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Temple of Understanding

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Educational Inequality in Kenya

Education has proved itself to be a bastion of opportunity and empowerment regardless of one's socioeconomic standing or background. In Kenya, students work diligently within schools to achieve top grades, earn excellent exam scores, enter university, and hopefully carve out a path that leads to prosperity not only for them but countless family members that look to them for support. Despite this demanding prospect, the structures and resources are not in place or lag far behind where they should to ensure the educational attainment of all children in Kenya. A complex history of colonialism intertwined with present-day issues such as poverty and gender inequality leave the future of Kenya's students in unsettling limbo.

The foundation of education in Kenya came with the advent of European missionary expeditions on the African continent. Missionaries perceived it as their God-given mandate to educate the natives they encountered, and within Kenya this led to the establishment of the first missionary school in 1846. Missionary schools focused on reading, writing, basic arithmetic, and training in Bible knowledge. Education in Kenya continued to be dominated by missionary endeavors until the early 20th century when in 1903 the British-appointed Governor of Kenya, Charles Elliot, encouraged white settlers to come to the fledgling colony that had just recently been born out of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. These settlers in turn demanded better schooling for their children, which soon resulted in an education system structured around racial lines. British educational policies within Africa, and in turn Kenya, tended to be rooted in racial science that deemed Africans incapable of receiving academic education. Similar stances were taken on education concerning Indians in the country, brought forth by the British experience in India with how education could be a powerful driving force in challenging their hegemony. As a result, technical and vocational schools were created to teach Africans skills within agriculture that were beneficial to white settlers as well as carpentry, metal-working, and forms of artisanry.

As such, little was done to invest in the academic education of native Kenyans until well into the 1950s, when the embers of independence began to shine brighter.

Following independence, the Kenya education commission was established to survey existing resources and to develop a new framework for a unified education system. The concept of *harambee* (self-help) schools became the norm, and soon came to exceed government-supported schools. A UNESCO conference of African states for development in education insisted on reaching free and universal primary education by the 1980s, which galvanized Kenya to shift policies and expand access to education. However, global economic trends such as drops in coffee prices and high oil prices often left the burden of funding education in the country to the public.

The current structure of education in Kenya follows an 8-4-4 system which consists of 8 years of primary school, 4 years of secondary school, and 4 years of university training. Students in secondary school take the Kenya Certificate in Secondary Education (KCSE) exam that is used to determine placement in the nation's universities. Despite the existence of the current system for decades, recent calls to promote learner potential through actively building upon critical skills early on has led to the proposal of a 2-6-3-3 that is slated to be fully implemented by 2026. This new system consists of 2 years of pre-primary, 6 years of primary, 3 years of lower secondary and 3 years of upper secondary.

Trends within education in Kenya vary between the primary, secondary, and university levels. Within primary education, a 5% increase in primary enrollment was witnessed between 2013-17 that saw a rise from 9.8 million to 10.4 million primary students. Furthermore, 91% of students within the country expected to be in primary school are enrolled, leaving a small but still alarming 9% that are not. Kenya's Gender Parity Index (GPI), which measures the country's progress in gender equality, shows an excellent record of closing the gender gap within primary schools. Data collected reflect 8 out of 10 primary students advancing to secondary school, and a decline in the average school size from 352 to 294 from 2013-17.

For secondary education, less promising statistics have proved to be prevalent. There has been only a slight increase experienced in secondary enrollment from 2 million to 2.8 million

between 2013-17. Most shockingly, nearly 50% of secondary school age children in the country are not enrolled in school, leaving a large portion of youth out of schools. Despite these shortcomings, there has been positive development in gender parity with an increase from 88% to 95% between 2013-17.

While primary and secondary education serve as the main organs of education in Kenya, special needs education is a critical area that is often overlooked. As a result, significant data does not exist on the number of children in the country that have special needs. But as of 2017, there are 234,153 special needs children enrolled in schools across the country with the majority in primary schools. A wide array of issues prevents the proper addressing of special needs education in Kenya which include lack of adequate facilities, poor understanding of special needs concepts, lack of identification, and lack of proper placement for children with special needs.

On the university level, enrollment has increased by 64% between 2013-14 to 2016-17. However, this is detracted by the lack of gender parity within public universities where the figure has stayed consistent at 67% compared to private universities at a high of 95%. Nearly 50% of all university students are enrolled in 1 of 4 universities in the country: University of Nairobi, Moi University, Kenyatta University, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology. In recent years, many universities have shifted away from their STEM-dominated atmospheres, which has only made it more difficult for women pursuing STEM who are already underrepresented compared to men at all levels within higher education. These issues coupled with high student to faculty ratios and an academic staff of whom only 35% are qualified to teach create environments that cripple student development and outcomes.

Kenya is faced with a plethora of issues that have proved damaging for current and future generations. Among them include costs to families such as uniforms and meals, terrorism/cattle rustling, early pregnancy in girls, long walking distances, lack of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities/supplies, intolerant cultural values, and improper distribution of teachers. The government, often in partnership with global organizations, has invested in and developed various programs to increase access to education at all levels.

The Kenyan government's budgeting priorities has seen spending on education increase from \$1.7 billion in 2010-11 to \$3.2 billion in 2015-16. Despite this, the share education spending constitutes to total government expenditures and GDP has decreased to 14.4% (2015-16) and 5.1% (2015-16) respectively. Moreover, per capita education spending on a single child has remained the same since 2011. On an institutional level, the Free Day Secondary School Initiative has served to make secondary education more accessible, especially to low-income students, by removing the previously required Sh9,374 school fee. The Higher Education Loans Board has worked with educators to provide funding for the creation of more public universities and to provide public funding for students attending private institutions.

Through Kenya's partnerships with various international organizations, programs such as Tusome, PRIEDE, and the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project have been developed to further spur educational development. Tusome was created in collaboration with USAID to increase literacy rates in children in grades 1-3. PRIEDE, a venture sponsored by Global Partnerships for Education (GPE), works to provide better math books for children and more comprehensive math training for teachers. Finally, the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project, a \$200 million program funded by the World Bank, hopes to improve secondary schools by addressing issues such as reducing teacher shortage, improving school infrastructure, and developing new curricula that can be implemented in schools nationwide.

While increased government spending and numerous programs have aided in combating Kenya's education shortcomings have proved effective, there is still much more that can be done to more aggressively approach the issue. Solutions to different issues impacting access to education include developing a framework for more structured education spending, constructing sanitation facilities, establishing free lunch programs for poorer families, distributing "School in a Box" kits to mobile schools and nomadic communities, and organizing community conversations to discuss the critical value of education.

Most importantly, Kenya must actively invest in the teachers who are tasked with educating millions of children across the country. Providing them with better training, livable wages, benefits, and the resources/support in the classroom will create an atmosphere of

amicable dialogue where educators and government can come together to continue developing even better methods for education.

As Kenya continues to emerge as a economic and political power not only in East Africa but the continent as a whole, education must continue to be seen as an essential pillar of the nation's internal policy. Investing in the youth and offering opportunities for children to receive an education regardless of geography, gender, tribe, or wealth ensures a country that will be nurtured by successive generations of educated individuals.

Works Cited

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