CCE Report No. 12

GENDER IN EAST AFRICA:

What keeps girls in primary school in Uganda? An exploration of the factors that enable girls' retention in Bududa and Nakapiripirit

Gender Report 7

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June 2012

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1. Introduction

This report forms part of the findings of the research conducted by the Centre of Commonwealth Education in Kenya and Uganda as part of a project entitled 'Girls Against the Odds'. The project focuses on discovering and understanding the dynamics affecting the attendance, performance and retention of girls in primary schools, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of children's lives through forging better learning environments (see Gender Report No. 1). In Gender Report No. 2 we reported on the Uganda Pilot Study. Here we focus on the main stage of the research, and on the views of pupils in Bududa and Nakapiripirit districts of the Republic of Uganda. Following a brief explanation of the methodology used, and a discussion of the contextual background, the report goes on to explore specifically the perceptions of school children on the odds against girls' education in the two districts and their insights regarding the factors that promote school retention in difficult circumstances. The emphasis throughout the report is on children's voices, and the Conclusion therefore summarises children's own views as to how their schooling might be improved.

2. Methodology

Individual interviews were conducted with 5 girls in each of 7 case study schools (4 in Bududa and 3 in Nakapiripirit). In the fourth Nakapiripirit school, because of a teachers' strike, it was not possible for individual interviews to take place; instead, a focus group discussion was held with a group of 6 girls. In addition, a focus group discussion took place with a group of 5 boys in each school. Schools were selected in consultation with District Education Officers on the basis that they were situated within challenging environments but were known to hold a relatively good record of retaining girls. The children, chosen by their teachers, were those who were known to come from backgrounds which put them against the odds, but who nevertheless stayed in school and were expected to continue doing so. All pupils were in Primary 6 at the time of the interviews, when they would usually be 11-12 years old. In fact, their ages ranged from 10-19 (Nakapiripirit) and 11-16 (Bududa).

The research was conducted by a Ugandan researcher, generally in the local language, through an interpreter in the case of Nakapiripirit. Discussions followed pre-arranged guides (also used in other case studies in Uganda and Kenya), in order to obtain the desired information and cover the same subject matter across the different schools. Participating children were given food as a token of appreciation. The topics included home and family circumstances, parents' level of education and employment, career aspirations, role models, challenges faced by both sexes, but particularly by girls, and suggestions of how girls and boys can be helped to stay in school.

The following schools took part in the research, grouped according to the geographical area in which they were situated. While the boys are referred to below by the school focus group in which they took part, the female participants, who were interviewed individually, are numbered in order to maintain anonymity:

Bududa

School 1 (606 pupils; 16 teachers) – Girls 1-5

School 2 (946 pupils; 20 teachers) – Girls 6-10

School 3 (751 pupils; 18 teachers) – Girls 11-15

School 4 (1005 pupils; 27 teachers) – Girls 16-20

Nakapirpirit

School 5 (891 pupils; 21 teachers) – Girls 21-26

School 6 (848 pupils; 16 teachers) – Girls 27-31

School 7 (599 pupils; 15 teachers) – Girls 32-36

School 8 (840 pupils; 16 teachers) – Girls 37-41

3. Context

Bududa District is located in Eastern Uganda, nestling on the western slopes of Mount Elgon. With an estimated population of 173,700 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2010), Bududa is the most densely populated rural district in Uganda averaging 1,000 people per square kilometre (Kitutu et al., 2011). The average land-holding per household is 0.5 acre (UNDP/UNEP, 2010); intensive subsistence agriculture is the chief occupation, to such an extent that Bududa is categorised as food secure and a net supplier of foodstuffs to local and international markets; arabica coffee is a major cash crop. There are 125 primary

schools and nine secondary schools in Bududa district, with a total primary school enrolment of 57,087 children (28,171 boys and 28,916 girls). Bududa is one of the 16 districts under the Quality Enhancement Initiative[1] (QEI) of Ministry of Education and Sports.

Nakapiripirit district is part of the larger Karamoja sub region, with an estimated population of 152,400 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The area faces severe environmental conditions such as harsh weather patterns characterized by extremely high temperatures (>40°C), limited rainfall (500-1,500 mm p.a.), severe wind soil erosion and long dry spells usually followed by violent flash floods. The harsh environment partly explains the nomadic lifestyle of the Karimojong who have to be on the move constantly in search of water and pasture for their livestock. Nakapiripirit is prone to violent inter-tribal animal raids and rustling. Nakapiripirit district has 43 primary schools and four secondary schools, with a total enrolment in primary schools of 17,799 (9,683 girls and 8,116 boys). Like Bududa, Nakapiripirit was identified in 2009 as one of the districts with the worst education indicators and placed in the QEI programme.

Recent data (UBOS, 2011; MOES, 2011) indicate that, on many indices (pupil-teacher ratio, pupil-classroom ratio, pupil absenteeism), Bududa and Nakapiripirit compare unfavourably with the rest of the country, but because these schools were deliberately selected for their ability to retain children, all the eight had high pupil enrolment figures. They also had good teacher-pupil ratios, ranging between 1:38 to 1.53, provisions for disaggregated latrines for boys and girls, and most schools had very high pupil-stance ratios for girls.

Extreme poverty was a common factor among children who participated in the study. Virtually all of the children experienced poverty and deprivation, which in turn was a serious hurdle to school attendance. Some of the child participants in the study were orphans; others had parents with limited levels of education. In Nakapiripirit children reported that their parents ‘do nothing’, meaning they had no stable means of income; despite this, polygamy was common.

[1] QEI was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Sports with support from Education Development Partners to focus attention and inputs to those districts that were found to have the worst education indicators such as low pupil retention, poor performance on basic literacy and numeracy competences and national examinations, high teacher absenteeism and low time on task, as well as poor community engagement in education.

The widespread poverty could partly explain the inability of families to provide basic needs for their children, hence the common lament among school children, conveyed in the following remark by a girl in Nakapiripirit: ‘The challenges girls face include menstruation, early pregnancy, hard/over working. For me it is lack of books, lack of sanitary pads, lack of uniforms, lack of panties and boarding requirements (mattress)’. A boy in School 4 echoed similar sentiments: ‘Sometimes we are sent to poor schools simply because our parents cannot afford to raise fees in the good schools’.

However, the question of poverty becomes contentious when examined further. In the case of Bududa, income from agricultural activities is relatively high, and it is a major contradiction that Bududa district is acknowledged as a regional food granary and a major producer of Arabica coffee yet it cannot feed its own children in schools. Similarly, in Nakapiripirit, the district has one of the largest concentrations of cattle and other livestock yet the people claim to be very poor.

Most of the children participating in the study came from fairly large families, but not all lived with their biological parents; some stayed with relatives, and many of the girls in Nakapiripirit were in boarding school. Under normal circumstances a child attending boarding primary school in Uganda is a reliable proxy indicator of the relatively better socio-economic status of the child’s family, and this is so in Bududa. However, in Nakapiripirit, where extreme poverty is a common condition among children, enrolment into boarding school could imply that they are from very poor families. It is in boarding schools where children are guaranteed a regular meal. Boarding schools also offer better child protection services, but there is a lack of mattresses, and many sleep on mats in classrooms converted into dormitories.

Pupils had a range of vocations they aspired to for the future. However, it was evident that while boys were more ambitious in their aspirations, for example wishing to become engineers, doctors, lawyers and teachers, the girls were more modest, aiming for callings like nursing, teaching and secretarial skills.

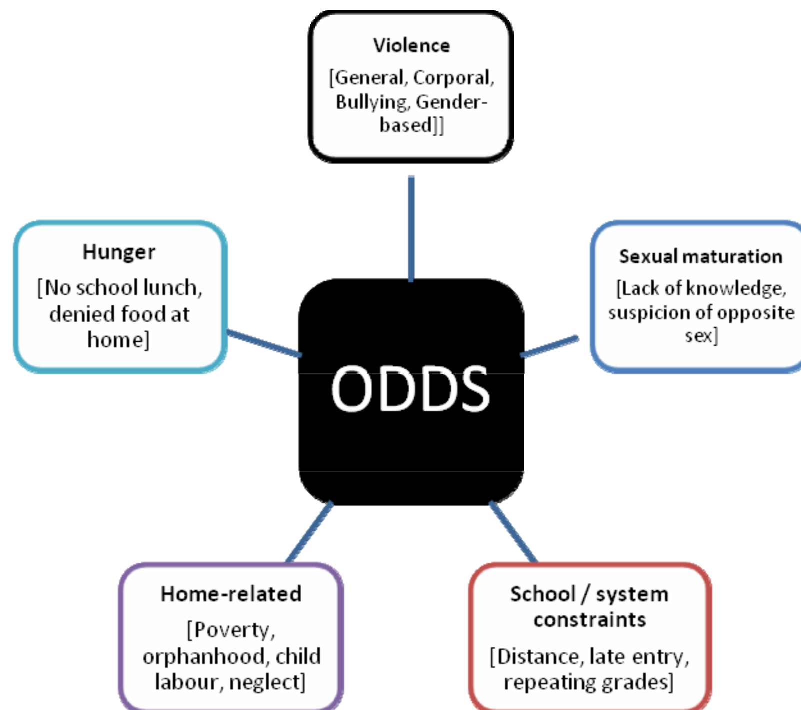
Pupils reported receiving some advice from their teachers and families. However, this was mostly unstructured and was informed by the immediate contexts where children admired the people in their lives and aspired to be like them. Some of the pupils claimed that their choices were independent of external influence. Statements such as ‘nobody has advised me about my future’ were common among the boys and girls in both districts.

Reflecting on the discussions with teachers who insisted that they provide career guidance to their pupils, one gets the sense that even schools are confused and they tend to conflate guidance and counselling with career guidance.

4. Findings I: the Odds against Retention

This section presents the odds as seen through the eyes and experiences of children, before looking at children's thoughts on what they need to lead decent lives and the pull factors that explain their retention in primary education. The views of the children were also informed by what they witness happening to their peers.

Figure 1: Categories of odds identified by children



4.1 Violence

Violence came through as a major category of the odds children in Bududa and Nakapiripirit have to navigate in order to stay in school. Several forms of violence were identified as follows.

4.1.1 General violence

The first form is the generalised violence. From the conversations with girls and boys in the two study contexts, it was clear that violence was part of the normal existence. Some children situated it in historical terms, e.g. Girl 1 (School 1) noted, 'It is said that my grandmother was very harsh and used to beat her children all the time. So my mother and her elder sister disappeared from home. They were picked up and taken to Kenya'. Violence was also very vividly current as illustrated by the following comment by Girl 17 (School 4):

> The other day we went for music competitions; we were each given one thousand shillings. Now, my mother is in Kenya at the moment so I have been staying with my brother … [who also] chased me and I went to stay with other relatives. However those relatives are equally hostile. When they saw me with the one thousand shillings they demanded that I hand it over, which I did and they went and bought themselves chapatti. Yet I had planned to buy some personal items I badly needed. … The relatives claimed that I had received the cash from men.

Much of the general violence could be described as irrational, and therefore frustrating to the children. Girl 35 (School 7) reported that, 'parents beat children a lot … My father does not beat me, but the [step mother] beats me if she knows that I have not finished cooking, she beats me'. This echoed what had been reported earlier by one of the boys at School 4 who said, 'In some homes parents beat children all the time. This discourages children'. Yet another boy, in School 2, complained, 'I don't like parents who cane their children when the children have not done anything wrong, for example when they find you playing with other children'.

Some of the general violence was accidentally sparked by the good intentions of the school, suggesting either a lack of consensus on the initiatives of the school to cause improvements in pupil performance, or evidence of deeper tensions between schools and families. Girl 21 (School 5) noted that girls were chastised for returning home late whereas the family members knew they were delayed at school for remedial lessons. She said, 'Some of the problems the girls face when coming to school is when they have to come to school early and if they have not completed the work, the family members start shouting at them'. An analysis of a typical day in the life of a school child shows that they hardly have time to

themselves. Denying children their childhood is an issue that needs to be recognised by schools and the children's families as potentially damaging in the longer term.

4.1.2 Violence through school discipline regimes

Pupils in Bududa reported more cases of corporal punishment than did their counterparts in Nakapiripirit. Teachers also tried to justify caning as a means of teaching, despite their knowledge of official government policy against corporal punishment of learners. 'If you come late, fail in academics or fight, they will lash you', said Girl 3 (School 1). The same message was echoed in the boys' focus group at the same school: 'It is the cane for everything: They cane us if we commit a mistake e.g. when you make noise in class, or when you fight; even when they find you playing. They cane us if we foul the environment in the classroom. So to avoid the cane, you the pupils in that class must ensure that the children who mess up the environment clean up'. Schools claiming to have abandoned the use of corporal punishment had allowed prefects to use corporal punishment on fellow children.

Pupils described as degrading the school regimes for correcting pupil behaviour, such as verbal insults and mostly corporal punishment. In Bududa schools 'Shiboko' or corporal punishment was identified as the teachers' first option for addressing all sorts of learner mistakes. Even the good schools practised it, as illustrated by the remark by a girl during the focus group discussion at School 6: 'What I do not like about school is corporal punishment, caning us for no reason'. Some of the pupils had come to accept corporal punishment as a corrective practice although they would have preferred more positive approaches such as counselling. 'Advise, counsel wrong doers,' suggested a boy in School 8, who wondered, 'If someone cannot understand and you cane them do they really understand?'

The children identified likely consequences of violence against them such as learner disengagement, loss of learner confidence and the likelihood of eventual dropout. Other longer term impacts could be inferred from the pupils' testimonies. These were:

- ***Negative perception of teachers as abusive adults*** as conveyed in the comment by a girl in School 6 who said, 'Teachers like abusing children'.
- ***Violence breeding more violence.*** A boy in Nakapiripirit said that his aspiration to become a teacher was so that in future he could also cane the children of his current teachers.

- ***Modelling negative behaviour*** and the perpetuation of a hidden curriculum about violence. Girl 22 (School 5) reported how she was helping to teach her siblings and how she learned that beating is not an appropriate method of teaching: 'I also help teach them. But if I cane them they run away so I know that I must not punish them when I'm teaching them'.
- ***Inurement and the futility of punishments.*** Asked if punishing girls helped them stay in school and concentrate on their studies, one boy responded, 'Not at all! It would drive them out faster. Maybe punishing the boys helps, but girls are very [sensitive and they can react negatively] to punishment'. Another boy in the same school observed, 'Some people get immune to caning and so it loses its bite'.

4.1.3 Bullying and teasing

Children identified bullying and teasing by fellow pupils as another common form of violence in schools. Girl 24 (School 5) reported, 'The first day I came to school, I found prefects beating pupils, I wanted to go back home so I went to sister [nun] crying and she told me that is how we are here'. The way other children behaved, whether through fighting, nicknaming or insulting, demotivated fellow children. Girls were the objects of bullying and teasing by boys, although in some instances it was conceded that girls were also bullies. Curiously, schools chose to suppress bad behaviour rather than developing consensus among children about it and establishing mutually agreed ground rules for its elimination. "Teachers are very strict and in case of a quarrel among children they are called to the staffroom and sometimes the parents are summoned" said a girl in Bududa. A boy in another Bududa school was more graphic:

> No. Teachers have made it clear that when you fight, they will cane you, summon your parents and you stand the risk of expulsion. When parents are called they are usually cross with the children and in fact children fear their parents more than the teachers. If the father has paid all the school dues and you cause him to be called, you can get in very real trouble.

4.1.4 Gender-based violence (GBV)

The risk of overt gender-based violence was mentioned by girls in Nakapiripirit and Bududa who identified males as 'our main challenge'. Girls expressed a sense of betrayal that schoolmates whom they trusted to protect them on their way to and from school could turn

on them and rape them. Girls said they were therefore afraid to walk alone because the risk of rape was omnipresent.

Among the types of gender-based violence were those inspired by the culture and traditions of the communities. In Bududa, the girls reported a spike in GBV during the circumcision ceremonies. Those reports by children were corroborated by older people, with a District Education Officer, for example, stating that during the circumcision season, all children are encouraged to experiment much the same way the Bible exhorts adherents to 'go forth and multiply'. There are subtle pressures leading to early marriages or early pregnancies, and even if some girls try to abort in order to continue with schooling, there are not that many supportive structures to encourage such girls to continue. Instead society turns judgemental and moralistic about such girls spoiling others. Boys also identified the ceremonies as risk factors, to themselves as well as to the girls. According to boys in School 3, some of their peers wanted early circumcision 'so that they marry', since once you are circumcised, you transform into a man, and therefore you qualify to take on adult roles and responsibilities. Yet while in the past young men were circumcised when they were in their twenties, nowadays boys as young as 12 get circumcised, and therefore treating them like adults is stretching the concept of adult too far.

For the children in Karamoja, their culture-related odds revolved around the tradition of cattle ownership. Where boys were socialised to raid cows, girls were the ultimate prize because the value of a daughter lay in the number of cows she would command for her dowry. Ultimately girls pay a heavy price for that honour as 'their parents do not want them to come to school; they want them to marry so that they can get cows' (Girl 23, School 5). Orphaned girls were said to be particularly vulnerable to forced marriage. Girl 25 (School 5) reported that, 'the families force [girls] to marry, some are orphans with no one to help'. Cattle rustling also places boys in the line of violence. In fact cattle raiding is feared more than HIV/AIDS since many young people die in the process of trying to acquire animals for their families so that they can raise the necessary dowry (Government of Uganda, 2007; CPRC, 2008).

The other culturally inspired form of violence in Nakapiripirit was abduction of girls, which children concurred, was a form of gender based violence common in that region. It was reported that girls as young as 11 years were targeted. The vulnerability of girls is exacerbated by the fact that their gender roles include looking for water and firewood

whose sources are generally distant. Girls reported walking up to 30 kilometres to look for firewood. Girls also have to help find food for their families. In fact the food ration provision by the United Nations World Food Programme, whereby school girls are given food to take home in exchange for their families' consent to enable the girls attend school, was founded on the recognition that the gender role of searching for food could not be negotiated unless food was provided. This could explain the anxiety among school girls in Nakapiripirit about plans to phase out food rations as they felt it would compromise their ability to continue in school.

Children also reported that for those girls who got in trouble with GBV, there were hardly any reliable reporting and response mechanisms to resort to. Their first point of call tended to be the Senior Woman Teacher who would offer solace but was incapable of pursuing culprits and bringing them to justice. The Headteacher of School 2 alluded to this when he expressed frustration at the non-responsive legal structures and the connivance of parents to defeat the course of justice. The report by a girl in Nakapiripirit, that 'young girls are raped all the time, and the rapists are not dealt with by the authorities', therefore conveyed the exasperation among girls about the absence of supportive structures. Instead, those who fell victim were laughed at, ostracised, held in suspicion and blamed.

Children placed part of the blame of GBV on their families as well. Girl 17 (School 4) said, 'As you know, by the age of 8 a girl is prone to harassment, first by the members of the family… it is a sort of rule that the parents call us names and generally bully girls. Then the boys come in so to deal with that sort of life you need a close friend in whom to confide and find solace. … Parents are very suspicious of our movements, always thinking we are going after boys'.

4.2 Hunger

At the launch of the Universal Primary Education programme in 1997 the government deliberately eliminated user fees for uniforms and school lunch, as well as indirect fees through Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), as they were considered likely barriers to access (Kattan 2004). Parents were only expected to provide scholastic materials and to pack lunch for their children. This position remains contentious, as there are reports that the political leadership of the country is opposed to school feeding and that government officials routinely intimidate schools that seek to mobilise parents to feed children at school.

Children in the study identified the absence of a school meal as a major threat to pupil retention. Many children felt that, as they contributed to family food production, helping with the production of food in the garden and delivering the produce to the market (and, incidentally, often coming late to school as a result), they were entitled to be fed by their families, and it is especially ironical that Bududa, the regional breadbasket, seems on occasions to fail to feed her own children. A boy in School 1 commented wryly:

> Children spend the entire day studying without food. That brings worries among children and also it is responsible for pushing children to markets to look for help. Because however good a teacher is, teaching you when you are hungry does not make much sense.

Several girls reiterated this point: in Girl 20's words, (School 4): 'Whenever I come to school my eyes cloud and my tummy aches, especially in the afternoon'.

Schools are aware of the impact of not providing a midday meal for children at school. They link it to depressed performance among pupils and teachers. For most of the children, the relationship between lack of feeding, truancy and child labour is straightforward. School 4 Boys, for example, identified a causal link between lack of school feeding and child labour when they said, 'You can get a contract to provide grass for the cow of a rich man or to dig in his gardens'. Similarly Girl 38 (School 8) and Girl 21 (School 5) reported that they exchange their labour on other people's gardens for money in order to supplement the food requirements of their families and to buy scholastic requirements.

4.3 Home-related constraints

Many of the children attending UPE schools in Uganda are from relatively poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and students identified mistreatment of girls by the parents as one of the major challenges leading to dropout. It was as if families vented or transferred their frustrations onto the girls.

Some of the orphans narrated the ordeals they went through, including being disenfranchised by their extended families and/or clans when they lose their parents. Where HIV/AIDS or conflicts had claimed breadwinners, children endured difficult conditions to persist in school. While for others, the sheer burden of poverty, where 'parents may fail to buy children scholastic materials', led the girls to resort to other sources. 'Parents may be willing to buy but poverty causes them to fail to provide the necessary items. So a girl finds a man and says "*ifa ninoyo*" [meaning "I'll die with this

one"]', said Girl 19 (School 4) in reference to peers who take drastic decisions. Orphaned girls had moving stories of how their efforts to stay in school are regularly thwarted by relatives. Girl 17 (School 4) reported how girls in her family were constantly harassed to find work or husbands.

> The only consolation is that none of the girls gave birth to an illegitimate child while still at home. … Our first born this side went up to P 6. Then one of our siblings took her to Kenya for work. I too went up to P 4 then I was taken to Kenya. There I had the opportunity to attend school but things did not work out so I requested to be returned to Uganda. I begged and was allowed to return to school. In May last year I was admitted to this school into P 6 but after the examinations it was decided that I repeat. I am not concerned about my age (15) so I will strive hard to perform well and join P 7 next year.

Asked if she thought this experience was unique to her or whether there were other girls in similar circumstances she affirmed, 'Plenty of them. A friend of mine fell sick and her siblings ran away from her'.

Other pupils complained of too much work at home which did not allow them sufficient time to catch up with their homework. A boy in School 7 graphically described the tangled challenges: '… I have no one to pay my fees; I lack school materials and clothes. When we go home, we burn charcoal to buy books; we have no time to read books they will just tell you to do this and the other and poor feeding both at home and at school, here at school even in the evening we are just taking porridge'.

The girls' personal initiatives to access and enjoy their right to education in Nakapiripirit were sometimes severely punished. A girl in School 5 reported, 'Some girls escape from home to come to school. When they go home for holidays, they are beaten by their parents. For us in Karamoja our parents do not want us to come to school'. The absence of rapport between children and their parents was suggested as likely to expose the children to other risks. The sentiment was also expressed by Girl 7 (School 2) who asked, 'When they ask us for remedial fees and food fees and I ask the parent, he says he has paid enough yet he paid only for food. How can I persuade him to pay the balance?'

Another common problem that was identified in both districts was the tendency for parents to withhold fees for girls as a form of punishment for disobedience. Even where children themselves acknowledged that some girls show brazen levels of disobedience, they still felt that denying those girls their right to education was an extreme measure. More challenges could be inferred from the following recommendation by a boy in School 6:

> [Government should] arrest parents who make children not to go to school.[There should be] sensitization on human rights. Some of our sisters are being forced to marry and boys forced to raid and look after animals, and yet they want money to go to school. They should cut the salary of the parents so that they can take their children to school. NGOs can help those who are performing well. For my case, the parent just refused to take me to school for three years until my uncle came and took me to school.

From the above it was clear that even salary-earning parents are negligent in their duty to children.

Children identified innumerable instances where decisions taken by families had explicit gender connotations. These were either mundane e.g. which children should carry out specified home chores, or they were more fundamental with regard to which child accessed education. For example, Girl 1's mother decided to support her two sons in boarding school while Mary was assigned to stay with her great grandmother, and the boys in School 6 highlighted the gendered difference starkly:

> Some girls as they see their friends, when they are in the same class, they say what am I doing here if my friends are married and they also leave school …

> Some parents working in offices have cows, and force young boys who are ready to study to go and graze and also to go and raid, as the boy goes, he is shot and fails to come to school.

For many children in Nakapiripirit, it is not a question of the right to education; rather it is a choice made by the parents.

4.4 School-related constraints

There were a number of school-related constraints that children identified directly as well as those that could be inferred from their testimonies. Key amongst these were: school availability and distance to school; late entry into primary education; repetition of grades.

4.4.1 School availability and distance

Most children in the study spent at least one hour walking to school, but there was a significant contrast between regions. In Bududa the long distances covered by children were due to choice of school, not lack of school within the vicinity of the children's homes. On the other hand in Nakapiripirit it had to do with the dispersal of few schools over a large geographical area. Most of the respondents in Nakapiripirit were boarders, but the day scholars travelled long distances (average one hour one way).

4.4.2 Late enrolment into primary education

Late entry was commonest in Bududa where only two girls and two boys were aged 11. The rest were above the recommended age of 11 years for P6, with some as old as 15; indeed, the oldest boy in Bududa was 16 years. In Nakapiripirit, many children of school age were out of school, and others entered school late, with the average age of entry of 10 years old being four years above the officially recommended age. Only 4 girls in the study were the right age for Primary 6, with the oldest being 16, and all boys were above 11, with the oldest aged 19 years.

This had obvious implications about length of exposure to schooling, but equally children were often too old for a grade and the curriculum offered. Thus the information provided in the curriculum that related to their personal growth and development, and sexual maturation, for example, was obsolete since many children would have already experienced some of the issues covered in those topics before they were 'taught' about them.

4.4.3 Repeating of grades

While evidence points to the futility of repeating classes (Chen et al. 2009), and in spite of official policy on automatic promotion, schools, families and pupils opted to repeat classes hoping to perform better in order to join the next grade. In Bududa, at least 32 of the 40 children who participated in the study had repeated a class or two, and even those who started early were not guaranteed normal progress. P3 was the most repeated level, with pupils apparently unable to attain literacy and numeracy competencies, and incurring high failure rates in this was the grade where they had a more rigorous examination of their skills and knowledge.

The problem is compounded by the fact that official records (Makerere Institute of Social Research, 2009) indicated that on average teachers spent less than 50% of their official time on task meaning that children did not make the grades, in part, because of teacher absenteeism.

4.5 Sexual maturation

Adolescence and its related challenges featured prominently. The process of growing up and how it is managed by children, their families and schools was identified as a potential

challenge to girls' (and boys') education in the two study locations. The issues ranged from personal experiences to interpersonal relations among children, the confusion engendered by body changes, the kind of information provided to children, the reactions of people to the physical and psychosocial changes girls go through, to the hardware facilities for school sanitation (water, latrines, washrooms, incinerators, etc.), girls' feminine products and other forms of support.

Children said they were left to discover for themselves that they were transiting into adulthood. Asked whether adolescence was a challenge, girls were acutely aware of this as a challenging stage especially in relation to the lack of sanitary protection and the possibility of being taunted about it. Boys in Bududa also agreed that it was a challenging period in the lives of girls: 'Some girls may get menstruation; then they feel that they are dying. Unfortunately they may not know that their time has come so they panic'. Boys also experienced similar predicaments regarding their own sexual maturation, with the onset of wet dreams or cracking of their voices very confusing.

A related challenge that emerged from the discussions with boys and girls in Bududa and Nakapiripirit revolved around the way they were socialised about relating to fellow children of the opposite sex. Children were deliberately taught to suspect the opposite sex. In that way a powerful underlying message that the opposite sex was bad was conveyed and perpetuated. Thus in School 3 boys could confidently assert that, 'we have only male friends. Girls disturb', while in School 6 the girls insisted that they did not associate with boys because 'we fear that people will say that we are engaging in sexual relationships. But we have just friends'. These inherent attitudes about boy-girl relations were equally promoted by parents who looked upon them with suspicion. It could therefore be argued that the perpetuation of such negative relations undermined the children's self-esteem and ability to offer peer support and therefore negated child friendly school principles.

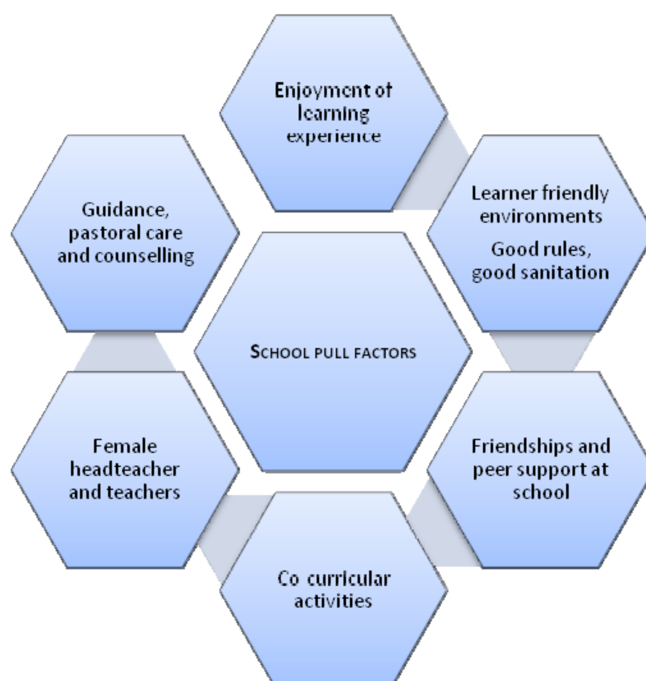
The children identified likely consequences arising from inadequate management of sexual maturation among boys and girls. These included early pregnancy, contracting diseases, dropping out. Even among boys, children explained that 'mature boys who love girls can make them pregnant then the parents of the girls threaten to arrest them. So the boys run away from such threats', and thus interrupt their schooling.

5. Findings II: Pull factors: What keeps girls in school?

After surveying the pupils' understanding of what constituted the odds, the study turned to their own assessment of their current schools to determine what motivated girls (and boys) to persist in their education in spite of the odds; these can be clustered into two broad categories of school pull factors and personal factors.

5.1 *School pull factors*

Figure 2: School factors identified from children's interviews



5.1.1 Guidance and counseling and high quality pastoral care

Pupils identified guidance, counselling and pastoral care provided by the teachers as offering crucial supports. The statement by a girl in School 6 during the focus group discussion summed up this aspect: 'I am encouraged to study by our guidance and counselling teacher. She always passes messages to us to avoid early marriages and complete our education'.

5.1.2 Female teachers

Girl 11 (School 3) noted that, 'Some of us girls go for early marriage so the teachers encourage us to stay in school. Mostly these are female teachers. They are like our mothers'. The teachers advised girls on how to behave and to hold themselves in high esteem. Similarly, girls in Nakapiripirit equated their teachers to mothers. The boys in School 7 reported that teachers were always on hand to advise them against sneaking out of school to go and take alcohol, as well as advising them on how to maintain personal hygiene.

The presence of female teachers was considered a major attraction, just as the headship of schools by women was widely acknowledged and celebrated by the children in those schools in Nakapiripirit. In the words of Girl 21 (School 5): 'What has made me stay in school, we learn about good hygiene; at least our Headteacher is a woman not a man'.

5.1.3 Co-curricular activities, friendships and peer support

Another aspect that children related to was the provision of co-curricular activities which offered them the chance to play with their peers and identify their different talents, although this featured more prominently in discussions with children in Bududa than in Nakapiripirit. Many children said they enjoyed playing with their peers, running, singing and engaging in drama activities. 'I play netball. I'm not in the school team but we play with friends', said Girl 19 (School 4). Girl 7 (School 2) also said, 'I like athletics, netball and volleyball. We also have [traditional] games. I tried to compete for the school but there are other girls who are faster than I am'. It was evident that the co-curricular opportunities afforded pupils the space to mix and interact among themselves, and then to go out and compete with other children, which they found worthwhile. Teachers and headteachers also emphasised this as a motivating factor.

Good schools fostered the development of vital life skills among children, such as friendship formation, creative thinking and effective communication. Children valued their friendships especially those that built them. The value of friendships to the children was perceived at several levels. Girl 18 (School 4) said,

> When we are moving together [friends] advise me against following wrong routes. I also advise them that apart from asking teachers to help us with difficult academic issues we can also consult one another.

A boy in School 1, meanwhile, noted that, ‘If a friend has a problem, we help one another. Also if we find academic issues difficult, we assist each other. Sometimes if a friend wants to join groups of children who are out of school, such as those who gamble with cards, we caution such a friend to avoid bad groups so that we minimise the risk of dropping out’. This linked to a similar response from boys in School 3, who, when asked how they could help a girl who was likely to drop out because of failing to manage her periods, said, ‘We reassure her and encourage her to return to school. If she is ashamed, we tell her this is a normal thing she is experiencing. “Go back to school. Don’t get married early”.’

5.1.4 Learner-friendly environments

The learning environment, in its various manifestations, was cited as a key motivator. Children considered good sanitation, clean buildings, and good rules as some of the ingredients of a good environment. The boys in School 5 said, ‘We enjoy getting knowledge, skills and like our teachers, they teach well. The rules are good. We are all in boarding school apart from one’. Girl 10 in School 4 was also able to report that ‘school rules are there and they are fair and friendly’, whilst Girl 4 (School 1) maintained that ‘I would resist any suggestion to transfer to another school because I am used to this school. I like the way the teachers care for us and teach us’.

5.1.5 Enjoyment of learning experience

The foregoing attributes collectively contributed to the pupils’ enjoyment of their learning experience. Enjoyment was also linked to learners’ participation in the various aspects of school life. For example, children mentioned names of ‘excellent’ teachers who had made science and mathematics accessible subjects. They mentioned the fact that their schools gave them a sense of achievement and enabled them to discover their potential. They boasted of working hard and beating others in examinations. One of the girls said that by remaining in her current school she would not be forced to repeat classes, noting, ‘I also fear that if I transfer to another school I’ll be made to repeat a class’. They were even able to compare the ambience of schools as follows, ‘This school is better than School X and School Y. Here we receive some visitors. We study well and we have some signposts that can encourage us to stay at school’. They also contrasted the performance of their school against other schools and for those who walked long distances to school, this comparison

provided the necessary rationale for their labours. Schools that taught and made children feel that the information was of immediate relevance to the children and their families were considered retention-facilitating contexts. One girl said she liked her school because 'They teach us how to keep ourselves from HIV/AIDS. They teach us how to study well and become a useful citizen in future. I am a member of PIASCY and Straight Talk clubs'.

5.2 Personal factors

These constituted the second category of enablers of girls' education in spite of the odds. Among these were the children's own initiative and self-drive, the power of role models, support from family and non-family members.

Several of the children claimed they had no one to encourage them or that they did not have anybody they admired and that it was purely through their determination that they kept in school. The majority in this category were boys although there were a few of girls in both Bududa and Nakapiripirit who also claimed that they are self-inspired. Girl 37 insisted, 'No one encourages me to come to school. My mother says nothing about coming to school'. The reports by children that some girls in Nakapiripirit escaped from their homes in order to access school seemed to corroborate the claim of self-motivation.

Nevertheless, for many children, their nuclear and extended families provided constant support either as role models or through explaining why education was important. Some of the advice was in form of threats, for example: 'My parents say go to school and do not be a Malaya [prostitute]. Follow what the teachers tell you and do this and that. My uncles encourage me to go to school'. Girl 33 (School 7) knew she was lucky as her siblings were told not to go to school: 'My father has been an influence to me in our family. I do not know why others were told to stay at home'. Similarly, the presence of educated siblings influenced boys and girls to stay in school; Girl 21, for example, said she was inspired by her own sisters who were at various levels of education: 'One has finished S.6, another S.4, and one is in S.1. I want to go above them', she vowed.

For other children the encouragement was provided materially. A boy in Nakapiripirit said, 'My uncle, brother, father and mother encourage me to study. I was promised a bull and a cock, to come to boarding school. If I perform well, my brother promised to pay my school fees'. For others the pressure was circumstantial, as in the case

of Girl 24 (School 5) who said, ‘My grandmother is a nurse, my grandfather is a doctor. They want me to learn. They know I want to be like them. I want to be a nurse on my own’.

Other children were inspired in one way or another by non-family members. These included friends, sponsors, public figures, civil servants and business people. Only one boy, already referred to, wanted to become a teacher so that he could also punish the children of his current teachers. One child said he would like to keep in school so as to avoid becoming a drunkard like his father’s former classmate: ‘Someone can come looking drunk and he says “I went to school with your father”.’

In most cases the role models inspired the children by their good deeds or their positions of power and influence, such as the doctor at Bududa Hospital who helped heal a child’s swollen eye; or through the discussions they had with children, like the nurse who ‘told me that they give you a frog to cut [dissect] it’; or the boy who admired the sub county chief because ‘he is young yet he is controlling many people’.

Some non-family support may seem mundane but it was potentially life changing, as was the case of the girl in School 5 who credited her teachers: ‘They came and asked my father to let me come to school’.

6. Conclusions

The children in the study schools had clear ideas about how their schooling might be improved. The most popular view related to the quality of teaching in an enabling environment, with the need for mutual respect among teachers and pupils that would ‘encourage children to work even harder’. One decried the tendency whereby ‘some schools don’t care about slow learners; the teachers say, “I move with those who can”; so you have to find a school which will help you understand’. The aspect of physically attractive environments was also prioritised, with children asserting the need to improve school infrastructure, to provide sufficient desks, repair cracks in walls and floors and ensure overall protection through fencing and diverting roads that cut through school compounds. Girls and boys also stressed the need for gender-sensitive sanitation facilities and in one school in particular they decried the tendency of community members coming to use school latrines. School feeding was also identified by children in both case study areas as particularly important: the provision of a school meal ‘will do wonders’, one said.

The second most popular item prioritised by the children was guidance and counselling, which was seen as a crucial factor in keeping girls in school. ‘Girls need to know that marriage is not necessarily a solution’, opined one of the boys. Children in Nakapiripirit suggested it was important that educators ‘work in collaboration with others like the GEM (Girls Education Movement) club members, teaching them well, educating parents to bring children to school and having good hospitality with pupils at school’.

Much as it is de-emphasised by government, uniforms or decent clothing for school girls was also identified as a potential solution to girls’ dropout. It was also pointed out that in spite of the government’s directive schools routinely chased from school those children who appeared in tattered clothes. The importance of the availability of girls’ undergarments, sanitary protection and related items was stressed by boys as well as by girls: in the words of a boy in Bududa: ‘It is not that girls demand things that are extraordinary’. Children also identified scholastic items as very problematic to obtain, with one even begging, ‘Let government come in and provide us with writing materials’.

For the children in Nakapiripirit, there was consensus that schools need to mount concerted outreaches into the community to mobilise and sensitise families about girls’ (and boys’) education. They urged, “Teachers can continue going to our homes to talk to parents so that they can let children go to school.” The children also noted that the shortage of boarding facilities was undermining girls’ education as the dropout rate in boarding schools is much lower than it is in day schools.

In these contexts, then, the issue of violence against children, including their being denied a midday meal while at school, needs urgent attention. This may also require a more incisive study of the attitudes and beliefs underlying the practices which continue unabated despite official policy. Violence would also require the development of an inter-sectoral mechanism to identify, respond to and refer victims of violence to professional help. Whilst it is neither viable nor practical in Uganda, given the scale of the country and the nature of the resource base, to expect the government to feed children on a regular and wholesale basis, there is nonetheless a need to develop a multi-pronged approach that will entail sensitising parents on their obligations, promoting coherent family planning methods and facilities, and supporting efforts to mitigate household poverty and food insecurity.

If we are to involve children as participants in research about their well-being, their schooling and their welfare, then it is crucial that we listen and respond positively to the

issues they identify, particularly when their voices speak with a common accord and with genuine authenticity. Although the major concern in these two districts, highlighted by pupils' responses, is the extent to which the socio-cultural environment militates in so many ways against girls and their retention in education, it is clear, too, that efforts to promote girls' education need to be complemented by efforts to improve the quality of education for boys. Equity focused interventions will most likely redress the current imbalances better than any efforts that seek to address marginalisation through marginalisation.

7. Acknowledgements

Although anonymised in this report, we would like to acknowledge and thank the 16 schools that took part in this research, and the girls and boys who shared their views and experiences so openly in individual interviews and focus groups. We would also like to express our thanks to the Commonwealth Education Trust whose financial support of the Centre for Commonwealth Education has made this research possible.

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