

School Fee Abolition: Impact on Learning and Persistence

Introduction

It is an undisputed fact that the abolition of primary school fees has led to vast enrollment gains in several countries. After fees were abolished in Malawi in 1994 and in Uganda in 1997, enrollment in both countries grew by 68 percent (Avenstrup, Liang & Nellemann, 2004). Lesotho's graduated abolition of fees, beginning in 2000, led to a Grade 1 enrollment increase of 75 percent, and over 1 million students entered school in Kenya following fee abolition in 2003. Finally, in Cameroon and Tanzania, the gross enrollment ratios increased by 16 percent and 14 percent, respectively (UIS, 2006).

However, included in the Education for All pledge is not only the opportunity to enroll in school, but also the opportunity to learn at school and persist to the next level with adequate skills and knowledge. As many countries abolish school fees as a major step toward achieving universal primary education (UPE), it is imperative that ample attention is given to learning and education quality as well as enrollment. Using available test-score and economic growth data from 50 countries between 1960 and 2000, Hanushek and Wößmann (2007) estimated that one standard deviation difference in test scores is associated with a 2 percentage point difference in the average annual growth rate in per capita GDP. Although economic growth is not the only goal of developing countries, these findings highlight the importance of considering quality as well as access when designing education policy. Education expenditures will only produce more benefits if student learning outcomes improve along with the increase in school enrollment and persistence, particularly in the lower primary grades.

Impact of Fee Abolition on Lower Primary Grades

The effects of fee abolition on learning and education quality in the lower primary grades is of particular concern as the largest influx of students following fee abolition occurs in Grade 1. In the year before school fee abolition in Kenya, Grade 1 and 2 students comprised 35 percent of all primary school students, while Grade 5 and 6 students made up 31 percent (EPDC, 2007). When fees were abolished in 2003, these proportions changed to 40 percent and 28 percent, respectively. In 2001, 40 percent of the Tanzanian student population was in Grades 1 and 2, while 23 percent were in Grades 5 and 6. One year later, after fees were abolished, the imbalance grew to 46 percent in lower primary and 19 percent in upper primary.

These trends translate into increasingly large classes in the lower primary grades. In Kenya, the overall primary level student/teacher ratio increased from 34:1 in 2001 to 40:1 in 2003 (UIS, 2006). While no comparative figures exist before fees were abolished, the 2003 figure masks important differences across grades: the average student/teacher ratio was well over 100:1 in the lower primary grades (Princeton University, 2006). Similarly, in Malawi, the average classroom sizes were 113 students per class in Grade 1 but only 27 students per class in Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, unpublished data, as cited in Kadzamira & Rose,



2003). The main reason for the discrepancy between class size and teacher/pupil ratio between lower primary grades and upper grade levels is that resources are often diverted to upper grades due to the emphasis on primary completion exams (Chimombo, 1999, as cited in Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). Lower primary classes in Malawi are also often assigned to the least-equipped classrooms or are conducted outdoors. Senior teachers tend to prefer teaching the upper primary classes, leaving the least experienced and qualified teachers for the lower grades (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). As a result, many of these students likely experience only a few years of poor quality school before they drop out, often without learning basic skills.

Learning Outcomes

Measures of learning outcomes are scarce, but those that exist suggest that learning decreases in countries where school fee abolition policies have been introduced. In Uganda, results from a simple reading test administered as part of the 1995 and 2001 DHS EdData Surveys revealed that the reading ability of students in government-aided schools decreased significantly after the abolition of school fees (NSO & ORC Macro, 2003). Controlling for observable differences between cohorts, the probability that a student could read a sentence was reduced by 11 percent. Among poorer households, the probability of reading a sentence fell by 20 percent.

Another test given to a nationally representative random sample of Grade 3 students in Uganda showed a decline in achievement since fees were abolished. The number of students receiving a satisfactory score declined to only 31 percent in 1999, compared to 48 percent in 1996 (Murphy, Bertoncino & Wang, 2002). The results were even more profound on the English oral exam, as the percentage with a satisfactory score dropped from 92 to 56 percent.

Low levels of learning are also noticeable in indicators that were measured only after the abolishment of fees. While it is impossible to determine if weak results are due to fee abolition policies, students who enrolled after the reduction of fees appear to be achieving little from their school experiences. For example, in Malawi, where fees were abolished in 1994, there are several indications that students are learning at low levels. The 1998 SACMEQ I literacy results show that only 19.4 percent of students reached a minimum level of competency, and only 1.3 percent reached a desirable level (Chimombo, Kunje, Chimuzu & Mchikoma, 2005). SACMEQ II results illustrate that these already low levels further deteriorated by 2000, where 8.6 and 0.3 percent reached minimum and desirable levels of competency, respectively. Among Grade 3 students, additional assessments found that more than half of the children could not read common words in textbooks. In addition, 10 percent of students could not write their names and 50 percent could not identify letters in the alphabet (Rose, 2002, as cited in Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). Although there are no comparison values prior to fee reduction, the low levels of learning are apparent.

Other countries exhibit similar findings. Among the Ugandan Grade 6 students who took the SACMEQ II exam in 2000, 25.5 percent of students were effectively illiterate and 38.8 percent of students were innumerate (Byamugisha & Ssenabulya, 2005). Even in

Nigeria, where fee abolition policies have been introduced on multiple occasions (UPE in 1976 and UBE in 2000), mass learning appears to be low. In 2003, the literacy level was only 55 percent (Ajetomobi & Ayanwale, 2005). According to the 2004 DHS EdData survey, 61 percent of children aged 4–12 who had at least some primary school education could not read a simple sentence, and 37 percent of these children could not perform simple addition (NPC & ORC Macro, 2004).

To some degree it is understandable that learning outcomes decline after fee abolition. Reducing education costs has the greatest impact on the enrollment of children from impoverished families or on children who had previously dropped out (Grogan, 2006; Deininger, 2003). Given this, it should not be surprising that overall achievement declines as the pool of students incorporates those more likely to struggle. However, while increased enrollment of students who are more likely to struggle is one explanation for the decline in learning outcomes, a decline in the quality of education is another potential culprit.

It is quite common for quality to deteriorate as enrollment increases. Tiongson (2004) summarized the findings of 19 studies where enrollment increased: 12 out of the 13 studies that measured quality found that it deteriorated when examining indicators such as pass rates, student/teacher ratios, textbooks, and teacher qualifications. Congested classrooms, insufficient supplies, and lack of individual attention from teachers are just some of the challenges created by enrollment surges that impact learning and introduce the trade-off between quantity and quality.

Persistence in School

When children repeat or drop out, it raises questions about the amount of learning students achieve in school. Indeed, children with greater cognitive skills are more likely to stay in school longer and are less likely to repeat (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Thus, the impact of school fee abolition on student persistence requires investigation.

In theory, school fee abolition could have opposite effects on measures of school persistence. On one hand, the elimination of financial barriers could allow students to stay in school longer. On the other hand, a decline in education quality could force students to progress slowly through the system or to abandon school altogether.

The evidence is mixed on whether or not school persistence improves or declines after fee abolition. This issue is further complicated as data often come from many sources and vary greatly and new educational policies, such as automatic promotion, can skew data. Consequently, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about school fee abolition's effect on repetition, dropout, and survival.

Repetition

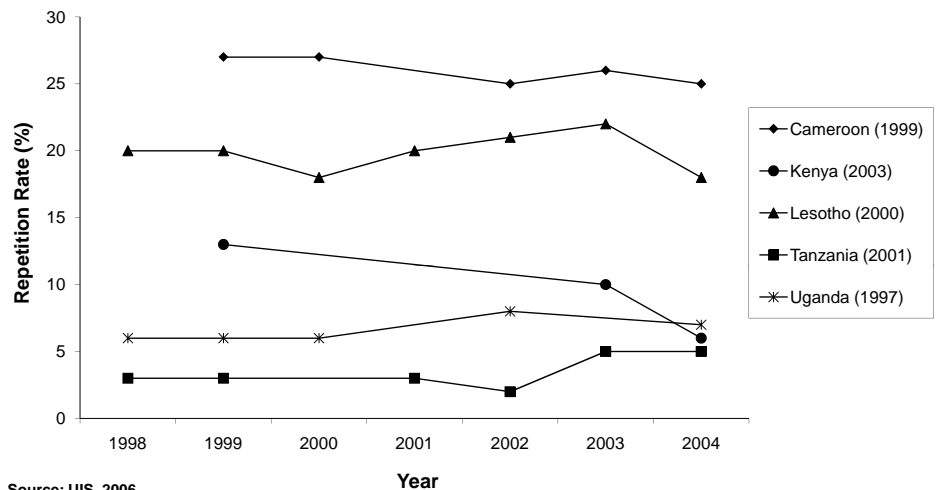
Most evidence suggests that repetition rates decreased in many countries after fee abolition. In Kenya, for example, the repetition rate declined from 13.2 percent in 1999 to 9.8 percent in 2003 (More Pupils Completing, 2006). Similarly, repetition rates in Uganda fell from 17 percent to 9 percent after fees were abolished (Murphy, Bertoincino & Wang, 2002). However, in both countries, automatic promotion policies had been



instituted, making it impossible to determine school fee abolition’s true impact. See Figure 1 for repetition trends in selected countries after school fee abolition.

Trends in other countries show no strong relationship between fee abolition and repetition rates. Lesotho’s repetition rate increased slightly, but eventually fell again. In Cameroon and Tanzania, the rates dipped modestly, before increasing again in Tanzania. However, as with student/teacher ratios, repetition rates may be particularly challenging in the lower primary grades. In Malawi, for example, the 2002 DHS EdData Survey found that 40 percent of students attending Grade 1 in 2001 repeated the grade in 2002.

Figure 1: Repetition rates in selected FPE countries



Source: UIS, 2006

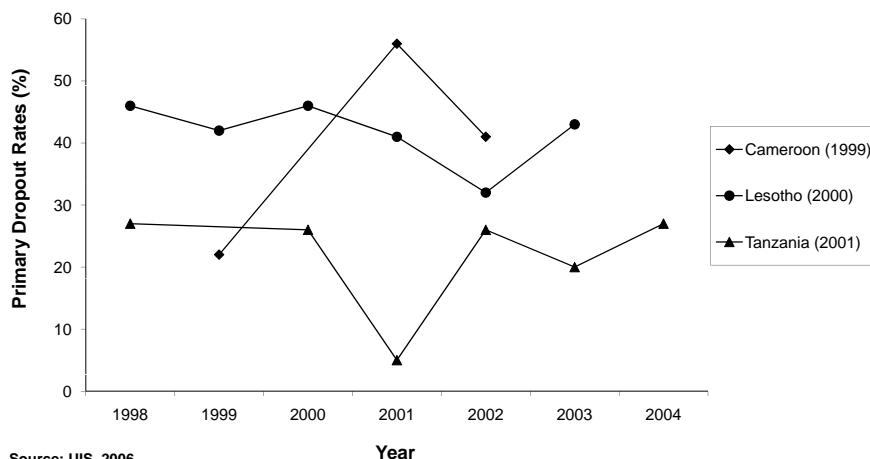
Dropout and Survival Rates

Dropout and survival rates show similar inconsistencies among fee abolition countries. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2006), dropout rates in Cameroon increased substantially in the two years following fee abolition, from 22 to 56 percent (See Figure 2). In Lesotho, on the other hand, the opposite occurred as dropout rates decreased from 46 percent in 1999 to 32 percent in 2002. In Tanzania, the dropout rate dropped dramatically during the year fees were eliminated (from 26 percent in 2002 to 20 percent in 2003) but then climbed back up to its original level the following year (UIS, 2006). While no pre-fee abolition comparative figures exist, dropping out is again a problem in the lower primary grades. According to the Malawi DHS EdData Survey in 2002, 60 percent of students who dropped out did so during Grade 1 or before Grade 2.

Survival rates appear to be declining in several countries that have abolished school fees while increasing in others (UIS, 2006). In Cameroon, the survival rate to Grade 5 fell from 81 percent in 1998 to 51 percent in 2004. In Uganda, the survival rate dropped from 59 percent to 37 percent (Avenstrup, Liang & Nellemann, 2004). On the other hand, the survival rate to Grade 5 in Tanzania increased from 81 percent in 2000 to 88 percent in 2003 and in Kenya it increased from 75 percent in 2003 to 83 percent in 2004. The Grade 5 survival rate in Malawi is highly variable before fee abolition (37 percent in 1992;

94 percent in 1993), making a comparison after fee abolition difficult. However, the survival rate has hovered between 40 and 50 percent over the last 10 years.

Figure 2: Dropout rates in selected FPE countries



Source: UIS, 2006

Recommendations

Given the evidence that learning and persistence may be jeopardized due to complications associated with school fee abolition, ministries of education have several courses of action to improve the situation. While the issues brief, *School Fee Abolition: Teachers' Voices*, provides more concrete suggestions to improve the situation of teachers, there are specific actions that countries should consider to address learning and persistence.

- Abolishing school fees is a policy with strong appeal, attracting the support of both donors and the general public. At the same time, the desire to enroll all children in school should not trump the obligation to also provide them with educational opportunities to learn and progress through school. Careful planning before fee abolition and consideration of the policy's impact on learning outcomes are critical to achieve Education for All.
- Lesotho abolished school fees using a graduated approach: fees were abolished for Grade 1 in 2000, Grade 2 in 2001, and so forth. Given the less dramatic drop in education outcomes in Lesotho post-fee abolition compared to other countries, more attention should be given to the benefits of graduated fee abolition. It is possible that such an approach, as compared to the oft-used "big bang" method, may provide a better way for countries to absorb new students without sacrificing quality and learning.
- Most evidence on learning and education quality is based on proxy indicators, which alone are not sufficient. Without a solid understanding of learning in a pre- and post-fee abolition environment, it is challenging to address the relevant issues. SACMEQ I and II do not span years in which fees were abolished in a particular country, but SACMEQ III may provide some stronger indicators of change in learning for countries such as Kenya, Lesotho, Tanzania, and Zambia. More importantly, governments should make a concerted effort to gather information on quality and learning directly to

identify the areas most in need of improvement. Rigorously designed pre- and post-test measures, along with process data, would be particularly helpful to understand changes occurring in learning outcomes.

- In addition to assessing fee abolition's effect on learning, carefully designed studies should delve into the impact of fee abolition on school persistence, as findings are currently mixed. Repetition and dropout create inefficiency and waste valuable resources. Examining why students are not staying in school or progressing despite substantial fee reductions can provide valuable information about how fee abolition policy should be altered or how new policies need to be designed to keep children in school.
- While many governments and education systems prioritize upper primary grades, the lower primary grades face the most difficult challenges after fee abolition. The least prepared and newest teachers are often assigned to these grades, and lower primary classrooms also often have the fewest supplies and the weakest infrastructure. In Malawi, dropout and repetition are particularly high in the first and second year of school. Students cannot be expected to perform well in Grades 5 and 6, assuming they remain in school that long, unless they have had a strong lower elementary school experience. To address this issue, human and material resources should be distributed in an equitable manner so that the earliest primary grades are adequately staffed and resourced.

Conclusion

If education quality is poor, there are a variety of repercussions: Students are not living up to their potential as learners and investments are being wasted. Poor education quality can cause children to progress slowly through the system to achieve minimum competency, costing both time and money and increasing students' risk of dropping out. The inability to learn at school might also lead to disillusionment among parents and children as to the merits of education. Although the increase in education access following school fee abolition is a major step toward Education for All, education quality and the improvement of learning outcomes need to be equally important goals.

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