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EDITORIAL

Education in sub-Saharan Africa: researching access, transitions and equity

Access to basic education is a central plank of the global initiatives on Education for All and is prominently included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to which almost all countries subscribe. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest indicators of educational access in the world with over 25 million children not enrolled and attending regularly at primary level and as many as 75 million at secondary. Many more fail to achieve minimum levels of competence in basic numeracy and literacy after six or more years of schooling and many are over age for their grade.

Almost all sub-Saharan Africa countries have programmes to universalise access to free primary schooling. But progress has been uneven, rapid expansion in enrolments has degraded quality, and the costs of accommodating all or even most of those completing primary education in secondary schools have become unsustainable without reform. Crucially, the restricted definitions of access used to monitor progress mask much silent exclusion (children enrolled but learning little), and conceal very unequal patterns of participation related to household income, location, gender, and other forms of disadvantage. The common measures of Gross and Net Enrolment Rates fail to capture high attrition rates and low levels of learning outcomes.

Access to education lies at the heart of development. The aspiration of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa is to develop materially and reduce or eliminate poverty. This is unlikely to occur without access to basic education for the vast majority of citizens. Determined efforts to improve health, nutrition, agriculture, industry, commerce and environmental conditions on the sub-continent have to start from a position where access to both basic and secondary education is equitable and what is provided is of appropriate quality. Unless this happens, maximising human resource potential for development will be elusive. Poverty will remain intractable, disadvantage will continue to be transmitted across the generations, and economic growth will be compromised by shortages of knowledge and skill in the work force. Sustained access to education is critical to long-term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women, and reductions in inequality. The issues have been widely discussed in comparative education conferences in the north and in sub-Saharan Africa but many gaps in knowledge and understanding remain. Too often problems of access to quality basic education in sub-Saharan Africa have been reduced to investment in the supply-side constraints that continue to exist. However, not enough attention has been given to demand and the factors which limit or promote it, especially amongst older children and within poor communities on the fringes of the modern sector.

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This special issue of *Comparative Education* draws on research and analysis undertaken by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Equity and Transitions (CREATE – www.create-rpc.org) to explore the different conditions and factors which shape access to education. The CREATE research collaboration is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Its aim is to generate new insights into educational access in the context of both the Millennium and Dakar Education for All Goals. CREATE has developed a schema to explore access issues in new ways and is undertaking community and school-based fieldwork, research reviews, and secondary data analysis with partners in both sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia. In this collection the focus is on SSA and analyses of access issues in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa are included.

The first paper in this collection, by Keith Lewin, provides an overview of changing patterns of access to education in SSA and develops some key concepts used in the CREATE programme of research to shape discussion of access issues. The 'expanded vision of access' includes physical access, appropriate age in grade progression, consistent attendance, reasonable access to post primary education, and appropriate learning outcomes. This can provide a basis for working definitions that capture more than nominal enrolments. The elaboration of the 'Zones of Exclusion' separates those who have no access and never attend school or its equivalent, from those who start schooling but fail to complete a cycle. It makes more visible those who are silently excluded and are in school and learn little despite being enrolled, and those who fail to transit into secondary schools. It also provides a reminder that in many low-enrolment countries access to preschool is even more unevenly distributed than that to formal primary schools. From this model of zones, a typology of five different country types is developed that reflects patterns of participation by grade and illustrates how varied status and starting points are to achieve the MDG of universal primary access by 2015.

The paper presents data on changing patterns of enrolment by grade which show how major Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy interventions can have short term effects that dissipate over time. In some countries Grade 1 enrolments have increased dramatically but the gains have not been reflected in Grade 6 enrolments six years later. It is also clear that the range of children's ages within grades can be wide – 5- and 10-year-olds can be in Grade 1 – and the range gets even wider the higher the grade. Most national curricula are organised on the assumptions of monograde with all children following the same learning programme at the same level within a class. This fails to recognise wide ranges in capability associated with age and needs to respond with appropriate curriculum restructuring and delivery, including multigrade.

Wealth, as indicated by household income data, continues to be a very powerful predictor of participation. On average in SSA those from the top 20% of households have at least six times the chance of being in Grade 9 than those from the poorest 40%. In some countries the differences are evident from Grade 1, and in others the effects are most noticeable above Grade 6. Gender differences in participation, though smaller than those related to household income, remain significant in the lowest enrolment countries. Strikingly where there are differences in participation by gender at primary school levels they are almost always magnified at secondary. Very few countries in SSA succeed in reaching gender parity at secondary until their gross enrolment rates exceed 50%.

Kwame Akyeampong develops insights into Ghana's Free and Compulsory Universal Basic Education Programme (FCUBE) in the second paper. This reviews

literature on UPE and highlights several important issues. These include the weak correlation of participation with compulsory education laws, the importance of low fee or fee-free initiatives, the mixed impact of child labour on schooling, and the balances between supply-side and demand-side constraints. Historically, Ghana had the highest schooling rates in West Africa. By the 1980s many of the early gains had been compromised by economic recession and unstable governance. FCUBE was introduced after the introduction of new constitutional provisions in 1992. Enrolment rates began to increase steadily. However, many schools started to charge levies for other services to replace lost tuition fee income. There is some evidence from the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) that the poorest failed to benefit from FCUBE as much as households with middle and high incomes. Urban boys in low-income households seem to have benefited least.

Although aggregate enrolments increased under FCUBE, attrition from Grades 1 to 6 remained fairly constant, suggesting that problems remained with learning achievement and effective demand. Primary completion and transition to Junior Secondary remains strongly linked to household income and regional location. Over-age entry and progress is common with a mean delay of three years in first enrolment in the Northern Region. It is linked to child labour which remains a reality since in some poor households it is an important contributor to household income. FCUBE has resulted in higher ratios of students to trained teachers. Achievement data has also been disappointing with a majority failing to reach proficiency levels at Grade 3 and Grade 6.

In conclusion Akyeampong argues that more effort is needed to ensure that fee-free really does mean this for the poorest, that concerns with school quality that are having an impact on demand must be addressed, issues around late entry and repetition leading to overage enrolment have to be resolved, and that full enrolment will only be achieved with a greater focus on the needs of the poorest households.

Caine Rolleston takes up more detailed analysis of the determinants of educational exclusion in the third paper, using the GLSS data sets. He charts the growth in participation since the early 1990s in Ghana and shows that rapid progress was replaced by much slower progress since the year 2000. The analysis confirms the findings that attrition rates have generally not improved despite enrolment gains, and repetition and dropout have persisted at historic levels. Equitable access remains a problem that sees large disparities in enrolment patterns regionally and within different socio-economic groups. This comprehensive analysis of the determinants of exclusion provides a richly detailed account of patterns of participation at the intra-country level in Ghana and draws attention to the many possible areas where there is co-determination of more than one factor interacting with others. Using the Zones of Exclusion framework the analysis focuses on Zones 1, 2, 4, and 5. Those who had ever attended school increased from 77% to 87% between 1991 and 1999 after which the proportion remained static. However as many as two-thirds failed to attend at all in the Upper East Region in 1991, and as many as a third continued to be excluded in 2005/6. As many as one quarter of all children who do enrol nationally fail to complete the primary cycle and as many as half fail to complete junior secondary. Thus in Ghana, as in many other low-enrolment countries the majority of those out of school are children who started schooling but failed to complete.

The data shows a decline in child labour most of which was related to farm labour, and a strengthening relationship with non-attendance. Engaging in farm work reduces the relative risk of not completing primary school and receiving no further education

to 20% of that for those not in farm work. Those whose household head was in public sector employment had as much as 21 times the chance of completing Junior Secondary when compared to those whose household heads were not working. Boys are more likely to attend basic education but also more likely to drop out before completion.

Joseph Ghartey Ampiah and Christine Adu-Yeboah explore reasons for dropout in Northern Ghana where non-completion rates are highest. In this study 89 children between the ages of 7 and 16 years were interviewed in the Savelugu-Nanton region of Northern Ghana. What emerges is a complex picture of multiple causes which interact leading to decisions to withdraw from school. Both demand- and supply-side factors are important. Self-reported factors that seemed to influence decisions to drop out prioritised learning difficulties and corporal punishment. The latter was widely cited as a reason for rejecting school. Irregular attendance, another factor associated with dropout, was often concentrated at particular times of the year related to the agricultural cycle. Interviews confirmed the importance of child labour to some households and the pressures this placed on school attendance.

This paper emphasises that dropout is often the result of a series of events, some of which can provide early warning signs of vulnerability. Illustrative vignettes give insight into how particular dropouts experienced crossing the threshold into exclusion from school. It also notes that those factors associated with schools may be amenable to change more easily than those based in the household. It is clear that in some cases costs remain an important source of exclusion and that the capitation grant recently introduced is unlikely to be sufficient to overcome the direct and opportunity costs associated with schooling.

Anthony Somerset's paper shifts the focus to Kenya where a small-scale study is tracking how participation has changed since the 1970s. This paper illustrates how UPE has been a policy priority at least three times since independence in 1963, first in 1974, then in 1979 and most recently in 2003. On each occasion short-term gains have been made but in the case of the first two attempts the initiatives were not sustained creating the need for a third set of interventions. Using data from national statistics and from small-scale fieldwork in Nairobi and Nyeri a detailed picture is assembled of how enrolments have changed in different time periods and how cohort survival curves have evolved.

In the 1960s the primary school system had relatively few dropouts and frequent repetition in the final grade. The Free Primary Education Initiative in 1974 abolished fees for Grades 1–4 and by 1980 fees were removed up to Grade 7. The effects were dramatic in that enrolment in 1974 in Grade 1 increased to 2.5 times its value in 1973. However, dropout in higher grades also increased greatly so although overall gains were made many still did not complete primary school. The second UPE cycle began only five years after the first after a change in presidential power. It sought to remove the various levies that had begun to replace fees after the fee-free policy of 1973. Its evolution mirrored the first period of rapid growth and was also accompanied by increased dropout. Between the second and third UPE initiatives three influences impinged on access – primary school performance tables, a change to an 8-4-4 system, and the introduction of cost-sharing measures.

The third initiative is still developing. From 2003 another new President launched a Free Primary School initiative designed to ensure no one was excluded by costs – thus uniforms were made optional, fees were abolished, and schools prohibited from collecting additional levies. There is some evidence that the gains since 2003 may be more sustainable than those of previous reforms. Capitation grants are replacing some

of the fee and levy income that has been lost. However some costs still remain, including the emergence of 'tutorial fees' (i.e. additional tuition outside regular hours) which in many schools is normal practice. It seems probable that enrolment gains are uneven and concerns with equity remain. Though girls now participate on a par with boys their achievement continues to lag behind.

Shireen Motala, Veerle Dieltiens and Yusuf Sayed develop insights into access to schooling in two districts in South Africa. South Africa has high rates of participation from self-reported household survey data which suggests that over 90% of all school-age children are enrolled. Achievement data (see Gilmour and Soudien in this volume) suggests that though many participate there is much 'silent exclusion' with learners failing to reach minimum standards of achievement. Moreover access that is 'meaningful' (i.e. results in worthwhile learning outcomes that are valued) is unevenly distributed as a result of the history of apartheid.

This paper reports insights from a small sample of schools in Guateng and Eastern Cape. After reviewing the general context in which policy is made it describes how fieldwork was undertaken and presents analytic insights. The findings are consistent with national data that shows low rates of dropout and minimal numbers with no access to schooling. Dropout is concentrated in the highest grades at Grade 10 and above, as are repeaters. The range of ages within grades increases from about four years in Grade 1 to more than six years in Grade 10. The paper reinforces the view that African disadvantage in schooling is characterised by age-in-grade slippage and low levels of achievement related to achievement norms. It notes that in some locations over-enrolment in Grade 1 may be caused by under- as well as overage entry when younger siblings are 'warehoused' in school while parents work. The picture that emerges is one where 'meaningful' access is elusive for many and unequally available.

Brahm Fleisch and Jennifer Shindler have reanalysed data from the longitudinal database developed by the well-known 'Birth to Twenty' cohort tracking programme. This captures children born in Johannesburg in April – June 1990 and maintains annually updated records on each child which include education and health data. As such it is a unique resource that allows true cohort analysis of educational access over time.

This paper explores patterns of enrolment, progression, transition and completion. Most children in this cohort entered within a year of the correct nominal age of entry, though 15% of boys were 8 years or older, but only 10% of girls. Almost all remained enrolled at the age of 15 years, the end of compulsory schooling. However repetition was common and progression rates worse amongst boys, with a gap of 15% emerging by Grade 7. In some grades more than twice as many boys as girls repeat and two thirds of all repeaters are male. At age 15 years 36% of girls had reached Grade 10 but only 22% of boys. Thus in South Africa it is male under-attainment and age-in-grade slippage that is one of the most prominent access issues.

David Gilmour and Crain Soudien provide insights into learning and equitable access in the Western Cape. Several achievement studies in South Africa – e.g. Grade 3 Systemic Assessment, Monitoring Learner Assessment (MLA), the Third International Mathematic and Science Study (TIMMS) – indicate that levels of achievement are low. In this analysis data from the Western Cape Education Department's own ongoing study were used to identify and highlight patterns and trends. Numeracy and literacy data on all Grade 3 and 6 children were reanalysed.

Over 50% of children at both levels failed to reach appropriate levels of competence. Moreover performance levels in 2007 appear inferior to those in 2003. Only

1.7% of the poorest learners were able to pass the relevant tests in 2007, and only 1386 out of 46,967 learners from the poorest 80% of households were able to pass at Grade 6 level. Perhaps surprisingly learners in quintile 4 (from the 60th–80th percentiles of household income) were closer to their poorer colleagues in quintiles 1–3 than to those in quintile 5 (the richest). Disparities in performance by race remain very large – 55% passes at Grade 6 in formerly white schools and less than 1% in formerly African schools. The paper argues that poor performance includes many from the new middle classes who perform more like the poor than the established middle class. Although physical access is available, effective engagement with the national curriculum remains elusive for many learners.

The paper highlights factors linked to achievement that include school management, language issues, age, and teacher attitudes. It concludes by arguing that both for the emergent schools with a middle-class catchment, and the mass of ordinary schools that underperform, new approaches are needed that learn from the indications the data provides of more and less effective practice.

Joseph Chimombo's contribution to this volume shifts the focus to Malawi. In the early 1990s Malawi had low primary enrolment rates and very low transition rates into secondary. After unsuccessful attempts to raise fees at primary level in the 1980s fees were partially abolished in the early 1990s but the impact on enrolments was modest. UPE was announced in 1994 as the Banda regime came to a close. Enrolments grew very rapidly in Grade 1 as they had in other SSA countries with UPE programmes catalysed by the Education for All commitments made at Jomtien in 1990. However, completion rates did not grow. In 1997 Grade 8 enrolments were 17% of those in Grade 1; by 2006 the proportion had only increased to 19%. Thus most of those entering Grade 1 fail to graduate successfully to Grade 8 at the end of the primary school. As in Ghana and Kenya, most of those out of school are those who have enrolled but have not persisted in school.

Differences in enrolments related to gender did disappear soon after 2000 as a result of various interventions and because of increased enrolment in general. However, differences in completion rates by household income remained high. Overage children also remained common. In 1991 76% were overage in primary schools and by 2004 the proportion had only fallen to 56%. There is ample evidence in the paper that quality remains low and that part of the reason is that expanded access has not been accompanied by commensurate investment of new resources whether in teachers, learning materials, or school infrastructure. Data from the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) shows that as many as 90% of children fail to reach competency levels of achievement and that even this low level of achievement may be deteriorating. The paper raises issues about the extent to which some of the reasons for the failure of Malawi to achieve changed patterns of access that reflect its aspirations can be attributed to advice and influence from development partners. Certainly the external resources invested have failed to transform access to education over the last decade in the ways which were intended. This paper gives some insight into why.

Overall this collection of papers captures something of the complex and changing topography of shifting patterns of educational access across SSA. It provides insights from analysis of both primary and secondary data into current status and past trends. Key messages that run across the papers include needs to:

- move beyond narrow understandings of access indicated by Gross and Net Enrolment Rates to embrace broader definitions that capture an expanded vision

that embraces appropriate age of entry and progression, regular attendance, appropriate levels of achievement, reasonable access to post-primary schooling, and more equitable provision infrastructure, facilities and learning opportunities
- conceptualise access issues within different Zones of Exclusion, each of which has specific characteristics and patterns of inclusion and exclusion from education, and each of which invite a different range of policy options
- recognise that most out-of-school children in SSA are likely to be those who have started schooling but not finished, and as a result invest more in analysing and improving school efficiency and effectiveness
- address issues of late entry, repetition, and wide ranges of age in grade that may reduce the chances of successful completion
- identify particularly excluded groups with special vulnerabilities and give voice to their exclusion, and develop new understandings of the challenges various excluded groups experience
- publicise data on patterns of access and inequality to increase awareness and political will to improve equity
- assess and improve quality not least through appropriate achievement studies to place a new emphasis on access to worthwhile learning outcomes and reduce silent exclusion
- explore new methods of improving both supply- and demand-side factors that compromise sustained access
- challenge existing orthodoxies about access to education, its role in development, and the strategies that may be most effective in approaching universal levels of access to basic education at both national and international levels.

The papers in this special issue highlight key challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa as it strives to improve access to education for all. From the collection it is clear that the goal of universal access to basic education by 2015 remains very challenging, especially if an expanded vision of access is adopted. Improving physical access remains important but is hardly sufficient to meet conspicuous needs to enhance quality and relevance. Unless new strategies and policies reflect a deeper understanding of the factors which influence the structure and patterns of access in particular countries, history will repeat itself and short-term gains will be overshadowed by persistent patterns of repetition, overage enrolment, dropout, and low transition rates into the next educational level. Ghana, Malawi and Kenya all provide examples of policy initiatives to universalise access that failed to deliver sustainable gains in line with expectations. South Africa continues to enjoy high enrolment rates but poor value for money in terms of measurable achievement.

Several of the papers highlight the fact that what happens in the educational 'black box' of schools is critical to sustained access. Dropout arises from both push and pull factors. The environment of schooling and what goes on in classrooms plays an important part in shaping the push that can lead to increased incidence of irregular attendance, low achievement, repetition and ultimately dropout. How children are treated by teachers and their experiences with learning shape their attitudes and commitment to education and those of their parents. If children are going to remain in school and complete the full cycle, schools need to be both 'child-friendly' and 'child-seeking'. Sometimes it appears they can be neither. And it may also be the case that accountability is low, incentives to reward efficiency and effectiveness largely absent, and school management very varied in quality and consistency of purpose. For some

children in some locations the pull factors related to paid work are clearly important, as are the perceived and real benefits of continuing in school in terms of labour market outcomes. Demand-side failure may become more likely as enrolment rates increase if the marginal benefits of continued attendance diminish.

A recurring theme highlights the inequalities linked to current patterns of access. Household income remains the single best predictor of educational access. Many systems continue to be financed regressively with disproportionate public subsidy of those from wealthier households. Thus in Ghana flat-rate subsidies target everybody irrespective of welfare status, but participation rates favour richer households. If educational access policies are to be labelled pro-poor they must actually benefit the poor and be effectively targeted. Higher participation, especially at secondary level, depends on lowering costs to poorer households whilst recovering some costs from those who can afford to pay. It may even be necessary to provide positive incentives to remain enrolled, e.g. conditional cash transfers though these have yet to become attractive to policy-makers in SSA.

In sum, patterns of educational participation reflect different histories, national priorities and local conditions. This is a reminder that no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to improving educational access is appropriate. Analytic frameworks are needed that can unpack causal relationships in different systems. Conceptual thinking is needed to understand how education systems evolve and how much – and sometimes how little – purposeful acts of policy shape change. Expanded access to education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for development to take place. Lack of education will remain both a part of the definition of poverty, and a means for its diminution.

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