

School Fee Abolition: Teachers' Voices

Introduction

As school fee abolition policies are enacted in developing countries worldwide, minimal research has focused on their impact on teachers. In particular, there is little known about what challenges the policy creates, how teachers respond to these difficulties, and how this, in turn, affects students' ability to learn. There is, however, much speculation about how enrollment increases might impact teachers, with qualitative findings and anecdotal evidence to support these ideas. Based on a review of the available school fee literature, teachers may face several challenges when fees are abolished, including large classes, a shortage of material resources, increased heterogeneity of learners, and weakened support from parents, head teachers, and non-governmental organizations.

Challenge: Large Classes

The most obvious difficulty facing teachers in response to school fee abolition, or any other enrollment stimulating policy, is an increase in class size. In nearly every country pursuing free primary education (FPE), the number of pupils per teacher has increased (See Table 1). In Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, pupil/teacher ratios increased in the years immediately following school fee abolition. In Lesotho, there was not much change in pupil/teacher ratios, and in Malawi it actually decreased (although it rose to 70:1 as of 2000).

Table 1: Number of pupils per teacher before and after school fee abolition

Country	Pupils per teacher before fee abolition	Pupils per teacher after fee abolition
Cameroon	52 (1999)	63 (2000)
Kenya	34 (2002)	40 (2003)
Lesotho	44 (1999)	47 (2002)
Malawi	68 (1993)	59 (1995)
Tanzania	41 (2000)	53 (2002)
Uganda	35 (1995)	53 (1998)

Source: UIS, 2006

Classroom Space

Large classes can result in a variety of challenges for teachers. One such challenge is a lack of classroom space for students. In 2005, UNESCO research teams labeled 60 percent of schools in Kenya as "overcrowded." Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the teacher to monitor and interact with students. Pupils also complained that crowded classrooms increased the risk of theft as bodies were tightly packed together, enabling students to reach into each others' pockets.

A much larger teacher workforce is needed to respond to the burgeoning class sizes, this demand is rarely met. For example, UNESCO's 2005 nationally representative study of the implementation of FPE in Kenya revealed that the average school visited was short two to three teachers. During fee abolition planning in Tanzania, the government expected enrollment to increase by 67 percent, yet only planned for a 29 percent increase in the number of teachers (Davidson, 2004).

The pupil/teacher ratios reported are national averages, can hide vast regional differences, and do not distinguish between qualified and unqualified teachers. In Malawi, for example, the ratio



of pupils to qualified teachers increased from 88:1 in 1992 to 119:1 in 1997 (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). Furthermore, pupil/teacher ratios often vary dramatically within a particular school, with the lower primary school grades often having much larger classes than the upper primary grades.

In the most extreme cases, teachers moved their classes outdoors. Learning outdoors is highly dependent on the weather and can cause distractions. Case studies done by Joseph Chimombo (2005) in Malawi revealed that even five years after fee abolition, one teacher was assigned to simultaneously educate 240 pupils from Standard 1 under one tree and 150 pupils from Standard 2 under a nearby tree. Managing both classes at once was nearly impossible.

Trained Teachers

Although no comparable figures exist before fee abolition in Malawi, only 46 percent of teachers were considered to be trained as of 1998, four years after fees were removed. In order to train 18,000 teachers in the three years after fee abolition, the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Program (MIITEP) was created. According to Demis Kunje's 2002 study, while 80 percent of the program's teachers became certified, there were concerns about the quality of the training. MIITEP was supposed to provide teachers with pre-service and in-service training and introduce them to new pedagogical styles. However, the amount of time dedicated to training was insufficient, and teachers in the field were left with minimal support. There is little evidence that teachers actually changed their pedagogical style or improved their content knowledge.

This increased demand for trained teachers is rarely met in other countries, leading to a shortage of qualified professionals. While countries such as Kenya and Tanzania report that all teachers had the requisite training both before and after fees were abolished, there has been a decline in the number of trained teachers Lesotho. According to the UNESCO Instituted for Statistics (UIS, 2006), the percentage of trained teachers in Lesotho steadily fell from 78 percent when fees were removed in 1999 to 67 percent in 2004.

Classroom overcrowding has also resulted in an increase in double-shift classrooms, reducing the actual instructional time students receive. In Tanzania, for example, the government estimated that 67 percent of classrooms would be used for double-shift teaching in the years following fee abolition. Follow-up studies in the Morogoro region demonstrated that most teachers used the double-shift system, especially in the lower grades. Teachers had been promised additional incentives for teaching in shifts and resented the education system after the incentives failed to materialize. In double-shift classes in Kenya, many teachers reported being forced to teach both shifts without any break, leading to fatigue and reduced quality of instruction.

Classroom Management

Organizing and managing a large class is another challenge associated with a surge in enrollment. Alex Alubisia (2005) quotes a senior teacher in Kenya as saying, "I am unable to maintain discipline in class as many children are unruly and noisy." Caning, the chief source of punishment prior to school fee abolition in Kenya, was banned along with fees, while guidance and counseling have been encouraged as alternatives to manage students who misbehave. However, with such a large class, teachers felt that such a tactic was unfeasible, and their lack of training in counseling exacerbated the technique's ineffectiveness.

Large class size also leads to teachers' inability to provide attention to individual pupils. Emily Wax (2003) writes that some Kenyan students had not even been able to formally

meet their teacher, with a line forming after class each day just to shake the teacher's hand. Within the classroom, teachers had to yell to be heard and some even used megaphones in order to teach the large number of pupils. Teachers have also resorted to less participatory approaches to learning. In Kenya, pupils in a 2005 UNESCO study reported that attention in overcrowded classrooms was mostly given to the brighter students, while weaker students were left behind. Teachers from the same study reported changing their classroom styles, assigning less homework, and often not correcting what they did assign. Some pupils concurred that teachers were stretched too thin with school fee abolition; they felt that teachers were not able to meet their individual needs and provided only minimal feedback.

There is, however, some indication that teachers have developed creative ways to cope with their overflowing classes. In Malawi, for example, Alison Croft's (2002) observations of several effective teachers found that they had adapted their curriculum by using songs to teach specific subject material. Teachers used songs to keep children occupied while they wrote on the board, to call children to the start of class, and to signal a change in subject or activity.

Margo O'Sullivan (2006) similarly found several Ugandan teachers who adopted effective teaching practices despite large numbers of learners (between 70 and 100 pupils). These effective classrooms all had teaching aids on the walls, exercise books, and other learning supplies such as pencils. "The teachers praised the children, asked a lot of questions, explained clearly, scanned the classroom constantly, used eye contact with as many of the children as possible, and used repetition effectively in that it did not degenerate into mindless boring chants." They managed time well, marked exercise books, used both individual and group work, and planned lessons in advance. Compared to most other teachers observed, the four effective teachers were positive, enthusiastic, and energetic. As with the teachers Croft studied in Malawi, these Ugandan teachers also utilized songs to manage their class.

Challenge: Shortage of Resources

Along with an increase in class size, there may be a shortage of learning supplies, furnishings, and appropriate infrastructure when access is quickly expanded. The absence of books, chalk, or desks can make teaching and learning challenging. According to Raja Kattan and Nicolas Burnett (2004), the pupils/permanent classrooms ratio was 119:1; the pupil/desk ratio was 38:1; pupil/chair ratio was 48:1; and the pupil/textbook ratio was 24:1. In Chimombo's case studies of 10 Malawian schools, 9 did not have any desks for Grades 1–4 and many schools did not have desks for the upper primary grades. In Kenya a year after FPE, only half of all classrooms observed by UNESCO had chalkboards visible from all parts of the classroom. While comparative figures do not exist before school fee abolition, these conditions highlight the difficult situations teachers are facing in their classrooms.

In several cases, teachers reported having more resources, specifically textbooks, following school fee abolition. Louis Grogan (2006) cites a 1995 survey by the Ugandan Ministry of Education that found a pupil/ textbook ratio of 40:1 for science, 55:1 for math, 49:1 for English, and 44:1 for social studies. After the government's efforts to improve production and disbursement after FPE, the pupil/textbook ratio fell to 6:1 as of 1999. In Kenya as well, pupil/textbook ratios were consistent with government goals of 2:1 or 3:1 after fees were abolished. In UNESCO's focus group discussions, teachers, parents, and pupils touted the improvement in textbook distribution as one of the greatest strengths of the FPE movement. These additional materials improved teacher effectiveness in the classroom by decreasing chalkboard use and by providing better resources to prepare lessons. These materials also



reduced teachers' work load: pupils could do exercises directly from their books, could correct their own work, and could move at their own pace.

However, while the number of textbooks has improved greatly, challenges remain. Alubisia reports that Kenyan students often found it difficult to finish homework when they shared books. Despite official reports of 3:1 pupil/textbook ratios in Kenya and Uganda, the situation on the ground often revealed ratios of 8:1 or 9:1. Furthermore, the additional textbooks tended to most benefit the upper grades and even when available, textbooks were not always used. A Primary Education Development Plan report in Tanzania concluded that teachers, having taught so long without textbooks, found it challenging to teach with them (Basic Education Development Committee, 2001).

Textbook procurement was also burdensome for some teachers. In Kenya, UNESCO found that under the new textbook disbursement system, most materials arrived late and in the second or third term. The system was also time-consuming, and teachers spent time selecting textbooks when they could have been teaching. Head teachers were further withdrawn from their teaching duties as they also had to collect the books.

Challenge: Increased Heterogeneity of Pupils

An additional challenge that teachers face is increased heterogeneity of students, especially with regards to age and ability. According to the 2002 Malawi DHS EdData Survey, 40 percent of students in Standard 1 were overage by two years or more, and by Standard 8, 79 percent of students were considered overage (National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, 2003). In some Malawian schools post-fee abolishment, the age of Standard 1 pupils ranged from 4 to 18 years, and students as old as 30 were enrolled in primary school. Some overage students were considered disruptive and not receiving education suitable to their needs.

In Kenya, UNESCO focus group discussions with teachers, parents, and pupils one year after FPE revealed the substantial difficulty of dealing with overage learners. Only one quarter of pupils were in the correct grade for their age and 44 percent were overage by two years or more. Pupils who were overage often did not participate, did not ask or answer questions, and were unwilling to read aloud, likely due to feelings of insecurity about their abilities. Bullying was frequent among the older children, who targeted younger or brighter students. Fighting, smoking, and soliciting younger females were all reportedly increasing at schools due to the presence of older pupils. Teachers felt that without caning, they had no recourse to punish the older students, who in turn felt free to taunt and ridicule both teachers and fellow classmates.

Further, variation in age can lead in part to variation in academic ability. In Kenya, children as young as four were enrolled in Grade 1 classes since primary school tuition fees were abolished but pre-primary tuition fees were not. Teachers complained of having to cope with children unable to even hold a pencil and with no pre-literacy skills (UNESCO 2005; Kaga 2006). Some parents even insisted that children be enrolled in particular grades despite their actual abilities, leading to children in Grade 6 unable to read or write.

Compounding issues related to overage and underage learners, enrollment surges often include those children from the poorest homes and the least educated parents, resulting in a greater proportion of students who are unprepared for school. In Uganda, enrollment following fee abolition most heavily favored the poorest students, with the difference in attendance rates between the top and bottom income quintiles shrinking from 36 percentage points to 11 percentage points (Deining, 2003). In urban areas of Kenya, the increase in enrollment was largely attributed to children from slum areas or those who formerly peddled

goods in the streets and market centers. The increase in the number of orphans has also been challenging for teachers, as orphans often come to school hungry and unable to concentrate. While it is a substantial achievement in each of these countries to have provided educational opportunities to the most disadvantaged children, teachers simultaneously need additional support to educate these children.

How teachers have dealt with the wide range of ability in the classroom is not well documented. Some teachers tend to focus on the brightest students at the expense of others, and give less and easier homework. One Kenyan teacher commented, “Nowadays instead of giving a lot of assignments, I have turned to giving remedial work because some pupils cannot read or write” (UNESCO, 2005).

Challenge: Weakened Support

One final area of difficulty for teachers following fee abolition is weakened support from parents and other FPE stakeholders. In UNESCO’s discussions with parents and teachers across Kenya, the lack of information regarding roles and responsibilities for FPE was cited as a major weakness of the policy. Parents often subscribed to the view that because education was now ‘free’, it meant that they should no longer participate in school activities. Consequently, many teachers have become frustrated with parents whose support has weakened after school fee abolition. Kenyan teachers in the UNESCO study almost unanimously agreed that parents’ role since fee abolition was minimal. They felt that parental support had declined substantially: Parents no longer came to meetings or attended school activities and refused to purchase items such as book bags or replacement materials. Teachers commented that parents need to be more involved in general and should support their child’s learning through encouragement, assistance, and material resources.

The sampled teachers in Kenya also felt unsupported by local education officials. Instead of addressing problems and explaining the nuances of FPE, education officers were described often as threatening and critical of teachers. The officials provided little support for managing large classes or dealing with overage pupils. Finally, the role of sponsors (e.g., non-governmental organizations and churches) appeared to diminish in some places. Some schools reported an increase in support, such as help in hiring extra teachers or providing uniforms. However, other schools in Kenya reported that assistance had stopped completely, and sponsors were no longer providing books, buildings, and support staff.

This lack of support to teachers in addressing post-fee abolition challenges may be resulting in lower morale among some teachers. In all three East African countries included in Oxfam’s review of FPE, teaching is viewed by stakeholders as a profession without much esteem. According to Alubisia, teaching is often the last resort for many in terms of employment, drawing upon the least-qualified secondary graduates. The added burden of FPE is likely enhancing teachers’ negative attitudes toward their profession. Teacher fatigue in the presence of double-shift teaching and large classes has also led to low motivation. For some teachers, the inability to control an unruly class can contribute to feelings of helplessness. Alubisia maintains that the workload of teachers has doubled since FPE, and when compounded with negative attitudes towards the profession, many teachers have become disinterested in teaching and have turned to other income generating activities.

Recommendations

It is apparent that schools in developing countries require more qualified teachers, more textbooks and materials, better classrooms, and many other inputs. But when education systems are limited in funding and capacity, the resource wish list will be impossible to

fulfill. The recommendations below, while not exhaustive, propose alternatives that use existing resources more effectively.

- More research needs to be devoted to teachers' experiences with FPE policies. Although many of the challenges teachers face have been noted above, determining the importance and prevalence of each challenge can help governments prioritize which problems to tackle given limited resources. Furthermore, the experiences of teachers can highlight lessons for governments that have yet to abolish school fees.
- No teacher can be expected to cope with nearly 400 children at once, regardless of the incentives put in place for the teacher to do his or her best. However, with the promotion of Education for All, large classes will continue to be a challenge for many teachers. In addition to pursuing policies to reduce class size, it would be useful to develop simple techniques to help teachers deal with large classrooms.
- Alternative management techniques for large class sizes should be explored. For example, interactive radio instruction (IRI) has been shown to be particularly helpful in improving learning among students and presents a cost-effective option (Bosch, 1997). IRI has been shown to help reduce, if not entirely eliminate, gaps in performance between urban and rural students as well as female and male children. It is appropriate for large-scale use and the costs per learner decrease as more learners use the service. Most importantly, IRI illustrates best practices for teachers and reinforces them continually. In countries that have used IRI, teachers have been shown to incorporate these practices into their own teaching to improve their performance. This would be especially useful when a large number of teachers need to be hired and trained in a short period of time.
- The heterogeneity of learners in the classroom after a flood of new students is given little attention in both research and practice. Countries need to recognize and plan for the ramifications of overage and unprepared students on a teacher's ability to teach. Solutions to this challenge need to be examined, such as creating special programs for overage learners or dividing classrooms based on ability. Furthermore, research has shown that disadvantaged students may require more resources to learn. Government expenditures should reflect these varying needs by providing more assistance to schools serving the neediest students.
- Lower primary teachers are most critically affected by enrollment surges and often receive the fewest resources and the least respect and esteem. Equipping these teachers with pre-service training, in-service training, and human and material resources gives these them the support and tools they need to be effective. Rather than focusing on the entire system, specifically targeting teachers in Grades 1 and 2 may be a more effective way of improving the quality of education provided.

Conclusion

Understanding the complications that arise for teachers from an enrollment surge and how they respond to these challenges is an integral step in preventing the trade-off between access and quality. Countries that have not yet adopted FPE policies will likely experience the same set of problems described by teachers from countries that have already abolished school fees. There is a vital need not only to alleviate some of these challenges through increased resources and targeted disbursement, but also to consider revamping pre-service and in-service training to provide teachers with the skills to cope in crowded, under-resourced classrooms. Overall, a more concerted effort needs to be made to highlight the experiences of teachers, the challenges they identify, and the solutions they think will best support them in educating all children.

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