previously discussed there are many reasons for the gender gap in regards to education, and that caring for family members could be one cause of girls missing or not attending school, but Zinyemba, Pavlova, and Groot (2020, p36) found that Women and girls are the majority of the population of HIV affected people and so they are more likely to suffer from the effects of the disease, causing another barrier for girls to attend education. However the United Nations Foundation (2017) stated that for every year that a girl stays in education then it reduces their risk of catching HIV by 6.7%, showing that by keeping children, especially girls, in education it can also benefit their health and well being as it allows them to access education on health matters.

Although improvements have been made in the treatment of HIV in Uganda, there are still high numbers of cases, especially in more rural areas of the country where people may not have easy access to health care and medication. This however is contradictory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child (1999, p14), Article 14-2(b) which states “to ensure the provision of necessary medical assistance and health care to all children with emphasis on the development of

primary health care” as well as the UNCRC (1990) Article 24 (health and health services) which states that “Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care.” Could it then be argued that the basic rights of the child that is stated in both the ACRWC and the UNCRC are not being met if some children are not able to receive the medication that they require.

Through support from the Government of Uganda and support agencies, help is being given both to those children who are HIV positive and education for those who have not contracted the disease on how they can keep themselves safe. This is allowing children to access their rights, continue in education and keep themselves healthy, in the hope that as time goes on the impact of HIV lessens therefor causing a less of a barrier to education.

There are many barriers that can affect a child or young persons ability to access education. The Government of Uganda are working hard to eliminate these barriers by providing support to families and working with outside agencies to raise the standard of education in Uganda. The Government understands that the education of all children is the best way to help the countries economic growth and to help the young people to compete on an international level with equal qualifications to those in other countries. Uganda has progressed in recent years and their commitment shows hope for the future of the children in Uganda in supporting them in their education to help them reach their full potential.

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