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Education—a Key to Life? Caregivers’ Narratives of Primary School Education in Iringa Region, Tanzania*

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Abstract: Findings from developed countries demonstrate a positive relationship between children’s educational outcomes and parental perceptions of the value of education. However, little is known about parental attitudes toward education in the context of the least developed countries. A better understanding of this could assist global efforts to increase educational attainment in the world’s poorest countries. This study investigates the parental perceptions of primary school education in the Iringa region of Tanzania and whether these perceptions vary depending on socio-economic status and urban/rural residence. It finds that though schools face severe problems, parents of all backgrounds have a generally positive perception of education as a necessity for employment, independence and modernized farming. Nevertheless, poverty overwhelmingly determines educational outcomes.

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Findings from research carried out in developed countries generally demonstrate a positive relationship between child educational outcomes and parental attitudes and perceptions of education (Drimie & Casale 2008; Schueler, Bahena, McIntyre & Gehlbach 2014). Parents' perceptions about children's schooling are central as they influence not only the access to education but also children's involvement with, and attitude towards, school. Pupils' motivation, behavior and academic performance are closely linked to their attitudes about school and thus learning outcomes may be affected by parental perceptions (Schueler et al. 2014). As Harris and Goodall (2008: 286) state, "Parents are the most important influence on learning."

Parents' perceptions, and thus motivations for educating their children, might further be related to the relevance of education, the total cost of education and perceptions related to the future labor market and expected returns (Jones & Ramchand 2014). For example, education is perceived by many parents as a tool for social mobility or maintenance of class status (Johnson, Dyanda-Marira & Dzvimbo 1997).

Furthermore, higher levels of parental involvement come from a positive perception of school climate while negative perceptions might result in withdrawing pupils from school. School climate can be divided into two sub-categories: academic and social climate. Academic climate refers to the school environment and whether it is perceived as supportive of learning while social climate instead refers to student well-being and social development and how these are supported by the school environment (Schueler et al. 2014).

Other authors claim that it is the parents' engagement in learning in the home, and not the parents' involvement at school, that has the possibility to increase learning outcomes (Harris & Goodall 2008). This engagement and educational attainment is closely linked to social and

economic factors. Thus, some parents are prevented from participating (Harris & Goodall 2008; Jones & Ramchand 2014).

Despite its implications for educational outcomes, little research on parental perceptions has been conducted in the context of developing countries. Two exceptions are research carried out in South Africa by Drimie and Casale (2008) and in Kenya by Buchmann (2000). The first study highlights parents' and other caregivers' positive attitudes towards education which are "seen as the key to children's future" (p. 39), showing that parents will try their utmost to ensure their children's education. One assumption made in the literature is that the rise of HIV/AIDS and consequent reductions in life expectancy would result in a devaluation of children's education, such that parents and other caregivers were less keen to invest money into education for possible future returns at a time of declining life expectancy. On the contrary, however, the authors show that education is perceived as a safety net and as a way to enter the formal economy and thus ensure a future livelihood. Unemployment and economic vulnerability were of central concern to parents. Education was believed to be a strategy to be formally employed and being able to secure a future livelihood as well as to support their families (Drimie & Casale, 2008). Buchmann (2000) identifies parental perceptions about the value of schooling to be a determinant for enrolment. Furthermore, the expectation for future financial assistance from children is a significant determinant for enrolment.

This article contributes to understanding of parental perceptions of education in a developing country context, drawing on qualitative data collected in Iringa region, Tanzania. The article aims to highlight the voices of parents and teachers from various contexts and settings, as the views of poor parents and teachers from the Global South are rarely recorded. The article examines how education is perceived by parents/caregivers¹, and whether there are variations depending on

¹ Due to the spread of AIDS and the high rate of orphans, caregivers other than parents are included in the study.

geographical context or social class.

It finds that though schools face severe problems, parents of all backgrounds have a generally positive perception of education as a necessity for employment, independence and modernized farming. Nevertheless, poverty overwhelmingly determines educational outcomes. The relevance of the influence of parental perceptions in this context is therefore questionable.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The first section presents a brief background on the Tanzanian context. This is followed by a discussion of the study's methodology and then a section analyzing the results. The final section provides a concluding discussion.

Background: Education in Tanzania

Tanzania is ranked among the poorest countries in the world today; out of 188, Tanzania is ranked 151, under the low human development category (UNDP 2015). Already by independence in 1961, education was prioritized by the nation's first president Julius Nyerere and the ruling party, Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). Expanding the education system for children and youth as well as increased adult literacy were seen as necessary to build a self-reliant nation and improve rural economic development (Nyerere 1969; Sabates et al. 2011; Tikly 2001). Following independence, primary schools were to become "the people's schools," with the intention of reaching more people, serving the interest of the country and preparing students for community work (Nyerere 1967; Siwale & Sefu 1977).

Universal primary education was almost achieved in the early-1980s but enrolment subsequently dropped significantly. By the end of the 1990s, the primary school enrolment rate was just below 60 percent (Wedgwood 2007). In the last census conducted in 2012, national net primary school enrolment was estimated at 76.8 percent (NBS 2014). Primary school consists of standard I-VII and attendance is compulsory (Dennis & Stahley 2012). In 2001, primary school fees were abolished

(Wedgwood 2007). Although each village is supposed to have its own public primary school, rural schools usually have a large catchment area. The national government is responsible for ensuring that each village has a primary school as well as teachers and some basic equipment. The village community, however, is responsible for maintenance of the school and parents are expected to support children with school supplies and obligatory school uniforms.²

The national pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 46 (World Bank 2014b), almost equivalent to the national recommendation of 45.³ However, in reality, the situation is quite different, the class size from standard I - VII in the schools visited for this study (see below) ranged from 32 to 82.

Parents are supposed to send their children to the closest primary school, but a primary school cannot deny a child education if it still has available seats. In reality, this leads to a choice for the parents, and children in urban areas do not necessarily attend the closest public school.⁴

Research Setting and Methodology

Two periods of fieldwork were carried out, one in October-November 2013 and a second in October 2014. However, this article relies mainly on qualitative data collected during the first round of fieldwork.

Site selection and research setting

Iringa is located in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, close to the border of Zambia and Malawi. It is rather distant from the political and

² Interview with village chief, October 15, 2014, village B.

³ Interview with head teacher, urban public school, October 22, 2014.

⁴ Interview with head teacher, urban public school, October 22 2014.

economic center of Dar es Salaam. In 2012, only 27 percent of the population nationwide lived in urban areas (UNICEF 2014). In Iringa region, the figure is even less, around 17 percent. Naturally, the largest economic sector is agriculture; the main staple crops are maize, potatoes and beans and the main cash crops are tobacco, sunflower and tea. Over 75 percent of the regional economy comes from agriculture and about 90 percent of the working population in the region is engaged in agriculture. The agricultural sector experiences problems such as unreliable markets, poor transport network in rural areas and low prices offered to farmers (Ministry of Planning, Economy and Empowerment 2007).

Iringa has been, together with its two neighboring regions Njombe and Mbeya, severely hit by the AIDS-epidemic. While the national HIV-prevalence is around 5 percent, the prevalence in Iringa region is 9 percent. Rising HIV-related mortality has resulted in an increase of orphans, who are cared for mainly by relatives (TACAIDS et al. 2013). While the national level of orphans⁵ is 7.7 percent, in Iringa it is almost twice as high at 14.4 percent (NBS 2014).

There are a total of 449 primary schools, out of which nine are private. Within Iringa town, there are a total of 47 primary schools (Necta 2014) and the number of private primary schools has increased over the last decades. In Iringa, the first private primary school appeared in the 1990s and today the town itself has six private primary schools. Education in these schools is associated with a high annual fee. Private schools promote themselves as having well-educated and motivated teachers, a focus on high moral standards and the use of English rather than Swahili as the medium of instruction. The medium of instruction becomes a significant barrier for students from public primary schools who enter secondary education where English is used. The private primary schools also provide their pupils with cooked lunches and snacks. Public schools aim to provide lunch (usually porridge); however,

⁵ An orphan is identified as a child under 18 years old who has lost one or both parents (NBS 2014).

as this is dependent on parental contributions, school meals are not provided on a regular basis.

In terms of school performance, Iringa region is doing well when standard VII pass rate, literacy rate and net enrolment are considered. According to the official ranking of primary schools the passing rate is above 60 percent, which according to the government represents high performance (Necta 2014). The regional literacy rate of 81.9 percent is above the national rate of 78.1 percent and the net enrolment rate of 90.7 percent is well above the national level of 76.8 percent (NBS 2014).

Selection of study sites within Iringa

Research was carried out in both urban and rural contexts. Rural-urban educational disparity in Sub-Saharan Africa is well known and related to numerous factors such as differences in income, living standards, access to electricity, running water and health care. Differences in family structure between rural and urban areas affect the age dependency ratio and consequently investments and savings. Lower investment in individual education is noted as a consequence of high fertility levels in rural areas. Higher educational attainment is generally found among urban households (Eloundou-Enyegue & Giroux 2012; Wiggins & Proctor 2001). It was therefore important that participants were drawn from both contexts.

Within the urban area of Iringa region three different areas were sampled, representing a low income area, a middle income area and a high income area. The living standard varies to a great extent among these areas in terms of housing quality, plot size, electricity and water supply and the surrounding environment. The high and low income areas were easy to identify as these were mentioned by all of the informants. The middle income area turned out to be “the remainder” of the town. The high income area is a calm area with well-constructed family houses and gardens which are usually surrounded by high fences, either locked or with a guard. The main roads in the area are bituminized and it is a

very green area. There are no shops there, but there are a few restaurants. The poor area is quite the opposite. It is busy, noisy and dirty. Shops and markets crowd its roads and there are auto repair shops everywhere. Poorly constructed houses, which lack both water and electricity, are located along a gravel road and there are no gardens. The families that do have some land have it in rural areas. According to the street chief,⁶ almost all households here are headed by a widow. The reasons for this are not openly spoken about, but it is presumably related to the high incidence of AIDS. The middle income area, which is located not far from the low income area, differs. Even though it is still busy and noisy with shops along the bitumen road, houses are connected to electricity and they do have on-site water.

The three rural sites (Villages A-C) also represent different standards in relation to electricity and water supply as well as access to services like transport, dispensaries and markets. Village A is located along the highway to Zambia and Malawi and transport to any urban areas is not a problem as buses run frequently. Electricity is available in the village although not all houses are connected. Water wells are available as well as a small market and a shop. The second village, B, is located along a gravel road and also has some access to services like electricity (yet not all houses connected). It has a dispensary, market and some shops. Access to water is problematic as it needs to be fetched from the nearest river. Village C is a remote mountain village without electricity, water or services. Although services are generally lacking, each village has a primary school, though the walking time for some children is as much as one and a half hours one way as the catchment areas for villages are large.

⁶ In town, each residential street has a chief, similar to village chief. This person is the link to the ward, which is the first administration division above village or street in urban areas, and he or she is supposed to know about ongoing activities and the needs of the area.

The villages were identified with the assistance of local municipalities. The urban areas were identified with help from the municipality and regional administration offices, as well as from local residents. Villages and urban areas were chosen due to their varying characteristics in regards to distance to the nearest urban center or services like dispensaries and public transport, access to electricity and water, main source of income and income in general. The aim is to see whether these differences are reflected in parents' perceptions of education, as one might expect perceptions to be influenced by social standard, e.g. level of income and employment, and living context.

Data collection methods

This research uses qualitative methods and is based on semi-structured interviews with caregivers of primary school aged children and primary school teachers. To complement these interviews seven focus group discussions with caregivers of primary school aged children were conducted. The use of qualitative methods is motivated by the interest in understanding caregiver perceptions of education and gaining a more nuanced picture of such perceptions. In total, 37 interviews were held with parents/caregivers, 22 teachers were interviewed and seven focus groups were conducted. Table 1 illustrates the location of interviews with caregivers and focus groups.

Table 1.

Allocation of Caregivers' Interviews and Focus Groups

Characteristic	Urban			Village A	Rural	
	Poor area	Middle class area	Upper class area		Village B	Village C
Interviews	8	2	5	5	8	9
Focus groups	2	1	-	2	-	2

Respondents for individual interviews with caregivers in the villages were randomly selected. From a village household list, households with primary school aged children were randomly sampled and the parents or caregivers of these children were subsequently interviewed. This method was somewhat time-consuming but prevented biases arising from depending on gate keepers selecting families for interviews.

While random sampling of respondents worked well in the three rural areas where defining the sampling frame was relatively uncomplicated, it proved much more difficult to use this technique in the urban areas where population lists are not possible to compile. As such, an attempt was made to visit every fifth house in each purposively selected residential area. However, this technique turned out to be impossible because either nobody was at home or there were no primary school aged children in the household. Having discarded this method, an alternative approach was developed, visiting each house in the selected streets to see whether any parent or caretaker was at home and whether they had primary school aged children.

As the aim is to learn about caregivers' perceptions of education and possibly grasp any differences based on social class or geographical setting, the semi-structured interviews with caregivers were guided by themes like value of education, obstacles for education and future expectations of children.

Focus groups included three to five people each and were arranged with the assistance of someone included in the sampling of individual interviews. The focus groups were divided according to gender and age (i.e. a parent or grandparent). There was a gender imbalance in the focus groups, with five out of seven involving female caregivers only. Due to high HIV-related mortality among men, it was hard to find male participants in some areas. The two all-male focus groups were carried out in villages A and C. The results from focus group discussions presented in this article are thus mainly influenced by female voices. This might have led to a stronger emphasis on the importance of education as previous research has shown a positive correlation between

mothers' ambition and children's education (see for example Jones & Ramchand 2014). The age balance was somewhat more equal as three focus groups were conducted with grandparents and four groups with parents. The focus group discussions were guided by themes like value of education, possible problems in primary schools and how to address problems, again to capture the perceptions of caregivers and also to include a gender and age perspective.

In addition to the above mentioned interviews and focus groups, interviews were held with each village/street chief both to present the project and to become familiar with the current situation and any social or economic changes that had occurred during the past few years in the specific location.

Interviews with teachers were held in both rural and urban contexts. All three village schools were visited as well as four urban schools, two private and two public schools. The 22 interviews were held as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.

Allocation of Teachers' Interviews

	Urban	Urban	Village A	Village B	Village C
Characteristic	Private school	Public school	Along highway	Along pebble road	Remote
Interviews	7	6	3	3	3

The idea to include teachers' perceptions was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the primary school education system. Teachers play a central role in achieving the universal primary education goal. The lack of trained teachers is wide-spread. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, it is estimated that more than two million teachers would need to be recruited to attain the goal of UPE (UNESCO 2012). Teachers are familiar with the working conditions in school and with pupils' abilities and they also interact with caregivers. The semi-structured interviews with teachers were guided by themes like compulsory schooling, con-

sequences of abolishment of school fees, the current school situation, possible problems within schools and working conditions in rural versus urban areas. Thus, the themes during the teachers' interviews were not only related to their perceptions but also aimed at gathering information on the education system and schooling environment.

The selection of urban schools, two public and two private, was made on the basis of the three residential areas described above. Through urban household interviews it was learned which schools the children attended and these were the ones visited. The locations of the schools are therefore not all within the same residential areas, since caregivers in some cases have chosen schools outside of these areas. Each village had only one primary school.

The interview data was collected and prepared for analysis as follows. All interviews and focus groups were conducted with the aid of a translator. Interviews with caregivers and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Teachers' interviews were not recorded to ensure that teachers would talk freely and openly regarding possible problems in school. Instead, detailed notes were taken during teachers' interviews and transcribed the same day. To be able to get an overview and understanding, all material has thereafter been coded. Coding qualitative data helps the researcher to sort and order compiled data as it is categorized into various codes (or themes) (Cloke et al. 2004). All transcribed material was entered in Dedoose, a data program for analyzing mixed method data as well as primary interview data. Within the program, a code tree was constructed and all material was coded so as to sort and structure the material into themes.

Data Analysis

Education costs

In 2001, primary school fees were abolished in Tanzania (Wedgwood 2007). Nevertheless, primary school education costs continue to impose

a significant burden on caregivers. Instead of the previous fee, caregivers are asked to make contributions to maintenance, desks, electricity, water, security guards, meals, examinations and other costs. Contributions are paid both in cash and in kind, i.e. the school may ask for a bucket of maize from each pupil in order to prepare porridge. Failing to make these contributions on time is, according to the caregivers interviewed, associated with their children being suspended from school or beaten. Obligatory school uniforms and school materials add further to the costs. This situation is not unique, worldwide poverty still prevents many parents from paying for education, despite free schooling, as other school-related expenses are involved (Jones & Ramchand 2014).

When discussing the main problems in primary education, several focus group participants highlighted both the frequency and the size of contributions. One of the focus group discussions was conducted with four young mothers in the low income urban area on November 21, 2013. The issue of contributions took up a large part of their discussion as it was identified as the main problem in primary school. According to one of the participants, “The main problem in primary school is the contribution. There are so many contributions, and when you do calculations it is like the one [student] who is in secondary school.”

The women questioned why monetary contributions were necessary. The four women were aware that public primary education is supposed to be free, without any obligatory parental contributions. The women raised questions such as, “Why should there be contributions for water when children carry water to school?”, “Why should there be contributions for electricity and school buildings when there is no electricity and still poor buildings?”, and “Why should we pay for a guard when there is no guard at school?” In a context of poor school facilities and lack of water and electricity, parents are still requested to contribute for exactly these services, leading to dissatisfaction among the mothers.

The group participants believed that the low levels of teachers’ salaries might be a reason for the frequent cash contributions the school required, with some of that money directed to supplement teacher

salaries. One mother expressed her preference for the reintroduction of school fees, something which is also raised by the middle income focus group, whose participants even suggest that the abolishment of school fees is the main problem in primary school today. A school fee that includes all costs is perceived as better, suggesting the severity of problems caused by contributions for many families. In private primary schools, where education is charged with a fee, delayed payments also affect the child rather than the parents as it may result in suspension of the child until the fee is paid.⁷

The few times caregivers mentioned in interviews and focus groups discussions that they had considered withdrawing children from school, they all cited the financial burdens caused by school expenditures as the reason. The families who have considered discontinuing their children's education were poor and had severe health problems within the family. On the question: Can you think of a situation when you cannot have them [his children] any longer in school? An HIV-positive father in village C replies: "If my condition will be in worse situation."⁸

The problem of contributions was also raised as serious by the elderly caregivers, primarily in Skipped Generation Households.⁹ When grandparents who are old and unable to work or farm are left with several grandchildren it is hard to finance education for all of them.

For their part, teachers in all the public schools argued that they need parental cooperation to improve results. When teachers are asked to elaborate on their perceptions of parental "cooperation" the first issue mentioned is the lack of contributions and school supplies children are supposed to bring to school. One head teacher in a public urban school¹⁰

⁷ Interview with a teacher working at an urban private school, November 8, 2013.

⁸ Interviewed on November 1, 2013.

⁹ A Skipped Generation Household consists of children being cared for by an older generation, usually the grandparents, and with the middle generation not present.

claimed that, “Sometimes the school faces a lot of problems due to insufficient contributions from parents.” Other teachers add that children need to be provided with sufficient food, be allowed time to study and do homework, and time to rest. Of course, this relates to household poverty, and it is only the minority of privileged children in private schools that are afforded this luxury.

Commitment to education

Regardless of geographical setting or social class, parents and caregivers in interviews and focus groups all referred to education as “the key to life.” Respondents universally believed it was the only way for children to become independent and to have a better and easier life than their parents and previous generations. One participant in a focus group discussion with fathers in village C, on November 10, 2013 stated that:

We send our children to school so that to have a better life in the future. They will be employed, the child will change from being poor. The child will help us, their parents, when he or she is educated.... High percentage of people has difficult life or we are poor because our parents also were poor. They were not able to send us to school because they were poor, that is why we are trying to make sure our children are educated so not to live as we are living. We are depending much on agriculture which is not the modern one, no use of fertilizer so the harvest is not enough. We work hard so that our children are going for schooling.

When parents explain what they mean by a “better and easier life” they refer to an income which could improve housing conditions and food quality.

¹⁰ Interviewed on November 21, 2013.

Material conditions vastly differ when rural and urban areas are compared in terms of socio-economic status, livelihood, access to services and poverty. The schools themselves are faced with different conditions. Both urban and rural schools seem to share the problems of overcrowded classrooms and lack of school supplies. In addition, lack of water and electricity are not unusual in the rural areas. Two out of three visited rural schools had no electricity. In Iringa region, only 17.6 percent of households use electricity as a main source of lighting (NBS 2014). This sometimes puts pressure on children to start their school day with fetching water and collecting firewood to bring to school. In two out of three villages visited, water is a main concern as it needs to be fetched from the river. Out of 13 interviewed urban teachers, six declared that they prefer not to work in rural areas where infrastructure and services are poor and that they actually would not go there even if they were posted there by the government. One urban mother in the upper class area also addressed this issue:

[W]hen you compare the situation in village and town, the situation is different. The difference is that so many people want to live in town because in town are places where you can find so many social services...they [teachers] don't want to live in rural area because when you reach there you can see there is no water, there are no teachers' houses, no electricity so many teachers do not like to go to villages...there are no people who like to work in rural areas. Maybe in the village where are those centers where you can find little services there you can find teachers working but for those areas you cannot find social services teachers do not like to work.
(October 27, 2013)

Differences are also confirmed between public and private urban schools. Both parents and teachers have a positive view of private schools as they are believed to employ the most competent teachers, have sufficient school supplies and serve school meals. According to two teachers in an urban private school,¹¹ teachers in public primary schools

may neglect the pupils and refuse to work. This is not an option in a private school as the contract would be terminated. The two interviewees believed that consequently, teachers in private primary schools are much more committed to their work.

As the study sites are so different one would expect parental perceptions to differ as well. Surprisingly, this is not found in the material. In the rural areas, education is seen as a possible way out of agriculture as the main source of income and an opportunity for entering the formal sector, which is mainly found in urban areas. However, education is also said to be necessary to set up small businesses and to improve farming techniques and thus increase yields. The value of education in rural areas was voiced during the young mothers' focus group in the remote village.¹² The need for education is not questioned, rather, in the words of one participant, "one cannot stay without being educated." Another mother continues: "If a household has one educated member he or she can advise the others; without an educated family member there is no development." Poverty within the village is explained by the lack of education:

our parents were not able to send us at school, that's why we are now poor. Our neighbors can have a better life because their parents sent them to school, they have good houses, eat good food like meat, beans and I would like to live like them with good house, eating good food.

A complete lack of education is perceived as problematic, leading to a very hard and dangerous life, with the risk of becoming a street child mentioned by several respondents.

There are high expectations on the next generation, both in their educational advancement and for future development. All but one respondent said they expected all their children to enter secondary school and several expected them even to complete a university degree. Not

¹¹ Interviewed on November 8, 2013.

¹² Female focus group in village C, conducted November 10, 2013.

surprisingly all respondents in the high income urban area had this expectation. But quite surprisingly, many rural parents (eight out of 22 interviewed) also expected their children to enter university education. Employment within the formal sector is the aim for many families but education is also seen as necessary to do any kind of business or improve farming techniques and outcomes. Considering that only 5 percent of primary pupils were selected to join secondary level education in the end of the 1970s (Eresund & Tesha 1979) and that the current (2012) secondary gross enrolment rate for Tanzania is 35 percent (World Bank 2014a), it is quite astonishing to hear nearly all respondents say they expect secondary level education for all of their children, not only a few, and not only for sons.

From interviews carried out in the rural context, one can sense a higher expectation among parents in terms of future returns. Education is not only for the sake of the future of the children themselves; being provided with education goes hand in hand with expectations of future support. Not only are they expected to become independent and, as one respondent expressed it, “not to be my burden”¹³ but they are also expected to provide their parents with future assistance either financially or in terms of providing labor. It is expected that today’s education of children will bring future development to the village as they will be employed and send remittances to their parents (or caregivers) to invest in housing, livestock or provide capital for farm investments or forestry. These kinds of expectations of future assistance are confirmed elsewhere in developing country contexts (see Buchmann 2000).

However, in the urban upper income area the situation is, quite different. Children are expected to work hard in the best primary schools and then continue their education through all levels. There is no other option. Formal employment is considered a must to remain within this social class and these children are used to a high standard of living concerning housing, food and transport.

¹³ Member of female focus group in village C, November 10, 2013.

At the household level, the perception of education as a right is rarely highlighted as a reason for investing in education. However, in one of the focus groups, it is directly mentioned that through education “they [children] will know their rights, because sometimes they face problems for not knowing their rights.”¹⁴

Some of the teachers made financial contributions to their pupils’ education. Out of the 22 teachers interviewed, four said they contributed from their own salaries to support certain children whose parents fail to pay contributions or to provide school supplies. Some have paid for children’s lunch contributions as they find it difficult to see all but a few eating. Others have contributed for children to enable them to sit national exams. Teachers are also contributing through buying school supplies like chalk or pens or paying for copying of books as textbooks are scarce. Some of them show frustration over their working conditions but claim they have to help children because they are able to. Without education, they argue, the children are unable to make it in life. One head teacher stressed the importance not only of reading and writing but also the need to learn about diseases, agriculture, science and technology. The interviewee believed that in a time of globalization, education is furthermore needed to understand the current ongoing changes.¹⁵

Despite the overall positive perceptions of education, concerns were raised by two teachers and two urban caregivers regarding the possibility of employment of all these educated students. One parent worried that since so many will compete over the same jobs, bribes would become necessary to enter the labor market: “Because there are so many educated and all of them are searching for an employment so in order to make sure that I am employed so I have to be corrupted so that to get the position.”¹⁶ If this is the future scenario, then education in itself will no longer serve as an avenue for development. Instead, families with the

¹⁴ Village C, November 10, 2013.

¹⁵ Head teacher in urban public school, November 21, 2013.

¹⁶ Urban father in the poor area of town, October 28, 2013.

right connections or financial resources will dominate the labor market.

The key importance of food

Lack of sufficient food is mentioned by parents and teachers as one of the main obstacles for learning outcomes both within and outside school. Ten of the rural respondents that took part in the individual parent interviews said they are unable to provide breakfast for their children before they leave for school. The situation is confirmed by five teachers pointing to the same pattern; poor families are unable to provide sufficient food. Interestingly, however, four of these teachers were working in urban schools. The public schools face problems in providing lunch for their pupils. They depend on parental contributions for this. As these contributions are sometimes late or insufficient, schools are forced to interrupt the serving of lunch for a few days or even longer periods. Children will then instead return home on foot during lunch break, although not all children do eat at lunchtime. Without breakfast or lunch, both teachers and parents raise the problem of children's poor attention in school. By contrast, in private schools meals are provided and they are used for marketing purposes; parents should not worry about their children being hungry and not able to do their school work. One teacher representing a public urban school argues that high attendance in this school is a result of the school providing porridge during the lunch break. Again, this depends on the parents' contributions. Lunch in school would, according to both teachers and parents, serve both as an incentive to attract children to school, addressing the problem of absenteeism, as well as a means of improving school results.

The issue of lacking food is raised both in rural and urban areas. However, the rural teachers in particular complained of students' poor concentration and sleeping during class due to the lack of food. This is not only the issue of lunch; both parents and teachers suggest that the problem is compounded when children leave for school in the morning without having had anything to eat. When interviewing individual

parents the answers were somewhat different. Apart from the ten rural households who were unable to provide breakfast, the more common answer was that the children have had something in the morning, like tea and a snack. There might, of course, be a stigma and sense of shame surrounding the issue of food and the idea of not being able to provide one's children with sufficient food. With limited access to food it is likely that these children will have difficulties in concentrating and thus fall behind with school work. Extensive research indicates a correlation between nutrition and academic performance (see for example Mendez & Adair 1999; Grantham-McGregor & Ani 2001). Unfortunately, this situation is not new. Already at the end of 1970s it was declared that a reform which would implement school meals "would substantially raise the learning potential of many children" (Eresund & Tesha 1979: 59).

Concluding Discussion

Perceptions of primary education do not appear to differ significantly depending on geographical context or social status. All caregivers viewed education as important—even essential. This is a dramatic change. Only a few decades back, investing in children's primary education was perceived as uncertain in rural areas where children had an important labor role within the household (Eresund & Tesha 1979). Now rural as well as urban caregivers invest in education in order for the children, and, by extension, the caregivers, to have a better life—or to remain within a certain social class. Most of the caregivers interviewed saw this better life in terms of higher incomes and less arduous labor. They hope for life to be easier and better for their children, for their children to find employment or earn more from agriculture, to be independent and, often, there is also an expectation of future assistance from their children. In addition, one interviewee also believed that knowing ones rights through education was also an important part of achieving a better life.

However, the expectations, possibilities and conditions for receiving education do depend on the geographical and social context. The

possibility for education, that is access to (certain) schools as well as educational standards, does differ depending on social class and geographical location, as only a few wealthy families can afford to send their children to private urban schools. Not only do possibilities differ but so do conditions for delivering education. Problems in urban public as well as private schools should not be underestimated; overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching material and sometimes inability to provide lunch are characteristics of urban schools. However, in comparison to the rural public schools, urban schools seem far ahead. Schools in rural areas face difficulties with large catchment areas and, because of water and electricity scarcities, pupils are usually requested to bring water and firewood with them to school on a daily basis. The provision of lunch is intermittent and school supplies and furniture is scarce. Furthermore, teachers are unwilling to settle in remote villages with poor infrastructure and services.

Despite being nominally free, primary school education in Tanzania involves high costs for families through contributions. The numerous contributions are raised as one of the main problems by both teachers and parents. Schools depend on them to provide satisfying service to pupils and fail to provide such services when contributions are not handed in on time or not at all. And parents are frustrated with the frequency, the amount asked for, not knowing when they will be asked again, paying for services which are then not provided and with having their children punished if contributions are not provided on time.

When conditions for learning are as poor as described above, and when children cannot be provided at least with basic needs, the role of caregiver perceptions of education in determining learning outcomes will be limited. A positive perception of education and its necessity for employment, independence and development is not enough when conditions both in schools and in individual households do not encourage learning. Without being able to meet basic needs, it is hard to expect that positive parental perceptions will have a positive effect on learning outcomes.

This means that even though Iringa region is on its way to achieving the development goal of universal primary education—with a net primary school enrolment rate of 90 percent—and the caregivers there have overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards education, simply being enrolled in school is not enough to significantly reduce poverty. As such, the stronger focus on quality education included in the SDGs is welcome.

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