THE DYNAMICS AND COMPLEXITIES IMPEDING THE MANAGEMENT AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY (UPE) IN UGANDAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore factors impeding the management of the implementation of universal primary education (UPE) policy in Ugandan primary schools. In examining the factors impeding the management of the implementation of the UPE policy, a qualitative research approach guided the study. Data was collected through semi-structured and focus group interviews administered to a variety of purposively selected participants. The following were the findings: Inadequate financial resources in form of low UPE capitation grants; the misuse and misallocation of UPE funds; the lack of consultation and involvement of frontline UPE stakeholders and the civil society in the planning and formulation of UPE policies and the lack of qualifications and skills of the UPE stakeholders responsible for the management of the implementation of the UPE programme. This study has the potential in contributing to the policy shift in matters related to UPE policy management and implementation.

Keywords: Universal Primary Education, Primary Schools, UPE Policy, Ugandan Primary Schools

INTRODUCTION

Widening primary education is of critical importance and to this end, the Ugandan Government in 1997 rolled out Universal Primary education (UPE). The intention of this programme was to abolish the payment of primary education enrollment fees in almost all government aided schools (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBoS], 2017; Burlando & Bbale, 2018; Sakaue, 2018; Kan & Klassen, 2020). For the Government of Uganda (GoU), through the implementation of this UPE policy, it was aimed at ensuring that the minimum necessary facilities and resources are provided to all to all Ugandan children of school age. This will help them to enrol in school, remain in school and successfully complete the primary cycle of education (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2008; UBoS, 2017).

The promulgation and the implementation of this policy led to increased enrolled numbers in primary education system (UBoS, 2014; MoES, 2017; Kan & Klassen, 2020). Inequalities in attendance related to income, gender, and region were reduced, and school fees paid by parents at primary level decreased, but not at secondary and higher education levels (MoES, 2017). As a result, UPE has instead caused the opposite of what it intended to solve. For example; students are still charged school fees at primary level; there are many unqualified teachers; a shortage of qualified teachers and a lack of school materials; there is a general decline in the quality of education, continued illiteracy, gender inequality in terms of access still persists and an increase in school dropout rates (Kan & Klassen, 2020; Sakaue, 2018; MoES, 2017; World Bank, 2018; 2020). Additionally, evidence suggests that the elimination of tuition fees had no effect on the likelihood of primary school completion and years of primary school achievement in Uganda (Kan & Klassen, 2020). This research therefore sought to investigate and understand how the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools is managed, the challenges impeding its efficient management and implementation and what needs to be done to address the challenges identified.

Research Question:

How is the implementation of Universal Primary Education Policy (UPE) in Ugandan primary schools managed?

Research Objectives:

- To explore, understand and assess the management challenges faced during the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools.
- To investigate and understand the impact of the external and internal environment in relation to the management of the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools.

The above strategic objectives and priorities among others are indicative of the importance and relevance that this topic has for educational policy and the research community in relation to educational policy reforms, design, management and implementation in Ugandan primary schools and elsewhere.

Introduction to Primary Education and Education in Uganda

Since the government took over education in 1920s, the Ugandan education system has undergone several changes (World Bank, 2018). Some of these changes were recommended by the 1989 Educational Policy Review Commission (EPRC) (MoES, 1999a). Universalising primary education was one of the recommendations of the EPRC, that later led to the government policies reflected in the Ugandan government (MoES, 1999a). Achievements of today's education system have been guided by these recommendations. Entrance from one level to the other is controlled by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB). Students can also join vocational and technical institutions at the end of each level (MoES, 1999b). Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) are taken at the end of seven years of primary education. The Ugandan Certificate of Education is taken at the end of four years of lower secondary education, Uganda advanced certificate of education is taken at the end of two years of upper secondary education (UBoS,

2017). Primary education, like all other education levels in Uganda, is provided by private and government-aided schools (MoES, 2017).

Macroeconomic Context and Previous Challenges

Uganda's political and economic instabilities of the 1970s and 1980s, characterised by coups and the general lack of security, negatively impacted the primary education subsector especially due to lack of funds and insecurity. In this case, the main challenge was whether UPE could be sustained.   The financing of education was left for the parents or guardians to bear (Mehrotra & Dilamonica, 1998). Teachers' salaries were below the minimum wage, most of the school infrastructure was decimated, and planning and management of education at all levels suffered. Assessment systems and curriculum were outdated (Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), 2008). Under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government in 1986, the EPRC was formed and in cooperation with the MoES, made a recommendation to universalise primary education. In 1996, the government appointed committee was given the power to examine the EPRC report and examine the feasibility of UPE policy implementation (MoES, 1999a).

Universal Primary Education Policy in Uganda

The UPE educational policy involved a direct elimination of all primary school fees in government-aided schools in Uganda as from January 1997 (Sakaue, 2018; Kan & Klassen, 2020). This was to ensure equal access to quality education for all. Despite registering some positive outcomes, UPE policy implementation in Ugandan primary schools is facing serious challenges (MoES, 2017; WB, 2018; NPA, 2018). Since the infrastructure in place did not match the massive increase in enrolment due to UPE policy, UPE classes became overcrowded, sometimes leading to multiple school shifts during the day in some primary schools, poor retention and completion rates, decline in the quality of education, insufficient teachers and enrolment problems (Sakaue, 2018; WB, 2018; Kan & Klassen, 2020). It has also been reported that the institution of UPE in Uganda has led to the enrolment of large numbers of adult students in the first year who are far above the normal school entry age (Deininger, 2003; MoES, 2017). This has negatively impacted the UPE educational system. For example, many people choose to opt out of the UPE educational system out of concerns about the quality of education.

Policy failure or success is usually assessed in terms of its objectives. However, to understand the observed outcomes, one needs to consider the policy-making process and implementation. The UPE reform sought to expand educational opportunities and improve teaching and learning outcomes (MoES, 2014; 2017; Sakaue 2018), but there is evidence that the gains in access and equity have not been fully matched by improvements in educational outcomes (WB, 2018; Kan & Klassen, 2020).

Structure and Management of UPE Policy Implementation in Uganda

UPE educational policy implementation is managed in a decentralised system, with various stakeholders playing their respective roles in the design (formulation), implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the UPE programme in Uganda (MoES, 2017). These include primary schools, district education officers, chief administration officers (CAOs), and the MoES all performing different functions with the objective of UPE policy implementation efficiency (MoES, 2005b; MoES, 2017).

At the district level for example, the district councils have the authority to register UPE children, distribute textbooks, formulate, approve and execute a development plan (MoES, 2017; UBoS, 2017). The district administration officer receives funding from the central government in relation to UPE financing in a given district (MoES, 2004:12). School head teachers in collaboration with the School Management Committees (SMCs) ensure that UPE policies are properly implemented within their respective schools. UPE policy implementation in Uganda is still characterised by a lack of stakeholders' commitment which has caused conflict in roles and the abandonment of vital aspects of the

programme, despite the government's efforts to avert the problem (MoES, 2008b; MoES, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

Sensemaking Theory

Research on educational reform and educational policy implementation of educational innovations is far more complex than the straightforward and unilateral execution of policy prescriptions (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 2009). Under the sensemaking framework, social actors are complex meaning-makers who do not automatically react to external stimuli but engage in interpretation in order to act upon their environments and interests (Coburn, 2006). For example, why do UPE schools continue to charge school fees? Why do many UPE teachers refuse to teach? Why are UPE teachers unmotivated? Why are UPE students unmotivated?

The sensemaking theoretical framework underscores the complex relationship between meaning and action which significantly impacts policy implementation, either negatively or positively. Sensemaking is shaped by interactions in the social context at various levels during the policy implementation process. Perceptions, interpretation and action build on each other (Weber & Glynn, 2006). The sensemaking theory makes a significant contribution to illuminating the relevance of meaning-making activities in educational policy implementation and educational reform (Ball, 1987; Waheduzzaman, Van Gramberg and Ferrer, 2018).

School and organisational leaders' understanding of the social nature of sensemaking, allows them to impact sensemaking during policy implementation (Coburn, 2005). The collectively constructed meaning can also help groups and organisations to work together towards a common goal (Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008). In analysing the change processes of policy implementation in school organisations in relation to UPE policy implementation in Ugandan primary schools, the researchers seek to combine the conceptual potential by integrating the sensemaking and the micropolitical perspectives, since they are rooted in similar theoretical and epistemological stances. Considering the limited UPE participatory governance and challenging school environments that precipitate sensemaking, and lead to poor implementation of UPE policies at the implementation levels (WB, 2018; NPA, 2018), this research seeks to explore and emphasise that robust consultations, engagement, collaboration, communication and cooperation between various stakeholders at all levels of the implementation process, are essential for UPE educational policy implementation efficiency in Uganda. This is because participatory governance is key in boosting stakeholder motivation, attitudes, efficiency and performance, and the building of collective sensemaking during the UPE implementation process for better outcomes.

The sensemaking theory helped the researchers to study stakeholder motivation and attitudes during UPE policy implementation in Ugandan primary schools and to examine the related implementation dynamics and complexities and helped in developing reforms or solutions to the implementation challenges identified.

METHODS

Research Approach, Paradigm and Design

The qualitative research methodology is used in understanding how UPE policy implementation in Ugandan primary schools is managed. Multiple case studies (collective) of different UPE primary schools from different districts within Uganda in relation to UPE policy implementation were used to better understand the phenomena (Stake, 2000; Creswell, 2013). Constructivism was also used to gather, explore, understand and interpret the data or the reality from the inside within a given context (Creswell, 2014, Flick, 2018). The researchers believe its best suited for this research as it will enable them to get insight and communicate what they learned from participants (Berg, 2009; Trochim & Donnelly, 2007; Yin, 2003). School case studies in relation to UPE policy implementation were also used in this study to better understand the phenomenon, with a focus on smaller but focused samples as opposed to large samples (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2000).

Instrumentation and Procedure

In order to address this study's aims and objectives, this research was conducted using face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions (Creswell, 2014; Silverman, 2004; Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis was from a mix of MoES officials (UPE policy unit), district education officials, local government representatives and UPE school principals from various UPE primary schools and districts within Uganda. Individual interviews were important for this research because they covered a wider population needed irrespective of location, gender and disability (Creswell, 2014; Silverman, 2004; Flick, 2018).

Sample Selection

The criteria for the selection of the participants were based on the participants' roles and their involvement in the management and implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools (Shenton, 2004). The researchers used purposive sampling in selecting knowledgeable participants with a full understanding of the research phenomena (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, the participants included: Five UPE school principals from both urban and rural UPE primary schools in two different districts in Uganda. They represented the school level given that they are responsible for the institutions that have to apply UPE policies. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES officials – UPE policy unit); responsible for the formulation, education budget, oversight and macro-management of UPE policy nationwide. It consists of the departments responsible for UPE policy, primary education planning and primary teacher   training. At least three commissioners from these departments with a focus on the UPE policy unit were interviewed because of the central role they play in planning, financing, training, organising and implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools. At the district level, understanding that district officials and local government representatives (LGs) have a role in the formulation of the UPE budget, planning and monitoring and evaluation of UPE schools, three district education officials including two (DEOs) and five local government representatives in two districts from different regions of Uganda were interviewed during this research. The participating UPE primary schools both in urban and rural areas were coded as **school A, B, C, D and E**. The participating two districts where the research was conducted were coded as **District A and B** (from central and western Uganda respectively). The collection of data took place in over a two-month period given the nature of the participants' work. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2011) substantiated that data analysis entails the procedures for the structuring of the collected data to give it meaning by making sense of it. Qualitative data collected from participants were organised and presented in a way that gives answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2014; Gibbs, 2007). In relation to coding, which is the process of organising and sorting data, the researchers used codes to label, compile and organise the data for a better, collection, interpretation and analysis of data collected (Gibbs, 2007; Rogers, 2018). The research data (interviews transcripts, literature, direct notes) were analysed in a systematic way, and idea, concepts and themes coded to fit the categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers organised the data manually and with the help of the computer. Interviews were backed up by supporting relevant and current literature to enhance the credibility and validity of this study (Creswell, 2014; Huberman & Miles, 2002). The researchers converted the collected data into manageable chunks through the categorization of data in order to find frequent patterns to give meaning to the relevant information, worked inductively to facilitate a continuous and coherent collection and interpretation process of the data and categorized the collected data to identify themes and subthemes, and then compared the themes, synthesized and interpreted the data in order to answer the research questions. The researcher used inductive thematic analysis to identify themes.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This research sought to investigate and understand how the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools is managed, the challenges impeding its efficient management and implementation and what needs to be done to address the challenges identified. Findings of this study revealed that UPE frontline stakeholders often operate in the midst of constraints and challenges. This has precipitated sensemaking and has led to UPE macro-politics being caught up in the micropolitics of UPE primary schools. A number of themes emerged from the data as a result of rigorous analysis and synthesis and were presented thematically through the use of descriptive analysis. The views of participants were captured verbatim. The following fundamental themes emerged from this study:

Insufficient Financing of UPE Policy Implementation in Uganda

There is no programme or project that can be implemented successful without the availability of adequate finances. Regarding the issue of UPE financial matters, it was agreed in principle that the Mistry of education does not have adequate finances to implement UPE policy. One of the principals' expressed the view as follows: *"UPE funding is the biggest challenge"*. In emphasizing the same expression, another principal also lamented that "*without an increase in UPE funding, the UPE programme would not be effectively implemented in Uganda".* Inadequate funding was considered to be the main cause of the inefficiency of the implementation of UPE policy in Uganda by the majority of the participants. For example, majority of the participants were of the view that, the lack of adequate funding to enable the construction of more school infrastructure to support high UPE enrolments, has negatively impacted teacher and student motivation and attitudes to participate in the UPE school system and has led to a high UPE dropout rate and teacher and student absenteeism.

UPE Capitation Grants

Participants highlighted that the GoU through the MoES finances the UPE policy implementation in their respective schools through the provision of UPE capitation grants. All UPE primary schools in each district receive capitation grants based on the number of students enrolled in particular schools. UPE primary schools submit the registration figures to the district that forwards them to the MoES and are used for the calculation of the capitation grants for each school. One school principal interviewee commented that: *"… government provides funding for our school through the UPE capitation grant … it is used for buying scholastic materials, financing school management activities, administration … etc."*. However, all the participants were of the view that despite government provision of UPE capitation grants, they are too low to meet the funding needs of each UPE student, hence impeding the efficient management and implementation of UPE policy in Uganda.

Insufficient UPE Stakeholder Collaboration and Coordination

Most of the participants in this research, highlighted the importance of UPE stakeholder collaboration for the efficient management of the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools under decentralization. UPE school level participants pointed out that in order to efficiently execute their mandates, they had to collaborate and coordinate with the parents, district administration and LG. In support of UPE stakeholder collaboration and coordination while managing and implementing UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools, the DEO commented that: *"The district works together with the MoES and the primary schools represented by SMC to ensure that UPE is well implemented…but more needs to be done… ".*

The Macro-Management of UPE policy by MoES: Planning and Organisational Challenges

As part of the findings of this research, based on the participants' interview accounts, the MoES fulfills its mandate of ensuring that UPE policy is well managed and implemented in all UPE primary schools in Uganda. Participants from the MoES and the district level stated that the MoES was responsible for designing the UPE implementation

guidelines, school budget guidelines and directives which were forwarded to districts and then to the UPE primary schools. In this regard, one MoES participant commented that: *"In collaboration with the district level officials and the school level; school principals and SMCs, the MoES is able to fully monitor and supervise the UPE programme nationwide"*.

Inadequate Monitoring, Inspection and Evaluation of UPE Schools

Participants at the district, local government, and the MoES narrated that the district administrations, through the District Inspector of Schools (DIS) and in cooperation with SMCs, monitor and evaluate UPE primary schools' performance. Many participants were of the view that more work needed to be done in relation to the monitoring and evaluation of UPE primary schools. In this regard, the DIS commented that: *"District officials go to schools to advise, monitor, assess and support UPE schools"* This perception was also expressed by another DIS from another district as follows: *"The district inspector of schools ensures that all UPE primary schools are monitored and inspected, and fully comply with the UPE directives"*.

Further, it was maintained that SMC also monitor and supervise their respective UPE primary schools. This view was echoed by the member of SMC as follows: *"I supervise government UPE funds … how its spent … I lead the SMC … we supervise and monitor … We are involved in drafting the budget of the school"*.

DISCUSSION

Confirming lack of funding as serious challenge, Sakaue (2018) and WB (2018) note that lack of economic resources serves as a barrier to the implementation of UPE policy in Ugandan primary schools. This view is further corroborated by MoES (2017) and NPA (2016) in that they argued that the current level of government spending on education, does not meet the funding needs of the education sector including UPE. Kan and Klassen (2020) are of the view that, in addition to other challenges, supply-side constraints in relation to UPE funding remain despite government funding and donor assistance. Due to inadequate funding, as evidence of sensemaking by UPE frontline stakeholders, some UPE schools continue to charge tuition fees from UPE students which violates UPE policy directives (Sakaue, 2018). Considering the views expressed by participants, the researchers argue and conclude that inadequate funding negatively impacts the management and the implementation of the UPE policy.

Considering the participants' comments on inadequate UPE financing, it is argued that UPE policy implementation has always been hampered by inadequate funds to meet the required implementation needs (Sakaue, 2018; UBoS, 2017; WB, 2020; Kan & Klassen, 2020). This has consequently led to the poor implementation of the UPE programme at the district and school levels, precipitated problems with UPE frontline stakeholders motivation, attitudes and performance, and has led to UPE macro-politics being caught up in the micropolitics of UPE primary schools (NPA, 2018).

During the researcher's interactions with the participants, the researchers noticed problems of UPE stakeholder collaboration and coordination. Empirical findings indicate that UPE stakeholders' attitudes and motivation towards UPE policies, are crucial to facilitating effective stakeholder communication, collaboration and coordination as part of the UPE internal environment. However, due to limited participatory governance coupled with inadequate UPE funding, some frontline UPE stakeholders engage in sensemaking. This has led to negative attitudes and less motivation to positively engage, communicate, coordinate and collaborate with other UPE stakeholders consequently negatively impacting stakeholder performance and UPE management and implementation efficiency. According to Kavuma et al. (2017) and MoES (2017) coordination and collaboration between the district and school levels officials is critical in ensuring that UPE is well implemented. Coupled with other constraints such as less motivation and negative attitudes, deficiencies in UPE stakeholder collaboration and coordination are reportedly impeding the efficient implementation of UPE policy in Uganda (NPA, 2018; MoES, 2017; WB, 2020).

Based on the majority of the participants views, it was evident that UPE stakeholder collaboration and coordination

was insufficient and needed to be improved in order to address UPE management and implementation challenges especially in the area of resource allocation.

Participants views are supported by Kavuma et al. (2017) and MoES, (2017) who contend that the MoES is the main actor and determinant of national policy and works in cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and communication with the local councils and districts officers (CAOs), parliament members, DEOs, SMCs, head teachers, founding bodies and NGOs. However, majority of the participants were of the view that the MoES wasn't sufficiently providing resources, communicating, collaborating and coordinating with other UPE stakeholders.

It was evident in the participants' accounts that the MoES macro-manages the UPE programme implementation in Uganda. However, the MoES must provide more financial resources and robustly engage, coordinate, communicate and collaborate with other UPE stakeholders while it is exercising its mandate. This would also alleviate issues of negative stakeholder attitudes and motivation towards UPE policies that emanate from sensemaking. Hence consequently boosting frontline UPE stakeholder's performance and mitigate UPE macro-politics from being caught up in the micropolitics of the UPE primary schools.

The above views are supported by the MoES (2008) in relation to the roles and responsibilities for UPE stakeholders at the district level. However, many participants commented on the lack of adequate school inspections and monitoring for compliance especially for schools in far rural areas. On this issue, a senior interviewee commented that *"Inspection of schools ... inspectors not doing their job"*. According to the DIS for District A, this research also revealed that many districts in Uganda lacked enough motor vehicles and financial resources to effectively execute the task of monitoring, inspecting and evaluating UPE primary schools.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers recognised that some of the purposively selected participants responses may be biased due to political influence and fear of losing their jobs especially at the ministerial and district levels. The researchers also noticed that many of the participants did not want to participate in focus group discussions and opted for the face-to-face, individual, semi-structured interviews. This created some extra logistical challenges for the researchers.

CONCLUSION

This research provides important knowledge and an opportunity to understand the complexities impeding the efficient management and implementation of UPE policy in Uganda. Findings indicate that, despite the current UPE management and implementation framework registering some successes especially in relation to universal access due to reduced access barriers, it still faces both economic and non-economic barriers and therefore internally and externally inefficient. The researchers believe that the discussion of the findings in relation to the themes that emerged from this research and the recommendations suggested, can help in improving the current UPE management and implementation framework, and simultaneously address the impediments that hinder the efficient management and implementation of UPE policy in Uganda.

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