

# **Primary Education Experience of a Maasai Woman in Kenya: The long-term impact of schooling beyond subject knowledge**

**Nobuhide Sawamura**

(Osaka University, Japan)

**Seiji Utsumi**

(Kyoto Women's University, Japan)

**Daniel Sifuna**

(Kenyatta University, Kenya)

## **Abstract:**

The current discourse on EFA has a tendency of focusing on learning subject knowledge and completing primary school. Thus, dropping out of school has always been negatively regarded. This study examined the impact of primary school education on female students who dropped out of school due to pregnancy and marriage. They were unsuccessful in completing school and proceeding to secondary education, but have more than several years of learning experience. This study aimed to identify whether their learning experience has made a difference in their lives. It further sought to discuss the long-term impact of schooling beyond subject knowledge. In this initial attempt, the research focused on a particular Maasai woman who dropped out of school at Grade 7, without completing 8 years of full primary education, in Narok. She has been traced over 12 years and was regularly interviewed. Five aspects were identified which enabled her to help improve her life because of schooling: (1) expanding her social network, (2) learning official languages, (3) being conscious about hygiene and health, (4) establishing more equal relations with her husband, and (5) acquiring soft skills of management. It can be said that primary schooling enhanced the capability of dealing with livelihood and bettered her quality of life in the rural community.

## **1. Introduction**

Achieving universal primary education (UPE) by 2015 is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and also as stipulated in the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000. The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in 1990 is the basis of current discussions on UPE. The EFA goal, however, was later transformed into achieving UPE, “to complete a full course of primary schooling” (MDGs Target 2.A). It was further accelerated in the year 2000 and afterwards. Primary schooling is basically a means to support self-actualization, but it has also recently become the purpose itself.

One may be reminded that Article I of the World Declaration on EFA clearly states that,

“Every person—child, youth and adult—shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs,” focusing on value, significance, and effects of education for individuals. The idea of education for individuals appeared to be disregarded and education for the nations came only to the fore in the last two decades. Subsequently, many developing countries have been competing with each other, with support provided by development partners, by trying to increase the participation in primary education. This enthusiasm for expanding primary schooling tends to leave quality challenges behind.

Currently UPE is concerned with the quality of education. It has a tendency of focusing on learning subject knowledge and completing primary schooling, despite the fact that there are some other important elements of schooling. This could be a shortcoming in utilizing target goals, such as MDGs in education, paying more attention to measurable indices such as test scores. Although there is a growing interest in education quality, there are few studies of the long-term impact of learning (Benavot, 2012).

This study examined the impact of primary schooling on female students who dropped out of school due to pregnancy and marriage in a traditional pastoral society of Kenya. They were unsuccessful in completing primary school, unable to proceed to secondary education and acquire jobs, but have more than several years of learning experience. This led to the question if schooling has any impact on their current lives?

This study aimed to identify whether the learning experience has made a difference in their lives, and further to discuss the tensions between being “traditional” and becoming “modern”. This paper presents the case of a Maasai woman who dropped out of school at Grade 7, without completing 8 years of full primary education, in Narok. She has been interviewed regularly over a period of 12 years and regularly met and was interviewed.

## **2. Primary School and Traditional Life**

It has been said that there is estrangement between modern school education and traditional life and that such education is not relevant to the needs of the traditional society. For example, nomadic people move around, with children missing the opportunity of attending school. Moreover, it may be argued that parents and elders fear school education for it threatens their traditional values and culture. But these arguments seem to be based on a large number of anecdotal evidence and on the misunderstanding that people do not like to change their lifestyle. Frequent droughts and the privatization of common land forced some nomadic people to change their traditional lives for survival.

There are numerous studies on pastoralists and education, with emphasis on how to include them in the EFA movement (Dyer, 2010; Kratli & Dyer, 2009; Sifuna, 2005). The

purpose of these studies is to find a strategic way to increase their participation and examine the effectiveness of providing assistance, such as in the forms of mobile schools and distance learning, as well as school feeding programs. Carr-Hill and Peart (2005) reviewed relevant literature on the education of nomadic peoples in East Africa and pointed out that, “As pastoralism adapts to new pressures as well as to new opportunities, arguments that pastoralists either have a negative attitude of education, or have effectively rejected it, are increasingly outdated and unconvincing” (p.18). In the same way, Leggett (2005) also claimed, “But as pastoralism adapts to new pressures, as well as to new opportunities, this study suggests that it is untrue that pastoralists have a distrustful and negative attitude to education” (p.144).

There is an exemplary case of tradition coexisting with modern education in North Western Kenya. When Samburu people move, they now even try to find a grazing land near a school in order to make their children attend school (Konaka, 2011). This implied that pastoral culture can harmoniously coincide with school education, rather than conflicting with it, as previously assumed. It also indicated that even people of traditional lifestyle, who used to have little interest in school education, could place a high priority on their children’s education. If people think that schooling is essential in their lives, they are keen to send their children to school.

Another field study conducted by Leggett (2005) in Wajir District, where the primary school enrollment ratio is one of the lowest in Kenya, also showed the similar perspective of attending school among pastoralists. Some of them, particularly the poor, utilize school education as a strategic tool to improve their family’s lives. He stressed that, “Instead of being adverse or irrelevant to the production system, education can have a complementary relation to pastoralism. This complementarity reveals itself in the way that the household labour force is increasingly being divided so that some children are sent to school as a way of improving the well-being of the family in the short and long terms” (p.144).

Utsumi and Sawamura have been carrying out a longitudinal school-based study in Narok, where the majority is Maasai. Their earlier study was an investigation of the real situations of repetition and dropouts, by tracing individual students over three years in two schools. The two phenomena were critical issues in the progress of Kenyan primary education. Their findings cited that there were fewer dropouts on the whole than it had been assumed and there were always several female students who dropped out of school due to pregnancy and marriage (Sawamura et al., 2003).

According to them, they were first concerned with easily observed cases at each school and had a negative image of female dropouts. It is certainly a crucial issue and must be avoided, but the question later raised was whether there is a significant difference between completing 8 years of full primary education and dropping out of school in 6-7 years. In terms of certifications, it would be yes. However, in terms of what they actually learned, it was not so clear. In this regard,

Utsumi (2003) traced a certain female student after two years of dropping out, and observed that although she could not complete primary school, her learning experience had certainly supported her life in the rural community. She was unsuccessful in completing school, but looking at her current lifestyle, she appeared to have gained a lot from her schooling to contribute to her life (Ibid.).

Then, Sawamura and Imoto (2009) further explored the extensive values and meanings of primary schooling and revealed that friendship formation, the development of an independent spirit and becoming free from harmful cultural practices are important aspects acquired from schooling besides obtaining new knowledge and skills. This is particularly true from the viewpoint of the children themselves. Although school activities are exam-oriented and students may have a difficult time in school, they are treated equally regardless of gender, for example, and they feel comfortable and safe, which is not common in a society outside their school (Ito & Sawamura, 2011). Friendship formation plays an important role in students' school life and students are socialized through interaction among peers to understand other peoples (Toda, 2012).

As shown in the aforementioned studies, primary schooling and traditional life are not necessarily in conflict with each other. But it must be noted that not all Maasai people live in a similar traditional society. Many of them are in between some level of modernity and tradition. Many of the Maasai whom we can see are 'semi-modern Maasai' (as one Maasai student reiterated). Some students said that "we cannot communicate with real Maasai, and they are quite different from us." Those studies conducted by Sawamura and Utsumi in Narok have focused on so-called 'semi-modern Maasai', with many people who understand that children need to attend school, particularly after the introduction of free primary education in 2003.

### **3. Maasai Woman and School**

This research presents the case of a Maasai woman who dropped out of school at Grade 7, without completing 8 years of full primary education, at Grade 7 (at the age of 17 years old) in Narok. Her name is Joyce (pseudonym) and she was born in 1984. When she got pregnant, she was in the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade. The primary school she used to attend was just a 10-minute walk from the traditional Maasai house (*Manyatta*) where she lived with her parents. The Maasai people around this area have settled and practiced farming as well as grazing animals, such as cows and goats, for their livelihood.

Many Maasai people living in Narok North District and the neighboring districts are traditionally pastoralists. Polygamy was commonly accepted. It was not uncommon for young women to marry significantly older men, and be taken as a second wife. Today, however, most Maasai people in the district are agro-pastoralists, settling down in conjunction with becoming

Christians and for school education. Both girls and boys are expected to help with housework and taking care of livestock. In many cases, girls are primarily the ones who take care of their families, including looking after their younger siblings (Chege & Sifuna, 2006).

This primary school is located in Suswa Zone, Narok North District and about 4 km away from the main road. It is the oldest primary school in this zone, established in 1978. The school had 450 students when she was there, increasing to 800 students in 2011. The school has boarding facilities and its academic performance is one of the best schools in the zone, thus attracting many parents and their children.

After Joyce dropped out in 2001, she was visited at her original residence with her small baby girl in 2002. The means of meeting her was embarrassing and shocking. During the first attempt at an encounter to know how she was at home, it was initially assumed that she would be more welcoming. But she ran away, leaving a tank of fetched water behind. After some time, she finally agreed to be seen. She thought that the purpose of the visit was to scold her for getting pregnant and for dropping out of school. She really felt depressed and took responsibility for not continuing school. She did not get married and was staying in the same house with her parents and child.

At present, Joyce has a new house and family, and lives with her husband and 3 children (9 year old girl, 3 year old girl and 1 year old boy). It is located approximately 10 km away from the school. Her family has 35 goats and a maize field. She was 26 years old and her husband, John (pseudonym) was 32 years old when the interview was conducted in September 2010. He completed 8 years of full primary education. The eldest girl was attending the primary school nearest to her house. During weekdays John works as a butcher in Narok Town, the capital of Narok North District. Joyce remembered fondly that she liked the subjects of Kiswahili and English and also enjoyed running and games in school.

The research is based on the assumption that she can reflect on her school life and analyze her own experience with her current life in the traditional community. Previous studies tend to rely on teachers' perspectives, overlooking children's views. It will be possible to find the long-term impact of primary schooling on her, and to identify whether this amount of schooling has made a positive difference in her life. The interview was conducted at Joyce's new house in 2003, 2006, 2010 and 2011. It is worth noting that she was so pleased to see us later, unlike the time when we saw her immediately after she left school in 2002.

#### **4. Impact of Primary Schooling in the Traditional Community**

By analyzing the interviews with Joyce, the following five aspects were identified which enabled her to improve her life because of schooling. Although a series of interviews were

conducted in the past 12 years, the aspects below were mainly extracted from the interview carried out in September 2010. It was verified with teachers' interviews.

*(1) Expanding her social network*

She goes to the market once or twice a week and meets her former classmates from neighboring communities. It takes her an hour to go on foot and buy daily commodities such as sugar, rice, potatoes, and cabbages. They talk to each other about their children, animals and fields, and exchange views on relevant information. This would not have been possible, if she did not go to school, particularly since Maasai's traditional communities are not so open among women.

*(2) Learning official languages*

An official language such as English and Kiswahili is not her primary language (mother tongue). Without attending school, it would not be easy to acquire such linguistic knowledge. Shopkeepers in the small town are not necessarily Maasai and do not speak Kimaasai well. In addition to this practical use of the languages, by having relatively good command of English, she can communicate with people of other ethnicities as well as foreigners. This also assisted her in expanding her social network as mentioned above.

*(3) Being conscious about hygiene and health*

She is conscious about her family's health and mentioned that she learned the necessary knowledge for health care in school. This largely comes from subject knowledge such as science, and also from her experience of the routine hygiene checks her teachers conducted during the morning assemblies. But it seems to be further strengthened by having conversations with her friends in school. She boils water before drinking it. In addition, she tries to keep her body and her children's bodies, especially hair, clean.

*(4) Establishing more equal relations with her husband*

It is often said that traditional Maasai women are dependent on their husbands. All family matters are determined by men and women are expected not to oppose their decisions. Her husband revealed that she is educated and therefore he can work in the town during weekdays, leaving her at home. She can live without being too dependent on her husband, and enjoy a more equal relationship with him because of her education. Some Maasai teachers said that many Maasai men tend to treat educated women differently.

*(5) Acquiring soft skills of management*

This is an observation made by a Maasai male teacher who has known her and her family since she entered school. Although he did not use the term 'soft skills', he observed that she has a personal ability that enhances the quality of her family's life by means of working effectively, fulfilling her responsibilities and managing limited resources. The same teacher said that these

kinds of attitudes are not so common among uneducated Maasai women.

The short-term negative impact of dropping-out disappears after some time and the long-term positive impact of schooling appears to remain in her life. Primary education is not solely to learn new subject knowledge. It is not only a place where children stay before proceeding to secondary school. Being in primary school, children can build assets and social capital which are useful through their entire lives.

## **5. Conclusion**

For children in rural Kenya, school education functions as a means to exit traditional society. Few children wish to stay in the rural community and most of them dream of working in the modern sector of urban cities. Girls, in particular, often have a definite wish to leave traditional society. Joyce also wanted to become a nurse which was not realized. She could not become “modern,” but she does not live strictly “traditional” either. The quality of her family’s livelihood has been improved. She appeared to have both values, and at the same time, knows where she is in the larger society. In other words, there are few tensions between modernity and tradition. She enjoys a “modern” life in the traditional community.

In the era of UPE, for those who dropped out of school, learning at primary school could be considered as wasteful. This is partly because previous attention has focused on the expansion of and access to primary education. What is the role of primary schooling? According to the Dakar Framework for Action, “It is an education geared to tapping each individual’s talents and potential, and developing learners’ personalities, so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies” (UNESCO, 2000, p.8).

It is necessary to take more interest not only in the ‘quantitative expansion of education for the nation’ but also in the ‘qualitative growth of individuals for the community.’ There is a need to reconsider the importance and value of primary schooling in the local contexts, beyond national or global ones. Those who experienced primary schooling, regardless of completing or dropping out, could be a driving force in changing communities and improving peoples’ lives. They can be agents of change in the rural community.

This exploratory research is an initial attempt to understand whether there is an impact of several years of primary schooling. There are so many external determinant factors and it would be difficult to exactly measure the impact. This may depend on the quality of education provided. Nevertheless, we can say that primary schooling makes a difference even if they cannot complete the full cycle. It can be concluded that primary schooling enhanced the capability of Joyce to deal with her livelihood and bettered her and her family’s quality of life in the rural community.

Further studies should, first of all, increase the number of cases to study of women who dropped out of primary school and are living in rural communities. The dropout students may be compared with those who completed primary education or those who have never been to school. There is much space for refining the research methodology. These considerations invite further empirical investigation.

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