



EDUCATION SUSPENDED: A Study of the Factors Surrounding Absenteeism in Kisumu, Kenya's Obunga Slum Community

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AKILI PREPARATORY SCHOOL – OPPORTUNITIES FOR QUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

Free Primary Education policies enacted in Kenya and other Sub-Saharan African countries have increased school enrollment rates, especially in the past decade. However, problems persist in the quality and access to educational opportunities, especially for girls who live in communities on the margins of society. Absenteeism is a problem that can affect students living in impoverished communities and it prevents children from receiving quality education that can help to lift them out of economic strife. The Riley Orton Foundation is an organization that helps to provide quality education to girls in the Obunga slum community in Kisumu, Kenya. This research focused on the main barriers to daily student attendance in this community, especially barriers in the form of school fees. It also explored how the Riley Orton Foundation addresses obstacles to attendance compared to local public schools. This researcher conducted a study using secondary and primary sources, including interviews with community members and families with daughters attending various area schools. From the results, an analysis of the causes of absenteeism and potential solutions to promote attendance is explored.

BACKGROUND

Free Primary Education (FPE) was reintroduced in Kenya in 2003 in an effort to achieve the universal primary education that had been outlined as an international goal by the United Nations.

Often touted as a success story in the region, the education sector in Kenya is allocated more money than any other public sector, receiving twenty percent of the national budget and teachers make up the “largest workforce” in the country. FPE led to an over 22 percent increase in primary school enrollments in the year after its launch. Rates of students moving on from primary to secondary school increased by more than 34 percent between 2003 and 2011, from 42.7 to 76.8 percent.

Though increased enrollments and free education is a positive development, it has been argued that Kenya’s education system was not equipped to intake the influx of students. Among issues cited have been limited access to public school in impoverished areas like slums; perceptions of low quality of education in the public schools; overcrowding of facilities and high student-teacher ratios; lack of resources; ineffective teachers; the continued payments of school fees; and higher rates of transfers from public to private schools.

The founders of the Akili Preparatory School hope that their approach to education can help to counter many of the problems found in Kenya FPE system.

INSTANCES OF ABSENTEEISM IN OBUNGA

Almost half of Obunga families interviewed reported that their child missed **at least one week of school** per month

16 out of 20 parents reported that one or more of their children missed days of school due to a failure to pay **school fees**.

“By the time you pay for one [child], the other [child] has to remain at home. The [children] who stay at home will fall behind academically.”

-Female, 40 years old, mother of 8, describing the challenges of providing school fees for all of her children.

PROJECT QUESTIONS

-What are the main barriers to education for girls and their families from the Obunga Slum Community?

-According to parents, to what degree are Akili’s high attendance rates attributed to the absence of school fees?

-How can school absenteeism be avoided?

RESEARCH METHODS

-Designed and conducted semistructured interviews with 20 parents of girls ages 7 to 13 in the Obunga Slum Community. Each Parent was interviewed twice.

-10 parents: daughters attended Akili

-10 parents: daughters attended local public schools

-Interviewed Officials in three different local public schools

-Conducted participant observation while working with ROF, conversing with community members, and spending time in Obunga.

The interviews conducted made it clear – the rates of absenteeism among the non-Akili girls and other non-Akili students from all of the families were drastically higher than rates of absenteeism of the Akili girls. This research and secondary research have found an array of negative consequences for students who are unable to regularly attend school.

Firstly, high rates of absenteeism have been associated with lower achievement in students, especially those in poverty, and it is suggested that a chronically absent student can even negatively affect the learning processes of their peers.

Studies have also shown that missing days of school can cause students to fall behind and repeat grades. In Kenya, over one-third of students in an average school year are held back to repeat grades. Repeating grades can lead to increased school drop-outs, especially if students find themselves in classes with much younger children.

At Akili, rates of absenteeism were drastically reduced, with girls rarely missing school days. Students at Akili attend school at much higher rates than their siblings and peers in public school.

SCHOOL FEES

The most-cited reason for absenteeism was the continued collection of fees from schools, in both private and public establishments. In Kenya and other East African countries, the term “free” in FPE is misleading. It has been found that families still pay public school fees, especially if government funds do not cover a particular school’s operating costs. Although there is technically no “tuition fee” to learn in government primary schools, there are a myriad of other fees that families are expected to pay.

The families I interviewed reported that students were sent home if fees could not be paid, and were not able to return until the parents could gather sufficient funds. Additional costs for uniforms, school supplies, books, and transportation added stress on slum families.

When asked about what they worried was the biggest barrier to their children’s education, fourteen out of the twenty respondents noted that school fees remained the largest obstacle. At a local public school, Kudho Primary, the absentee rate jumped from fifteen to forty percent during times of the month that coincided with when fees were due.

For parents with girls attending local public schools, these fees ranged from 900 KES to 7,000 KES per term. These fees seemed to be the norm for children attending primary school. When parents talked about their children in secondary school, fees often reached higher than 50,000 KES per student. Large families also put a considerable strain on respondents’ ability to provide financially for children’s education. Even if school fees were reasonably low, there were families who had up to seven children in school at a time, with more on the way. When added together, school fees could become astronomical, especially when compared to the average income that Obunga families earned. For example, one family owed almost 340,000 KES in total school fees every year, but according to their response, only earned a little over 200,000 KES annually.

In the cases of larger families especially, many parents had to choose which child’s tuition to pay first. While many respondents reported dividing money equally between children, over half claimed that the first priority was always for the older children.

At Akili Preparatory School, students were not charged fees, and were not absent due to a failure to pay them. Girls are able to attend school uninterrupted.

Other Reasons Reported for School Absences:

- **Illness** – especially regular cases of malaria
 - **At Akili**, some parents asserted that their daughters’ health improved: *One parent noticed that since his daughter started at Akili, she had not contracted malaria. He attributed this to the fact that at home she has to share a bed with multiple siblings, and it is easier for her mosquito net to be kicked off the bed. At Akili, he noted, each student slept in their own bed with their own mosquito net.*
- **Nutrition** – even if students are technically present at school, missing meals can cause children to lose focus or interest in studies
 - **Akili** offers a school feeding program, unlike most schools in the area. About nutrition, one parent noted: *“After a child eats, she will have energy. If there is no food, she can collapse or sleep while lessons are on.”*
- **Student truancy or “ditching”** – some students choose to leave school, with or without their parents’ consent in order to engage in outside activities. Parents reported concerns of peer pressure influences in students’ decisions to leave school.
 - **Akili** parents often mentioned that they felt that their daughters were surrounded by better influences at Akili. One parent said: *“The matrons [at Akili] are more like mothers to them...they take care of the kids like their children so when she’s there, it is like she is at home.”*
- **Distance and Transportation** – parents reported students attending schools in locations up to 5 km away. Weather and street conditions can prevent attendance or cause tardiness.
 - Because **Akili** is a boarding school, girls do not have to commute long distances or face hazards between home and school. One parent talked about her worries about her older daughter who went to public school: *“At the time [the oldest daughter] is waking up there is danger, someone could get in [the house]. Someone could sneak in. At the time she is walking to school she could be raped. But I am forced to send her to this school because I do not have enough money for boarding school.”*
- **Political Conflict** – During research, there were political protests held. Many of these turned violent. Parents reported keeping their child home from school on these days if their schools were near volatile areas.
 - Because **Akili** was located outside of the city, students continued their studies uninterrupted.

After analysis into the detriments of absenteeism and the struggles that the respondents had in paying fees for multiple children, it is recommended that practices that limit the opportunity for a child to learn because of their parents’ poverty should be strictly avoided by all schools, public and private. Akili, a school that is striving to give education to society’s most vulnerable, should especially work to avoid this practice. Efforts to limit school fees will be necessary in order to educate the nation’s future, increase girls’ opportunities, and work toward ending the cycle of poverty, especially in marginalized communities like Obunga.