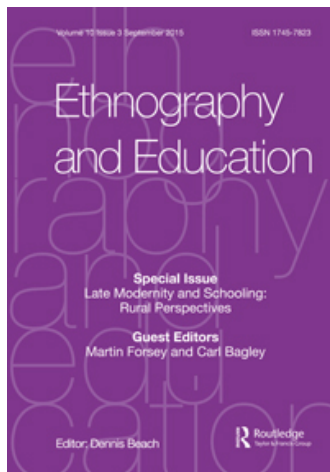


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The testimony of neoliberal contradiction in education choice and privatisation in a poor country: the case of a private, undocumented rural primary school in Uganda

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With international momentum to achieve ‘Education for All’ by 2015, global attention is being paid to those parts of the world where mass formal primary schooling is relatively new. Uganda is such a place. In the context of ethnographic fieldwork at a poor, undocumented, private primary school in rural Uganda, parents were interviewed in order to better understand their conceptualisations of education during this ‘massification’ era. The interviews reveal interesting contradictions between the espoused neoliberal principles and the nuances with which they describe education. In the absence of a robust public schooling system, privatisation has emerged to fill the gaps in educational provision as the country finds itself caught between the international mandate for free primary education and the lack of capital.

Keywords: Uganda; rural schooling; ethnographic interviews; choice; privatisation

An international pledge to universalise access to primary education around the globe was articulated at a 1990 World Conference on ‘Education for All’ (EFA). UNESCO assumed responsibility for the pledge and was joined in various ways by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF and the World Bank (WB).¹ In 2000, the United Nations established eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – the second of which is ‘to ensure that, by 2015, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling’ (UN 2000, 5, 2015). Uganda is touted as making commendable progress towards the ‘EFA’ goal since passing its 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy. However, a lot remains to be done if the goal is to be achieved. For example, poor, rural children are left under-schooled and public education is burdened in ways that seem virtually irreparable (Winkler and Sondergaard 2008; Dixon 2012). Because Uganda is still young in what they call the ‘massification of education’, a comprehensive and systematic establishment of schooling has not yet rooted. Moreover, the main Uganda newspaper, *the Daily Monitor*, noted that, philosophically the Government of Uganda never *bought* the idea of free primary education. The president, in one meeting, urged that, ‘focus should be on the development of infrastructures. If people were helped to become rich, they would easily pay fees for their children but won’t build roads ...’ (as reported in *the Daily Monitor*, July 30, 2014). Cost-sharing is one of the educational principles of the WB. Low-fee private schools, like the one we are

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studying, seem to marry neoliberalist purposes and mechanisms of education, including the idea of cost-sharing, with the desire to make schools accessible to children who are poor and/or who live in areas where government-aided schools have not been established (Tooley 2005; Dixon 2012). In this paper, we explore the substance of *parental choice* with respect to their children's enrolment in Ssuubi,² a private, undocumented, low-fee, rural primary school in Uganda. Our analysis indicates the extent to which neoliberal ideas pervade parents' and proprietors' talk about choice in a context where choice is limited and privatisation is more about hope than individual prosperity ownership.

The benefits and risks associated with low-fee private schools in poor nations are debated (Dixon 2012; Walford 2011; Watkins 2000; Oketch et al. 2010; Chimombo 2009; Tooley 2005). Some argue that low-fee private schools for poor children are making essential contributions towards EFA goals. Moreover, the problems with public schooling in poor nations are well-documented (for Uganda see specifically Munene 2006; Ekaju 2011). We are interested in the conceptualisation of 'choice' in Uganda, particularly in terms of how parents talk about choice. In the end, we want to speculate on the extent to which their talk might reflect outcomes of what Molla (2014) describes as the 'knowledge aid' of the WB³ and to consider the contradictions that also manifest. The knowledge aid aspect of the WB is virtually un-studied.

Conceptualising the globalisation of education within Uganda Education Policy

Whether conceived as *human* right or global necessity, the contemporary international community no longer stands agnostic on the provision of primary education. Such partisan stances create an underlying global answerability between nations on the question of schooling. This answerability impinges *onto* developing nations through financial and knowledge aid (Molla 2014). Both the availability and the quality of primary education are internationally scrutinised and policy-ed by a largely western cadre with a relatively narrow set of objectives. Amongst the many debates associated with providing access to education around the globe is (1) whether or not school choice is fundamental to educational excellence and equity (Davies and Quirke 2005) and (2) whether or not the privatisation and entrepreneurship of schooling promotes social equity and financial responsibility (Tooley 2005; Dixon 2012). The international call for UPE fuels efforts to get schools up and running, accessible (both by location and cost), and good across various groups (including poor and rural children). Related is the practical problem of how choice can/should be leveraged by families to promote the educational success of their own children. School choice and school privatisation are hot-button issues in countries with long histories of public education systems like the USA and Canada where choice and privatisation are conflated, but their complexities, controversies and overlaps differ somewhat from countries where a robust universal public schooling 'option' has not been established (Tooley 2005; Dixon 2012). In her study of postapartheid South Africa, Subreenduth (2013) critically reports, 'choice seems to be articulated only within the limits of one's means and individual networks of relations' (597). At base, '[k]ey to the ideal of school choice is diversity of accessible provision and parents who are prepared to inform themselves about this diversity in order to make wise decisions' (Windle and Stratton 2013, 203). This conception of choice is simply not meaningful in rural Uganda. To the point, Ssuubi is located in a place where schools are least likely to be f(o)unded by anyone at all, including the government, and serves students who are poor and rural. As we will look at the structure of school choice and privatisation through the perspective of parents and proprietors of Ssuubi, we complicate

the more common western critiques of neoliberalism. Moreover, there have not been studies of single schools in Uganda, and studies of rural schools are desperately needed (Munene 2006; Ekaju 2011).

In western countries where direct and indirect business takeovers of schooling are being openly debated (Beach 2008), the privatisation of schooling in Uganda and other poor countries rides on the backs of hardworking individual proprietors without business capital whilst public schools are being largely funded by supra capital (WB) whose inevitable 'business' involves investment in poorer nations (Nambissan and Ball 2010). WB investment depends on the development of capital in those countries (Lincove 2012). Thus, in very specific ways the development of education is inextricably linked with the development of capital whose fiscal mechanisms are directly linked to government-aided schools. Detstatalisation, marketisation and privatisation of schooling intersect with the global call of 'EFA' as if global capital *wants* to benefit from a seemingly humanitarian mandate (Jessop 2002). Despite a growing chorus of criticisms over WB policies (Harrigan and Mosley 1991; Ogbu and Gallagher 1991; Gertler and Glewwe 1992; Sen 1999), in Uganda perhaps few believe the humanitarian mandate of EFA can be met without serving capitalism. In fact, Klein (2008) has convincingly argued that neoliberal principles are necessary in situations of crisis – post-war, poverty-infused Uganda would certainly qualify. With external pressure towards universal education, a short timeline for development, and insufficient trust in traditional knowledge, privatisation is emerging as a potential solution (Munene 2006; Ekaju 2011).

Formal education in Uganda was introduced by Christian missionaries in the 1880s while Uganda was still a British Protectorate. The school system was intended for a smaller population, mainly the children of the chiefs, to provide functionaries for the British colonial government (Ministry of Education & Sport – MoE&S 1999). In the 1920s, the British Government decided to take over responsibility for education by providing financial support to the missionary schools and by establishing new public schools in regions where mission schools did not exist (Ssekamwa and Lugumba 2001). The education system was modified several times across many government changes, including Uganda's independence from Britain. Some of the most recent improvements were recommended by the 1989 Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC; MoE&S 1999). The EPRC recommendations later led to the amendment of government policies reflected in the Ugandan Government 'White Paper of 1992' (Government of Uganda 1992). Today's education achievements have been guided by those recommendations. Going on simultaneously, of course, was global pressure for universal education and WB involvement in funding education (World Bank, n.d.).

The principal aim of the 1997 UPE reform was to enable all Ugandan children of school age to enter, remain in and successfully complete the primary school level of education (MoE&S 2004). With the School Funding Grant, the Government of Uganda established a mechanism for paying children's tuition fees through the transfer of (predominately WB) money to government-aided schools (Nishimura, Yamano, and Sasaoka 2008; Nishimura et al. 2009; Suzuki 2002; Ogbu and Gallagher 1991). The government supported a cost-sharing approach to funding, expecting parents and guardians to pay for other schooling expenses, such as the cost of scholastic materials (books and supplies), uniforms, food and transportation (Grogan 2006). Implementation of the grant, however, has been less than satisfactory as the flow of UPE funds to schools suffers significant delays (Winkler and Sondergaard 2008), corruption and mismanagement (Munene 2009).

With increased enrolment, the teacher–pupil ratio went up to 1:55 and is even higher in many UPE rural schools which are not distributed in a planned or even way. This

massification of education is linked in people's minds with a lower quality of teaching (Munene 2009; Winkler and Sondergaard 2008). The majority of pupils in UPE schools in Uganda leave primary school without the desired literacy and numeracy competency levels (Ekaju 2011). Muwanga (2007) identifies literacy problems with UPE schools. Non-school enrolment and school dropout problems persist (McGee 2000). Some individuals/parents took matters into their own hands hence giving rise to the emergence of private schools in towns and villages.

Despite evidence that government-aided schools have failed in Uganda (Munene 2006), significantly enhanced attendance at primary schools has been documented (World Bank Uganda 2014). Moreover, with respect to equity, Deininger (2003) compares primary school attendance rates across quartiles of per capita income distribution and reports significant increases in attendance rates for children from poor households (see also UNDP 2007) and for girls since UPE (see also UNICEF Uganda 2015) which had particularly profound effects on orphans and children from female-headed households (see also Nishimura, Yamano, and Sasaoka 2008). Nevertheless, approximately 7% of children aged 6–12 years reportedly never attended school (UNDP 2007). Two-thirds of students enrolled in first grade are unlikely to complete seventh grade (UNDP 2007). The two main reasons reported for students dropping out of the UPE system are: (1) its unaffordability⁴ and (2) lack of interest (MoE&S 1999, 2005). Pregnancy and early marriage among girls are additional reasons accounting for female students who drop out of the UPE system (MoE&S 2004; UBS 2007).

With UPE quality in doubt and swelling enrolments at the early primary grades, Ekaju (2011) documented a rush by investors/entrepreneurs to open up private schools. In Uganda, as in other parts of the world, such entrepreneurs are perceived to be helping the government to put right what seems to have gone wrong with the UPE policy.

Methodology

This paper reports on a small piece of a larger participatory ethnographic project at the undocumented, rural private school we call Ssuubi (Luganda for 'hope'). The goal of the larger study is to thoroughly understand the development of such schools during these times when global pressures for education are confounded in Uganda by the challenges of poverty and limited infrastructure for organised social action. The purpose of *this* paper is to analyse parent and proprietor talk on school choice and privatisation. In this section of the paper, we describe the school site, methods, participants and limitations.

Site

Ssuubi is located in a rural district outside Kampala, Uganda. It was started in 2013 by married partners Sekamatte and Madame Amy. The school was selected for study because its proprietors are valued educators who reflect a positive, caring motivation for owning a school; because the school is located in a rural setting; is undocumented and so assumes a complex relation with the state; is new and therefore can be studied from its beginning; and because the researchers had easy access to it.

In 2000, Sekamatte and Madame Amy had a vision of starting a school. Sekamatte earned a degree in education and served as a secondary teacher. Madame Amy was also a secondary teacher and a head teacher. Sekamatte learned lessons from an earlier failed attempt to start a school (in 2005) which informed the efforts at Ssuubi. After saving, he and his wife were able to buy a plot of land in a rural area to be used for a school (though

buildings at this site are not yet completed). Sekamatte feels he is continuing a legacy of valuing education that was started by his father. At present, the proprietors rent an abandoned dairy (which they improved) near that purchased plot of land where they will move the school once the site is ready.

All of Ssuubi's students live in the rural area. Government schools are not available there. The school began with 23 students, but by the third year had registered over 70 students (three-year-olds through P5). English is the primary language of instruction (the rule throughout Uganda), but Luganda is used to facilitate learning, particularly with the younger children. Madame Amy is the Director of the School and works alongside Head Teacher Georgina, who has been with them from the beginning.

Methods

This paper draws largely on ethnographic interviews with six parents and stories/informal interviews with the proprietors and other members of the Ssuubi community during the school's first year.⁵ Sekamatte wrote a story about starting the school which has, also, been included as data. All three researchers make observational visits to the school, with Mayengo actively participating at the school on a weekly basis since its inception. The analyses use grounded interpretive approaches to reconstruct meaning fields and develop codes. The codes were simultaneously organised into larger categories of meaning. The analysis process was conducted by all three researchers collaboratively, using peer debriefing and consensus strategies to articulate inferences. Sitting together at a laptop using the Free Version of QDA Miner Lite, we engaged in critical dialogue with one another and the data to make sense of the grounded inferences.

Limitations and validity

Given the ongoing nature of the ethnography and limited number of interviews from that first year, we acknowledge that more data, including follow-up interviews with the parents, will result in more robust findings. We used peer debriefing, recording devices, long-term presence in the field, member checks with Sekamatte and Madame Amy and Ugandan native researchers to strengthen the validity of the study.

Findings

Driving west from the hustle and bustle of Kampala, one eventually veers off the main tarred road to drive up unnamed dirt lanes, pot-holed and rural, eventually reaching a small path on whose corner Ssuubi sits.

There are no other schools in this rural vicinity. The attending students are from poor families, most of whom engage in subsistence farming. The school has low fees, roughly 1/10 the cost of private schools in Kampala. The parents pay a subsidised fee for uniforms. Other materials are provided by the school, but the school has not yet been able to afford texts and has only slowly acquired home-made desks, reading books and writing materials. The school does not have electricity or running water, but provides latrines and carries in water for drinking and food preparation.

Sekamatte's main intention 'is to give children a chance through quality and affordable education' and each year the school gets closer to fulfilling that intention. He wrote that the mission of the school is 'to reach out [to] each child and enable them to meet their full intellectual, creative and physical potential in school and beyond' with



Figure 1. The rural dirt roads leading to Ssuubi. Personal photo taken by Barbara.

particular interest in offering an ‘effective, caring, and distinctive learning environment for children in deprived semi-rural areas in an African context’.

Interviewees espoused ideas about formal education for their children that conform, in part, with neoliberal ideas of marketplace competition, choice and privatisation also strongly touted by the WB’s knowledge aid (Molla 2014). Though market-based principles are consistently articulated, they are also challenged through practices that seem to mitigate their full-on acceptance. Each of following principles are interconnected in participants’ minds, yet, in each case, there are also subtle, coexisting contradictions.



Figure 2. The children of Ssuubi gathering at the end of the school day. Personal photo taken with permission by Barbara.

- ‘I have a choice and I am choosing’,
- ‘You get what you pay for’ which links to ‘Interest is maintained through fiscal responsibility’,
- ‘Competition benefits quality’ and
- ‘The customer is always right’ which links to ‘Accountability is maintained through fiscal dependency/consumership’.

‘I have a choice and I am choosing’

The idea of choice is largely backgrounded to the other market-based principles articulated. We write about it first because it is assumed in each of the other principles. The western literature suggests that school choice requires a diversity of options to which parents become aware and avail themselves (Subreenduth 2013). Sekamatte and Madame Amy live nearby and they knew that there was no UPE school available. Even so, some parents visited Ssuubi when it opened, and *chose* the school. One parent reported:

First of all, I looked around at the schools which were around. Most of the schools, were, the standard was not too good, so, I thought this is the better school that I could give my child a good standard such that he would have a good foundation.

Another parent said:

When I got news about your school [Ssuubi], the information really touched me. One, it’s a Christian school, the founders are believers. Two, the site was okay. The environment is convenient for learning, the facilities are available and I really trusted the teachers, that’s why I brought my child here.

Another parent explained that he chose the school because of the meals provided: ‘[t]hat was my first, at least my firstest idea, because the school had just started I didn’t meet [see evidence of] its performance and I didn’t know its teachers’. Despite the clear absence of a diversity of school options, parents talk about the decision to send their child to Ssuubi as a choice.

Though parents talk about themselves as the locus of choice for their child’s school, the choices are not without their boundaries. Another parent said that she chose Ssuubi because, ‘the standard [is good] when compared to government schools, bigger schools [that] we call first world schools’. Despite the talk sounding as if parents are choosing from amongst schooling options, the most fundamental ‘choice’ parents at Ssuubi have is whether or not to send their child to school at all, not whether or not to send the child to this particular school or some other. Trekking long distances is an obstacle for rural families trying to get their children in schools. Most parents mentioned this. Another parent told Mayengo that he did not want to send his child to a school on the main road (which was quite a distance from the rural area near Ssuubi). Transportation is not easy for families, many people walk or hire local bikers so if the distance is too great, the ‘choice’ to take one’s children to school is virtually erased. A parent told Mayengo, ‘If I had that capacity, I would take my child to a government school, but because of distance, I cannot’. None of the parents interviewed just assumed automatically that Ssuubi, as a private school, would provide a higher quality education than a UPE school.

Another aspect of the choice to attend school in general involves actual needs for the child to help out at home. Sekamatte talked this when he lamented that parents:

request for a child to be away for a week to weed or plant being a rainy season. You labor to explain the importance [of] daily homework and why parents should help their children to write the daily take home exercises.

A young child's parents might choose to send her to school if they do not need help from the child at home. In fact, one parent told researchers that he is willing to send his child to school 'because he [the child] is not needed at home.' It was said that children in the rural villages, 'go barefooted and expect to have that chance to fetching water, making bricks' (as a source of small income) instead of attending school.

Reasons parents offer for sending children to primary school centre on the expectation that school will change the life prospects of a child and of the clan. Parents do not mention UPE as a compulsory force, but rather as an opportunity. Parents want their children to achieve what education has to offer. For example, one parent recalled:

First, as a person I didn't go to school. I didn't have that chance. The little education I got was through a public school where we didn't learn English, yet, it's the most used language [in school]. I want my children to have a decent and bright future decorated with success. I want to see some of them become medical doctors and the like, to enable home development. If [a person] in a home is well learnt, it becomes a pillar for home change and improvement. In case of any opportunity in the village, the family has a say and representation. It's easy to tap such chances.

Another parent sees education, in part, as a way of making it in Uganda. She said, '[I]n this Uganda now you cannot survive without education. With the test as preparation for a job in the future, this is the training I can give to my child'. The points these parents are making about the value of education for their child's life are complicated. They speak both to the individual advantage provided the child through education, but also to the role education can play in a community.

This idea of *choosing* to send a child to school in order to increase personal life chances is complicated by the idea of children having a right to education for its own sake. Though this was not expressed by very many parents, there is a growing child's rights movement in Uganda that claims education as a basic right (in alignment with the MDG #2). One parent talked about it like this:

And, the child is in the school-going age and so it is also her right to be in school ... The rights of a child [includes] education. That's why a child has to be in school. That's why I bring her to school.

The aims of Ssuubi fit this conception of education. The mission statement is:

To reach each child and enable them to reach their full intellectual, creative and physical potential in school and beyond.

The school teaches the Uganda national curriculum and prepares pupils for public examinations. At the same time, they aim to develop self-confident students who care for each other and for their local communities. The school encourages students to be open minded and questioning. They are taught to respect evidence and to appreciate the need for shared human values.

The school offers an effective, caring and distinctive learning environment for children in deprived semi-rural areas in an African context. It aims for an education that respects:

- high levels of achievement and social responsibility for each child;
- freedom of thought and expression;
- rational enquiry; science and the need to support argument with evidence;
- human rights;
- gender and racial equality; and
- the rights of individuals to choose their personal life stance. (Email from Proprietor)

'You get what you pay for'

Parents, school proprietors and administrators touted the adage, 'You get what you pay for'. One parent reported that, 'Private schools are more caring than public. ... Since parents pay money ...'. Another parent said, 'When you pay school fees you get what you want. When you don't do so, you find that things don't work the way you want'. One parent had her children at a school where the fees were waived for them (because of the family's poverty), 'but', the parent said that her children 'were being given manual work, poorly handled, would go minus lunch. I was forced to change them'. This was not happening to students who were able to have their fees paid. This mother enrolled her children at Ssuubi where she does pay a small fee.

Admitting that education is never free, the question of funding education generally is whether the money should be obtained primarily (or solely) at the expense of the common coffers or whether parents should pay some (or all) fees associated with obtaining education for their children. There are noteworthy contradictions to the idea 'You get what you pay for' – we can use teacher pay to bring these contradictions out. In Uganda, teachers are the schools' primary assets (Winkler and Sondergaard 2008). Teachers in the UPE system are paid more than teachers at Ssuubi, which makes retaining them at Ssuubi difficult. Despite teachers being paid more in UPE schools it is widely known that there is heavy absenteeism of teachers in UPE schools and the lack of care for their work (Winkler and Sondergaard 2008). In comparing pre- and post-UPE schools, one parent said:

[UPE] Teachers of today are not professionals. They only work because they expect a salary. Perhaps they should be counseled or talked to. Teachers of today rarely do visit parents to share more about the character/ person of the child, how the child is at home among others. They simply sit to wait for their end of month pay check.

Another parent commented on the high rate of absenteeism, but explained it also through this same principle 'you get what you pay for': 'What they earn is not to the services they give. They are not paid well and they travel long distances to school'. Thus, you cannot expect teachers not to be working at second jobs, if they are underpaid. They will not give their best work to the schools. Yet, when parents talked about the teachers at Ssuubi, they consistently reported that the teachers are there, working hard, treating children well ('I have not had any complaint of a teacher beating badly the children' – caning them as is common in Ugandan schools even though doing so breaches state policy), and 'making sure the child passes her work' though at Ssuubi teachers are underpaid.

One problem with the adage 'you get what you pay for' involves the question *WHO* is paying? UPE teachers are paid by the government through a variety of means including national indebtedness and taxes. In a direct way, parents pay less to send their children to UPE schools than to private schools (though indirect costs like transportation might be quite high), and yet teachers are paid more and are not necessarily performing according to high standards of professionalism (as described by Ssuubi parents and as reported in Winkler and Sondergaard, 2008). The directness of the pay and the directly visible outcomes make it seem as if one gets what one pays for, while masking the flow of money and failures to meet high standards of professional performance involved in UPE schools. Parents realise that they pay less to have their children attend Ssuubi than they might at some other private school, and they acknowledge that by paying less, they get access to a school in their rural locale, but a school without electricity or computers, slim on materials and lacking government approval. Nevertheless, they appreciate the proximity of the school to their homes, the meals, the positive learning experiences.

'My children are always eager to report to school even when they are sick. They like school'. While parents mentioned potential improvements – the need for more books, electricity, computers and the like, they did not propose paying higher fees to cover those costs. Parents and proprietors believe that owners of private schools have to work out friendly, favourable and flexible fees payment plans that enable parents to finance the cost of education. The owners of Ssuubi argued that for rural parents to be able to contribute towards funding their children's schooling:

comprehensive rural development strategies need to be put in place [by the government] so as to increase the benefits from primary education and also to make parents believe/realize that the expected benefits exceed the total direct and indirect costs of education. This should take into account improvements in the quality and internal efficiency of both private and public primary schools in rural areas. Thus, it does seem that there is some confidence that a low-cost school could provide quality educational experiences despite the adage 'you get what you pay for.'

Another challenge to this principle is the ethical belief that poor kids deserve a quality education even when their families are unable to contribute financially. Uganda has a substantial orphan population and the highest birth rate in the world with nearly half of its total population under the age of 18. The proprietors of Ssuubi desire to provide a better education for poor, rural and even orphaned children than those children are able to afford – even better educational opportunities than what Ssuubi school fees collectively afford. Proprietors *want* to be able to provide affordable schooling for rural poor children. Sekamatte shared:

It brings great joy to a proprietor when the project is thriving. You see many children enrolling raw and walking out with a great life achievement. You interact with children and parents from all walks of life, and above all, when you die there is a fundamental legacy.

However it is also true, that 'teachers must be paid at every end [of] month regardless of whether there is payment from students or not'. 'You get what you pay for' is not compatible with the moral (and international) call to provide every child a *free* primary education. Proprietors are committed to making improvements at the school without having to over-burden poorer parents with the costs. At present Sekamatte and Madame Amy subsidise fees with donations from individuals and from their own pockets. They have considered taking out a personal loan. The problem of capital riddles their capacity to provide the education they are intellectually, morally and educationally capable of providing. This level of information nuances what Dixon (2012) has described as the capacity for low-fee private schools to manage efficiently, specifically by underpaying teachers. In the case of Ssuubi, the fees are being subsidised in ways that make it difficult to say exactly what the per pupil cost of education is.

The principle 'you get what you pay for' is held in conjunction with the idea that *interest is maintained through fiscal responsibility*. While many Ugandans believe in the value of education, it is widely held that schooling is most effectively delivered through the free market or, at best, a mixed model, like the one in Rwanda, where parents contribute something small which serves to keep them interested in how the schools are run. Kim and Boyle (2012) described a discrepancy between the international articulation that access to free education was a child's right – at least at the primary level and the WB principle that the government should be small and parents should cost-share for education. Thought parents and educators at Ssuubi articulate this neoliberal belief as their own, they also shared stories that counter this position. One of the parents removed her child from a school because her child was being mistreated – she was passionately

attentive to what was going on at school though the fees had been waived and she was not directly paying. Other people told stories of fighting against the odds of poverty to keep their family members in school. The fiscal ties to the school were necessary, but did not explain the interest. People interested were willing to do what they could to pay, but the interest came first. Sekamatte told us about a friend.

We had a female parent who always carried tins of coins to pay school fees. She had two children with us [at Ssuubi]. The father of her children was not bothered with the education of his children as none of his family members was surviving because of education [their survival was not dependent on education]. The poor woman like many others was left with the burden of finding fees for the children.

Sekamatte is describing a woman whose interest is independent of her ability to be fiscally responsible. There were parents who participated in our interviews that similarly expressed a value of/and interest in their children's education, though paying was not always possible. Most compelling of all was Sekamatte's own story:

My father was an Anglican reverend/clergy. Together with my mother, they served wherever they were sent by the Bishop. They served mainly in rural areas. God blessed them with eight children and I happen to be the second born from each and the first born for the couple. We went through a number of rural schools as we would change schools whenever our father's services were geographically transferred. Primary alone, we went through four schools all dictated by transfers.

Life went on humbly like that until November 1995, when my mother passed. My father followed after four years (January 2001). By then I was a year old in the world of work and below me were three sisters and three brothers who were now directly under my sole care. I salute my parents who facilitated humbly my finances until I graduated with a Bachelor's of Education in 2000. With confidence, I was the first in our family to get a Bachelor's Degree (count two generations backward) given the fact that the grandfather to my father produced two children whom he never educated. My young siblings looked on me for the future and I prayed to the Lord to enable me [to] educate them until they get at least a Bachelor's Degree.

Competition benefits quality

'Private schools [have the highest performance]. As they are in competition, I understand that they put in much effort to see that their children get a good record in education'. As this parent and others suggest, schools want to be able to attract students by demonstrating that students reach a high standard in comparison with other schools. This kind of competition pushes schools to their highest levels of performance – so the claim goes. This claim reflects the common 'knowledge' of the parents.

This idea of competition is also part of a theory of learning voiced by some parents. One said that Ssuubi would be better if there were more children to compete against one another. There are few children in the older primary grades and this makes for less opportunities to compete against one's classmates.

[Y]ou find that he [the son] challenges some kids in other schools. You find if you ask him something he is able to answer that question, he can read some words in a book, and when you put him with [kids from] other schools, you find that those kids cannot do what he is doing.

Accordingly, when a child compares favourably to peers, the competition spurs on continued high-quality learning and teaching.

Another parent likened this competition to business: For the owners, 'the schools belong to them. If they fail to monitor business, it's theirs to lose'. It is believed that some

proprietors have a predominantly profit motive, in which case, getting the most students and higher performance would benefit their efforts to maximise profits. Ssuubi proprietors are not profit-motivated, but they do want to attract more students and certainly would not mind if the school was financially self-sustaining. The proprietors realise that the presence of more students superficially indicates that they are competitive at attracting and keeping pupils. When talking about initially attracting students to the school, Sekamatte wrote:

Some parents give you children depending on how many you have in class or in school. Many parents send children where there are numbers. Tactfully, we opened seven days before the official date. My daughters and sons, together with a few other children from my relatives were the first to attend classes. By the end of the week some community members were convinced as they witnessed [actual] teaching.

UPE schools do not have to compete for students because their classes are filled to the brim, with a shortage of teachers to meet the needs. Thus, private schools compete with other private schools and with UPE schools for students, but UPE schools are not really 'in' a competition with private schools for students. The government needs private schools to pick up the burden of education and, particularly, in rural areas, competition for students is less about competing with other schools and more about convincing parents to send the child to school period – making attendance amenable to family needs.

The customer is always right

Sekamatte talked about serving the parents as a school owner. He wrote:

With the new school in this rural area where I and Madame Amy are proprietors, we are amused [delighted] first of all by the trust parents have in us. They have entrusted us with their children and the challenge now is to meet their expectations. Day by day we receive positive comments from the community and indeed this makes us proud about that initiative.

One parent told Mayengo that 'Since the parents pay money, the teachers make sure that the child receives what parents will expect'. Later, she told researchers that 'If I found out my child was not receiving what I expected. ... or if there was deterioration in the school' she would take her child out of Ssuubi. The parents' expectations are seldom questioned. Recently, Madame Amy told Barbara about a parent who wanted her child placed in a level higher than what would likely be successful. The parent was insisting against the better judgement of the educators. Madame Amy did not believe the parent was right, but the parent expected to be treated like a customer who would receive the service requested. Amy was not sure how to proceed. This idea of the customer being right confounded the way Amy could interact with the parent and left her feeling uncertain about how to handle the situation.

When the parent is considered the customer, *the money exchange from consumer to proprietor ostensibly maintains accountability*. Parental consumership and proprietary dependence can lock in the mechanism for parental involvement in the school through an articulation of parent expectations. By most accounts (Kim and Boyle 2012; Winkler and Sondergaard 2008; Ekaju 2011; Munene 2009), there is a problem with accountability in UPE schools. Winkler and Sondergaard (2008) reported a tremendous lack of efficiency regarding accountability or knowledge of effectiveness of schooling since UPE. Neither parents, administrators, nor the state are holding UPE schools accountable to high-quality standards. UPE teachers are not answerable to parents' expectations or to government policies and practices. With private schooling, because the parent is the customer, is

always right, and can choose to leave the school, there is a reported responsiveness on the part of teachers and school administrators. However, in rural areas where there are not a lot of schooling options, and accountability assumes a relational dynamic such that proprietors hope the value of the education and its quality is plainly visible to the parents. So while choice as consumer is considered the ultimate accountability system in the neoliberal discourse, Madame Amy, Georgina and Sekamatte try to establish a relationship with parents and children through which they can hear parent concerns while also bringing their own educational expertise to bear on the conversation.

Conclusions

The neoliberal talk of participants conforms to the ‘knowledge aid’ of neoliberal organisations like WB who have a strong influence over policy conversations and implementation in Uganda, but their substance is not without complication and contradiction. According to Molla (2014), ‘the WB declared [in 1996] that it would become a “knowledge bank” that produces and disseminates knowledge as a key tool to combat poverty’ (232). This ‘softer, subtler’ influence on policy (229) is harder to trace than the financial threads. The dissemination materials and mechanisms appear to be ‘objective’, ‘neutral’ investigations – research reports, consultancies and conferences. In a policy brief the WB (2009) reported, ‘Poor countries – and poor people – differ from rich ones not only because they have less capital but because they have less knowledge’ (World Bank 2009, 1; also cited in Molla 2014, 232). This kind of thinking poses a double entendre for poor nations – the presumed ‘need’ for knowledge about how to provide EFA and the ‘need’ for knowledge in general as would be provided by primary schools which, when taken together, suggests an impoverished view of the ‘knowledge’ of locals. An active endeavour to fill ‘the knowledge gap’ from the top (WB) down (local instantiation of policy) rushes in to supplant the steady in-country knowledge growth more organically emerging (Molla 2014). The lived contradictions of the ‘knowledge aid’ work against what is in the best interest of Ugandans.

In addition to the contradictions articulated in the findings, the weakening of ‘local knowledge regimes’ and the uncritical ‘acceptance’ of neoliberal principles are unintended consequences of this knowledge aid (Molla 2014, 230). Molla (2014) argues that native people themselves should be taking up their own research, investigating their own situations and rendering their own talking points, but this is not happening. Few in-country scholars are involved in the production of knowledge. Our study does what Molla suggests – the lead researchers are Ugandan educators and we took a close internal look at one Ugandan school on its own terms, rather than assessing and surveying the schools according to external criteria and arguments.

In this paper we focused on how ‘choice’ was both *serviced by* and *in service to* a neoliberal underlayment (what WB is referring to as ‘knowledge aid’) while simultaneously contradicted and complicated by counter ideas and practices. Some crucial questions with respect to knowledge regarding school choice and privatisation emerge through the cracks between practices. For example, when the choice is between sending one’s child to school or not (rather than between various schooling options), how is one’s role as consumer compromised? Who benefits most from the decision to school or not? How are the answers to this question indicative of the school being privately owned? When accountability is linked to the consumership of parents, but competition is not a strong feature of that consumership, how is accountability structured? What is the basis of the accountability? Such questions indicate that the study of neoliberalism in poor

countries where publically financed government schools are largely financed through big business loans is necessary to fully understand both the neoliberal and the humanitarian global context in the drive for EFA.

This study informs the two debates raised earlier: (1) whether or not school choice is fundamental to educational excellence and equity and (2) whether or not the privatisation and entrepreneurship of schooling promotes social equity and financial responsibility.

According to existing literature, privatisation works counter to education quality and equity (Beach 2008; UNESCO 2008), but our study seems to suggest the literature might not map over to Uganda – more research is needed. It is the explicit hope of Ssuubi proprietors to contribute to education quality and equity. The parents indicate that the school provides an education for their children that would not otherwise be available – it is both accessible and has a good standard. UNESCO's (2008) claim that 'There is no substitute for a properly financed and effectively managed state education system, especially at primary level' (21) is not helpful when substitutions *are*, in fact, necessary. Within the gap between the achievement of comprehensively available public schools and the education of a generation of kids for whom the 2015 EFA international timeline looks, we find schools like Ssuubi doing their best to educate left-out children in their reach. In a weird twist, privatisation (particularly privately owned, undocumented schools like Ssuubi) is less directly linked with capital entrepreneurship than UPE schools, whose financial indebtedness to the WB (see <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/Uganda>) tether *public schools*, rather than *private schools*, to market economics and the business model of privatisation for profit with corporate sponsorship/administration like we find in the West (Beach 2008; Davies and Quirke 2005; Windle and Stratton 2013; Subreenduth 2013).

As Walford (2011) noted:

The obvious, but quite unrealistic, answer is that less economically developed countries should improve their government schools. It is unrealistic simply because most of these countries are swimming in corruption so that a great deal of funding simply does not reach the schools and much of what does is misused. (411)

The status of public schools in Uganda is young. The government, despite its reliance on the WB and direct parental cost-sharing plans, has not been able to make government schools comprehensively available. Consequently, the government *needs* schools like Ssuubi to meet the massification needs created by its own UPE in the context of international universal education mandates. It willingly turns its head on policing undocumented schools. The absence of internal capital and the dependence on WB loans to cover educational costs has resulted in a lean capacity to be fiscally responsible while simultaneously building infrastructure and capital necessary to repay the incurring debt. Marketisation of the public school through WB loans seems to be a problem without a solution for underdeveloped, poor countries. Nevertheless, access to primary schooling has improved since UPE, in part because of the concomitant development of private school proprietorship. Though competition was one mode through which parents talked about schools, their talk was complicated and did not indicate that public school failures were unrepairable. In fact, several parents expressed a preference for UPE schools. The problems associated with the public school do not seem to be problems that increased marketisation could fix. Our study suggests that a both/and approach rather than an either/or one might be warranted.

That Ssuubi is both rural and in a poor country are intrinsic to how parental choice and privatisation in education are talked about and experienced. Alternative

destatisation (Jessop 2002) suggests that governments should set the conditions within which private enterprise can succeed. Such conditions set the stage for choice and accountability on the part of individuals. Certainly, this seems to be the backdrop for school choice in the case of Ssuubi. Governmental ignoring of undocumented schools coupled with the lack of systemic UPE school development while promoting the idea that parents *should* be expected to cost-share in order to maintain their concern for their child's schooling. By choosing to send their children to a private school, Ssuubi parents think of themselves as powerful brokers in the education afforded their kids. They see their 'choice' as the primary accountability system for the school, and, yet, there is no marketplace of schools available. The way parents talk about their 'choice' for schools indicates the precarious balance they navigate between the force of international capital and its knowledge aid and the EFA mandates of the global community.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The WB made its first loan to Uganda 12 December 1959 for the expansion distribution of hydro-electric power across the country.
2. Names for the school and participants involved in the study are pseudonyms.
3. WB education finance to Uganda began in 1998 with computer grants and money (part grant and part interest-free loans). WB started to provide loans to Uganda in 1996 with a large interest bearing loan in 2009.
4. The most common additional costs are for supplies, uniforms and building fees. The average total cost of primary school is quite high at \$16.74 USD for boys and \$18.26 US for girls. Total school costs are high in relation to Uganda's GDP per capita of \$348 (World Bank 2012) and GNI of \$550 USD per capita in 2013 (World Bank 2013). This amount would not sound like much to a Western reader from a wealthy context, but indeed it is a challenge for parents to pay. The high average costs indicate a high willingness to pay for primary school among Ugandan parents, but possibly, also, significant obstacles to full enrolment and reported drop out before completion of primary level.
5. Mayengo was responsible for conducting the interviews. They were completed in English, with Luganda used for support purposes.

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