

Is Uganda's education system increasing the social divide?

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Most private schools employ better teachers, have excellent facilities, enough instructional materials, have small and manageable classes that make it easy to follow up on students' performance. FILE PHOTO

In Summary

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By Blessing Atwine

In the early 1990s, the government liberalised the education sector which led to an increase in the number of privately-owned schools. Despite the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, parents are still parting with huge sums of money to educate their children in private schools.

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This is mainly because most private schools employ better teachers, have excellent facilities, enough instructional materials, have small and manageable classes that make it easy to follow up on students' performance and above all teachers are better motivated which guarantees high chances of success.

On the other hand, some public schools (especially those implementing the UPE and USE programmes) are the opposite. They are characterised by poor facilities such as absence of furniture (and in some cases students sit on dusty floors), absenteeism of teachers, incomplete classrooms that are crowded. These poor facilities negatively affect the learning outcomes of the students.

Parents are willing to educate their children in private schools irrespective of the high cost. This is because the expected returns on education are higher in private schools than the free public schools with poor quality. It is important to note that private actors in the education sector are contributing to the growing disparities in education outcomes between the rich who are attending private schools and the poor who are going to UPE and USE schools.

Disparities

As a result, the reality in Uganda is that parents with higher incomes can ensure a better education for their children through private schools which enables them to obtain the

required skills as they transit to the labour market and find satisfying employment. On the other hand, the poor parents are forced to send their children to the failing public schools thus acquiring little or no skills and transit into vulnerable employment. This widens the social divide as their incomes vary remarkably and the inequality cycle continues.

The separation of the rich and the poor at the different levels of the education system due to financial constraints is creating a highly unequal and stratified society. Those who go through private schools (usually the rich) are better placed socially and can easily get employment. On the other hand, the poor who go through failing public schools are socially disconnected and are most likely to end up in vulnerable employment in the informal sector.

This has resulted into a continuous social structure where the poor go to one end and the rich to the other not mentioning increasing poverty and income inequality.

The introduction of UPE and USE was expected to reduce the high levels of poverty and improve human development by ensuring that every child goes to school. However, this expectation is not being realised due to poor quality results from these schools. The only success registered by most of these schools is the increasing numbers of students in poorly constructed and crowded classrooms with few or no teachers to follow up on them.

Mending the divide

To improve the quality of public education in Uganda, there is need to decongest classrooms to manageable sizes, enhance instructional quality, strengthen and motivate the teaching staff and monitor public schools to ensure that teachers deliver quality

education.

This can be done through investing more money in the public education sector to train teachers and reduce the student-teacher ratio, equip students and instructors with scholastic materials such as textbooks and library resources. This will eliminate the differences in the outcomes of attending the private or public school, provide equal opportunities for both children from poor and rich families and enhance social equity.

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