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A second chance to dream: initiating ODeL in secondary school re-entry programs for young adult secondary school dropouts the case of Mumias District, Western Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The Kenyan education system has very limited re-entry options for learners who drop out before attaining secondary school certificate. It is very difficult to access training and or secure a job that requires at least secondary school education. This study examined the prospects of initiating Open and Distance e-Learning(ODeL) in re-entry programmes into high school for out of school Young Adult Secondary School Dropouts (Y.A.S.S.D). The study focused on the enablers and challenges of initiating ODeL in the secondary school re-entry programmes. An alternative flexible and sustainable community based ODeL model that potentially can address re-entry for the Y.A.S.S.D is proposed. A qualitative phenomenological design was used; focus group discussion and interviews were conducted from a purposeful sample of participants. The study revealed that the potential of ODeL in addressing re-entry into secondary school for Y.A.S.S.D great. Majority of the participants were aware of the existing secondary school re-entry options, however, ODeL appeared new. Despite there being challenges in introducing the ODeL mode of study in secondary school re-entry programmes, it is viable and requires further exploration. The enablers of this mode of study are largely in place to the extent appreciated by participants in the study.

Introduction

Kenya has made remarkable strides in expanding access to secondary school education. However, there continues to be a worrying trend of learners who drop out of school before attaining the secondary school certificate. The existing re-entry programs for such young adult learners include enrolling in community adult learning centers, privately enrolling in regular schools or seeking private tuition services offered by regulated and unregulated providers. These learners are then expected to register and sit for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination up completion of studies for certification. Each of the mentioned re-entry options has its unique challenges which impede the young adult dropouts from accessing education again.

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For many years the Kenyan education system has continued to be very academic especially at the basic education level. Kenya's education system has been governed by meritocracy. Those who excel academically go to the top of the ladder while everyone else is left languishing at the bottom of the pyramid. A lot of emphasis is laid on examinations and grades. The cycle begins with eight (8) years in primary school, four (4) years in secondary school and four (4) years of university education hence 8:4:4. After completion of 8 years in primary school, one can proceed to secondary school or exit and join vocational training, after 4 years of secondary school the high school graduates may proceed to university or join other tertiary institutions at certificate or diploma level. Programs for high school dropouts returning to school in Kenya are not fully developed. Those returning to school can only do so through the existing secondary school regular syllabus.

Buckingham (1984) noted that undereducated young adults are both a burden and a cost to society. He drew a correlation between the characteristics of these individuals and their inability to gain employment. He emphasized that young adults are disadvantaged by their poor social adjustment, inability to relate to authority, lack of future orientation, and inability to tolerate structured activities. They have battered self-images, fear taking risks, and are deficient in skills needed for survival in today's technological society.

The problem of school dropouts in Kenya is endemic. Some studies have related the school dropout problem with unemployment.

> Kenyan school dropouts face a challenge of unemployment. They are not able to get jobs because colleges, where they could train to acquire skills, cannot admit them because they lack high school diploma. So the future of a Kenyan high school dropout is predetermined to poverty, joblessness and marginalization. (Lombo, 2015)

Such a predicament leads to criminal activities. A recent study in western Kenya revealed that there was correlation between crime escalation and school dropouts. 'Vihiga County Security Committee (2012) report says that, among the youth who engaged in criminal activities in Vihiga County, 73 percent were teenagers who had dropped from school' (Injendi, 2013).

As discussed above, there are many challenges in the existing re-entry programmes for Young Adult Secondary School Dropouts (Y.A.S.S.D). In his study on adult education, Lombo concurs that one solution is to have a more modern, official way of going back to school (Lombo, 2015).

The current study proposes a modern way of integrating technology and open distance learning in secondary school re-entry programs.

> Distance learning is one of these alternatives which have become attractive where students and instructors are physically in different locations and time. By using distance learning tools, their education can be more flexible with respect to place and time constraints. Thus, students can access information any time and any place. (Cansu & Guzin, 2010)

The use of technology in distance learning is not a new phenomenon. In this study, an Open Source Learning Management System (OSLMS) is proposed as a modern distance learning tool that can potentially revolutionize the secondary school re-entry programs for young adult secondary school dropouts not only in Mumias District but also in the country as well.

Literature review

The challenge of providing re-entry options for school dropouts has concerned a growing number of researchers in Kenya. However, most of the studies tend to address causes of

school dropout cases. In one such study conducted by Mudembo (2013), these causes were isolated and remedial measures recommended to mitigate their prevalence. Lombo (2015) examined the implementation of re-entry programs for school dropouts through vocational training in adult learning centres. Among other measures the study recommends ways of assisting adult school dropouts to gain access to vocational training and higher education through adult education learning centres.

Other studies in this area focus on the issue of re-entry programs for out of school teenage mothers. A recent baseline survey on expanding access to secondary school education for out school teenage mothers, Undie, Birungi, Odwe, and Obare (2015) established that there was lack of clarity among school personnel about school re-entry policy for such mothers. It also established that there was negligence on the part of the ministry of education in monitoring re-entry programs. The study recommends among other measures clarification, revitalization and acceleration of implementation existing policy regarding re-entry programs for teen mothers.

It is clear that although there are other options of re-entry, they are either rigid or restraining. It is the issue of limited or rigid secondary school re-entry options for out of school young adult secondary school dropouts that informs the need to initiate ODeL as an alternative to the existing re-entry options for such disadvantaged groups. ODeL as a mode of study will potentially address the issue of flexibility in learning and inclusivity thus allowing school dropouts intending to return to school a chance to study with minimal interruption to their day-to-day activities.

Existing secondary school re-entry programmes in Kenya

There is no clear path for re-entry into Secondary school for Young Adult Secondary School Dropouts (Y.AS.S.D) in Kenya. This is a challenge to those high school dropouts who wish to pursue secondary school for a second time. The Y.A.S.S.D do not qualify for admission into an institution of higher education because there is no structured re-entry program to allow them to do so. Provision is only made for those who successfully complete secondary school (Lombo, 2015).

The Y.A.S.S.D are left with one of the three re-entry options which include.

(1) Enrolling back into regular secondary schools at the initial point of exit.
(2) Enrolling into an Adult Learning Centre secondary school, then register for KCSE examination through recognized adult examination centres.
(3) Enlisting services of private teacher(s), then register for KCSE as a private candidate.

Enrolling into regular secondary schools
This is perhaps the path taken by many Y.A.S.S.D. They consider going back to school a second chance of attaining secondary school certificate and perhaps improving their lives. The option of enrolling into regular schools is the most common because;

It is popularized by a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), Community Based Organizations (C.B.O) and other education advocacy groups. These groups are usually funded by donors. To continue receiving funding these groups are forced to operate within the provisions and objectives of the donors. These groups among other things offer incentives to the Y.A.S.S.D so that they can be enrolled back to school.

Some local politicians in popularizing and endearing themselves to the community, may offer incentives to the Y.A.S.S.D to encourage them to enroll back into regular secondary school.

Other initiatives are taken by parents who can afford to enroll back Y.A.S.S.D into local day secondary schools.

Characteristics.   Under this arrangement the Y.A.S.S.D are expected to drop everything and fully enroll into secondary school from the point at which they initially had dropped out.

The school into which these Y.A.S.S.D enroll depends on a number of factors:

(a) Proximity to the school
(b) Willingness of the school principals to accept them
(c) The school choice and conditions of the person(s) funding the education for the Y.A.S.S.D

Strengths.   The students enrolled in the Y.A.S.S.D programs study under normal conditions as other regular students thus enjoying all the experiences of secondary school life.

They have access to facilities and teachers just like the regular students

They are well prepared to sit for the KCSE examination thus boosting their confidence in handling the examinations.

Limitations.   Although the students enrolled in Y.A.S.S.D programs are willing to take a second chance into education, enrolling back to regular schools is one of their fears.

The stigma associated with it both at school and from their peers out of school can be overwhelming and is perhaps one of the reasons why the Y.A.S.S.D students chose to hide in their predicament.

Some teachers are insensitive to the stresses and the inner turmoil that young adult secondary school dropouts face and experience.

It is may be challenging for the students in the Y.A.S.S.D program to drop everything else and enroll into regular secondary schools. These are individuals with unique needs. For instance, some have families to support.

There is bias in supporting the female Y.A.S.S.D students particularly those who drop out due to early pregnancies. For this reason, the boy child feels neglected and out of the picture when it comes to re-entry and recovery programmes.

The issue of funding is another problem that threatens re-entry through regular school. As discussed earlier funding by Non-governmental Organisations (NGO) can sometimes be terminated suddenly thus threatening continuation of education programmes. Local politicians too in some cases withdraw their support when they realize that they (politicians) no longer enjoy community support. Such an interruption affects students they may have volunteered to support.

Cultural factors also come into play here. For instance, one of the roles of a married woman in the African cultural context is domestic management of the household. By enrolling into a regular school the husband is expected to step in this role when the wife goes to school. To attend school in Africa married women will often need permission from their husbands. In some cases husbands resist allowing their wives to enroll into regular secondary schools.

Enrolling into adult continuing education (ACE) learning centres

Adult Continuing Education (ACE) Learning Centres were established under the ACE program. It dates back to the coming of the Arabs, the European missionaries, explorers as well as the colonial masters in the 19th centuries who taught adult converts vocational skills such as carpentry and masonry in addition to agriculture (Ministry of Labour & Social Development, 2008).

The department of adult and continuing education was established in 1979 to spearhead national literacy programmes. The ACE centres enroll learners aged fifteen years and above. These centres are now enroll both primary and secondary school adult dropouts who wish to have a second chance to sit for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE).

Characteristics.   Most ACE centres are run by NGO's, local communities and religious organizations. These centres are usually located in the rural areas and in urban poor neighborhoods. Entry is open to all individuals ranging from fifteen years and above.

Strengths.   The ACE centers are dotted in the rural communities and in urban poor areas where the potential clients are likely to be found. They also try to provide flexible schedules to meet the needs of their learners. (Continuing Education Review Vol. 2, Kenya, Ministry of Education, 2014).

The relocation of the ACE from the ministry of labour to the ministry of education has brought about some improvement in terms of service delivery.

There is a Special Board for Adult and Continuing Education (SBACE). The mandate of this board is to formulate courses and syllabuses, establishment of institutions and advising the cabinet secretary on matters concerning adult education. These are positive developments in strengthening adult education.

One of the main challenges attached to adult education is the stigma attached to it. This dates back to the colonial era when these centres were established to cater for the needs of low achievers in education in the communities. The perception still remains to date. The Y.A.S.S.D enrolling in these centres are afraid of being tagged as low achievers, failures and backward. These schools are known locally in Swahili language as 'Shule za Ngumbaru' loosely translated as 'Mature age'. Most Y.A.S.S.D do not like to be associated with community 'Ngumbaru' schools.

The other challenge is finance. Most of the learners enrolling into ACE secondary schools are dropouts who might have dropped out due to financial reasons. These learners do not benefit from government subsidies for secondary school education and are expected to pay for their own school fees. Some have even dropped out again.

Few ACE schools offer secondary school education. Those that offer secondary school education are scattered thus making it difficult to reach all the potential candidates.

Registering as a private candidate

The private examination centres are run and operated by regulated and unregulated providers. Most of these centres are mainly found in towns especially in poor urban neighborhoods. A few are located in affluent estates but operate mainly as offices to receive clientele. These are the exceptional ones who serve the rich. Tuition is sometimes conducted in homes or in offices as most of the rich clients wouldn't want their literacy status revealed to the

public. Very little is known about these centres. Some operate with minimal adherence to the set regulations governing establishment and operation of such centres.

Characteristics.   A prospective candidate registers for national examination through Kenya National Examination Council. Private arrangement is made between the service providers and the student for private tuition in preparing for the registered examination subjects.

Strengths.   Private operators offer flexible arrangement in terms of place and space. In some cases the private student can be coached from home or even in the office.

Learning is individualized thus the student can receive maximum attention from the teacher.

Limitations.   As mentioned earlier private providers are difficult to regulate. In most cases they are more concerned in teaching to the test at the expense of knowledge and skills. These centres focus their activities more in teaching how to pass examinations and less on acquisition of practical knowledge and skills which are equally important to the learners.

The qualification of some of the teachers providing private tuition in preparing school dropouts for examinations is questionable. They are not properly vetted in order to be allowed to provide tuition for private candidates.

It is an expensive affair. The private tuition centres are owned by individuals and in some cases by community based Organizations. Tuition fee is charged per hour or per registered subjects. The candidate foots the bill. These issues lead to further dropouts as some the adult school dropouts cannot afford to pay for the tuition. Many therefore register for examinations, disappear and only re-appear to sit for the examinations.

Private centres lack the required facilities for delivering proper re-entry programs for young adult school dropouts.

It is difficult to trace the records of the learners in these centres.

In the recent past, the private examination centres have been associated with massive irregularities including examination cheating. This has prompted the government through the ministry of education to move in to tame the escalating situation as captured in a local daily newspaper below:

> The Government has announced that all private examination centres will be closed beginning next year due to the number of cases of impersonation witnessed in the centres. According to the Ministry of Education, the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) has received a number of complaints from stakeholders concerning students registering for examinations as private candidates … private candidates will be forced to register for exams in public institutions. (*The East African Standard 15th November,* 2016)

Methodology

Research design

In this study, a qualitative design was employed. The design was used to bring out experiences of the young adult school dropouts; ACE learning centres administrators and secondary school principals on the existing secondary school re-entry programs.

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological case study design in order to explore and present the experiences of young adult school dropouts and why they need flexible model that can offer a second chance for re-entry into the high school program.

A phenomenological case study approach was used to highlight and identify phenomena showing how they are perceived by the actors in the situation. A case study design was developed in order to gain insights into, not only the experiences of the young adult school dropouts but also to identify the perceived challenges and enablers of an ODeL model that can address the challenges. One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher 2010 cited in Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014).

Sampling

The study was carried out in Mumias District of Kakamega County in Western Kenya. The selection of the young adult school dropouts, ACE learning centres administrators and high school principals was purposefully done to ensure that the findings were authentic. The target population comprised of young adult secondary school dropouts of between 18 and 35 years, ACE learning centre administrators and secondary school principals.

A sample of ten (10) adult secondary school dropouts comprising six (6) females and four (4) males, two (2) ACE learning centres administrators both male as well as four (4) secondary school principals comprising of two (2) males and two (2) female were purposively drawn. 'The logic and power of purposeful sampling depends on selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. The information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry' (Patton 2012, p. 169).

Data collection and analysis

Review of the existing literature was followed by data collection using, focus group discussions and interviews. In the focus group discussions with adult school dropouts in one of the ACE learning centres, the researcher created an interactive environment in which the participants freely shared their experiences. This technique was believed to increase the quality and richness of data, more than one-on-one interviewing could have done (McMillan and Schumacher 2010, p. 360). The research instruments were validated and reliability of data was ascertained. An inductive approach to analyzing the responses was undertaken to allow patterns, themes, and categories to emerge. This identification of themes was important in understanding the depth of the problem of addressing re-entry among the young adult high school dropouts.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the Mumias District Education Office. Further permission and consent to conduct interviews was sought from the participants.

Specific questions

(1) What are the prospects of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programmes for young adult school dropouts?

(2) What are the enablers of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programs for young adult school dropouts?

(3) What are the challenges of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programs for young adult school dropouts?

Findings and discussion

Prospects of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programs for young adult school dropouts

The study established that the potential of initiating ODeL in secondary school re-entry programs was high and welcome among the young adult school dropouts. Most of the participants saw this as an easier alternative way of giving them a second chance to accessing secondary school education,

One of the participants had the following sentiments on the prospects of initiating ODeL in re-entry programs:

> 'I think this a good thing if it will allow me to work from home without going to school'. This is good in that the young adult learners are motivated by the prospect of initiating ODeL.

On the question of learning resources, the participants were particularly excited that they can be able to access e-books and journals instead of spending money to buy textbooks for each recommended subject.

The prospect of studying at home at one's own convenience was welcome. There is a promise of improving self-directed learning among the young adult learners.

Sharing of resources is another important thing that emerged popular among the learners and the ACE learning centres administrators.

Initiating ODeL in re-entry programs for the young adult school dropouts was seen by the high school principals as beneficial not only for re-entry programs but as a potential avenue of entrenching ODeL in regular secondary school programs.

The ACE learning centres administrators agree that ODeL will increases access to learning and training opportunity for many of their potential students.

The prospect of lowering costs and improvement of cost-effectiveness of educational resources is another promise that is associated with ODeL.

Enablers of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programs for Y.A.S.S.D

The best thing that emerged from the discussion with the participants in the study is the positive attitude towards initiating ODeL in re-entry programs. They viewed this as a positive development and a challenge they were ready and willing to take. There is so much readiness in terms of attitude and this is potentially good for implementation of ODeL in secondary school re-entry programs for Y.A.S.S.D.

Availability of internet infrastructure was seen as another of the enablers that could work well in initiating ODeL in the re-entry program. Most of the participants were positive that the mobile phone network within Mumias District could serve them well in accessing information.

Participants seemed to be aware of the efforts by the government to integrate technology in learning and especially e-learning. The government has taken strategic initiative to improve overall e-Learning infrastructure. Through Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), there is effort towards digitization of content both in secondary and in primary school curriculum. This was seen as an enabler in implementing ODeL in Secondary School Re-entry programs.

The Kenyan government recognizes education as a human right, the means to developing human resources for development and socio-cultural transformation (GOK, 2010). The policy

of the government on education requires that all access education in line with the education for all policy. Participants in the study felt that ODeL was an avenue through which those left out in secondary school education could access education again.

Challenges of initiating ODeL for secondary school re-entry programs for Y.A.S.S.D

When it came to addressing the cost of ODeL in secondary school re-entry program for Y.A.S.S.D participants raised the following issues:

(1) What will be the cost of implementing the ODeL for the Y.A.S.S.D?
(2) What will be the cost of purchasing and maintaining equipment for the project?
(3) What are the likely maintenance costs?
(4) Shall we be required to pay any school fees for us to access learning?

The cost factor emerged as one of the challenges of initiating ODeL in secondary school re-entry programs. The challenge is addressed in the proposed community based ODeL model. Since this model proposes a new way of accessing education there is need to address the fear of the unknown. This emerged as a challenge and a potential barrier in implementing ODeL in secondary school re-entry programs.

Another challenge emerged from the issue of two key subject areas; the affective subjects such as religious studies and hands on subjects such as sciences. Most of the participants felt there was need to address these key subjects in the new model.

Proposed community based ODeL Secondary School re-entry program

From the experiences of the adult school dropouts, adult centres administrators and the secondary school administrators; there seems to be concurrence on the need for inclusivity, freedom, practicability and flexibility of high school re-entry programme for Y.A.S.S.D.

Given that these are young individuals with other obligations in their day to day activities, it is important that a solution is found that will enable them access quality education at the same time allow them to continue with their normal life without interruption.

Initiating Simplified Open Source Community based Learning Management System can be a good model as a starting point. In this model, users who are mainly the adult school dropouts have the advantage of benefiting from an enriched experience of e-learning resources. The proposed content will be drawn from the subject content recommended by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD).

> The ministry has put a lot of emphasis and support on ICTs as documented in the Kenya Education Sector Support Program (KESSP). Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), has embarked on a digital content design and development project, whose terms of reference are to design, develop and produce digital content for use in schools in line with our national curriculum. (KCID, 2016)

Most of the core subjects examined at KCSE level are already on digital format. More content is still being developed. Some of these subjects are available on Video Compact Disks (VCD). The proposed community based open source LMS will make use of these already developed and recommended courses as a starting point. Therefore there shall be no need of 're-inventing the wheel'.

'If eLearning content is not masterfully designed, all the rest will just go down the drain'. It is incumbent upon the facilitators to provide flexible, relevant and enriched course experience in order to attract and retain the adult school dropouts and keep the momentum for ultimate course positive learning outcomes.

One of the main challenges of secondary school re-entry programs is the cost factor. This is a significant consideration going forward. Provision of a cost effective solution is key to initiating and sustaining any learning program. What is the actual cost of an open source community based LMS? Although open source LMS may appear free, it is not 'free'. In order to bring down the cost of initiating and sustaining a community based LMS, the following is proposed

Initial cost of setting up the program covering the equipment, licenses, and related items can be mobilized by the community with support from donor organizations. At this point engaging the government agencies in providing funding is discouraged as it can easily stall the project due to the long and tedious bureaucracies involved in such matters especially in Kenya.

It may be necessary to set up a small technical team to oversee the maintenance of the system. The team could be assisted by university student interns in the community who can be hired to provide voluntary services on rotational basis.

The course facilitators to be drawn from the existing government teachers at the ACE high School centres and assisted by identified secondary school teachers already on government payroll. With a little incentive for the extra load of facilitating e-learning courses, they can be incorporated to provide the rich high school experience that is crucial in making the whole project relevant to its users. It is also proposed that continuous 'in-house' training and apprenticeship model be adopted for the course facilitators so as to minimize any cost of training staff.

Apart from course facilitators, deliberate effort can be made to encourage self directed learning by students or Minimally Invasive Education as advanced by Sugata (1999). The motivation to learn needs to come from the students themselves.

Most the students are young adults. Therefore they can be assisted to acquire smartphones, tablets or laptops for use at home at their convenience using the 'pay-as-you-go' model. This model has been popularized by mobile phone companies such as M-Kopa Solar. The company provides rent-to-own solar energy products that help in providing cheap solar power to rural homes' (Forbes Magazine, 2016). The same model can be adopted so that these students are able to acquire the required equipment complete with solar chargers in places where there is no electricity so that they may access e-content.

An enriched learning experience will be achieved by pooling students, teachers, KICD content; online resources, local community content and life skills.

Conclusion

It is clear that there exists a challenge in the manner in which secondary school re-entry programs for Y.A.S.S.D are addressed in the Kenya education system. This work contributes to a growing body of work that looks at instances of young adults being given a second chance to dream and make meaning out of life.

The Y.A.S.S.D should be given a second opportunity through more flexible channels that should among other things be friendly, practical and most inclusive. The prospect of initiating

and implementing the ODeL model is a good starting point and holds the promise of access to education for as many participants in the Y.A.S.S.D programs as possible which is in line with the government policy of education for all.

The enablers of initiating ODeL model are more important in this study. These are opportunities not to be wasted. Challenges on the other hand are real but are not insurmountable. With proper strategies they can be overcome even at their initial stages. The ODeL model is important as it has the potential to open a bright future for access to education especially for Y.A.S.S.D in marginalized communities in the country and other countries in the developing world. There must be sustained effort towards ensuring that indeed the young adult secondary school dropouts are afforded a second chance to access secondary school education; in other words 'A second chance to dream'. It must be mentioned that this study is not conclusive in itself but should serve as a starting point in future studies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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