

THE EDUCATION ALIBI

TRACING EDUCATION'S ENTANGLEMENTS
ACROSS CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

Elizabeth Cooper,
Erdmute Alber, and
Wandia Njoya, Editors



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The Education Alibi

*Tracing Education's Entanglements
Across Contemporary Africa*

Elizabeth Cooper, Erdmute Alber,
and Wandia Njoya, Editors

University of Michigan Press
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CHAPTER 1

The Education Alibi in Africa

Tracing Processes of Responsibilization, Depoliticization, and the Production of Inequality

ELIZABETH COOPER, ERDMUTE ALBER,
AND WANDIA NJOYA

In globalized development discourses relating to Africa, education and schooling usually have a positive connotation, as they are promoted as key to the future of the continent. Education is conceptualized as “an essential building block for a country’s human capital,” and also “a key driver of growth, competitiveness, and economic development” (World Bank 2020: 6). Indeed, the United Nations (no date: 1) espouses that “education is the key that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals . . . to be achieved. When people are able to get quality education they can break from the cycle of poverty.” Such goals and promises of education’s reach and impact have for decades gone unmet, but the positive images, promises, and related attempts of “education for all” have not lost their allure; indeed, in many ways they have become more insistently promoted. Overwhelmingly, the school enrollment of children continues to symbolize access to globalized knowledge and consequently the promised futures of enlightenment.¹

While the official story of education continues to be one of innocence and indeed of public good, education and schooling have constituted an arena of

1. In this book, we discuss education as produced, performed, and also contested within the frame of “modern,” “formal,” or “Western,” in any case institutionalized, schooling. We acknowledge other forms of education, as for instance in Koranic schools, in households, in agricultural labor processes, or in other settings. These are not the object of our inquiries here.

intense contestation since colonial times. Across many different African histories, education is accused of much wrongdoing and of concealing depravity. Is it possible that while claiming to be doing one thing, education has (also) been doing another? Is education functioning as an alibi for something else?

In this volume, we conceptualize education as an alibi to shine an interrogative light on suspicions that it is being used to divert scrutiny from other matters. This approach opens opportunities to examine how education may be entangled with other transformations. The chapters in this collection approach education as a site of mutually entangled social projects of (re) production and putative transformation. Our contributions trace how education often simultaneously entails competing projects and paradoxical effects. While we are not arguing against education or schooling for children and young people, we are insisting that the future of education systems will be poorly informed, and even potentially damaging to young people and their societies, if the multiple entanglements of education with larger society are not considered.

We have been further spurred to consider education as an alibi in response to it being overlooked in leading and wide-ranging scholarly treatises on how to account for many of the political and economic challenges that African societies confront. Perhaps it is the power of the hegemonic framing of education as always enlightening and improving that has permitted education a free pass from critical analysis of politics, governance, and societal conflict. Education and schooling are often left unproblematized in scholarly political economy analyses, either because they are uncritically regarded as necessary and good for people and societies, or because they are considered distant from issues of power and categorized as mere domestic subject matter. Conceptualized within mainstream positivist development technocracy, education tends too often to be invoked as a simple tool to help teach Africans (and others) particular political propensities, like peaceful citizenship.

A major exception to this lack of critical reflection is, of course, found in the decolonizing gaze that Afrocentric analysis has taken to reframe education. This work refutes assumptions that the underlying motives of education are unilaterally beneficial, especially when it has been implemented as a major component of Euro-American interventions across colonized and postcolonial Africa. Scholars have shown how education has been used as a systemic form of violence and destruction (e.g., Afful-Broni et al. 2020; Dei 2009; Ngũgĩ 1986; Nyamnjoh 2012). However, many of these academic critiques are still based on the broader theme of cultural imperialism in the style of the years immediately after national independence. Rarely do these

critiques interrogate the twenty-first-century dynamics of the travel of education policy across borders; the role of the global education industry; the privatization of schools all over the continent; or the actual experience of teachers and children in classrooms, families organizing children's enrollment, or those who evade schooling. Where such analysis has been carried out, it is largely in the realm of higher education (Babyesiza 2015; Mamdani 2007; Mbembe 2016; Mubai 2021).

We also seek to shift education out from under the (alibi of the) mainstream development mantle to examine what else can be seen when education and schooling are made the foci of critical investigation. And we purposefully seek to train our attention on experiences with primary and secondary education on the African continent, which have, over recent decades, received less critical interrogation than higher education. Our thinking has been informed by insights developed in different African and non-African contexts, and we believe what we have to offer can inform analysis in other contexts, and even beyond policies and practices of education. With that said, we have found it productive to consider the education alibi in relation to present-day African contexts given some of the important similarities among African countries' colonial and postcolonial experiences of formal education and global policy travel.

Other, and amassing, critiques have also punctured the dominant narrative of education as always beneficial. Critical studies drawing from diverse contexts have conceptualized education as a paradox, a contradiction, a "trap," a "lie," "a facade," and an obstacle to human flourishing in the pattern of "cruel optimism" (Alber et al. 2023; Abebe 2023; Berliner and Biddle 1996; Groeger 2021; Jeffery et al. 2008; Levinson and Holland 1996; Stambach and Ngwane 2011). As well, a focus on "educated unemployment" draws attention to the broken hopes and frustrations of individuals who have not been able to achieve the expectations they associated with educated futures (Ansell et al. 2020; Jeffery et al. 2008; Mains 2012). These works have helped us appreciate many different ways of appraising education and schooling and clarify our own argument that we can productively use the concept-metaphor of the alibi to question education.

THE EDUCATION ALIBI AS PROVOCATION

With "alibi" we are applying a conspicuous term to our charges about education in Africa. We choose it as our key term for several reasons. First, we

are inspired to take this suspicious approach out of respect for the skeptical, even accusatory, *questions that many of our interlocutors have raised* about whether education systems are doing what they claim as they take children into schools. We are prompted to take up such an assertively scrutinizing gaze by the queries, suspicions, and hypotheses of the people whose lives are most affected by educational interventions.

We also recognize many contradictions and paradoxes between the intentions and outcomes of education, many of which are well documented in scholarship (Bulgrin 2020; Levinson and Holland 1996; Stambach 2017; Stambach and Ngwane 2011). Most strikingly obvious is the paradox that while the intention of the global goal of “education for all” (e.g., Millennium Development Goal 2 and Sustainable Development Goal 4) is to expand economic opportunities for all, economic inequalities persist and indeed often seem to become institutionalized and further entrenched through education systems and the divergent educational pathways. As other scholars have documented, schooling tends to be a “contradictory resource” associated with opening opportunities yet simultaneously reinforcing inequalities experienced by class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and age (Broadfoot 1978; Dyson 2019; Hunter 2019; Simpson 2003; Willis 1981). Our provocation to consider how education may figure as an alibi spotlights the paradoxes of education that tend to be concealed when the equalizing goals of education for all (EFA) monopolize policy and public attention, invisibilizing the mentioned tendencies to produce and reinforce inequalities. When we persist in asking probing questions about all the simultaneous projects and effects entwined with education, we can more explicitly account for how such paradoxes are reproduced in relatively unproblematic ways.

Furthermore, in raising the charge of education as an alibi or a set of alibis, we are pursuing an interrogatory approach that is more aggressive than one that simply identifies paradoxes. This brings us to our second reason for choosing to approach our analysis as investigating a potential alibi. Once we began considering the conceptualization of education as an alibi, we recognized its potential as an *interrogatory* term implying an accusation, followed by a promise to investigate in search for evidence that corroborates or refutes claims made.

In this, we note both the aggressive stance and forensic potential of the alibi. As an offensive move, an “alibi” immediately suspends education from the claims made in its name; it refuses to take education at its own and others’ word. As a forensic tool, the charge of an alibi forces an analysis beyond

accepting generalized judgments of innocence or malfeasance and requires a systematic exercise of examining what might count as evidence. It encourages us to hypothesize alternative scenarios, including alternative motives that could be in play. Such suspicious approaches to reality can be fruitful, expanding ways of interpreting the world and thus freeing our possible understandings from received orthodoxies. And so we appreciate how starting with the charge of a possible alibi provides us with a critical methodology and diversifies our analytical tool kit for the critical consideration of education and schooling.

Third, and related to the above methodological interests, we recognize there is an *open-endedness* to the accusation of education as an alibi. An alibi is not as definitive a charge as a lie or a trap, which are accusations other analysts have leveled at education systems (Berliner and Biddle 1996; Alber et al. 2023; Groeger 2021). Instead, the charge of something being used as an alibi keeps open the possibility of a causal relationship that was not intended, as well as to deny causal relationships that are implicitly made (such as the reduction of poverty through education).

Jacques Derrida considered the concept of the alibi as allowing more leeway in judgments of guilt or innocence, noting how the term alibi derives from the excuse of being “elsewhere” at the moment of a crime:

The alibi always tells a story of lying. And thus of perjury, every lie being first of all a perjury. But a perjurer will always be able to claim that he neither lied nor perjured; he was simply elsewhere, his mind was elsewhere, and his attention disjointed. His distraction or amnesia, thus his finitude, serve him as an alibi. . . . in the slumber of dictionaries, “alibi” means simply “elsewhere,” “in another place [*alius ibi*].” (Derrida 2002: xxvi)

As Derrida notes in that passage, there is an important distinction between committing perjury, that is, voluntary violation of an oath or false swearing, and claiming an alibi. This aligns with how the term “alibi” is used in “ordinary English discourse” (Grossman 2002: 24) to generally mean “excuse,” where deniability of intention becomes plausible, even if material evidence indicates collusion.

We find this way of thinking about the alibi as maintaining its critical purchase, even if we are unable to meet some burden of proof about the intentionality of a deception, to hold significant potential. When Wandia Njoya (this volume; Njoya 2019) and other critics level their charges of policymak-

ers' deceptions, they are often met with the challenge to prove the deception has taken place, for example, to prove an actor knowingly lied. But accessing and exposing such indisputable proof is often impossible. In our view, this should not invalidate the suspicion. Rather, the suspicion can remain fruitful for stimulating hypotheses of alternative explanations for what might have occurred and with what culpability. These hypotheses may help us identify unintended consequences. Such possible alternative accounts raise potentially important questions that should remain on the public radar; the questions should not be invalidated and buried just because the suspicions on which they rest cannot be conclusively proven.

Our use of alibi does not need to excuse effects, however. Exposing how an alibi works is necessary in order to account for effects, regardless of whether these are proved intentional or not. The allegation of education functioning as an alibi makes us skeptical and concentrates our questioning approach, but it does not force an all-out accusation of knowing dishonesty.

Likewise, we are not making a totalizing argument against education. We acknowledge people's immense hopes and investments in education as well as the fact that a successful school career has been an important means of realizing social and economic gains and is still frequently associated with liberation from specific constraints. However, that does not—and it should not—exempt education from critical, and even suspicious, inquiry. We see that our approach of questioning how education might be an alibi for other projects can be applied to the most radical critiques of “Western” education that exist, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, or the exclusion of girls from schooling in places such as Afghanistan. In such cases, we see that attacks on education are being used as a means for advancing more encompassing violent, destabilizing and exclusionary agendas.

To level the accusation of an alibi is also not as equivocal as considering how education is framed or represented. Certainly, we recognize that discourses and beliefs about education are powerful in their constitution; education tends to be framed in ways that characterize it as beneficial and productive. But accusing education of being a possible alibi, rather than only examining how it is framed, raises the stakes to accounting for actual effects and motives. Our approach seeks to do more than expose the cultural construction and reification of education, or to claim that a model that emerged in the Global North has been introduced all over the globe with contradictory effects. The alibi charge is an approach that probes education's practices, and specifically seeks to account for the pursuit of simultaneous projects and how

existing power dynamics allow both official and unofficial projects to occur but escape public recognition.

The “concept-metaphor” of the alibi, as Gayatri Spivak (2004: 524) conceptualizes it, can be used to specify accusations, and indeed to draw attention to actors’ unstated motivations, effects, and procedures. Spivak, for instance, notes how colonization, international development, and human rights have been used as alibis for political, economic, and military interventions. She uses the concept-metaphor of the alibi to signal how a concept like human rights (and we would note, the right to education), which appears to be doing good, can simultaneously obscure a power dynamic and thereby protect those advantaged in that power dynamic. Moreover, Spivak employs the idea of the alibi with the intention “to name a psychological disposition toward an ideological power dynamic,” according to critical philosophy scholar Jana McAuliffe (2020: 12). As McAuliffe notes, for example, “Cultural relativism can be an alibi for what is actually cultural chauvinism, serving as a superficially moral reason to remake the world in the image of Western norms. Similarly, human rights can function as an alibi when the interventions made in the name of rights, for example aid projects, perpetuate rather than ameliorate the economic dependence of the South.”

Here we recognize how the alibi is meant to work: It is intended to exculpate, to remove blame, and/or transfer responsibility. In following Spivak’s notion of how the alibi works, we appreciate how its use is immoral, not just accidental, and interested, not just differing in interpretation. The alibi is the official or public account that is given, undermining the likelihood of another account of the situation. In taking the alibi as our interrogative provocation, we appreciate that even if the alibi stands because it cannot be disproven, it does not mean that another account must be undermined. The alibi approach pushes us to look at the possible simultaneity of effects, as well as the interests at stake. It also challenges us to ask how the alibi is upheld. As Jonathan Grossman (2002: xi) observes from his studies of alibis in literary fiction, “Alibis, even when true, draw their strength from the support of others.” Accordingly, in investigating how an alibi works, we must identify relationships and how they distribute complicity. Who is involved, and how, and with what kinds of awareness of the simultaneous effects of their actions?

We might consider an alibi as doing the work of a mask or a screen. The insight that actual material practices and institutions can be overshadowed, even overcome, by illusory constructs has been demonstrated in relation to other studies, of “the state,” “development,” and “the nation,” for instance. As

Philip Abrams helpfully articulates in his essay “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977),” “The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.” Abrams recognizes, of course, that there is a state system comprising a material set of practices and institutions, but he notes that the state “starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified . . . and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice” (1988: 58). Abrams draws on Jeremy Bentham’s arguments regarding how terms like “government” and “order” are deployed to create “an atmosphere of illusion,” sometimes serving as an “official malefactor’s screen.” Thinking along similar lines, we seek to probe how the sanctioned account—the dominant story—of education has displaced the material practices and implications of education, leaving a screen, or alibi, that can divert our attention from seeing educational practice as it is. We believe that careful case studies, and particularly those employing ethnographic approaches that deliberately attend to people’s lived experiences and perspectives, can sidestep such diversions and recalibrate how education is problematized.

SUSPECTING EDUCATION AS A DIVERSIONARY TACTIC

The chapters in this collection provide a range of carefully examined cases of education in practice in different contemporary contexts across the African continent. From these accounts we recognize three key themes in how the education alibi works: responsabilization, depoliticization, and the production of inequality.

Processes of Responsibilization

While international agencies such as the World Bank and UNESCO, national governments, and “donor” countries celebrate their leadership and investments in EFA, there is a simultaneous process of offloading responsibility for education onto various actors at different scales, both in Africa and across the world. With the concept of responsabilization, we refer to societal processes of governmentality in which concrete actors, be they individuals, communities, institutions, or states, come to believe and govern themselves as responsible for actions and outcomes for which they were not previously regarded as responsible. Of course, such shifts also mean that responsibil-

ity is removed from those who had it before; one might call that process de-responsibilization.

Responsibilization has been linked to a form of neoliberal governance that seems to transfer responsibility to individual agents through an “appeal of freedom” mechanism (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017; Rose 1999). It is deeply related to the conceptualization of the “self as enterprise” (McNay 2009) and to individuals as “entrepreneurs of the self” (Zipin et al. 2015). Responsibilizing, thus, can be seen as an ambivalent process, because it may sometimes be understood as an empowering process of creating “do it yourself persons” (Gambold 2018) but, at the same time, one that burdens actors with economic, moral, or psychosocial necessities that are veiled behind an imagery of voluntary and free decisions.

Processes of responsabilization are hidden behind the alibi of education as a necessary, desirable, and achievable good to which everybody should contribute. We see processes of responsabilization implicated in the education alibi on different scales of societal organization. In experiences from “below,” they are enacted through assigning moral and economic loads to students, parents, and wider kin networks. For instance, to whom are the slogans like “Every girl to school” that emblazon billboards and public buildings addressed, if not to parents and local communities, to make them responsible for children’s enrollment in school? Processes of responsabilization are encouraged through moralizing discourses about how, for example, a child’s education reflects the family’s honor and potential upward mobility (Masquelier 2022). Responsibilization at the individual or collective community level might also be perceived as necessary due to lacking public investment. Students, parents, as well as wider kin networks are charged with carrying much of the burden of educating children (Quaretta, this volume). Parents are expected to pay a significant portion of schooling costs in the present, but also to anticipate the future by encouraging children to pursue educational pathways that often necessitate those children becoming strangers in their parents’ lifeworlds (Alber, this volume). Parents are chastised to prepare their children in ways that make them available to pursue these pathways, and they are shamed and blamed as lazy, immoral, and ultimately irresponsible if they fall short. Children are also made to feel responsible for dedicating themselves exclusively to pursuing their schooling. When students drop out, those children, as well as their families, and sometimes even whole communities, are tagged as irresponsible (Kwayu, this volume).

These realities are not reflected in the contemporary, globally publicized

account of how EFA is being realized today. Unlike during the colonial era, when some Africans were cajoled and scolded by missionaries and government officials to send their children to school, today education is seen as the vehicle for individual and societal progress and enlightenment and therefore a right that everyone must seek and that governments must deliver with the help of donor organizations. What is forgotten is how parents and children are in fact the people most pressured to ensure such EFA.

At the same time, the idea of EFA as a public and seemingly timeless good veils changing historical and, above all, generational experiences with the changing promises of schooling. In many places on the African continent, as long as schooling remained an exceptional path for children, it did tend to enable socioeconomic mobility for the graduates who made it through and their parents who invested in it. Today, however, degree inflation, the educated unemployed and underemployed, and prevalent situations of “waithood” (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2019) counterbalance the credibility of the responsabilizing discourses aimed at parents. Nevertheless, and perplexingly so, such counterbalancing has not seemed to broadly diminish the pressure of responsibility (e.g., Alber, this volume; Quaretta, this volume). Regardless of realistic expectations about what schooling can deliver, the EFA rhetoric retains its moral hegemony, undermining serious explorations of alternatives.

Processes of responsabilizing are not limited to very personalized and localized levels of societal organization, however. Institutions like the World Bank, UNESCO, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation distribute resources according to morally loaded criteria presented as objective standards, thereby institutionalizing the responsabilization of whole states and often, later, of others in case of failure (Hook, this volume). Processes of creating report cards, for example, of states’ performances in the education sector, in the name of objectively measuring performance for comparative purposes, allow the judgment of whole states as irresponsible or unable to govern themselves effectively. Further “innovations” in responsabilization are proposed and implemented through cash-upon-delivery interventions that take the form of a contract, with a funder only releasing payments “for each unit of confirmed progress” (Birdsall and Savedoff 2010: 17). In the end, little scope for autonomy is left for African governments to independently make decisions about how to organize their educational systems for rising numbers of students. This disenfranchisement is then rationalized with appeals to the urgency of fixing the “education crisis” (World Bank et al. 2021). The depo-

liticizing implications of such responsabilization are discussed further in the next section.

Processes of Depoliticization

Depoliticization refers to the denial of political influence. It is often practiced through the transfer of functions away from publicly accountable representatives (e.g., elected officials), thereby removing the potential for those functions to be considered as political and consequently politically accountable. Yet, as a process, depoliticization begins earlier than this; it starts from a way of perceiving problems—such as poverty and inequality—or “education poverty” and educational inequality, for example—as technical rather than political problems, thereby legitimizing technical fixes rather than political solutions. Scholars studying states, international organizations, and international development observe that depoliticization has become a dominant mode of governance, with varying degrees of public acknowledgment (Ferguson 1994; Flinders and Wood 2014; Harriss 2002; Louis and Maertens 2021).

Depoliticization is the result of intentionally sidestepping political contingencies. Regarding a problem as technical, rather than political, legitimizes the role of technical responses, and thus the authority of technical experts over public processes of decision-making. James Ferguson’s (1990, 1994) critical ethnography of international development policies and practices in Lesotho in the 1980s influentially used the metaphor of an “anti-politics machine” to convey this approach. In that study, Ferguson noted how international development practitioners needed to understand Lesotho’s poverty and “underdevelopment” as technical, rather than political, problems to justify their application of the technical solutions they had devised according to generalized theories about underdevelopment. As a result, the development practitioners produced a distortedly reductionist representation of the country’s situation that did not account for Lesotho’s long-standing, complex, economic and political linkages to the world. Seeking to fix Lesotho’s economy and indeed society as if they were simply “politically-neutral artisans” using “development projects as tools” (Ferguson 1994: 178) to transform the country according to a predetermined plan led to failure after failure, however, due to inadequately contextualized understandings. Correspondingly, there was an inability to recognize how decisions affecting people’s lives and livelihoods, such as land access and market interventions, were fundamentally political decisions rather than simply technical approaches. As Ferguson reflects, operating under the idea that government operates as an apolitical

machine of so-called experts simply delivering services blinds practitioners to how government is a thoroughly political means through which power and interests are (re)produced.

With regard to the education alibi, we note processes of depoliticization, as those of responsabilization, at all scales. Global policy and donor actors determine and implement audit culture mechanisms that responsabilize governments to satisfy certain kinds of standardized outcomes, producing the effect of diminished autonomy of locally elected governments to determine the content, procedures, and measures by which their education systems will be judged. Indeed, the goal of “harmonized” global education standards is to achieve “good governance” through depoliticizing local governance. While the intention of insisting on globalized standards is to hold the promise of quality EFA to account (by providing a comparable measure), the simultaneous effect can be an education system governed by fidelity to the globally set standards rather than responsive to local political decision-making processes and local needs. At the same time, by privatizing large sectors of the educational landscape and thus allowing private providers of schools to take over growing proportions of students in many African countries, governments are seemingly relinquishing much of their authority, and thus accountability, for education. In such scenarios, elected governments consign themselves to acting as monitors of education providers. As Tyler Hook’s (this volume) analysis of the “public-private partnerships” in Liberia’s education sector demonstrates, this kind of approach can result in finger-pointing in all directions without clear pathways of accountability that students, families, or teachers can pursue for answers.

In the conclusion to his study, Ferguson suggested a question similar to our approach in which we ask whether education serves as an alibi for other simultaneous processes. As he put it, “Rather than repeatedly asking the politically naive question ‘Can aid programmes ever be made really to help poor people?’, perhaps we should investigate the more searching question, ‘What do aid programmes do *besides* fail to help poor people?’” (Ferguson 1994: 180). In the case of Lesotho’s problematic Thaba-Tseka Development Project, Ferguson notes, what was produced was not a machine for eliminating poverty but rather a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, through the concrete effects of establishing various state administrative services in rural areas, for example. Yet, as Ferguson acknowledges, similar to our understanding that simultaneous effects can be produced without deliberate conspiracy, “Such a result may be no part of the

planners' intentions. . . . The result can be accomplished, as it were, behind the backs of the most sincere participants. It may just happen to be the way things work out. On this view, the planning apparatus is neither mere ornament nor the master key to understanding what happens. Rather than being the blue-print for a machine, it is a *part of the machine*" (Ferguson 1994: 181). Using Ferguson's prompt, we can ask how global education policies, such as EFA, function as part of a system that tries to erase politics from its operations.

Production of Inequality

Our analysis also attends to how education produces new inequalities or deepens existing ones. The irony of the sweeping emphasis on "all" in the "education for all" goal is that even when "all" are targeted for inclusion, the inclusion is unequal and (re)produces unequal life chances. Obviously, the globalized EFA campaigns, which were increasingly emphasized and specified through Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, were supposed to have mitigated and eliminated the inequalities in children's life chances through ensuring educational access for all children. The underlying assumption of this ambition was that inequalities are politically and socially reproduced and education would serve as an equalizing force. At the very first EFA conference in 1990 at Jomtien, Thailand, delegates focused on how particular categories of children, such as girls, children with special needs, children living with disabilities, and children living in poverty, had been historically marginalized, and on how increasing their access to education would improve their chances for a better life and ensure greater equity in societies. Since then, policy and funding campaigns have continued to highlight the need to address enduring inequalities in educational access, quality, outcomes, and completion. The push for education to be made free of all costs for all children has been prioritized, and girls' education has been specifically identified as requiring special promotion.

However, with each passing year and each passing progress report, international meeting, and updated commitment, the EFA targets have gone unmet. Universal and inclusive education in Africa remains the lowest in the world, with statistics indicating that only two in three children in Africa complete primary education by age fifteen, while one in five primary school-age children in Africa is out of school (UNESCO 2023). These trends are not surprising given the challenges that African societies have confronted and continue to confront. In the 1990s, EFA was being promoted as a global goal, while the world's financiers, namely the World Bank and International

Monetary Fund, imposed stringent fiscal policies on African countries, which included cutbacks on public spending for services such as health and education. African countries found themselves submitting colossal sums of money as debt repayments, which was money that could have otherwise paid for a significant number of African children to attend school (Ismi 2004). During this period, private schools proliferated, and children with families who could afford the privatized costs for education continued their schooling, while poorer children could not (Oketch et al. 2010). In the early 2000s, as countries sought to meet EFA goals by introducing free primary education, there were massive increases in student enrollments in public (i.e., government-funded) schools, resulting in overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms, and accompanying public perceptions of poorer-quality education being delivered to all children (Abuya et al. 2015). In response, again, families that could afford it enrolled their children in better-resourced private schools, thereby intensifying the production of inequality through education systems (Dilger, this volume; Edwards et al. 2017; Heyneman and Stern 2014; Kambutu et al. 2020).

While the intention of EFA is seemingly to expand economic opportunities for all, inequalities often become institutionalized and further entrenched through education systems and their divergent educational pathways. This starts with the very materialities of inequality, namely discrepancies between poorly equipped public schools and excellently equipped private schools, as one can observe in any African country (e.g., Maistry, this volume; Engelbrecht et al. 2016). Even in government-funded schools, where education is supposed to be free, many children's families find themselves required to pay the additional costs of many required items, such as textbooks, uniforms, and supplementary teachers (Abuya et al. 2013; Lumosi et al. 2022; Takyi et al. 2021). The production of inequalities through education continues with diverging investment possibilities between urban, middle-class families and poor, often rural, families: some children, for example, have their educational pathways facilitated through families' private financial investments in extra tutoring and learning resources as well as parents' attention to their children's education. The expansion of private tutoring, known as "shadow education," has been documented in countries around the world and is understood as a "hidden form of privatization . . . concealed by the facade of fee-free public provision of education" (Bray and Kwo 2013: 481). Other children and youth, from poorer backgrounds, are not only excluded from such additional resources but are sometimes obliged to contribute to the financing of learn-

ing resources by earning money through children's work, or services that put them at risk of sexual exploitation (Alber, this volume).

The competitiveness of education systems today, often with emphasis on high-stakes school test results, drives a logic that families are acting responsibly when they provide educational advantages for their children. In many contexts, this logic is pursued from the start of children's school trajectories: While early childhood education is promoted as the means to improve all children's readiness for schooling, one consequence has been the proliferation of private early childhood education centers and families privately funding their children's early education to improve the children's eventual success in primary school (Bleck and Guindo 2013; Dei 2005; Kambutu et al. 2020). Meanwhile, cultures of "parental blame," as subsequent chapters show, not only discipline parents but also reproduce inequality.

We cannot simply trust that increasing rates of school attendance are redressing inequalities. As Obed Mfum-Mensah (2018) argues, school attendance can both maintain and aggravate the social cleavages that marginalize children, such as those based on markers of identity and belonging, physical ability, or distressed economic circumstances. While expenditures on education may increase, the social marginalization of some children can remain acute. Mfum-Mensah (2018: 22) notes: "The contradiction here is that schools also maintain and perpetuate the existing power relations in societies and the institutional structures that support those relations." Education reforms have little impact on "both the value systems of the politically dominant cultures and the social ordering that serves that group" (Mfum-Mensah 2018: 22). If educational systems and practices mirror societal order, then they tend to reproduce, intensify, or modify existing inequalities.

Clearly, education can produce inequalities through several different means, and most obviously, as Caroline Sarojini Hart (2019: 583) notes, via disparate access, experiences, and "outcome opportunities" upon leaving school. If education is, echoing Amy Stambach (2017: 2), a "social field on which the future is imagined" (see also Häberlein and Maurus 2020), then education not only makes an unequal present but also reproduces inequalities in the future. These transcend materialities and life chances, as Arjun Appadurai (2013: 289) argued when theorizing the "unequal distribution of capacities to aspire" as shaping the "future as cultural fact." Appreciating education's multidimensional potentialities reinforces our desire to probe more deeply and critically into how contemporary experiences of education are entangled with other transformations.

WHY CLAIM ONE THING AND DO ANOTHER?

From our investigative approach, we have identified three processes through which the education alibi is spread. Yet we are left with other questions—largely about intentions. In criminal investigations, suspects are questioned about three factors: their means, opportunity, and motivation to commit the crime. We have a pretty good sense of the means and opportunities in cases of using the alibi of education for other ends, but what of motivations?

We question what the trend of state governments blaming parents for their children's lack of educational enrollment or success could be an alibi for. Does this privatizing of the responsibility for education serve the agenda to reduce the notion that education is a public good? But why would state governments seek to absolve themselves of responsibility for education, beyond just not wanting to pay all the financial costs of it? Could it be that with education underfunded for so long, the quality of learning so obviously compromised, and people's futures clearly vulnerable to the vagaries of global capitalism, governments do not actually believe that education can deliver its promises, despite the official rhetoric to the opposite effect? Does the move toward privatizing responsibilities toward parents help national elites, who can afford the costs of private schooling for their children, to ensure the reproduction of their distinction from the majority of families less favorably situated? Is the responsabilization of parents, and indeed children, a reflection of a lack of interest in advancing equality through education?

Are students meant to learn that public services are inherently inferior to private ones? Won't students—and shouldn't we—understand a state's disinvestment, or at least disinterest in adequately investing in meaningful educational quality for all, as enfolded in a systematic commitment to institutionalize—through privatization—unequal opportunities? This is the neoliberal agenda, but it is a condition left unproblematized as parents, students, and teachers are put on the spot to evidence their commitments to succeed through striving for more and better education. Instead of insistence of governmental accountability to public education, there is civic alienation via the engrossment in educational competition (Cooper, this volume).

For certainly, education is not being delivered in any consistent way as a public good, which is the presumed responsibility of state governments. There is increasing privatization in the education sector, with the surge in private schools being the most obvious case in point. More hidden than that mode of privatization is the downloading of educational costs to parents

in a regularized way. Despite the EFA policy statements, education seems a persistently deregulated space, which reflects an agenda of state disinterest in delivering education. The NGO-ization of the educational sector (Fichtner 2012) could be read, in this perspective, more as a symptom than as an attempt to solve a problem.

Clearly, we do not judge education to be an alibi for one specific agenda. As evidenced in the diverse chapters in this volume, we do not regard education as a monolithic, coherent whole, although we notice a hegemonic narrative of education as beneficial to various actors, and we recognize the homogenizing implications especially when global standards are applied. We see education entangled with multiple other projects of future making, and advancing diverse consequences, including the creation of private markets; facilitating economic access or advantages to private corporations, philanthropic foundations, or bilateral trading partners; legitimizing governments; disciplining citizens; and creating a more unequal landscape around the globe.

In conclusion, what we seek to do with the concept-metaphor of the alibi is to provoke a revitalized role for ethnographically rich and historically sensitive case studies to illuminate critical discrepancies between educational experiences and hegemonic ways of thinking about education that circulate today. To question an alibi is to take a deliberately investigative step; it is an analytical methodology before becoming a theory. Accordingly, this collection features contributions that approach education as a site of mutually entangled social projects of (re)production and putative transformation and their inherent moralities that need to be analyzed first and then rearticulated in a manner that locates education within competing projects that operate simultaneously.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

Part I: Responsibilization

The first part's chapters expose how responsabilization features in contemporary education agendas and how particular shifts and delegations of responsibility affect different institutions and people, often in ways that are beyond education planners' concerns. The chapters' investigations mainly detect how state actors create alibis for their own failures in realizing the promises of education through attributing responsibility (and blame) to others. Uncovering the assignment of responsibility to parents, children, households, kin

groups, and teachers, the authors pay attention to the creation of additional tensions and conflicts that often transgress the realm of education and have long-lasting implications.

The first chapter in this part, by Erdmute Alber, analyzes how rural parents in northern Benin, who see themselves as not knowing or “blind” in relation to their children’s potential educational pathways, have been responsabilized, and today responsabilize themselves, to provide for the costs of schooling as well as other shifts in children’s life courses. Alber shows that this has not historically been the case when schooling careers were still the exception in children’s life courses and understood as alternative paths toward adulthood. Then, in simplified terms, parents either supported children’s educational pathways or other pathways such as the start of their children’s marriages and parenthood or apprenticeships. Educated children were expected and likely to secure their own jobs and contribute toward their future marriages and households. However, today, Alber observes, parents find themselves responsible for their children’s educational pathways as well as the other costs of helping their children become adults, through financially supporting marriages, the birth of children, and apprenticeships, for instance. Intergenerational care relations have changed in a substantial way, leaving pronounced burdens on parents.

In the urban setting of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Edoardo Quaretta found similar processes of responsabilizing parents to the point that they indebt themselves to ensure children’s education. He describes their investments as not only economic, but also related to the symbolic value that schooling has. Expectations of families to privately pay for children’s education structure gender and intergenerational relations and materialize an ethos of reciprocity among family units. Quaretta’s study attends to the stress and conflicts that people experience in trying to provide the necessary funds for school fees that simultaneously help to fulfill norms of kinship obligations as well as an idealized urban identity of being responsible and Christian. He accounts for the various strategies that teachers and parents follow as they find themselves caught in problems of indebtedness for school fees and challenged by concurring needs and analyzes how these actions function as strategies of “real governance” (Olivier de Sardan 2008) to make the system work in the face of state ineffectiveness. Once again, in-depth tracing of how education systems rely on multilayered responsabilization demonstrates extensions beyond what is conventionally recognized as the realm of education.

In the chapter that follows, Claire Dungey and Nicola Ansell reveal how teachers in rural Lesotho are blamed by both local community members and urban-based policymakers for the failure of education to deliver its promised benefits. Dungey and Ansell argue that the casting of blame on teachers serves as an alibi, covering up broader failings and allowing “education” to continue to command respect. In particular, the blaming of rural teachers excuses policymakers’ inadequacies, and more broadly it diverts attention from the structural aspects of unequal education quality. In this case, Dungey and Ansell analyze how rurality and distance figure in how teachers are blamed in Lesotho: Working at a distance from the centers of educational administrative power makes teachers vulnerable to blame by policymakers, while living in ways that hold themselves apart from local communities (including sending their own children to schools in urban centers) also make teachers vulnerable to blame by the people of the villages where they teach. In addition to diverting scrutiny from other important factors that undermine educational quality, Dungey and Ansell contemplate how such blaming undermines the potential for forging solidarities and pursuing political action.

The last chapter in this part, by Hildah Oburu, takes us to Kenya, where students have used arson in their boarding schools, undermining the policy ideal that schools are safe spaces for students and teachers. Oburu traces how Kenyan government officials and school administrators respond to students’ disruptive actions in ways that individualize and pathologize “culprits,” adopting punitive control measures involving the criminal justice system and exclusion of the “bad apples” from schools. These approaches of blaming students and their parents for the arson attacks are largely supported by the media. However, Oburu suggests that such blaming of students often ignores the structural factors against which students are revolting. Oburu’s analysis further shows how students are expected to accept whatever education is on offer, and shamed for any opposition they show. In attending to how processes of responsabilization and de-responsibilization hold the potential of violence, Oburu’s chapter reemphasizes that education and schooling cannot be taken for granted as safe and supportive for children or society.

Part II: Depoliticization

The chapters in the middle part of the collection illuminate how education and schooling tend to be positioned as if they exist separately from—and even as if they are above—politics. As the case studies from Liberia, Niger, and Kenya demonstrate, the depoliticization of education is promoted through

various means. One common way is through the deployment of “common-sense” logics about what education does, such as the omnipresent notion that education is necessary for “development.” Related to this, some education policymakers promote narrow designations of what education is for and how it can be realized, which further reduces the scope of possibilities for ordinary people—such as teachers, students, parents, and others—to demand more from education. In recent decades, this narrowing has most obviously followed neoliberal logics, such as those that conceptualize education as an “investment” in human capital development, and especially the preparation of entrepreneurial individuals ready to compete in the global “marketplace.” Another common means of depoliticizing education is distinguishing it as a technocratic endeavor that requires “experts” to decide what is needed and how it should be implemented, thereby squeezing out broader participation and mechanisms for public accountability. This tendency can both contribute to, and be advanced by, the privatization of the schooling sector, with concurrent reductions in state governments’ influence and responsibility for education experiences.

In Kenya, Wandia Njoya traces how understanding education as a means for developing human capital as well as instilling social order has persisted from colonial limitations on education to postcolonial approaches. While postcolonial governments have expanded access to schooling, the education on offer remains constricted in purpose. Njoya documents from her personal experiences of questioning education philosophies and practices in Kenya that such efforts are marginalized and discredited through accusations that the questioner is “antidevelopment” and even “harmful” to society. In a case study of the introduction of a new “competency-based curriculum” in Kenya, Njoya observes how government actors presented education policy decisions as imperative and already decided by experts, effectively leaving teachers, parents, students, and others to understand that their perspectives on education policies do not matter.

Writing from Liberia, Tyler Hook accounts for how the proclamation of a national education crisis enabled the outsourcing of “fixing” the education sector to external entities, including nongovernmental organizations and private corporations. Hook reflects on the tendency to “capitalize on crisis” and the infiltration of private interests in the delivery of public goods through the propagation of ideas like “creative capital” that make the case for how market incentives can generate social change in sectors like education and position private corporations as befittingly knowledgeable and ethically motivated

actors. As a result of the “fixes” to Liberia’s proclaimed education crisis, Hook traces how ownership and influence over educational assets and governance were shifted from the national government and local communities to foreign donors, investors, and other corporate and NGO actors. The chapter details how teachers, students, and local communities have experienced various forms of vulnerability under the new arrangements of corporate governance and market incentives due to the absence of political mechanisms of participation, transparency, and accountability.

In Niger, Adeline Masquelier argues, the framing of education as “the solution to a bundle of related problems, including ‘child’ marriage, uncontrolled fertility, poverty, gender inequality, and underdevelopment” makes it seem unassailably good, which can prevent critical consideration of actual school experiences. In Niger, as elsewhere, education has been promoted as fundamental to the very publicized development goal of “girls’ empowerment,” and by correlation the less publicized goal of population control. However, Masquelier argues, this emphasis on schooling as a safer route than early marriage for girls diverts scrutiny from how people actually experience education. Her research with girls and their families reveals that they have serious concerns with the risks that schools present to students, including sexual violence and pregnancy before marriage, which, in turn, may actually exacerbate the pressure on girls to marry. However, the paradigm of education as rescue has become so powerful that it overwhelms the capacity, and interest, to acknowledge any such potential contradictions.

Elizabeth Cooper also focuses on the obfuscations facilitated by narratives of education as innocent and promising. From her study of educational experiences in Kenya, Cooper considers how primary and secondary students’ school exams are used to promote the understanding that life’s opportunities are decided by merit, and she analyzes how the government’s much-touted war on exam cheating demonstrates a predilection to govern through suspicion and acrimony. Cooper describes how extensive government security operations to “safeguard” the integrity of exams reinforce the idealization that a meritocracy is at stake, and frame ordinary Kenyans as persistent threats to its realization. However, the emphasis on exams and their securitization distracts from contradictory evidence that socioeconomic chances are not determined by merit in Kenya but rather are extremely limited, and often decided by preexisting social and economic advantages. Moreover, by sowing distrust and discord within society over the threat of potential cheaters, government politicians divert attention away from their own deficiencies.

Each of the chapters in this section demonstrates how careful study of educational experiences holds important potential for improving analytical insights concerning how people's lives are governed and how hegemonic ideologies are creatively resisted. Education is political, whether it is officially recognized as such or not. Scholars and political actors need to stop treating education as if its implications are confined to an imagined private realm of childhood and hold it up for wider scrutiny.

Part III: Production of Inequality

The chapters in this section go beyond statistical data about inequality and difference in education and do at least three things. First, they demonstrate that the universal ambitions for education did not translate to local success as seamlessly as the policymakers might have anticipated. Second, the chapters highlight the complexity of education, and how moral, relational, and economic dimensions of African life interact intimately with education. It is not enough to provide schools, when the children who attend school, as well as their families, are grappling with a complexity of issues such as political histories, social prejudice, cultural values, personal ambitions, modes of discrimination, and precarious livelihoods. Third, the contributing authors accompany their observations about social and institutional dynamics of schooling with perspectives from a cross section of African actors who grapple with these complexities.

Writing from South Africa, Suriamurthee Moonsamy Maistry analyzes how different education-focused policy initiatives have worked as alibis for different kinds of agendas, with each linked to enduring inequalities in education. Maistry notes how the "pseudoactivity" of education policy proliferation gave hope that conditions of the majority of South Africans would improve. People were encouraged to believe that the individualist, neoliberal policies promoting "freedom of choice" in schools, curriculum uniformity, and the entrenchment of English as the language of instruction would improve opportunities for all. Despite these promises, inequality persisted, if not worsened, and socioeconomic gains were, after apartheid, only possible for a newly emerging but small black middle class. Meanwhile, a national discourse developed that made the poor responsible for their fate by failing to pursue entrepreneurship, yet small businesses struggled to grow in an environment where access to credit and markets was not self-evident. As Maistry analyzes, the school as a major pillar of this inequality was eventually exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when an audit revealed the stark contrasts in school resources.

In her chapter focusing on education in Tanzania, Aikande Kwayu points to the fact that truancy is identified as a major factor that reduces school completion rates. As she observes, the truancy rates are highest among children marginalized by poverty and affect boys more than girls. However, school-girls' pregnancies tend to receive more political, policy, and public attention in relation to questions of access to education. Kwayu traces the moralizing discourses that accompany the categories of truancy and schoolgirl pregnancy and argues that they serve as alibis for systemic neglect of children's challenging realities of poverty and gendered discrimination. She notes how these categories and discourses blame individual boys and girls for dropping out of school, and thereby shift attention away from the government's failure to provide basic EFA in Tanzania.

Issifou Abou Moumouni enriches our understandings of how inequalities are produced and experienced by considering the perspectives of people in Benin who have not been to school. He presents an ambivalent picture: Despite the fact that there are considerable numbers of persons who are regarded as successful without having been to school, families are still willing to commit significant resources for their children to go to school. However, his interlocutors' expectations of schooling are realistic: They do not anticipate that education will secure employment or wealth; rather, they see education as creating opportunities to enhance a person's social status and literacy, which both ease interactions within the larger economy and institutions. They seek refuge in the consolation that school is not the only contributing factor to success; there is also work and faith. Indeed, Moumouni notes that many people tend to value school for facilitating the essential activities that unschooled actors struggle with, including dealing with bureaucracy and trade. Thus, different from the orthodoxy EFA promises, the production of inequality is found not only in children's unequal access to school, but also in the complex ways people are able to situate themselves in the encompassing political economy.

The final chapter of this collection comes from Hansjörg Dilger's study of how the policy goal of EFA has led to diminished quality of public schooling in Tanzania and consequently advantaged private faith-oriented schools. Through ethnographic research in two Catholic schools in Dar es Salaam, Dilger captures the contradiction that schools whose founders are motivated by concerns for social justice have become sites for perpetuating the opposite trend, charging high fees to meet operating costs, and consequently primarily serving children from middle- and upper-class families, while emphasizing how their particular schools develop morally and socially superior citizens.

Dilger's chapter attends to how school administrators, teachers, and students grapple with these contradictions. The teachers feel this inequality quite intimately because they tend to come from lower income backgrounds, and so they are conscious that their work of teaching advantaged children only perpetuates the inequality they have experienced. As Dilger notes, "the focus on the education alibi allows for a more critical look at how the diverging institutional agendas of specific educational actors have translated into concrete—often contradictory—societal developments on the ground."

Ultimately, the chapters in this last part of the book challenge whether "education for all" remains a legitimate agenda when substantial political work must be done to address the multiple factors that affect if and how African children and their societies can derive benefits from their schooling. Tracing education's entanglements with other transformations reveals its active participation—despite its alibi claiming to be occupied elsewhere—in some of the most significant moral, economic, and political challenges societies are facing.

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PART I

Responsibilization

CHAPTER 2

Responsibilizing Parents to Overcome Blindness

Changing Intergenerational Relations Through Education for All in Northern Benin

ERDMUTE ALBER

ADAMOU'S CONCERNS

In April 2022, I spoke with Adamou, a twenty-one-year-old man from the village of Tebo in the Borgu region of northern Benin, who recently started undergraduate studies in mathematics at the University of Abomey-Calavi in the south of the country.¹ He is one of only about five young people from the village—all men—who have realized their studies in Benin's first and largest university.

Adamou's pride in being the first university student in his family was combined with deep skepticism. Not yet having told his parents that he had failed three exams in the first year, he confessed that it was easier for him to talk with me about his difficulties at the beginning of his studies than with his

1. This chapter is based on field research realized in the Republic of Benin since 1992 that allowed me to accompany the life trajectories of my research partners over decades and, more specifically, on conversations I had in July 2019 about children's and parents' perspectives on schooling. This was realized in the frame of the project "Making a Living" in the Cluster of Excellency Africa Multiple at the University of Bayreuth, financed by the German Research Council (DFG). My thanks go to my research partners for friendship over decades, to the participants in the workshop "Education Alibi" in April 2022, and to my coeditors, Elizabeth Cooper and Wandia Njoya, for valuable comments and suggestions.

parents.² First, his accommodation in the household of a former headmaster in Tebo situated in the growing city of Abomey-Calavi,³ where his father had arranged for him to stay, was much too far from the university to walk and he did not have enough money for public transport. Due to the distance, he missed several classes. He did not blame his parents, because they had never been in southern Benin and did not know that the city was far too big to traverse on foot.

Adamou had also faced some conflicts with his host family, who wanted money for his accommodation and expected, as he explained, more household work than he could do. Eventually, he decided to leave the household and rented, together with some fellow students, a shared room near the university. In addition to these efforts to improve his living conditions, he had, as an absolute newcomer, to find out the written and unwritten norms of the university system, as for instance how to study for exams. All that explained, in Adamou's perception, why he failed in the first year. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about the exams he had retaken and about those in the future. Considering the difficult start as the principal reason for the failure, he trusted in his intellectual capacities.

He was more concerned about his educational career in general. His parents were paying more for him than for any of his siblings. Would they be able to continue with the little money they earned from agriculture? Given that graduate tuition was much more expensive than the nominal fees charged for undergraduate studies in Benin, how could he ever pay for a master's program? And if not, would he be able to find a job without a master's degree? He desperately needed a computer for his studies, but how could he finance it? Adamou feared enormous obstacles in his way through higher education. When I met him again in August 2022, he came with the good news that he had passed the three exams, so that he could start the second university year. But his doubts continued.

Meanwhile, his parents were proud and confident. Adamou's father as well as his mother were glad that at least one of their children was able to study in Abomey-Calavi, despite they themselves being "blind." What this blindness meant, Adamou's father said, was that they were not able to read and write, had never visited the south of the country, and lacked knowledge

2. Reflecting on my positionality and Adamou's trust in me, I was at the same time an outsider not involved in the village's rumors and an insider who knew his parents as well as the University of Abomey-Calavi better than others of his acquaintances in the village.

3. No longer a small village in the neighborhood of the capital, Abomey-Calavi has today more than one million inhabitants.

and networks to support their son there. However, they trusted his abilities to find his way.

As often when talking with rural parents and their adolescent children two decades after the turn of the millennium, I noticed a discrepancy between parents' hopes and children's doubts when listening to their perceptions of the educational pathways of today's generations. Adamou's pride and concern over being the first son of Tebo to study mathematics reflects a generational problem he and his contemporaries face in Benin. Born in 2002, he is part of a cohort that I call the *education for all* generation, a generation shaped by large-scale educational campaigns at the beginning of the new millennium. In those years, the whole country was flooded with billboards, posters, and media advertisements encouraging parents to send all their children to school. Financed by international donors such as USAID and Save the Children, and reproducing the moralizing discourses of the *aid industry* (see below), the nation-state of Benin attempted to realize this millennial development goal by promoting primary schooling all over the country. However, without any monitoring system to ensure compulsory education or other measures to guarantee a fair and equalizing schooling system, the campaigns mainly addressed parents' readiness to send their children to school. Adamou is a successful representative of this generation: He reached the university level without repeating any classes. He is a good illustration of the success of these campaigns, since many of his older siblings had not attended school. In contrast, he and his younger siblings were all enrolled, at least for a while.

Educational politics and policy ignore the concerns Adamou and his family face. While access to primary education is free of charge, families have to pay when sending their children to secondary schools.⁴ A few years before the *education for all* campaigns started, in 1987, university grants for students, which had covered every student since the foundation of the first university in 1970, had been eliminated. Education had become a field to be largely covered financially by the families (Banégas 2003: 97). The campaigns did not address other concerns such as the financing of higher education through grants, or the employment of sufficient teachers for the public schools (Tama 2014: 80–81). To the contrary, the official discourse declared compulsory schooling as the main pathway to a better future exactly at a time when austerity measures led to a significant reduction of the number of civil servants in general (Banégas 2003: 76ff.) and especially of teachers (Tama 2014: 80–

4. The amount of school fees for a school year in a public secondary school is 12.000 FCFA, or about 20 Euro.

81). Consequently, realizing *education for all* was in fact attributed to parents and children themselves.

In this chapter, I look at these discrepancies between the national goal of education for all, which follows what Resnik (2006) has called the unquestioned and depoliticized “black box” of education as making for economic growth, and the constraints young men and women from the rural areas face during their educational careers. These discrepancies are mitigated but not solved by parents’ efforts to support their children, often while lacking resources.

Focusing on parents’ perceptions of their children’s life trajectories, I address changing intergenerational relations and especially changing parental responsibilities of care. My argument is that education for all tremendously increased parental responsibilities, not only for children’s enrollment, but also for other expenses entwined with their schooling trajectories. How could it be that education for all led to such an extension of care responsibilities? Sending children to school does not at all mean that they will successfully finish. And even if they do, this does not always lead to a successful integration in the job market. Indeed, that can require additional expenses. Education for all responsabilizes parents, first for the direct expenses of schooling and then for other expenses that follow, because many children leave school without being able to finance themselves. Some of these costs are for marriage and pregnancies, but also for additional apprenticeships or investments in income generation activities. In sum, parents of education-for-all children cover much more than the generations before.

The empirical material I present in the following focuses on parents and children more than on the nation-state of Benin and its entanglements with global education players, as well as with international and national NGOs (see Hook, this volume). To embed my argument and the case studies in the political history of the country, the next section gives an overview of the history of schooling in Benin, with special attention to the north. I then consider parents’ changing moralities and the shifts in care responsibilities by looking at two gendered case studies.

A HISTORY OF SCHOOLING IN NORTHERN BENIN

When my friends in the village of Tebo narrate the past, they rarely use national changes such as the independence of Dahomey/Benin as tempo-

ral points of reference. By contrast, the date of the construction of the primary school building in Tebo is frequently used as a marker of time; for instance, someone would tell me that she was born in the year before the school was built. This time marker underlines the importance of education in local perceptions. The construction of the school building was one of the most important events in the history of the village in the twentieth century. It enabled families to enroll their children at home and later send them to secondary schools in other places, to be hosted by others. Mentioning the building of the school also demonstrates that narrating history is based on concrete and specific, and often generation-related, experiences and perspectives. And it relates changing individual and local experiences to changing national politics.

Schooling in Benin began as part of the colonial project, far away from large parts of the population such as the people in Tebo. With independence, the socialist phase, and later democratization and neoliberalization, schooling mirrored significant national and global transformations.

The first mission schools in what was then called Dahomey, the colonial name for the future Republic of Benin, were introduced in the late nineteenth century. Located exclusively in the south, they had a decisive influence on the political history of the colony. The whole political elite who later organized the nation's independence and formed the state administration, government, and political parties, was educated between 1900 and 1920 in these first mission schools (Banégas 2003: 40–41), even if these were educating, as elsewhere in the African colonies, “Africans for inferiority” (Corby 1990; see also Fichtner 2012: 40ff.).

Colonial education also contributed to stabilize the colonial concept of the *évolués* (developed), as distinct from the *indigènes* (Indigenous) who had not attended school. This colonial divide was also anchored in the colonial law that put *indigènes* under customary and *évolués* under French law.⁵ Thus, colonial schooling established the production of distinguished elites seen as deserving positions in the state administration. This went alongside a devaluation of those without access to schooling. Until today, the divide is mirrored in self-ascriptions like that of Adamou's father describing himself as blind. Being blind, or not having opened one's eyes, is the most frequent metaphor

5. Part of the construction of the *indigènes* and the divide between these and *évolués* was the introduction of a codified customary law for this category in Dahomey, the so-called Coutumier de Dahomey. See Médénuovo 2004 and in more detail Cornevin 1962: 407–410.

used in conversations when people in Benin describe themselves as different from those who are educated. Blindness in this sense is a frequent metaphor for not seeing oneself as enlightened, or sometimes even civilized, perpetuating the colonial binary of *indigène* versus *évolué*, and even today influencing parents' hopes that their children will distinguish themselves through schooling.

In 1906, with the creation of the status of civil servant teachers as important part of colonial education policy (Bierschenk 2014: 7; Fichtner 2012: 40), colonial schools complemented mission schools in offering education. Like other colonial infrastructure, schooling in Dahomey mirrored a north/south divide in which backwardness was attributed to the north. Here possibilities of becoming an *évolué* started later. Starting with a primary school in Parakou in 1909,⁶ the first schools were opened in the administrative centers and were limited to these locations for a long time. During the entire colonial period, children from the north were sent, after finishing primary school, to the south to advance their schooling, either in colonial or in mission boarding schools, where the costs for their living were covered either by missionaries or by the colonial state. By the end of colonialism, there was not a single secondary school in northern Dahomey. Consequently, more than 80 percent of the about ninety thousand children enrolled in school in 1960, the year of independence, were originally based in the south of the country (Asiwaju 1975a and 1975b). The notoriety of Dahomey as a center with many *évolués* earned it the nickname *Quartier latin* of French West Africa (corresponding with the Latin Quarter of Paris, which is famous as the location of the Sorbonne and the gathering place of intellectuals).⁷ However, this ascription held only for the south of the country.

All in all, only some hundred children from the whole north attended school during the entire period of colonization, among them nobody from the village of Tebo. This contributed to a local perception of schooling as a radical exception in children's life courses. Those few children from the north

6. Archives Nationales de Benin, Serie 26, Rapport Mensuel Trimestriel, Borgou, May 1910.

7. The nickname of Dahomey as *Quartier latin* of French West Africa is present in the colonial literature as well as in popular representations. See for instance www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/benin/2-le-dahomey-quartier-latin-et-enfant-malade-de-l-afrique. It refers to the fact that Dahomey sent more of its citizens to work in the colonial administration in French West Africa than other colonies. Before independence, professional trajectories of people working in the colonial administration were not organized nationally; they circulated in the whole territory the French governed.

who were enrolled took life paths very much distinguished from those of their siblings. They were often considered highly successful. Their educational careers and later working conditions brought them into living circumstances, habits, and workplaces that had almost nothing to do with the experiences of their age-mates. In consequence, educated children were expected to build up their later life trajectories, to found households in the cities, to create their own marriage choices, and to establish family norms that were different from those of their kin in the villages.⁸

Independence brought an acceleration in the development of schooling, and new educational hopes. Already in 1972 the number of children in school had increased to two hundred thousand. The pace accelerated during the socialist period from 1972 to 1990, when, for the first time, national educational programs started to build primary schools in rural centers. This was done all over the country and included larger villages like Tebo, which had at that time a population of about one thousand inhabitants. During the socialist period, a system of rotation of civil servants and the willingness to promote the northern regions in general as well as careers of people from the north⁹ contributed to the first reduction in the educational gap and differences in access to the state between north and south (Banégas 2003: 66ff.).¹⁰ This was also a period of experimentation with new forms of education linked to the socialist vision of the nation. Increased state investment in primary education went along with a ban on private schools, at that time still mainly Christian missionary schools (Tama 2014: 24ff.). The number of pupils increased to almost a million by 2000 (Guingnido et al. 2001). The opening of schools and implementation of possibilities for students included the establishment of secondary schools in the department centers in northern Benin, and, in the south, the establishment of the first university, the Université Nationale du Bénin.¹¹

8. Here I am referring to life histories of children enrolled during the colonial period that I collected for research on the transformative power of schooling on child-fostering practices. See Alber 2018: 159ff.

9. Matthieu Kerekou, the socialist president of the country, was himself from the north.

10. Part of this project to overcome the dominance of the south could also be seen in the renaming of the nation-state. The former name, Dahomey, was that of the most powerful (southern) kingdom of slave traders, very much feared all over the country. Benin, the name of the bight of the country's seaside, was seen as neutral.

11. The process of founding a national university in Dahomey/Benin started immediately after independence, but took some time until the Université Nationale du Bénin was founded in 1972 (uac.bj/decouvrir-luniversite/historique). It was renamed University of Abomey-Calavi in

This first wave of opening pathways to education all over the country was accompanied with excellent career prospects in the growing national bureaucracy of the socialist government. Not only were boarding schools free of charge, but every university student got a grant on which he or she could live independently of the parents. Furthermore, every university graduate would be employed in the state bureaucracy. Until the late 1980s, even a primary school certificate was enough to become a policeman, enter the army, or to become a primary teacher in a local school.

However, the policy of constantly increasing public services burdened the national economy. As Bierschenk (2014: 7) argued, due to the high cost of public services, Benin was already almost bankrupt when it gained independence. The resulting tensions prepared the ground for the political crisis at the end of the 1980s that ended the socialist phase.

Two main experiences with schooling could be seen as stable during colonial times and up until 1990. First, completing school was the preferred pathway to become an *évolué*, gaining access to the national state bureaucracy and to urban elites. Second, the few who were able to overcome difficulties in entering a schooling pathway and managing to finish primary school would find good positions in the administration fairly easy to achieve. Obstacles to entering schooling were manifold, however. Many of my research partners talked about the difficulties in convincing parents to send them to school; others narrated that their parents selected their siblings when deciding whom to enroll. In many places, schools were not available, and some told me of not having known about possible advantages of schooling, or not being able to endure sitting the whole day in a classroom. Or they did not want to be the exception and preferred to share the daily routines with other children. In contrast, those enrolled seemed to proceed relatively easily, and once they had become university students, they were already seen as members of the expanding state bureaucracy.

These institutional dynamics came to an abrupt stop in 1987 when, in the middle of the financial crisis of the state of Benin, World Bank structural adjustment policies forced the government to end the policy of expanding the state bureaucracy. Banégas calls this time the “end of the postcolonial compromise” (2003: 76), claiming that the state’s quasi-insolvency immedi-

2001, when the second university, the Université de Parakou, started to function (<http://www.univ-parakou.bj-historique>), allowing young men and women from northern Benin to study in their home region.

ately curbed the policy of hiring all educated people into the civil service. The shift was radical, as if within one day university students were no longer guaranteed employment, and a first wave of unemployed educated men and, to a lesser degree, women was produced. The economic crisis first led to the acceptance of the structural adjustment policies, and then to a political crisis that ended with a “democratic renewal” and the end of the socialist government in 1990.¹²

While the previous policy of guaranteed employment has been criticized internationally for creating an excessive state bureaucracy and producing imbalanced national finances, it had provided predictable career possibilities for those enrolled and contributed to the deep optimism about individual career progress that dominated perceptions of schooling for a long time.

The phase of “democratic renewal” brought contradictory changes for the educational landscape. Structural adjustment programs consolidated the financial situation of the nation-state. At the same time, these austerity programs were accompanied by efforts to invest in education (Igue 1999: 77ff.; Banégas 2003: 82ff.). In 2003, a first National Action Plan for the implementation of education for all started with the aim to guarantee the state’s provision of primary education for every child, all over the country (Fichtner 2012: 96ff.). This program financed the construction of primary schools in nearly every village. At the same time, the policy of hiring teachers changed fundamentally. A growing number of contracted temporary teachers with low salaries were hired in addition to the few teachers still recruited as civil servants. Consequently, teachers’ statuses and salaries became highly differentiated, and a process of class formation among teachers started (Tama 2014: 80ff.). An increasing number of unemployed university graduates found low-paid temporary positions in the educational sector.

Subsequently, parents were asked to increase their share of the payments to the schooling system. Such contributions included paying for additional teachers in public schools that the state could not afford. While schools became more accessible in the countryside, their quality decreased. These trends continued when a program of building secondary schools in the countryside began in 2005. With this, secondary education became accessible throughout the country, but with great disparities in quality. In 2015, about three million pupils were enrolled (République du Bénin 2018: 39).

12. Concerning the democratic renewal and the structural adjustment policies, see Banégas 2003; Igue 1999: 74ff.

An important step toward neoliberalizing the educational sector was the reopening of private schools. Christian schools had been closed during the socialist period (1975–1990), but were reopened after 1990. With the addition of other faith-based schools, mainly Muslim schools, or international schools, which became the choice for national elites, a market of possibilities for children’s education emerged, with large varieties in quality, prestige, and resources. Education transformed to become an important business. In 2015, about 25 percent of all pupils were enrolled in private schools (République du Bénin 2018: 39). The growing sector of private schooling also provided economic opportunities for wealthier people: Creating a private school became one way to generate income for those parts of the society that also sent their children to private schools.

Public schools as well required increasing support from private funds, as Sara Fichtner’s monograph (2012) argues. Parents financed salaries of additional contract teachers, infrastructure expenses, children’s school meals, and the additional costs of teaching supplies. Institutional actors, such as NGOs and parents’ associations, complemented the efforts of the state in financing and developing schools. After the democratic renewal, international and global donors also increasingly entered the local arenas of education.

Despite these processes of commodification of the educational sector, the official rhetoric of the nation-state of Benin constantly claims it pursues educational policies to promote equality. In 2018, the third “Education Sector Plan (ESP) for 2018–2030,” articulating the state’s educational policy for the next decade, was published. It declares a bold aspiration to become, by 2030, a country whose “education system will ensure access of all learners, without distinction, to the skills, entrepreneurial spirit and innovation that will make them well rounded, competent and competitive citizens able to secure economic growth, sustainable development and national cohesion” (République du Bénin 2018: 18). As with Benin’s previous national education plans, a significant number of international institutions and donors, such as the World Bank, USAID, UNICEF, Save the Children, and many others, produced the plan together with state bureaucrats representing the ministry (République du Bénin 2018: 11). This demonstrates how deeply international donors and (national and international) NGOs contribute to the making of the state’s educational politics. As Fichtner argues, NGOs, international donors and institutions, and other actors on the “aid and development market” (2012: 32) are deeply entangled with state structures; the fact is that many actors individually change between both job markets. Pushed

by the spreading of pedagogical concepts from Europe and the United States, and the investment of large sums for infrastructure and schooling campaigns by these donors, the nation-state of Benin implemented several educational reforms without involving teachers or parents (Fichtner 2012: 52). Entangled with the aid and development market and numerous international actors, an independent policy of the state, different from that of NGOs or donors, cannot be identified (Fichtner 2012: 52). Rather, the educational politics of the nation-state in Benin is largely coined by the moralizing discourses of these institutions. As the main investments in the education programs came from these outside actors, the main marker of the nation-state's educational politics has become the production of moralizing discourses about the importance of education, while not actively steering and building a national educational system independent from the international institutions that could contribute to the declared aims of equality of chances, balance, and a good education for all.

The equalizing discourses and visions of education for all, coproduced by the state and the aid market, promise the creation of possibilities. However, the appeal to send every child to school only addresses parents' responsibilities. Responsibilizing parents veils the state's unwillingness, and maybe inability, to cover the costs of the educational system. Furthermore, the seemingly equalizing plea to enroll every child hides an important process of creating inequalities. In the highly differentiated schooling system, disparities in parents' economic situatedness are translated into highly unequal situations of learning and remarkable differences between different schools (for South Africa, see Maistry, this volume). While rural parents often lack the resources to send their children to good schools, they often also lack the knowledge to properly support their children in their schooling trajectories, as I accounted for in the opening story of Adamou.

In sum, since the democratic renewal in 1990, the introduction of private schools, the large education-for-all campaigns at the beginning of the new millennium, and the lack of an independent state politics to reduce the increasing inequalities in the educational sector, the old experience of schooling as being an exceptional but predictable path toward a good position in the administration was gradually replaced by a new experience. Schooling, no longer experienced as a matter of choice, became a child's right for which the parents have to pay. At the same time, education lost its ability to provide secure career paths for children. In the next section, I will concretize these findings by zooming in on the example of one rural family.

FAILED HOPE IN SCHOOLING CAREERS: YAROU'S SONS

Yarou, about seventy-five years old, is a small agriculturalist in the village of Tebo who had already decided before the educational campaigns to send all his children to school. Having never had the chance to learn to read and write, or to speak French, he had a clear conviction that his children should be educated. Here he differed from others in the village, who tended to only enroll some of their children, while the majority went directly into agricultural work.¹³

Yarou has invested much of the proceeds of each year's harvest in his children's school fees, supplies and transportation costs, and training programs. However, only one of his ten children has completed high school. Several others, among them all of his daughters, dropped out during primary school. However, even those sons who left to study at secondary schools in other places did not manage to continue through the university level.

The only son who managed to finish secondary school entered the University of Parakou, but left after one year because he felt lost and failed some exams. Furthermore, he had impregnated a young woman from Tebo. He took her back to the village and asked his parents to care for her and their child. Later he too returned to Tebo to work in the fields, in the hope of eventually continuing his education. Another son failed the final examinations at secondary school several times. Yarou paid to send him to another school to try again, and later also paid the fees for a private nursing school. However, just as the son had finished, a new educational reform invalidated diplomas from most private nursing schools because the curricula were not officially registered. He returned to Tebo as well, where he joined the young lady he had impregnated during his schooling career and their newborn child. Yarou paid for an apprenticeship for her because she had become pregnant while still being enrolled. Like his brother, that son returned to agricultural work, hoping for another chance.

Two other sons were sent to Koranic schools when young. One became a driver for a politician in the capital but had to return to Tebo when his employer left the government. He returned with his wife and two children. The other son did quite well in school and was therefore awarded a travel grant to continue his religious studies in Sudan. However, Yarou told me that

13. In 2002, I did some statistics about schooling: Of the almost one thousand children born between 1950 and 2000, about 70 percent were never enrolled (Alber 2014: 348).

somebody from an urban family had access to the list of travel grants and at the last minute replaced his name with his own son's. As a result, that son, too, finally returned to Tebo, with the visa for Sudan still in his hand.

The only one of Yarou's sons whose sees his own trajectory as successful is Ousmane, the eldest son. He had left school three years before the final exams—voluntarily and against his father's will—at the age of sixteen in 1997. He felt that his father needed help in the fields because all younger siblings were enrolled. At that time, Ousmane had considered his level of schooling to be sufficient for a later career in the civil service. However, degree inflation in Benin meant that after only a few years, the level of education he had achieved was no longer enough to access formal work. As the oldest living son, he gradually took over the leadership of the family compound from his father and managed the resources of the farm, which enabled him to buy a car for his younger brother so that he could return to work as a taxi driver. Ousmane once told me that if he had known that all his younger brothers would return to the village anyway, he would have continued his schooling career. But at the time of his decision, that was not foreseeable.

Although he acknowledges that as the new family head he is better off than his younger brothers who left school with higher qualifications than himself, Ousmane still regrets not having listened to his father and continuing school. Nevertheless, his self-assessment remains positive, thanks to the fact that he has become his father's successor and performs an important role in supporting younger family members in their educational pursuits.

Yarou himself claims that he had hoped for much more for his sons and expresses deep disappointment that none of them succeeded in completing university. He still sees schooling as essential and insists that he will continue to send every grandchild to school in the small hope that one might succeed.

The example of Yarou supporting his sons' life trajectories is typical for rural parents of today. Even if only a small minority of rural children manages to finish school, parental engagement is strong in supporting school-going children by paying school fees or searching for places for children to stay in cities while they attend schools. However, their children's careers do not meet at all the expectations for which the parents' support was intended.

Beyond school fees, Yarou and his wives (and later their eldest son, Ousmane) were confronted with additional responsibilities produced by their children's schooling careers: for instance, taking care of their sons' marriages and children while the sons attended school, or paying for additional learning

such as the private nursery school, or for the driver's license and a taxi car that one son needed to return to his profession, or for the apprenticeship for a daughter-in-law after she became impregnated during her school career. For a parent like Yarou, who had never left his home village, the enrollment of his children did not lead to careers in the public service, as he had wished, but to activities outside the village that required additional resources.

These examples also tell us that returning to the village is always an option if none of the options outside the village work. From the perspective of the parents in the village, returnees have to be supported with food and living costs before contributing again to the family economy of the common fields.

Yarou's children's trajectories also demonstrate that, despite complicated obstacles in their educational careers, their struggles and those of their parents to support them could not at all be described as "waitthood" (Honwana 2012), but rather as hustling and finding ways to make something out of the vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks 2006) found in failed exams, pregnancies, lack of money, or lost job opportunities. To find ways toward a future is not an individual task alone but a relational process of making a living in which parents are actively involved and see themselves as responsible over time. Part of this is a continuous, active search for alternative routes, as, for instance, obtaining a driver's license while in Koranic school, searching for alternative diplomas, or returning to agricultural work when activities in town do not work out. Rural children's life trajectories are highly influenced by their parents, who make up for the lack of obvious opportunities by contributing with their knowledge, care, and financial resources. Yarou's Islamic conviction let him place two sons in Koranic education, and his support allowed another son to study at a private nursing school. Yet, as Yarou acknowledged, it was also his advice that led his son to attend a nursing school whose diplomas later became invalid. Yarou felt responsible for that decision, which he related to his being uneducated, or, in his own words, a *blind* peasant who did not know better. He interpreted the unfulfilled schooling careers of his sons to his own failings, which he in turn attributed to his ignorance.

In fact, intergenerational relations are shaped not only by parental capacities, but also and sometimes even more by the lack of them. Against the equalizing rhetoric of "education for all," the example of Yarou and his sons demonstrates the difficulties for rural children to perform in an educational system that highly privileges urban upper- and middle-class children studying in private schools. In fact, rural children's difficulties produce additional responsibilities for their parents.

ACCOMPANYING DAUGHTERS: DADO'S PERSPECTIVE

Educational trajectories and the related responsibilities are not gender neutral. They affect not only boys and girls differently but also fathers and mothers differently. This chapter cannot go into detail concerning the complex spousal negotiations of responsibilities. At the risk of overgeneralizing, I suggest that the attribution of tasks within a rural couple in northern Benin tends to go alongside the husband's responsibility for the agricultural work and, on that basis, for financing the basic needs of the households and its members. Wives are attributed responsibility for the work in the household, including the preparation of meals, but also for networking through marriage and other relations. Costs for schooling fees are primarily seen as paternal tasks; however, in practice and due to the availability of resources, mothers often contribute substantially as well.

Changes in parental responsibilities are linked to the specific challenges of gendered schooling trajectories. I will now look at a mother and her children, with a special emphasis on the girls' trajectories. Dado, a peasant woman, is about fifty years old, the birth mother of four daughters and two sons, and the foster mother of several other children. Her daughters' schooling careers are typical for rural girls in the area. Like Yarou, Dado deeply believes that there is no alternative to sending one's children to school today, whatever it may cost. In July 2019, she told me: "Whatever happens, nobody should be able to say, 'My life is like that because they did not send me to school!'" (translation from Baatonum, EA).

In insisting that her children should never hold her responsible for not having attended school, Dado refers to her specific generational experience: At her time, the few selected children, mainly boys, who went to school succeeded, whereas some of their siblings felt left out and later expressed regret for not having been selected. Many said that their lives would have been different if they had had the chance to be enrolled. This implicit responsabilizing or criticizing of parents is what Dado wants to avoid. Here she refers to a notion of schooling as a child's right, which makes it a moral obligation for parents to enroll them. Indeed, there are today rumors and critical discourses in the villages about those who do not send their children to school, thus reflecting the discourse of "education for all." With this understanding of schooling as a sign of proper parenting, Dado acknowledges the responsabilizing message of the education-for-all campaigns, that parents who do not send their children to school do not properly parent.

Nevertheless, her two oldest daughters, born before the campaigns, were fostered by relatives and did not go to school.¹⁴ The third daughter, Falli, born in 1992, was the first girl in the family to be enrolled. She was a promising pupil and, after finishing primary school in Tebo, continued at the new secondary school in a neighboring village, where she lived with her great-aunt. After she failed the BEPC examination four years later,¹⁵ her mother strongly encouraged her to continue. However, Falli decided to move in with her boyfriend's family in another city and continue with a two-year course to become a nurse's aide. This was understood as an engagement between her and the boy, and in such cases, the in-laws are normally seen as responsible for a young woman. However, Dado paid for the tuition by herself, so that her daughter would maintain some option if she wanted to break up with the young man and continue her education. When Falli finished her course, she became pregnant by him. She then started to work in a community hospital in another village, where she met another man and had a second child. Dado took in the first child and enrolled her in the primary school in Tebo. Thus, she also enabled her daughter to continue her trajectory of a professional working mother being able to divorce and reorient.

Dado's fourth child, a son, went to school, but his father withdrew him before he finished primary school because he needed help in the fields. Dado could not dissuade him because it was obvious that one of the sons would be needed to take over the farm. As it was seen as the father's domain to decide about the future management of the family farm, he had the moral right to make this decision.

The fifth child, Adama, was the girl who should have had the most opportunities. She was placed in a foster arrangement with wealthier acquaintances in Parakou, the biggest city in northern Benin, where she was enrolled in an urban public school, seen as more promising. However, after two years she was accused of misbehavior and had to return to her birth parents. After finishing primary school, she was sent to the secondary school in another vil-

14. Concerning fostering as the typical way of bringing up children in the Borgu region, see Alber 2018. My statistics showed that enrollment was much lower in the case of fostered children, and very low in the case of fostered girls. Of children born between 1950 and 2000 in three villages, only 9 percent of fostered girls went to school (Alber 2018: 221).

15. The *brévet d'études du premier cycle du second degré* (BEPC) qualification in Francophone countries follows six years of primary and four years of secondary school. After the BEPC, which is required for many professions and training schools, the *baccalauréat*, the high school diploma, requires three further years of study.

lage, like her older sister before. Two years later, she became pregnant. Dado asked the parents of her daughter's boyfriend to take care of her. However, she told me sadly, the boy's mother refused to support Adama or the child, claiming that it was not her problem that her son had impregnated somebody. This led to Dado's decision that Adama should have an abortion, which she did in the third month of the pregnancy. It was a difficult vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2006), but without any help from the side of the in-laws, Dado saw it as impossible to manage her daughter's situation differently. She also declared that the parents could not afford to support a baby and pay more school fees as well. She hoped that Adama would, after that experience, be more cautious in the future. However, after some time, her daughter got pregnant by another young man, and his parents did what they should have done according to Dado's moral judgment: they paid the bride price and the marriage costs. Adama moved into her husband's parents' household, delivered there, and started later on an apprenticeship to become a tailor, paid for by the in-laws.

Dado had expected another career for her daughter, but she is content that Adama's boyfriend's parents did what she sees as appropriate, namely to take care for their daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, Dado is also caring not only for Falli's daughter but also for a son of her foster son who impregnated a young woman during his schooling career. The young woman left the school, delivered in Dado's household, and started an apprenticeship for which Dado and her husband are paying, whereas the foster son still tries, after having failed the final exams of secondary school, to find another educational path outside the village.

For rural girls, the risk of pregnancy during secondary schools is omnipresent. It requires negotiating the consequences by deciding about marriage and mothering or abortion and continued schooling. The theme is also quite present in moralizing discourses on girls' schooling (see also Masquelier, this volume).

Dado's frustration is that rural parents cannot prevent their daughters from getting pregnant, especially because those in secondary school do not live at home. Like many other mothers, she blames parents. According to her, parents are too poor to give their daughters what they want and need. Dado considers the girls to be seeking out contact with boys and men partially in order to find financial support during schooling. When I first asked her how she sees the possibilities of schooling, she spontaneously said: "What should I see? We were told to send all our girls to school, but instead of returning with

exams in their pocket, they come with pregnancies, and we have to find out ways to sort them out of these situations!”

Technologies of protection—contraceptives, abortions, or surveillance—are seen as the only way to get girls through school successfully. Dado, like other mothers, paid for abortions and contraceptives for her daughters. She claims that one must constantly warn the girls not to become pregnant.¹⁶ In fact, the only girl from Tebo who managed to get through a schooling career without pregnancy grew up in a Christian boarding school. The surveillance offered in boarding schools is seen as another pathway of protecting girls. The unspoken story behind the high number of pregnancies of rural girls is inequality: It is shared knowledge that girls from lower income groups have a much higher risk of becoming pregnant than girls from better-off families.

CHANGING PARENTAL MORALITIES WITHIN IRREDUCIBLE ASYMMETRIES

Dado’s and Yarou’s care for their children’s trajectories is shaped by their specific generational experiences, and by the specific needs of their children produced in a specific historical time. I will now look at the parental moralities and understandings of care, which are shaped by overlapping and entwined, but not identical, lifetimes.

Parenting is a relational concept that describes multiplicities of moralities, actions, care, knowledge transmission, and feelings in specific historical moments in which the intergenerational relations are emerging. Parent-child relationships are often seen as symmetric, as for instance expressed in the idea of an intergenerational contract that puts emphasis on balance over time. It assumes that parents owe their children what they have received from their own parents. This idea of reciprocity is also present in local perceptions of parental relationships in Benin and neighboring countries (Häberlein 2018).

School attendance campaigns argue in the same vein of intergenerational reciprocity when stressing that the future of the country depends on enrolling the totality of a nation’s children, who will enroll their children as well. However, the idea that anybody might give one’s children the same education that

16. Early pregnancy and schooling is a large issue in the literature. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks has extensively described related vital conjunctures (2002, 2006). On transactional sex and the relational moralities of parents and children see also Cole 2004.

one was given by his or her parents is a delusion. Moralities, needs, and care obligations are changing, be it at the level of national productions of parental obligations, as in the school attendance campaigns, or in the realm of everyday parenting in households.

In contrast to the idea of balance and reciprocity, parent-child relations are sometimes experienced as asymmetrical, which some theorists, as for instance Marilyn Strathern (2011), have grounded in asymmetries in knowledge. In the case studies presented here, this asymmetry of knowledge, or of acknowledging parenthood, is important in conflicts, as for instance when Dado wanted the in-laws to take responsibility for the pregnancy of her daughter and, thus, to act as good parents. In her perception, the boyfriend's mother clearly refused to parent by not acknowledging that she should care for her son by paying the costs for his marriage and childbirth, as a good mother does.

Dado's and Yarou's ways of parenting uncover another asymmetry, which results from the fact that parents and children share overlapping and entwined but not synchronized lifetimes.¹⁷ The concept of entwined lifetimes was defined by Whyte, Alber, and Geissler (2004: 1) as having "different pasts and different futures and sharing a present that . . . is being radically affected by historical transformations." These differences in lifetimes and the implications for generation-specific experiences have been theorized by Karl Mannheim ([1928] 1964), who argued that these divergent generational experiences, based on "fresh contact," shape societal change. At the same time, the entwinement of lifetimes provides, following Coe (2015), the task to orchestrate overlapping lifetimes. Yarou's and Dado's care for their children is based on their time-specific generational experiences, which were not identical with those of their parents and are not at all similar to those of their children. Taking care for the enrollment of ideally every child is an essential part of their generation-specific understanding of good parenting. This stands in contrast to their own experiences when young, when sending children to school was not part of a shared understanding of good parenting and nobody was criticized for not sending every child to school. This very asynchrony means that no generation can fully reciprocate, just because the norms of good parenting are changing together with societal change. Often, but not always, these changes in parent's moralities lead to conflicts about parental duties, which involve negotiating understandings of parenting as well, as the conflict around Adama's pregnancy demonstrates.

17. On the problem of orchestrating overlapping lifetimes, see also Coe 2015.

Within these conditions of asymmetrical normativities in parenting, the education-for-all campaigns at the beginning of the millennium, together with the commodification of the schooling system, reshaped parental moralities of care, with important consequences for family economies. As described, the changes transgressed the educational realm in a narrower sense. Appropriate parenting today also concerns the costs for pregnancies during unfinished schooling careers of girls and boys, but with different outcomes. With the boys, the main parental task is to take care of the pregnant girlfriends; in the case of girls, in-laws are expected to help the pregnant daughter-in-law to continue education with an apprenticeship. With that background, it seems obvious why girls' parents are reluctant to blame the young men who impregnate their daughters: like Dado, most of them have sons who have done the same. Parents of pregnant girls usually try to make sure that the parents of the boys take responsibility for the girls and pay the costs of the birth and expenses for the baby, but do not blame the in-laws in general.

Giving a child a husband or wife and being responsible for the costs of bride price, dowry, and the wedding rituals has for a long time been seen as the most important parental obligation. It ensured children became adults through marriage and passed through the important and transitional moment of their first marriage. The introduction of schooling as alternative pathway to adulthood transformed this scheme for those enrolled. Instead of caring for the marriage, parents covered the costs for schooling, accepting that children would later live in town and develop a lifestyle different from that in the village, which included caring by themselves for their marriages. Part of the expectation was that these adults would be wealthier than their parents.

However, as it has become increasingly difficult for children to meet these expectancies, becoming independent in town is often no longer possible. Many boys and girls are already involved in sexual relationships during their educational careers. Marriage and childbirth, often starting during their schooling careers, influence the educational trajectories as well. As the example of Adama demonstrates, parents might also influence these decisions. And finally, it has become the exception that young men and women successfully join the formal labor market. In consequence, parents are responsabilized for children's marriage costs even if they were enrolled in school, at least for the many children who return to rural areas. Schooling costs, for some time seen as a kind of substitute for marriage costs, have become an obligation to be covered, if possible, for every child. With the increasing number of children

dropping out of school, it has now become mandatory for parents to take responsibility, if needed, for both schooling and marriage.

CONCLUSION: THE DESIRE TO OVERCOME BLINDNESS

Education-for-all campaigns contributed to the development of immense hopes and aspirations for new life trajectories of children in Benin, especially because in their parents' generation finishing secondary school almost always ensured important careers in the state bureaucracy. Embedded in neoliberal commodification of education, moralized through the education-for-all campaigns and policies and the national discourse, coproduced by state actors and the educational *aid industry*, that schooling is every child's right, parental responsibilities deeply changed in the last years. In addition to parents' responsibility to pay for marriage and childbirth, the enrollment of every child has become a significant task of parental care. This moral duty has become independent from the expected outcome: Even knowing that there may be only a small chance that schooling will really help their children to succeed, parents see themselves as obliged to send their children to school. In addition, they are caring for the costs of marriage, apprenticeships, childcare, and other needs associated with the new life challenges children encounter once they have experienced education. Yet the most important expectation of rural parents in investing in all these needs is that their children should, if possible, do better than themselves and continue their trajectories in more urban environment. However, parental expectancies remain largely unfulfilled. Some parents decide to take their children out of school, as Dado's husband did, just after having demonstrated his goodwill by enrolling his son for some years. But, in general, parents continue to invest in children's schooling, hoping that they will have a chance to succeed.

As mentioned, the metaphor of preventing *blindness* (which I take as a local concept) through schooling is ubiquitous in my research area. Overcoming blindness is the most frequent desire I heard from parents reflecting about their aspirations, but also the most frequent justification of why children should be educated. Parents responsabilize themselves for their children's failures with a reference to their own blindness. One might understand this self-recrimination as an internalization of the responsabilizing of parents by the schooling campaigns and, more broadly, profound acceptance of the neoliberal argument of individualized responsibility. One might also want

to think that by claiming responsibility on their own, parents are protecting their children in the given difficult conditions from the shame of being responsible for not performing sufficiently well at school. Referring to their own blindness, parents also allude to poverty and the difficult circumstances in which they became or remained blind.

The moral and economic pressure on parents to bear the costs for children's education hides the scandal that neither nation-states nor international donors undertake efforts to work on a schooling system that helps children from poor backgrounds to perform as well as their wealthier age-mates. The equalizing message of the education-for-all campaigns, and the spirit of the cited third Education Sector Plan (ESP) for 2018–2030 remains an alibi that hides the nation-state's unwillingness to invest in an educational system that gives the children of rural agriculturalists a real chance. Under the conditions of today, only a few exceptional rural children successfully finish higher education and find good jobs in the formal labor market. Although much more disenchanted about his educational prospects than his father, Adamou still believes he will be among them.

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CHAPTER 3

Symbolic Investment, Actual Indebtedness

The Competing Logics of the School Sector in the Contemporary DRC (Lubumbashi, Haut-Katanga)

EDOARDO QUARETTA

In 2017,¹ I sat at the St. Matthias High School in Kasungami, on the outskirts of Lubumbashi, with school accountant Richard as he reviewed the student register of the IV B section. Richard was running his finger down the last column of the register and loudly uttering each student's name and the sum of Congolese francs written next to each name. In a desolate tone, Richard said to me "Students end [the school year] with a lot of debt," adding, "Most of the parents in Kasungami—either they are unemployed or do not have a fixed salary." Richard was referring to a perennial problem that all schools in the country face, which is the inability of parents to pay school fees and the subsequent accumulation of debts students' families owe to the schools. Richard was preoccupied because a large part of teachers' salaries and expenses for the daily running of the school depend on students paying the *frais d'intervention ponctuelle* (occasional intervention fees) or FIP (De Herdt et al. 2012), which are school fees paid monthly in both public and private schools.

The same day, at 2:00 p.m., Richard closed the school's secretary office, and

1. This text is based on the ethnographic research I carried out in Lubumbashi in 2017 and 2018. I conducted forty-six semi-structured interviews, six focus group discussions (three with pupils/students, two with teachers, one with parents), and four months of participant observation in two schools, St. Matthias at Kasungami and Imara in the city center. I consulted the archives of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Lubumbashi University and gained access to undergraduate and graduate final dissertations. I am grateful to Prof. E. Mwenze for giving me access to these and many other works.

we went for a beer. It was at the bar, having shed his role of money-grabbing school accountant, that Richard reframed the issue of school debts from his standpoint as a parent: *Ni mawazo ya masomo* (That's the problem of school), glossing in a Swahili expression largely used in Lubumbashi. When I asked Richard how many children he was supporting, he replied: "The ones I live with: three, plus my own children; that makes six." Richard further said that children from other branches of his extended family were "a direct charge," and they were like his own children. When I asked Richard why he took care of other children of the family, he replied, "There are explicit requests from the family. . . . In Africa obligations have to be respected."

The consciousness of playing the double role of a school administrator and a parent gives Richard a deep understanding of the delicate balance between the pressure felt by parents for paying fees and the strategies teachers use to force parents to pay. For that balance to be kept, he knew that he had to be indulgent with parents. "You have to understand," he repeated, the understanding being that he had to make payments bearable for families whose children are enrolled in his school. "Education is not a business," he said. Therefore, in Kasungami, where families know each other and he himself knew "the rhythm of life," time was given to parents for "catching money," so they could then pay off debts to the school.

From my conversations with Richard, I learned that the stress provoked by school fees is the result of two conflicting dynamics: It is a matter of money, of paying school fees; and it is about the respect of kinship reciprocity and the desire to conform to an urban identity of being responsible and Christian. As we shall see in this text, kinship norms, responsibility, and Christianity are aspects intertwined with schooling and whose historicity has to be traced for understanding how value is attributed to school.

This chapter examines schooling and education in Haut-Katanga as a possible "alibi": I ask, what do the efforts of parents and children in pursuing a high school diploma really mean, when everyone knows that this accomplishment is actually worth little more than a piece of paper? Are there other agendas that are perhaps hard to recognize if we only count children's school completion as the end goal? And what are the implications of the entwinement of these alternative agendas with education goals?

In Haut-Katanga schooling is a field within which social actors act according to three contrasting, albeit overlapping, socioeconomic logics. The first logic is that of the state's interest in the survival of the school sector itself (De Herdt and Titeca 2016), even if only as an administrative framework for

the state to be able to claim legitimacy. The second logic at play is that of the supply and demand of what we may call the “school market.” The supply is sustained by teachers and school staff who, first and foremost, need to make the system work, one way or another, because the payment of the school fees is the only source of their salaries. The demand is from parents who want state education for their children, even as there has been “internal privatization” (Hibou 2004) of the education sector due to insufficient funding from the state since the 1990s’ adherence to neoliberal reforms. The third logic is that of reciprocity unfolding within families. Here schooling is not reduced to its financial and educational aspects. It has become an important vector of mediating relationships, namely through negotiations over roles of responsibility toward children’s school education and the acquisition of symbolic power provided by the fulfillment of those roles. In contrast to the monetization of social relations enforced by the institutional and market logics, providing formal education to children within Lushois families may be conceived as being what Michael Lambek (2011) calls an “act of kinship.” The obligation of schooling is part of a framework of norms defining urban kinship’s reciprocity. That is the reason why today in Haut-Katanga kinship networks try to bridge the gaps left by the absence of the state (Rodima-Taylor and Bähre 2014).

In what follows, I trace these intricate dynamics and their historicity. In the first section, I trace key moments in the history of Congolese education, in order to demonstrate how colonial education ideology initiated a process of responsabilization toward schooling children and made it a part of its “civilizing mission.” It created a “regime of responsibility” (Rubbers and Jedlowski 2019) whose prerogatives were in the hands of the administration, the church, and private companies. Although in the colonial era the responsibility of schooling was not directly assigned to parents, the colonial regime outlined a framework of social obligations, among which schooling children stood out, which it progressively transferred onto families and parents after independence. In the second section, I analyze some widespread practices of schooling’s “real governance” (Titeca and De Herdt 2011) that aid in understanding how the school sector works and how families get indebted to schools. In the third section, I analyze the intimate social meanings of paying tuition within family networks. In discourses and acts of my Lushois interlocutors, schooling has a surplus of meaning that overcomes its economic aspects and calls for reciprocity underpinned by a specific logic of the gift (Godbout [1992] 2000). I conclude by returning to the conflicting social logics through which social actors inhabit the school field.

MISSIONARY SCHOOLS, THE *ÉVOLUÉ*, AND THE MAKING OF THE EDUCATED SUBJECT IN HAUT-KATANGA

Haut-Katanga is a region in the southeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Historically, it stood out from the other provinces of the country because of its greater economic development, strongly influenced by the Copperbelt, which is rich in copper and other metals needed by foreign corporations (Jewsiewicki 1977; Vellut 1981; Rubbers and Lochery 2021). Exploitation of mineral resources started in the first decades of the twentieth century and led to the creation of the continent's largest mining company, the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK)² and the growth of the city of Lubumbashi (Fetter 1976). UMHK has been the engine of industrialization and urbanization of "Industrial Haut-Katanga" (Omasombo 2018). From colonial times until 1965, the majority of the population depended on the UMHK for their livelihoods (Young and Turner 1985).

Wage labor and colonial paternalism have been deeply connected to the development of the urban society in the province and shaped a specific "regime of responsibility" (Rubbers and Jedlowski 2019). By regime of responsibility, I mean a configuration of discourses and practices, given to a historical moment, made and enacted by multiple social actors who, through a series of power techniques, generate and distribute responsibility (Rubbers and Jedlowski, 7). In this sense, responsibility is not apprehended as the manifestation of an individual's behavior. It should rather be grasped as the result of a process of responsabilization through a set of normative rules and moral obligations. Colonial government and the UMHK's social and economic policies shaped Congolese society's norms for responsibility in conjunction with ideals of urbanity and modernity by promoting Christian marriage, monogamy, and domesticity (Rubbers 2013; Hunt 1990).

A key element of colonial paternalism was the socialization through schooling of workers' children, an essential element for the future of the UMHK and of the colony more generally, which aimed to "make the workers' camps a reservoir of healthy, skilled, and cheap labour" (Dibwe 2001: 22). The UMHK was therefore one of the private companies working in collaboration with Catholic missions to provide schools (Tshimanga 2001). The colonial state established a basic education system, aimed at training Congolese as a

2. It was renamed Générale des Carrières et des Mines (Gécamines) after the Congo's independence in 1960.

workforce required by the emerging mining and agricultural economies and by the colonial administration (Kita 1982: 154–155).

The influence of missionary education in colonial times is fundamental to understanding how a religious conception of schooling is still widespread today. The content of primary school curricula was basic and essentially religious (Kita 1982). In rural villages, much of the missionary curriculum focused on manual work and agricultural cultivation, and was aimed at developing a “work attitude” with little attention to literacy and mathematics. Missionaries also paid great attention to personal hygiene, proper nutrition, and cleanliness of clothing (Quaretta 2017: 96–97).

Education at the UMHK was similar to that of missionary schools. Mathematics, literature, and French were deemed unproductive, and gender distinctions were practiced to make girls good housewives and boys good (mine) workers. In both rural and UMHK schools, missionary education contained a strong moral element aimed at teaching values of Christianity. From the 1920s, the colonial school system participated in the construction of a hierarchical society in which access to paid labor in large private companies, such as the UMHK, or in colonial administration positions was only accessible to those who held a school diploma.

An important legacy of the colonial regime of responsibility that lingers in the postcolonial Congo originated in educational reforms of the 1950s and the accompanying rise of the *évolués*. The *évolués* appeared when the Belgian government required the colonial administration to make education system more accessible to Congolese and as similar as possible to that of Belgium (Kita 1982; Tödt 2021). In the 1950s, the status of *évolués*—as distinguished from that of *indigène*—was granted to subjects who were schooled, repudiated “tribal tradition,” and were open to adopting the European way of life (Stengers 1989: 250). The *évolué* was thus educated, could speak good French, was worthy of being employed within the colonial economy, was married, and was Catholic (Gondola 2016: 13). The *évolué* embodied the religious dimension of missionary education and the elitism in the access to education. The *évolué* is a historical figure of Congolese colonial modernity and, as such, has been partially appropriated by postcolonial society with echoes also in contemporary urban Katanga. On many occasions, I heard the term *évolué*, as well as others like *civilisé*, used, as in the colonial past, as a social category employed by the Lushois to recognize themselves as *bamuville* (people of the city) and as distinguished from the inhabitants of the *cités* and from the *vil-lageois* (Dibwe 2002).

After independence, from 1960 to the end of the 1970s, the country witnessed the implementation of then-President Mobutu's nationalization policies (*Zairinisation*) and the accumulation of external public debt (Young and Turner 1985: 326–362). Mobutu imposed a complete nationalization of the education sector and school buildings in 1971 as part of his effort to create political consensus around his one-party regime. However, by 1977, Mobutu's regime accepted its inability to manage the school system and signed an agreement with the missionaries and other stakeholders, the Convention de gestion des écoles nationales (Poncelet et al. 2010), which reorganized the entire education sector around five school networks, each of them with its own administration but still strongly linked to the state (De Herdt et al. 2012). The network comprised schools directly managed by the state and four “conventionalized” networks, namely Catholic, Kimbanguiste, Protestant, and Islamic schools. Private schools not financed by public authorities were also established.

During late 1970s, the Zairean economy fell into a deep recession due to declines in the global price of copper and the economic policies of the Mobutist regime (Ndaywel 1998). With the application of the structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s the economic crisis and the progressive bankruptcy of the state led to the inability of the Congolese government to pay teachers' salaries (Poncelet et al. 2010). In 1992, after several unpaid months and in the aftermath of teachers' strikes, the Zaïre Episcopal Conference and the National Parents Association signed an agreement to let parents take over the payment of teachers' salaries under the form of FIPs. This measure was intended by its proponents as a temporary solution. However, it soon became an institutionalized practice through which Congolese governments shifted the responsibility of the school finance to parents.

Over time, the FIP system has become more complex and now supports a large part of the school system. The FIP system is a de facto private system that proved particularly effective to the point of financing about 90 percent of all costs of public education (Titeca and De Herdt 2011: 222). Beyond casting onto parents the responsibility of paying teachers' salaries, the FIP system has created significant inequalities within the school system. FIPs created huge differences in the quality and resources available for schools, as both depend on the number of students enrolled and on the socioeconomic level of neighborhoods wherein schools are located.

The informal privatization of the school sector has presented Lushois households with major difficulties in providing their children with access to good-quality schooling and consistency in school pathways (Petit 2003;

Nkuku and Rémon 2006). Nonetheless, despite families' economic hardships and the ongoing deinstitutionalization of the school system, the school sector has surprisingly survived and even expanded, with the number of enrollments increasing exponentially (Poncelet et al. 2010; Titeca and De Herdt 2011). What may be seen as a paradox, however, is better apprehended as the latest phase of the regime of responsibility that has been changing since the colonial era. Responsibility for children's schooling was first displaced from the "civilizing mission" of the colonial institutions to the nationalistic ambitions of the postcolonial state and, finally, to the responsabilization of parents and families in contemporary times.

The following excerpt from my conversation with Innocent, a father of three children and a teacher, is representative of how Lushois are aware of their own responsabilization toward schooling:

In the past, the state has resigned and no longer paid teachers [and] students could not study anymore. So there were parents who realized that children of politicians were sent to study elsewhere because they had means: to Europe, to South Africa, to much more developed countries. Now, children of the poor remained uneducated since the state cannot pay. So there has been an agreement between parents and teachers. Parents thought that, as the state had become negligent, they had to take charge of that responsibility.

Although Innocent talks in terms of "agreement," his words, like those of Richard presented in the introduction, illuminate the agonistic and dependent relations of teachers and parents shaped by the processes of privatization and responsabilization described above. Teacher-parent relations are agonistic and at the same time dependent because while school fees are teachers' only source of income, and they thus pressure parents to pay at all costs, they are parents too. They are by consequence subjected to the same constraints they themselves participate in reproducing. Therefore, parents who are teachers act at the intersection of the state, the market, and kinship, and their different modes of functioning and logics of attribution of value.

In the next section, I introduce some widespread practices of school that aid in understanding how the "school alibi" is brought about: Schooling holds different meanings depending on whether one looks at it from the parent's or the teacher's point of view. What nonetheless remains unchanged is an understanding of responsibility that is inevitably discharged onto ordinary people, regardless of whether they are teachers or parents.

EVERYDAY SCHOOL PRACTICES IN LUBUMBASHI

Between 2017 and 2018, monthly school fees varied according to the type of school (public, private, or “conventionalized”) and its supposed quality, that is, good or *bidon* (poor), as my student interlocutors would say. FIPs varied from CF 10,000 (or \$10)³ for poorer schools up to \$100 for those with better teaching and services. In addition to FIPs, parents have to add the enrollment and occasional costs (from a few CF to \$100).

In the two schools of my ethnographic research, the monthly FIPs were CF 15,000 in the Kasungami high school and CF 35,000 in the Catholic school located in the city center, which was considered of average quality. However, it should be emphasized that the fixation of FIPs was done differently: In the Catholic school, the school board is in charge of fixing the FIPs each year; in Kasungami, FIPs were negotiated by school staff with families.

The assessment of schooling costs compared with average incomes is difficult in a neighborhood like Kasungami because of the diversity of its population. However, according to the school accountant, Richard, most of the parents were unemployed. Interviews with parents seem to partially relativize Richard’s statement. Most fathers, in fact, were employed as traders or shop employees, while mothers were sellers at local markets. In these cases, monthly incomes were around a few tens of dollars. In a few other cases, parents’ employment was better: A student stated her mother was a nurse in a private clinic, which may secure her \$100 monthly. In the Catholic school in the city center employment is more diversified and seemingly more stable. In the 350 enrollment forms I consulted at the school’s office, the most frequently mentioned jobs of fathers were state employee (22 percent), unemployed (22 percent), trader (9 percent), teacher (8 percent), doctor (5 percent), mining employee (1 percent), other (34 percent); while for mothers these were unemployed (40 percent), housewife (57 percent), other (2 percent).

A teacher’s salary depends on the kind of school and on the teacher’s seniority, ranging from \$100 in modest schools (in Kasungami it’s around \$200 monthly) to \$600 in inner-city schools (for example the Catholic high school). In public and conventionalized schools, teachers are officially employed by the state and have a monthly salary ranging from CF 60,000 to 100,000. This amount is added to by FIPs. In private schools, teachers’ entire salaries depend on FIPs.

3. In DRC Congolese francs (CF) and US dollars are both employed. At the time of my research the rate of exchange was CF 1,000 = 1 USD.

Three widespread practices related to the payment of monthly fees have become part and parcel of the Congolese school culture and represent the observable concretization of agonistic and dependent relations between schools and families: the expulsion of children from school, the *vagabondage scolaire* (school vagrancy), and the *faux bulletin* (the fraudulent school report). These techniques of micropower enacted by schools, children, and families are so widespread in Katanga, and more generally in the Congo, that they are a common concern for education administrators and parents. Instead of considering them as forms of corruption, I propose to apprehend them as strategies of “real governance” (Olivier de Sardan 2008) enacted by teachers and school administrators to make the system work despite the state’s ineffectiveness and by parents and children to fulfill the social obligation of schooling.

The most common solution implemented by school staff in order to limit the excessive accumulation of debt is to expel children from school. Children of insolvent parents are removed daily from school during classes. This technique aims at forcing indebted parents to come to school and pay the fees. At St. Matthias Secondary School in Kasungami, about 20 percent of the students regularly pay their monthly fees, while 80 percent accumulate a variable amount of debt. On the outskirts and in the inner-city schools, the expulsion of children is performed differently. In the city center and at higher-quality schools, students are forced to leave the school after two warnings: a first blue warning and a second red warning. In lower-quality schools, children are expelled without any notification. The aim of this practice is, as one administrator put it, “frightening parents.” Here is a brief description of the ritual of expulsion that I witnessed in October 2017:

Richard and Solomon, the accountant and the head teacher of St. Matthias Secondary School in Kasungami, are responsible for the expulsion of students. It takes place in the first lesson hour of the morning. Today, the classes involved are the first and second grades CO (*cycle d'orientation*), four classes in all with a total of more than a hundred students. The school accountant gives the teacher on duty this morning the payment report. The teacher asks all the students to get out in the courtyard in front of the classroom and to make a horizontal line. Then he starts calling the students by name. Those who have paid show their receipts and can enter the classroom again; those who have not yet paid, but have the money to do so that morning, are allowed to go to the accountant’s office to pay and then return to class. Amid the background laughter of their classmates, a good number of students who have not

paid and do not have the money today are forced to leave the school. Some insolvent students try to get into the classroom anyway but are stopped by the teacher. A student shows her notebook to the accountant upon which her father has written, "I'll pay Monday." Another student is caught wearing a uniform with the symbol of another school. She is laughed at by her classmates, sent away, sits in a corner, and, crying, peels the symbol off her shirt.

Expulsions from school are a technique of micropower exercised by school administrators in order to provoke parents' feelings of responsibility and desire to conform to the urban identity of the "responsible parent." The humiliation inherent in their children's expulsions pushes parents to search for the money so that they can pay their debts and thus not risk being identified as irresponsible. Jacques, father of four school-age children, articulates the vicious circle established by the expulsion from school: "So as not to be accused of being irresponsible, so that my children do not come here to the workplace when they are chased from their school, I even go into debt." From the early 2000s, expulsions have become such a recurring phenomenon that they have been embedded in popular imagination as a real dishonor to urban parental identity, particularly to fathers, and have become an icon of Congolese popular paintings.

Expulsions occur more frequently in the final year before students sit the state exam and earn their state diploma. The state exam is indeed a crucial symbolic moment for families and children, as it marks the conclusion of the school pathway. "When he is in the sixth grade, the student becomes a family affair, and everyone gets interested in him, even the neighbors," Solomon told me, from his perspective as both a teacher and a parent. The *sixième* is therefore a time when tensions heighten between school staff and parents and within the family, in order to find an agreement for the payment of the fees and solve problems of debt. Two other moments when expulsions occur more frequently are the beginning and the end of the school year. These are moments when the amount of the FIPs is determined, enrollments for the new school year are made, and school reports are verified for admission to the next grade. It is therefore at these moments that cases of fraudulent school reports and school vagrancy significantly increase.

Vagabondage scolaire and *faux bulletin* are two phenomena closely linked to each other and practiced by parents and children in order to keep attending school despite debts contracted with schools. Many school administrators explained to me that because students end the year with an unpaid debt,

“School reports are confiscated by the school.” Since school reports are mandatory for enrollment in the next grade, administrators do not give them to parents whose debts remain unpaid. The denial of the school report prompts parents to enroll children in a new school. Theoretically, in order to enroll in a new school, it is necessary to present the school report of the previous year validated by the SIRNIE office.⁴ However, school administrators, always in search of new enrollments, are prone to believe that students not presenting their school reports have been “denied the school report” from their previous school, or they are likely to accept a false one. Paying to get a fraudulent school report in order to change schools is an easy task in Katangese schools (Kasongo Kabimbi 2016: 2). Buying a false school report and paying for the enrollment in a new school, and then starting anew free of debt, is definitely cheaper than paying off the debt incurred with the previous school, which in many cases amounts to \$100 or more. The head teacher of a secondary school in Kimbeimbe stated that the issue of the “confiscated” school report gives rise to what is called in Lubumbashi the *vagabondage scolaire*. This school vagrancy leads pupils and students to an itinerary of constantly changing schools as soon as they can no longer bear the weight of the debt.

From the description of these school practices, we may draw three main conclusions. First, we can note the harmful effects they have on the system as a whole. In terms of the quality of teaching, it is apparent that experienced teachers are reluctant to work in schools where family debts are high and thus salaries are uncertain. They prefer schools where FIP payments are more regular. Schools where payments have to be constantly solicited, through expulsions as described above, resort to hiring teachers who are “not mechanized” (i.e., not recognized by the state), such as young graduates who have no prior teaching experience. Institutes with experienced teachers attract students and money, which increase the average quality of the schools in the richer neighborhoods.

Second, the school practices described also undermine children’s school attendance, increase early dropouts, and push parents, who do not want to be labeled as irresponsible, to take on debts. There are no official statistics on the impact of FIPs on school dropout rates. Nevertheless, with much caution for all the biases these studies may have, we can draw this information from final dissertations in statistics carried out at the University of Lubumbashi. Authors report that 52.7 percent of the sample of families interviewed in

4. National Students Identification Service.

Likasi stated that they did not have the financial means to provide schooling for their children; 47.2 percent of the pupils surveyed repeated the class due to lack of money to pay their debts at school; 62.5 percent of teachers interviewed noted “parents’ irresponsibility” toward the payment of school fees (Banze 2007). Other works focusing on Lubumbashi’s municipalities report that the main cause of pupils dropping out is the inability of parents to cope financially with FIPs (Kitungwa 2004). In the Gambela II district (a Lubumbashi inner neighborhood) 33.3 percent of the interviewees claim that the reason for frequent dropping out is the expulsions of children from school because of the unpayment of the FIPs (Penze Kolonye 2013: 68).

Third, while the informal privatization of the system has made survival possible for individual schools, and the school sector more generally, the uncontrolled discharge of the responsibility for payment of the FIPs onto parents has also created agonistic yet dependent relationships among the actors involved. There are agonistic relations among schools that seek to extract the most from parents in terms of FIPs; and relations of dependence are those of the teachers who need parents for their economic survival. The process of responsabilization is here fundamental. The entire system, in fact, is only sustained if all the actors value children’s schooling and take on the responsibility to cover the main costs of the educational system. As we have seen, these attitudes toward schooling are rooted in the historical processes that shaped the Congolese postcolonial ideas of citizenship, and are vulnerable in the present.

In the next section, we will see that agonistic relationships and dependency produced by the privatized costs of school system extend to the realm of kinship. Within kinship, schooling becomes valued for the symbolic power it provides to both the giver and the receiver.

THE GIFT OF SCHOOLING

In most cases where school payments are concerned, the Lushois become indebted to their own families. Kinship relatives are still considered the privileged relations for filling the gaps left by the absence of the state. Therefore, loans and debts within kinship networks are common practice. Economic exchanges, debts included, within kinship networks follow a different logic than that apparent in schools and the market. These latter are based on the logic of equivalence of values realized through the exchange of money for a

service. Excluding the affective relationship between the two parts involved (Godbout [1992] 2000: 136–138), what counts most in money transactions is the good itself and, of course, the money paid for it. Kinship relations often have other logics, more oriented toward reciprocity and gift-giving (Marie 1997). In the economy of family relationships what is relevant is not the thing given or bought, but the relationships it creates when that thing circulates within the kinship network (Godbout [1992] 2000: 19–21).

Kinship relationships involved with schooling are those among relatives belonging to different households and between elders and juniors. These relationships involve different kinds of ties. They may involve the ties of parents with their birth children; they may involve senior and junior siblings living in different households; or they may involve structurally stronger and more vulnerable family members. In all these cases, relations are linked to the norms of urban kinship's reciprocity. We may identify at least three elements that determine urban kinship reciprocity: cohabitation, households' geographical proximity, and households' socioeconomic conditions (Petit 2003; Rubbers 2003). Paying for the children's schooling according to these three elements frames kinship reciprocity and enables children's mobility from one household to another and forms of fosterage, as in other parts of Africa (Alber et al. 2013).

In Lubumbashi, fosterage is generally based on the distinction of the "children of the household" (*enfants de la maison*) in contrast to the "children of the family" (*enfants de la famille*). The "children of the household" are birth and foster children all living in a married couple's household; the "children of the family" are children recognized as belonging to the kinship group but not living in the same household. This fundamental distinction gets intertwined with the three elements of urban reciprocity mentioned above. The general rule is that all children who live together, including foster children, must be schooled. Elder children are usually schooled first, and if they complete their studies and hopefully find a job, they are then called upon to take over the school fees of younger siblings. However, in contexts such as Lubumbashi, where resources for schooling are limited, younger children are schooled as long as money is available. When money is not enough for all the children of the household, parents negotiate kinship affiliations and responsibilities to ask for financial help or send their own children to another close kinship household (Rubbers 2013: 207–214). In the latter case, the prioritization of schooling follows the same logic: foster children are supported as long as money is available and as long as that serves for keeping a balanced distri-

bution among the mother's and father's family sides. When resources fall short, and younger or foster children are excluded from schooling, conflicts can arise within families. In these cases, given the importance of households' socioeconomic conditions in establishing urban reciprocity, poorer households may claim, with no risk of being blamed, their inability to take care of the children in their home or to participate in supporting the schooling of the family's children. Conversely, wealthier households can't escape those obligations and, because of their higher financial possibilities, they are constantly solicited to do that (Petit 2003).

Schooling for the Lushois has assumed importance similar to that of other valued practices of kin-based care (Carsten 1995, 2000), such as contributing to a family member's bride's price payment (Kahola Tabu 2005) or funeral (Noret and Petit 2011). The role the payment of schooling plays in the regulation of kinship relationships is the reason why it cannot be completely commodified and fully absorbed by the market of education. School education is not conceived by the Lushois as exclusively being a good or a service. It is rather considered as a network of relationships and a mechanism of attribution of responsibilities that can hardly be commodified. For its social relevance, the "gift" of an *ainé* supporting a *cadet's* schooling may be considered an "act of kinship" (Lambek 2011) within the framework of kinship norms described above. There are different acts of kinship, and those that best frame schooling support are those Lambek calls "deliberate and formal acts" (2011: 3). These latter are "the enactment of deliberate, marked rituals that would formally, substantively, and conclusively constitute or consummate our relationship as one of kinship and publicly affirm our mutual commitment to it, such that any subsequent departure from solidarity would be perceived as a specific kind of fault or failure" (Lambek, 3).

Responsibility for schooling is today in Haut-Katanga not a simple act of kinship but an "elementary" one (Lambek 2011: 11) because paying for school is, for Katangese parents, among the first acts that initiates kinship obligations of giving and taking upon which the reproduction and the maintenance of family ties rest. It is also elementary because the specificity of the "gift of schooling" lies in the third step of the give-receive-return system. Again, the payment for schooling does not correspond exclusively to a material return, for example, children's success. The return is a transformation that confers to the giver the role of a responsible figure (parents/fathers/elders), and to the recipient (a child) the imperative to develop oneself through school education to become an educated and modern subject and make possible the

acquisition of respect for the norms of reciprocity within the family. Finally, as Lambek (2011: 3–5) states, the acts of giving, taking and being recognized must be socialized. In other words, these have a public dimension, since the parents' reputation as being "responsible" depends on their capacity to fulfill this social obligation in front of the family and of the community. Let's now see in two case studies how schooling actually works as an act of kinship and how through it parents and children negotiate kinship affiliations and responsibilities.

Innocent and Kapiso

When I first met Lore, a fourteen-year-old girl, she told me that she would like to stay at the home of Adrienne, her paternal aunt, and not to go back to her father Kapiso's place, who was also Adrienne's maternal uncle. However Innocent, Adrienne's husband, had had some "misunderstandings" with Kapiso, her *muyomba*, the local name for maternal uncle, underlining the cultural meaning and social importance of this figure. To understand the relations of power in place, it is necessary to mention the roles the two men played within the family. Innocent was a young father in his thirties, a graduate of the university, with a job as a teacher and skilled in finding side jobs to make ends meet. His standard of living was significantly higher than Kapiso's, and he was engaged in paying the school fees of two children from his own larger family. As said, subjects like Innocent are constantly solicited because, although his economic conditions were precarious, he had some means and, above all, had to rebalance the distribution of resources toward his wife's family. Kapiso, conversely, was a man in his fifties, without a stable job, but nevertheless he held a structurally stronger position within the family. In my observations, I noticed that he constantly reminded everyone he was the family's *muyomba*. In the matrilineal lineages of Bemba and Tabwa communities, the *muyomba* is the person who looks after his sisters' daughters (such as Adrienne) and has the last word on decisions concerning them. Some of the qualities expected of a "real *muyomba*" Kapiso cited are actually a mix of cultural elements related to a different cultural heritage, including the Christian's ideal of "suffering" ("I want to suffer with my children"), the Bemba and Tabwa rule of control over younger women ("It's my duty to manage women's family"), and the colonial model of the father who has the right to lead the education of the family's children. Kapiso similarly handled different symbolic repertoires when he explained decisions as regards to his children's schooling. On the one hand, he echoed a colonial vision suggesting that school education was

valuable not for the professional skills it may provide but for the qualities it nurtures in making children into educated subjects. He frequently stated that he performed his role as a father because his children were very well educated: “In my family all appreciate my children for being so educated; they all ask me to have them at home.”⁵ On the other hand, by allowing Lore to live at Innocent and Adrienne’s house, he withdrew from Lore’s upbringing, and in giving Innocent the responsibility of paying school fees for Lore, he delegated his parental tasks to him.

The problem that confronted Innocent and Kapiso concerned who was responsible to take on Lore’s school fees while she was living at Innocent’s place. In 2016 Lore joined Innocent’s household in order to help Adrienne with her second pregnancy. As Lore moved into his home, Innocent, even without explicit requirement from Kapiso, felt the obligation to take on Lore’s education: “I didn’t think it was normal that the child [Lore] lives at [my] home and her father comes here and pays for [her] schooling.” After a couple of years spent in Innocent’s home, once Adrienne no longer needed Lore’s help, Lore did not want to return to her father’s home. Innocent honored Lore’s wish, but he expected that since he felt his obligations were over, papa Kapiso would have to now take up “his own responsibilities” by resuming his obligation to pay for Lore’s schooling. Kapiso did not and avoided talking anymore about that issue with Innocent, letting things continue unchanged. In Kapiso’s eyes, as he told me, Innocent was responsible for Lore schooling because of his wealthier condition and the balance he had with his wife’s family. What was at play here was the management of power relations in unequal economic conditions and according to the norms of kinship’s reciprocity. A younger male relative (Innocent) contests kinship norms, and an elder (Kapiso), from his stronger structural position (*muyomba*), becomes the agent who produces and imposes the responsibility of kinship’s reciprocity, mediated through the payment of school fees: Close, cohabiting, and wealthier subjects of the family are morally constrained to provide for the needs of their poorer relatives, whether they are young or old (Petit 2003: 90). Innocent talked of this unspoken imposition in terms of “contract” and “debt”:

Basically, it is as if there are internal compensations, which cannot be explained. These are silent agreements [*contrats tacites*]. As soon as I accept children of my family in my home and to make them study at school, it is as if

5. Fieldnotes, October 15, 2017.

I am indebted to my wife's family. A balance is needed. You will see that wife's family also has children who are [waiting] for the husband to make them study in some way.

Innocent closely recalls Lambek's "act of kinship." Acts of kinship stand outside the flow of everyday practices ("silent agreements"), are often irreversible ("as soon as I accept children"), and are intentional interventions (as in the case of supporting children's schooling) that may be conceived as an act of giving ("internal compensation") or, as Innocent thought of Kapiso's behavior, of "theft" (Lambek 2011: 3). There is another feature of acts of kinship well expressed by Innocent's case. As Lambek states, "What is at stake is not the monitoring or regulation of individuals or behavior but the constitution of social relations, acts, and persons" (2001: 4). The "silent agreements" Innocent refers to are precisely acts that establish specific and enduring obligations so that kinship relationships are not altered by the arbitrariness of individual behaviors. In Innocent and Kapiso's case, Lore's schooling works as a publicly marked act of kinship: It is not a "private contract" between two family elders. It is instead a mutual engagement that thrusts individuals like Innocent, always on the edge of contesting the norm, into a social dimension that controls behaviors and imposes the respect of reciprocity. As said, public recognition of the act of kinship is crucial and in Katangese society is based on fulfillment of the historically determined role of "responsible parent."

Victor and the Moral Debt

Victor, nineteen, is a *finaliste* at St. Matthias Secondary School in Kasungami. He is the fourth-born in a family of seven children, with a father who was a soldier and did not have enough money to pay for Victor's schooling: "His priorities were focused on other stuff," Victor told me in October 2017. Victor therefore missed the first year of primary school and later moved to Likasi with his uncle, Victor's father's younger brother, who worked in a shop and had three younger children. The uncle struggled to provide Victor with primary schooling. For Victor, life in his paternal uncle's family proved to be complicated. In particular, the relationship with his uncle's wife was very conflictual. In order to compensate for the payment of school fees, Victor was to help his uncle's wife with housework. However, as Victor explained, "Problems never lack." The uncle's wife complained that "the boy was too proud" (*orgueilleux*). Victor believed the problem was that he was not the woman's

biological son but one from the “children of the family.” He felt uncomfortable in her household.

These preliminary details of Victor’s account demonstrate how urban kinship norms work and how the lack of money might have a negative impact on their reproduction. Given his family’s limited resources, and because of his position in the kinship network as a fourth-born, Victor did not have immediate access to school. In Victor’s case, affection also played a role, given that, as he himself said, he moved in with his uncle because he got along well with him. However, when resources are scarce, a couple’s children are prioritized over other cohabiting children, and Victor soon found himself marginalized. As has been said, while schooling is not necessarily provided to receive material returns, the lack of money unveils “the true face” of kinship alliance relations (Godbout [1992] 2000: 132): The more dependent subjects are, the more the “generalized reciprocity” (Sahlins 1972) of the inner family shrinks, which can further marginalize, and possibly exclude, some subjects.

The household conflicts led Victor to go back to Lubumbashi at the end of his primary school years in order to continue secondary school. A close reflection on Victor’s accounts and other indicators from his relatives suggest that the boy’s transfer to his uncle was problematic from the beginning. Victor’s father, a Bemba from Kasenga, belonged to a matrilineal family, and therefore Victor’s natural path for being granted schooling should have come from his maternal and not paternal uncles. However, his mother was Hemba, which is a patrilineal group, which may have inhibited Victor’s maternal aunts and uncles taking responsibility for him. In the end, however, Victor’s maternal uncles later took over the boy’s fees for secondary school in Lubumbashi.

The most interesting aspect of Victor’s story is his own reflections on his course of schooling. He explained that a child becomes indebted to the family who supported his studies, implying the inscription of what he calls a “moral debt”: a debt that ties the giver to the receiver, imposing on the latter a moral obligation of the counter-gift. I quote a passage from Victor’s explanation:

When someone supports you [in your studies], for example your uncles, it is a moral debt I owe to their children. That’s true in family and more broadly: If someone does the good to you, you must also do the good for them. When you receive from others, afterwards there will always be this moral debt in your head and in your heart. My uncles paid for my education. If one day their children are going to suffer, I’ll have to look after them too in order to pay my debt.

Victor explains the gift logic inherent in the regime of responsibility of children's schooling: The freedom to give ("if someone does good to you") binds the receiver to the giver (and vice versa). An effective tie is created through the mandatory counter-gift to be returned. In the two excerpts that follow, Victor goes further and expresses his willingness, now that he has grown up, to reject the ambiguity inherent in the logic of the gift, that is, the subjugation to the elders' responsibility to take charge of children's schooling, which drags him into the circle of the "moral debt." In the second excerpt, somewhat contradictorily, he emphasizes how he himself, once freed from his moral debt, is ready to reproduce the same mechanism with his own children.

The moral debt is heavy, it does not pass by, it hurts me. That's why, now that I've grown up since primary school, I've become adult, I have to prepare myself. I would like to become a doctor. That's why I chose biochemistry. First, I have to find a job to prepare myself to go to university. Although I have someone who can pay for my studies, I myself must have the means. I can't get up in the morning and ask for money for syllabus and transport. It's shameful.

I will prepare a good life for them [his future children], and when I am old I will hide myself in their shadow. As I would have prepared a good life for them, they will have a good life [and] when I no longer have the strength to go to work, to fend for myself, they too will be there for me. They too will do their duty to me, as I have done for them.

Victor, as a recipient of the responsibility of his *ainés*, clearly expresses the concept of what we may call the "circle of the endless debt" (Marie 1997). He does it in such a clear way, rarely found in the conversations with many adults I met. Victor's case shows how schooling is at the core of kinship reciprocity and how this follows a logic of gift and counter-gift. He himself has internalized it, albeit in a contradictory way. While considering the burden implied by family obligations, he realized the inherent power channeled through the responsibility of supporting the schooling of younger generations, and, when the time comes, he will agree to comply with it. Being supported in schooling means supporting other younger family members in the future, which in turn gives it symbolic capital, to be spent in family relationships and considered an investment in his own future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The informal privatization of the school sector has presented Lushois households with significant challenges. Raising fees for children's schooling creates extraordinary stress for parents, children, and wider kin groups, as well as teachers and school managers. Yet, despite such pervasive difficulties, the school sector has surprisingly survived and even expanded. This chapter has investigated what adults' and children's efforts to invest in schooling really mean, when everyone knows that school completion has lost its immediate practical values as an individual instrument of socioeconomic advancement.

The chapter accounts for the concealed and unquestioned motivations that compel parents and families to make enormous investments and even become indebted for children's school education while being aware it won't be of much help in the future. This text has argued that, in contrast to the monetization of social relations that the contemporary school sector enforces, paying children's school fees produces valuable symbolic power within kinship and family. The moral imperative of schooling is conceived, by both parents and children, as the most powerful means to fulfill the social obligations and the moral imperatives that shape contemporary Katangese subjectivity and citizenship. In this sense, for Lushois families, symbolic motivations outweigh utilitarian ones. This is due to the fact that the material investment in school payments does not aim exclusively at a material return but at a social profit as a leverage to negotiate kinships affiliations and responsibilities.

The Katangese case may be considered an example of how societies resist the transformation of fundamental "goods," such as education, into commodities. A complete commodification is realized when goods and services are progressively taken over by systems alien to the logic of the gift, such as the commodification of school education enabled by, among other things, the lack of state authority in regulating the sector. Nonetheless, Katangese society, challenged by the commodification of an aspect as important as education, has responded by retrieving kinship reciprocity as one of the most important "urban mutualities" (Chari and Gillespie 2014). Schooling is thus conceived as a symbolic vector of kinship and family relationships that turns the imperative of schooling into an "act of kinship" (Lambek 2011). The enactment of this symbolic vector ensures that "in the midst of personal or structural transformations, the social dynamics of everyday interaction and exchange draw on (and challenge) well-established cultural registers" (Bjarnesen and Utas 2018: 3), such as forms of the responsabilization of people, of

fostering, and of kinship reciprocity. All these well-established cultural registers, often concealed to an external gaze, prompt us not to take for granted what meanings people attribute to school education and why they pursue it, beyond the simplistic idea that it is as a vehicle for economic success. As this text has tried to do, those meanings and motivations have to be searched for elsewhere.

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CHAPTER 4

“The Teachers Just Consume Our Money”

Casting Blame for Educational Failure in Rural Lesotho

CLAIRE ELISABETH DUNGEY AND NICOLA ANSELL

Formal schooling is widely perceived to play a key role in children and young people’s lives and is linked with ideas of progress and empowerment (Henry 2020). Yet it is increasingly apparent that schooling often fails to deliver what it promises and is associated with broken dreams and experiences of failure (Dyson 2019; Stambach and Hall 2017). Increased access to schooling has happened at a time when opportunities to benefit from social and economic mobility have crumbled, particularly for those growing up in rural settings in the Global South (Jeffrey 2008; Camfield 2011; Körling 2019). There are a multitude of structural factors that help explain the failure of education to deliver its promised benefits (Ansell et al. 2020), but these often remain hidden from those experiencing schooling and even from those responsible for its implementation. Based on ethnographic research conducted in two Lesotho villages with parents, educators, and community leaders, as well as interviews and workshops with the policy community working within the field of education, this chapter shows how teachers have become embroiled symbolically in the narrative of educational failure.

Teachers are blamed, both by rural communities and by policymakers, for the perceived inadequacies of rural education. In environments (both rural communities and policy circles) where it is increasingly difficult to be critical of education itself, the casting of blame on teachers serves as an alibi, covering up broader failings and allowing “education” to continue to command respect. While most chapters of this volume focus on how education, perceived as an inherent good, diverts scrutiny from other matters, our emphasis

is on the ways in which teachers become the target of criticism, deflecting criticism away from more structural aspects of education. We explore how rural teachers come to be blamed for educational failure by quite distinct sets of people, and the ways in which this is entangled with rurality, remoteness, and processes of boundary making. We also examine the ways in which this blaming functions as an alibi.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the next section, we outline some themes from ethnographic literature that help illuminate our research findings. In the third section we explore the context of schooling in Lesotho and how rural schools have often been neglected. We then move on to describe the context of our research as well as the methods we used to gather data. In the fifth section, we present the empirical findings of our research, drawing on examples of how both adult villagers and urban policymakers were critical of rural teachers. In the final section we draw some conclusions concerning how blaming teachers in a context of rurality functions both for villagers and for policymakers.

RESPONSIBILITY AND BLAME

Much has been written in recent decades about “responsibilization” in education policy, in particular the ways in which policy and practice increasingly seek to confer responsibility for the success of education onto children and their parents. Through international initiatives and campaigns, individuals, communities, and nation-states are all made to regard themselves as responsible for the economic cost of schooling (Cooper et al., this volume). Alber (this volume), for instance, explores how “education for all” campaigns in Benin have shifted moral obligations concerning children’s futures to parents, distracting attention from the state’s failure to deliver viable futures for youth. Blaming is in various ways the obverse of this process. Where responsibilization confers on ordinary people the responsibility for their children’s *futures*, blaming attributes responsibility for the *current* state of affairs. The two are not unrelated. Often the policy community is implicated in processes of “victim blaming” wherein people’s misfortunes are interpreted to be outcomes of their personal failings (Rier 2022; Killean et al. 2022), a process that contributes to individuals assuming responsibility in the ways that policymakers desire. Moreover, ideologies of parental responsibilization are reproduced through the media, which, for instance, attribute blame for institutional fail-

ings to parents and staff, rather than institutional governance or policy (Yến-Khanh 2022), views that then become widespread throughout society and are often internalized by those groups deemed blameworthy.

Blaming is not, however, a simple corollary of responsabilization. Responsibilization is generally a purposive process whereby those with power seek to encourage those without to act in particular ways in order to achieve a certain type of future. While this can lead indirectly to casting of blame for current misfortune on those adversely affected, people experiencing misfortune usually seek to attribute blame elsewhere. What does not generally happen is for ordinary people to blame their misfortune on distant forces like government or invisible structural processes.

A number of scholars have observed that blame is usually directed at those most proximate. Rudiak-Gould (2014), for instance, found that Marshall Islanders were much more inclined to blame their own community for climate change than to blame those in more distant places who objectively have contributed more. Scott (1985) observed how poor people in a Malaysian village blamed the rich in their own neighborhoods for their situations:

The more distant and impersonal causes that most assuredly play a role here are upstaged by a perspective that emphasizes moral lapses, selfishness, and the violation of social decencies. As the poor see it, the rich have callously chosen to ignore their obligations to their neighbors. (181)

Scott (1985) concluded that both rich and poor see the problems they face as “human problems.” They refuse to blame more distant forces such as government, and instead blame those who implement harmful practices locally, even where government is ultimately responsible. Blame is personalized—attributed to moral lapses, selfishness, and the violation of social decencies (Scott 1985). However, while responsabilization focuses on the individual, the tendency that Scott and others have observed is for blame to be cast not on specific individuals but on a section of society who are held collectively blameworthy.

The tendency to attribute blame in this way is an indication of the functions blaming fulfills societally. In part, blaming is concerned with sense-making. Based on ethnography in northern Ghana, Denham (2012) noted that casting blame for infant sickness and death on the supernatural served to make adverse events comprehensible and even controllable: “Blaming is part of a larger post-misfortune existential inquiry” (Denham 2012: 177). Blaming creates understandable casual relationships, identifies agents of harmful

behavior, and finds solutions that convey a sense of security and moral order (Rudiak-Gould 2014). In so doing, it contributes to local definitions of normality, and establishes sociopolitical boundaries within and between groups that reinforce community ideals, serving to other and control groups perceived to be threatening (Denham 2012).

Blaming functions in several ways both to assert and to conceal power relations. Structural processes including government policies that underlie rural suffering are not directly observable, but blaming those people who are plausibly within one's own "sphere of social action" is strategic: It offers some possibility of exercising influence, where a focus on processes and people elsewhere would not (Scott 1985). Blaming is not deterministic (Denham 2012). It asserts a type of agency and a claim to status and can function as a form of resistance that is more subtle than organized movements or protests (Scott 1985; Akurugu and Degnen 2022). At the same time, blame can conceal and mystify power relations (Bourdieu 1994), attributing causal power to proximate causes and even to those who have very little influence over a situation.

In this chapter, we explore the ways in which a particular part of the education system, rural teachers, become objects of blame not only by rural communities affected by educational failure but also "from above," by officials of the Ministry of Education and Training. Scott (1985) points to the ways in which different groups in a rural community may direct blame at different targets, but draw on the same "community of discourse"; their blaming is "fashioned from the same cultural materials available to all" (140). Our interest is in blaming directed at the same target, yet from different directions. We argue that the common feature here is the role played by rurality and distance in making teachers suitable targets for blame. Blaming is a boundary-making activity in which both proximity and distance play key roles. Rural teachers operate at a distance from centers of formal power in education systems, but also in many ways distance themselves from local communities. Within the rural community, teachers are visible but not fully present. To understand their position, we need to provide some contextual detail about Lesotho's education system.

SCHOOLING IN RURAL LESOTHO

Lesotho has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, estimated at 98 percent among women and 87 percent among men (Lekhethe 2018). Free primary

education was introduced in 2000 and made compulsory in 2010. Between 2000 and 2010 net enrollment increased from 82 percent to 95 percent, and in grade 1 gross enrollment was 98 percent in 2014 (Global Partnership for Education 2022). Yet in a country with relatively few opportunities to make use of educational credentials, the purpose served by this expansion is not self-evident (Ansell et al. 2020).

Those educated in rural schools may be at a particular disadvantage in making use of their education, with less access to well-resourced schools and physically distanced from employment opportunities. It has been observed elsewhere that schooling can alienate young people from rural communities, as they can neither earn a living in a subsistence-based economy, nor acquire a job in the formal sector (Clemens and Biswas 2019). Moreover, Lesotho's remote rural schools failed to benefit from a school rehabilitation project of the 1990s and 2000s, funded by World Bank and the African Development Bank, that provided infrastructure and furniture to existing schools, as well as building new schools, enrollments being deemed too low to merit investment (Lekhetho 2018).

While investment in rural school infrastructure has been limited, the education sector has not remained static. From independence in 1966 to the early 2000s, change was minimal: Children were required to pass academic subjects in each year of primary school to proceed to the next level, and at the end of primary school passing the Primary School Leaving Examination enabled some to progress to secondary school if they could afford the fees. Secondary schooling largely focused on academic topics that were irrelevant to rural life, and culminated in the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate, awarded to the few who were successful. Most rural school leavers were unable to find formal sector jobs or to use their education in other ways, and the system produced an occupational elite (Ansell 2002, 2004).

In 2008, the Lesotho government introduced a new comprehensive curriculum and assessment policy with the intention of transforming the education system and making it more relevant to the Lesotho context (Ministry of Education and Training 2009). The policy document was developed at a time when Lesotho was experiencing problems of unemployment, environmental degradation, and increasing levels of HIV and AIDS (Raselimo and Mahao 2015). The new curriculum focused on equipping learners with life skills for dealing with everyday challenges rather than merely focusing on academic examinations (Dungey and Ansell 2020a). According to the policy, children who struggled with the content should not be viewed as failures as

this might discourage them from engaging in education, and were to progress automatically to the next class every year (Dungey and Ansell 2020a). The new curriculum design was intended to promote access, equity, quality, and relevance (Matobako and Heqoa 2018). Yet elements of the reforms remain controversial and, as we have shown elsewhere (Dungey and Ansell 2020b), the introduction of entrepreneurship (a core component of the new curriculum) has faced resistance.

In the past, Lesotho’s education system was commonly described as a three-legged stool, resting on the government, church, and community. It is noteworthy that a large proportion of schools in Lesotho are owned by churches (particularly the Roman Catholic Church and the Lesotho Evangelical Church). The significance of this ownership has diminished over time as teachers are paid and curricula set by the government, but the churches maintain the fabric of the buildings and have responsibilities in relation to the management of schools. They seek to ensure that the school board, teachers, and principals work efficiently and might intervene in cases of conflicts. They may also be seen as closer to communities than the government, linked through local churches.

Community representation was formalized by the Ministry of Education and Training through the establishment of school boards at both primary and secondary school levels under Lesotho’s 2010 Education Act. These include two parents and other community members such as the chief (Nthontho 2018), although the extent of their influence is limited (Senekal 2015).

THE RESEARCH

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two rural villages in Lesotho from 2017 to 2018, as well as research with educational policymakers and managers who worked mostly outside these villages. Claire Dungey spent nine and a half months conducting the research in Lesotho, while Nicola Ansell spent three short research periods in the villages and in the capital city. In this chapter we are focusing on the perspectives of adult community members and policymakers.

The bulk of the fieldwork was spent in the villages, interacting with children and their families, for instance, sitting in classrooms, participating in village meetings, or harvesting while talking about children’s aspirations and relationship to education. We conducted recorded interviews with twenty parents and

held informal discussions with parents and grandparents about the purpose of education when doing a household survey or during informal interactions.

The first village, Mabana (fifty-five households in 2017),¹ was a three-hour journey from the capital city, Maseru. The nearest larger settlement (a large village) was ten to fifteen kilometers away, and for most was accessible only on foot or a horse or donkey. This was the location of the nearest secondary school. The nearest primary school, owned by the Catholic Church, was located on a hillside about a half-hour walk away, a journey that involved wading across a river. The distance to secondary school meant that most children either dropped out of school at grade 7 or stayed elsewhere with relatives for schooling or in the boarding facilities at the secondary school.

The second village, Paleneng (118 households in 2017), was located in southern Lesotho, forty kilometers from the district capital. At the time of fieldwork, there was one primary school located in the village owned by the Lesotho Evangelical Church (a ten- to fifteen-minute walk for most villagers), but also a Catholic primary and secondary school thirty minutes' walk away. When the children finished grade 10, they either dropped out or went to nearby towns or across the border to South Africa to continue schooling or find work.

Research was also undertaken with policymakers, including representatives of the Ministry of Education and Training (mainly national officials but also district education managers), the church education secretariats, international funders, and international NGOs involved in supporting Lesotho's education sector. Most of the participants were from Lesotho, resident in urban areas, although some of them had grown up in rural environments. Seventeen formal interviews were conducted with policymakers in their local offices about their visions for schooling and their views on the new curriculum. We also organized three workshops for policymakers over the duration of the research, at which discussion focused on the research, interpreting our emerging findings, and considering the potential relevance for policy and practice.

CASTING BLAME

The remainder of this chapter draws on data from our research with villagers and policymakers who were critical of rural teachers—particularly for the

1. Pseudonyms are used for the villages as well as respondents.

perceived low quality of education in rural areas. We begin with a brief introduction to the teachers and their location within the complex power relations of the education system.

Rural Teachers: An Ambivalent Position

Many in the policy community expressed the view that most teachers today take on the role as a means of generating income rather than for the intrinsic satisfaction it affords. Given the level of unemployment in Lesotho, this is perhaps unsurprising. Moreover, salaries are not high, and many teachers pursued other livelihoods alongside teaching, such as running small businesses. Most teachers in the two communities were outsiders who had settled in the villages after getting a job, but a posting to a rural school was not usually their preference. Many had families residing elsewhere for reasons associated with employment or schooling, and gave some priority to spending weekends with them and the transport challenges that entailed. Teachers were also confronted with inadequately resourced rural schools, where they were often expected to supervise multiple classes at once with limited facilities and poor infrastructure (see also Matobako and Heqoa 2018). In winter, the unheated school buildings, some with cracked windows, got very cold, and some teachers would send children home from school in bad weather. Unlike their urban counterparts, rural teachers had no mains electricity or running water in their homes. Together these various challenges help explain why teaching is not every teacher's first priority.

On the other hand, rurality afforded certain advantages. School inspectors from the Ministry of Education and Training almost never made their annual visits. District resource teachers, employed at district level to support rural schools and organize community events, had long been in decline (the primary school in Paleneng had not received any visits for seven years). Teachers also seldom attended workshops outside the village. The only routine monitoring of rural schools, therefore, was the scrutiny of annual examination results. Consequently, teachers had considerable discretion over what and how to teach and indeed how to run the schools. Teachers in one of our study communities, for instance, explained that they were continuing with the pedagogies of the old curriculum. In contravention of the new government policy, they also insisted students should pass end-of-year exams before progressing to the next class, to incentivize their engagement and ensure they would be ready for the next level.

Remoteness may also have shaped parental engagement with schooling.

It was not uncommon for children to be absent from school due to having to carry out work in the home or care for livestock. Since schooling was compulsory by law, however, teachers were generally able to convince parents that they should send their children to school, and we encountered few parents who openly said that they did not want to. One father, for example, spoke of himself in the third person while explaining that he had decided to send his son to school in Maseru at the end of primary school since “they” (he and his wife) were bothering the boy and requiring him to go to the veldt. As argued by Cooper, Alber, and Njoya (this volume) parents are responsabilized for enrolling their children at school, and many seek to avoid blame for not having sent their children to school. One mother in Mabana felt so heavily responsible for sending her child to school that she considered carrying her child across the flooded river, and feared her child would be punished if she did not arrive. Occasionally, teachers called upon other authorities to help entrench their power to require attendance. In Paleneng, it was mentioned that the schoolteachers called the police when a child was repeatedly absent from school, after which the child had returned to grade 7.

The only local body with direct influence in the schools was the school board. The chief’s secretary in Mabana, Kekeletso, was skeptical of the board’s role. He explained that the Education Act was merely a formal document, but had not changed actual practices:

The teachers know how to read. They just do as they please with the parents. . . . The very same board runs after the parents. Yes, on paper it is good—you can feel that it can work out very well. But then in practice it doesn’t work like that. Yes, there is a chief and many others in the board, but then you would find that each and everyone wants to show his or her powers, and for all the time, you will find that the matters of the school don’t meet the school’s needs directly. A teacher would be telling them that he or she isn’t paid by them, instead by the government. The parents also will be talking of the fact that they are not being paid, they can’t do such things, so the chief will be wishing that things go accordingly but then . . . The inspectors and all the other concerned staff do not come on time to see to it that this thing that they have formulated works accordingly.

Kekeletso emphasized that policies on paper had little impact in real life, since parents and teachers would disagree on matters, and there would be no external monitoring from inspectors. He hinted at power struggles between

teachers and parents—teachers did not want to listen to the parents’ perspectives, and parents would argue that the teachers needed to hear their voices. When Kekeletso stressed that school boards “run after the parents,” he suggested an unequal power relation, particularly as teachers, unlike the parents, were paid by the government. While rural teachers often perceived parents to lack interest in education, a very different picture emerged when we spoke to rural parents.

“This School Doesn’t Teach”

Many residents of both villages were critical of the local schools. ’Me Rethabile, a fifty-nine-year-old housewife who resided in Mabana, had one son who was a factory worker in Maseru and a son and grandson who were herders in the village. Her granddaughter attended grade 4 at the local primary school, but she was unimpressed by rural education. When interviewed, she said of the school:

Eish, it really makes me hopeless. It doesn’t have good education. . . . It doesn’t have education at all. . . . We are just taking the children there just for the sake of knowing how to read. . . . Children only get to be better if we take them to Maseru. . . . You will find that once they go to other schools, it will be as if it’s then that they are beginning to [attend] school. . . . They will be started afresh; they don’t even know English, students of here.

’Me Rethabile’s statement is insightful for understanding how she and others experienced the inequalities of rural education. Rural schools were understood to be of a lesser quality than urban schools, and it was expected that children would not receive the same qualifications as they would were they educated in the city. As Cooper, Alber, and Njoya (this volume) remind us, schooling is constantly productive of difference and hence inequality. The idea that education is an equalizing force is misleading.

The inadequacies of the local schools, and the poor outcomes for the children attending them, provoked a need to blame. That blame was cast not on the more limited resources or other structural factors that literature tends to highlight (Ansell 2004), or indeed on rurality or remoteness per se, but rather on the teachers, who were accused of lacking motivation and frequent absenteeism. At a village meeting (*pitso*) held on the hill in Mabana in February 2018, Claire made notes of the following conversation between various women who were allowed to proffer their opinions after the men had spoken:

YOUNGER WOMAN: The teachers themselves take their children away.

ANOTHER YOUNG WOMAN: They take the children out there because this school doesn't teach.

GRANDMOTHER: The children move to the next class still being dull. At other schools, children will no longer be failing. I so wish they are still passing/failing. If the child fails, he or she can repeat that class. Now that they are just passing, if you take them to other schools, they send them back to the other grades. It is said that they know nothing.

CLAIRE: Has it happened that someone was sent back to another grade?

GRANDMOTHER: The child was sent back to grade 5; he left here from grade 7. All they [teachers] do is to go in cars and leave. Children are loitering for the whole day. They [the children] don't leave, but the month can never end for all of them [the teachers] having gone somewhere. The remaining teachers never teach in the grade where the teacher is away. . . . When children have been to school in Maseru, what do you see? A big difference.

This exchange touches on two themes that occurred in many discussions about the local schools. First, the image of the teacher leaving is symbolic of how people thought the education system in rural areas was failing. As one shopkeeper in Mabana expressed on our first visit to her shop, the teachers would not care about the children on payday and would be absent. Although teachers might have been attending to work-related matters and stayed for days at a time with relatives due to transport challenges, the fact that they were away fueled the suspicions. It also made teachers a perfect target for blame. Echoing the Malaysian villagers Scott (1985) describes, residents considered teachers a relatively affluent group that was not showing the commitment expected given their presence within the community. Beyond that, they were actively taking themselves out of the village whenever possible. Distance produced by the teachers was turned into a boundary by the parents.

Second, teachers sent their own children to get educated in the capital city. This too symbolized lack of connectedness and commitment to the community. Another Mabana parent criticized the quality of teaching and attributed this to the failures of the school principal: "The lady who is in charge is the problem because she doesn't even send her children there due to her carelessness." Parents themselves wanted to invest in what they perceived as quality education—in the city—where the teachers sent their own children to school.

Some were able to do this (and doing so was considered entirely acceptable by their neighbors). However, for teachers to do the same was interpreted as drawing a separation between their own lives and those of the villagers and, particularly given their role as providers of education in the village, this provoked blame.

In general, blame was reserved for the local school and its teachers, not national policy guidelines, which were not directly visible in the communities. Apart from Kekeletso, Mabana’s chief’s secretary, no participant explicitly mentioned national policy throughout the research. The discussion at the village meeting quoted above highlights a grandparent’s critique of the current practice of allowing children to progress between classes without passing exams, but she appeared to attribute this to the teachers more than the system—she indicated that she believed other schools would not allow children to enter a class without demonstrating that they were at the appropriate level. It is perhaps ironic that the implementation of a policy intended to improve access to those more disadvantaged was interpreted as a contributor to broken dreams and experiences of failure (Dyson 2019; Stambach and Hall 2017). But it was the visible teachers rather than the abstract policy decisions that were cast as the culprits. While, as Kwayu (this volume) points out, teachers serve as the “arm of the state,” interpreting the decisions of policymakers within communities, in the narrative of bad teachers, policy (and the politics behind it) escapes scrutiny.

“They Just Consume Our Money”

Parents wanted to emphasize that teachers were not only failing to provide a satisfactory education, but also actively exploiting their charges by embezzling funds intended to meet the children’s needs. In contrast to the situation described by Quaretta (this volume) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, households in rural Lesotho are no longer expected to contribute through fees or other monetary contributions to the education of primary school children. While they are expected to take on the responsibility of ensuring their children attend school, in return they expect certain entitlements to be provided by schools on behalf of the state. At the time of the research, schools provided a free meal to children on school days under a government scheme supported by the World Food Programme, but parents did not feel that the food was landing in the right mouths which was a particular concern given household food shortages. Villagers in Mabana suspected that teachers were using the school feeding program for their own benefit.

They had noticed that food was not always provided to children at school and observed that teachers stored additional food. The school, away on the hill, was both almost in their midst and beyond their scrutiny.

Other forms of embezzlement were also hinted at. Ntate Realeboha, fifty-six, from Mabana, was proud of his older children who now had office jobs, but his fifteen-year-old daughter had attended the local school. She was accused of loitering and stealing from her own family in the village, activities that were attributed to her recent dropping out of school which would otherwise have kept her busy. When Claire asked what Realeboha thought about the local school, he openly criticized the management (the school board and the principal) and the teachers for not improving the school:

To be honest, since the white missionaries left, and the black ones took charge, they have just been sleeping, and just embezzling funds, and they didn't build [the school].

According to him the current “black fathers” (the Catholic school management) overseeing the school were focused on their own businesses and raising their sheep, rather than focusing on the education of the children. The white fathers (missionaries) in his opinion had contributed to the building of the school, but no repairs had been done. When Claire asked him about what he thought about teachers, he uttered a similar criticism:

NTATE REALEBOHA: The teachers, those ones, they just consume our money. . . . They would be wanting this and that from us, saying the church needs it.

CLAIRE: Can you send your children to attend school there?

NTATE REALEBOHA: Not at all. . . . This one has expired.

He used the very strong phrasing “This one has expired” when explaining that the school was not of the same quality as the urban schools he sent his older children to.

Realeboha's blaming both of black priests and the teachers for failing to engage with education, while praising earlier “white fathers” for bringing benefits to the community, is in keeping with a tendency to cast greatest blame on those who are closer in time and space. Those perceived as foreign are viewed as more reliable and less blameworthy than locals (see also Cooper 2015 on the ways in which Kenyan beneficiaries of child sponsorship

schemes are convinced of "the goodness of foreign sponsors and the badness of Kenyan employees" [44], whom they suspect of "eating" gifts intended for the children). Teachers today are less dedicated than those in the past; teachers here are less committed than those in urban areas.

It is significant that Realeboha criticized the schools for "taking our money" when free primary education was introduced in 2000, meaning parents no longer had to pay school fees. However, parents still had to pay for schoolbooks and uniforms, which were costly, and children were given a free meal at school, which helped many families. There is perhaps also a deeper suspicion that funding intended to improve the quality of the school is used by the teachers for their own benefit, rather than in the interest of local children. Overall, the community's depiction of teachers as morally deficient resonates strongly with Scott's (1985) account of the blaming of the rich by the poor in rural Malaysia. A locally visible group becomes subject to narratives that enable them to be scapegoated as the cause of a set of problems.

"Our Teachers Are Not Committed"

There were strong resonances between the views that prevailed in the local communities and those expressed by policymakers and managers, and here too rurality and distance played a role. Below we consider the perspectives both of the Maseru-based policy community, responsible for developing new policy and overseeing school inspection, and of a district education manager, based in a district office and in theory responsible for the implementation of ministry policy across the district.

During the fieldwork we invited educational policymakers from the ministry and international organizations, along with representatives of teacher training and nonformal education institutions, to three workshops in Maseru to discuss our emerging findings. At the last of these meetings, we asked participants to comment on how they thought rural teachers could be better supported. Several of the participants responded by criticizing teachers, representing them as an obstacle to improving education in Lesotho, and lacking commitment to implementing the new curriculum. Following a breakout discussion, two representatives from an organization involved in nonformal education reported back on their group (which involved participants from a range of other institutions). They emphasized that learners needed to be supported in learning about their environment and that it was important that teachers were role models. Claire's field notes reported some further comments from this group:

Teachers choose being teachers without passion simply due to wanting to have a job.

The teachers in these rural areas, most of the time, there is lack of motivation among themselves, maybe why they blame the government or the system, when one's motivation is very low, one is not thinking straight.

Both statements expressed a widely reported perception that rural teachers lack motivation to teach in a passionate way. The second quotation, interestingly, is critical of a perceived tendency among teachers to blame the government, in contrast to the policymakers' perception that the teachers were to blame.

A representative of one of the church schools' secretariats, Ntate Motsamai, explained further the issue of demotivation:

NTATE MOTSAMAI : Sometimes you don't get the people you need, you just grab somebody nearby and so on, but in fact all teachers are trained, that is . . . the training of teachers also is somehow questionable because teachers are no more as dedicated as in the past . . .

CLAIRE: : Why is that the case?

NTATE MOTSAMAI: Maybe it's because of the incentives, maybe their wages and all that there is, [teachers] complain about so many things even the facilities themselves—also they demotivate the teachers and so on.

Ntate Motsamai's assertions recognized possible structural causes (the churches, notably, play no role in relation to teacher pay). However, more prominently, he cast teachers as morally suspect: They complain about the facilities and demotivate other teachers in spite of the training they have received, a situation he contrasts with past teachers who were more dedicated. He attributed the teachers' moral failings to an interest in money rather than the pursuit of teaching, a situation he suggests was exacerbated by the payment of incentives to rural teachers. Only one of the teachers in the case study villages mentioned these incentives, whereby teachers in rural areas were paid an additional 3,100 maloti (around £146), which they could spend on phone credit or transport to reduce their isolation. The teacher suggested that this had initially motivated him, but the practice had only lasted from 2014 to 2016. As with the villagers, casting blame is bound up with a depiction of selfishness (as also reported by Scott 1985).

A more extreme condemnation of the immorality of teachers was expressed in an interview with Ntate Mafatle, a district education manager:

Teacher and learner absenteeism, lack of preparation for the teachers, and lack of commitment of the teachers . . . you know, our teachers are not committed—discipline, you know, ethics, they are so unethical. . . . Imagine a teacher, a male teacher, having an affair with, a love affair with, a primary child. . . . And even [in] the secondary schools it is, it is more prevalent in secondary schools, and you know and you see the results . . . the general lack of culture of teaching and learning. The teachers just feel that once they are enrolled in school system, it is okay; the learners, if they appear in school, it is okay. Whatever they do there is secondary, you know. Generally I have no confidence in our teachers, absolutely no confidence in our teachers, and they . . . I don't know where it went wrong. Have you listened to them teaching?

Ntate Mafatle labeled rural teachers collectively as morally corrupt, a product of individual failings. As a district education manager, Ntate Mafatle was responsible for the district-level implementation of policy. He was situated far from the ministry in Maseru but also far away from Paleneng, and he rarely interacted with villagers. This distance from the rural school limited his capacity to exercise influence and meant that teachers could carry on teaching as they deemed appropriate. He absolved himself of responsibility for their inadequacies: His alibi was that their remoteness rendered them uncontrollable. At one level, Ntate Mafatle directed blame upward to the Maseru-based ministry. He felt that he could not make decisions since the education decisions were centralized rather than being made on the ground. He explained that his office had no funds. He was supposed to run workshops for teachers, but often government funds did not arrive on time meaning these workshops could not happen. He was responsible for sending inspectors to schools but focused his attention on those nearby. The more remote communities were hard to access. Although it was generally possible with a four-wheel-drive vehicle, Ntate Mafatle explained that his team were often unable to attend community events in such places due to lack of transport. The vehicle that he and others usually used had been out of order since they traveled to a community event in Maseru and children had thrown stones at the car. Blame for infrequent travel to rural areas (and thus limited engagement) was attributed to the failings of the ministry in distant Maseru.

While presenting the ministry as out of touch and troublesome, Mafatle

did not cast it as unethical in the way that teachers were. In representing teachers as unethical, Mafatle made a distinct moral boundary between “us” (the policy community) and “them” (the teachers). While wanting more attention from the distant ministry, Mafatle blamed it for his own lack of attention to the distant village. The autonomy afforded to rural teachers by their isolation absolved him of responsibility—provided him with an alibi. There is an irony to Mafatle’s question, “Have you listened to them teaching?” While he clearly wanted to communicate that he did not think the standards were good enough, his view was in all likelihood based on very limited observations.

In summary, policymakers and managers spoke of teachers in critical terms, using them as an excuse for the education system’s failures. They focused on individual moral failings but associated these not with individuals but with (rural) teachers as a class. Blaming of teachers provided an alibi, excusing inadequacies that might otherwise get leveled at their own roles.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this chapter we have presented examples that reveal how rural teachers were blamed for what was perceived as a low quality of education delivered in rural primary schools. Villagers and policymakers alike accused teachers of lacking commitment, investing too little time in teaching, being late or disorganized, or having “consumed” school resources and funds.

In the accusations of the villagers, we see strong resonances with previous literature. People in positions of limited power cast blame on proximate groups perceived as more powerful with accusations of selfishness and immorality (Denham 2012; Rudiak-Gould 2015). Blaming teachers in this instance can perhaps be a form of resistance, or a “weapon” (Scott 1985) mobilized by parents who feel that their voices are unheard and no favorable changes are being implemented. The collective blaming of a class of people within the community gives meaning and explanation to an uncomfortable situation, while reinforcing a sense of identity by drawing a boundary between “perpetrators” and “victims.”

In these deeply rural contexts, distance plays a complex role. At some level, the failures of schooling are attributed to rurality and remoteness, though this attribution is continually mediated through criticism of teachers. Teachers appear to attract blame in part because of their proximity. Unlike other actors in the education system, they are present in the rural community. Yet at the

same time, most are perceived to be outsiders and, perhaps more importantly, seeking to distance themselves from the community. They travel away from the village whenever an opportunity arises, and they decide to educate their own children elsewhere. Villagers, by contrast, have little capacity to travel and feel neglected by the outside world. For thirty years Mabana residents had been requesting a bridge that would enable schoolchildren to cross to school, but nothing had happened, and many felt that they were not being listened to. More than representing national education policies and funding decisions, teachers represented the neglect of the rural.

For policymakers, the rationale for blaming rural teachers is perhaps less obvious but may be more revealing. At some level, casting blame is doubtless about (intentionally) casting responsibility elsewhere (Rudiak-Gould 2015). Policymakers depicted a collective failure on the part of individually flawed teachers, criticized as unmotivated or unable to understand the content and pedagogy of the new curriculum. This diverted scrutiny from the lack of educational investment in rural areas, such as electricity for children to learn information and communication technology skills, or from the lack of visits from district resource teachers, who were meant to support teachers. Those in more senior roles had some power over curriculum and resourcing, and some of the responsibility for the inadequacies of rural education doubtless lay with them.

But there are wider structural issues over which education policymakers have little control. Budgets are low, and for new initiatives the ministry often depends on funding from international donors. Moreover, education policy cannot fully address the failure of the Lesotho economy to employ all who pass through its education system. But policymakers on the whole did not draw attention to these structural challenges. Rather, like the villages, the blamed teachers—as individuals, with personal failings and questionable morality.

Blaming of teachers, then, must serve other functions for policymakers. As with the villagers, blaming helped establish boundaries between policymakers as formulators of policies and teachers who were tasked with implementing the curriculum. In this case, the boundaries were cemented by physical distance. Long dirt roads separated policymakers and district officials from remote communities. While teachers often felt neglected as a consequence, the physical distance also gave them a degree of autonomy, as their behaviors went unobserved. For policymakers, this meant that teachers could be positioned as beyond their control—hence blamable.

It seems likely that while policymakers were perhaps more aware of the structural causes of educational failure than the villagers, blaming teachers served a similar purpose for them. Policymakers may have felt powerless in relation to structural forces, but they also felt powerless in relation to rural teachers as a consequence of the liberating effects of distance. By blaming distant actors over whom they claim to have no control, policymakers—and district officials—could shore up their own collective identity. They had an alibi that they shared.

Scott (1985) noted how different groups in society draw on the same “community of discourse” or “cultural materials” (140) to attribute blame. It is unlikely that the similar accusations leveled at teachers by policymakers and villagers are entirely independent of each other. Lesotho is a small country in which most urban dwellers remain connected to rural relatives. It is unsurprising if narratives of blaming circulate and become embedded among different groups that each deploy them in ways that function for themselves.

While blaming teachers might have some utility for villagers and the policy community, it undoubtedly also has adverse consequences. It serves to mask deeper more generalized causes behind the failure of rural education to fulfill the aspirations of parents and children, and perhaps also undermines the potential for political rather than individualized means of redress. It is rooted in a separation between groups of actors—between villagers and teachers on the one hand (entrenched by a sense that teachers are outsiders whose lives are centered elsewhere) and between policymakers/implementers and teachers on the other (in this case a physical separation but one in which both sides have a degree of interest). Each group seeks to blame the others (while not discussed here, teachers cast blame on parents, whom they regard as uninterested in education, and the ministry that fails to support them). In so doing they further entrench their separate identities and deepen the boundaries.

These boundaries can, however, be breached. Links can be built between teachers and villagers. Some teachers in Mabana talked of previous times in which parents had come to the school to teach children practical craft skills. This had ended as parents now expected to be paid for such work, and there were no funds available to pay them. School board members could also provide a connection. It was notable that one couple in Paleneng, Tseliso and Keneiloe, found fault not only with the teachers but also with the Ministry of Education and Training and wider education system, and the ways in which rural education was managed from outside. Ntate Tseliso was a school board

member (a parent representative), and was concerned about the number of teachers rather than their lack of commitment. He was working to secure additional appointments, since three teachers were currently responsible for teaching all seven grades. His wife, 'Me Keneiloe, echoed the policymakers' view that the teachers were unduly focused on their salaries. However, she stressed that her main concern was that they were not being monitored. She had noticed that the children who attended an English-medium school returned to the villages with stronger skills.

I can blame the ministry with the fact that they don't take these schools that are in the mountains seriously, the fact that they don't go around the schools to check what is happening.

It may serve villagers and policymakers in various ways to cast the blame for educational failure, not least in circumstances where both groups feel relatively powerless to achieve change. This also operates as an alibi, hiding their own roles and more importantly the structural barriers to change. It is not, however, inevitable. Even in rural communities where distance intervenes to consolidate boundaries, there are possibilities for those boundaries to be broken down and a more nuanced picture of the forces shaping education to be achieved.

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CHAPTER 5

Changing the Narrative on School Arson in Kenya

Beyond Pathologizing and Criminalizing Approaches

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Recurrent incidents of school arson in Kenya's secondary schools have persisted for decades and have been a subject of government task force investigations, but there has been "no consensus on the causes nor the best way of managing the problem" (Oburu et al. 2020: 94; Cooper 2022: 295). Many of the recommendations by the task forces, however, focus on increasing discipline in schools (Cooper 2022) while some of the explanations in print media discourse focus on the individual students who are "bad apples" as a result of bad parenting, peer pressure, and a broken-down society. Such a perspective recommends the exclusion of such students or the reintroduction of corporal punishment in schools as a solution to school arson (Oburu et al. 2020). One of the recommendations in the 2016 government report, for instance, is the establishment of Borstal institutions and rehabilitation centers to hold students convicted by courts of law to enable them to continue with their studies (Republic of Kenya 2016: 99). The proposal for alternative institutions for students who are isolated as the culprits behind the arson suggests a view that the roots of arson are in the students alone and have no connection to institutional or social phenomena. This gesture is a form of responsabilization, where the weight of achieving the outcomes of education is placed on the youth rather than on the administrators and the society providing education.

It is against this backdrop that I write this chapter with the aim of reconceptualizing and expanding the analysis of school arson in Kenya. In particu-

lar, I will demonstrate that an analysis of the dormitory as a target of arson in boarding schools reveals a disconnect between what the adults (the teachers and parents) on one hand, and the students on the other, think of the schooling experience. The contradiction is one of the factors that fuels the frustration of students who resort to arson when they feel unheard.

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SCHOOL

One of the most pervasive arguments about school arson in Kenya has been that there are a few bad students who are either undisciplined (Ombati and Kabale 2017) or disconnected (Ondari 2016) or under the influence of drugs and alcohol (Sunday Nation Reporter 2016) who start the fires or who influence the other students to participate in acts of arson. This approach implies that removing these “bad elements” from school would solve the problem of school arson. This argument is highly psychologized and comes from its own discursive space in which the “psy” disciplines are seen as providing the rational solutions to social problems (Barnhart 2018). However, “psy” discourses heavily depend on the individualistic mindset when dealing with children’s behavior, leaving too little space for understanding children holistically and within the appropriate cultural and societal context (Wierviorka 2014; Bartolo 2010). Conoley and Gutkin (1995) have argued that school psychology has failed to realize its promise because it is devoted to answering the wrong questions due to its historical foundations. They aptly opine that school psychology

is preoccupied with the problems of individuals rather than understanding the ecologies in which people function. It is a science with historical roots in personality theory and the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders, providing little or no guidance for those interested in initiating organizational change. Most school psychology curriculum is long on assessment and clinical processes, and very short on social psychology, organizational development, social influence, and other topics that are supportive of systems change. (210)

This limitation is seen in the reactions to school arson in the media and in government task force reports on the arson in Kenyan secondary schools. The public discourse and government policy documents recommend punit-

tive quick fix measures that treat problems at the individual behavioral level while ignoring the sociocultural, political, and systemic failures that underpin behavior. This approach of focusing on punishing the “bad apples” or excluding them from school or increasing discipline in schools has been implemented for several years but the problem of school arson persists. For instance, all the government task reports have made recommendations for more vetting of students, especially those seeking school transfers, with the aim of excluding the “bad” students to ensure they do not “transfer” their bad behavior to the next school (Ministry of Education 1991, 2001; Republic of Kenya 2008, 2016). The newspapers also focus on the efforts by the government to address high school arson through the framework of the criminal investigation system rather than through other institutions. For example, one report (Oduor 2018) focused largely on establishing special schools for “culprits,” meaning children convicted of arson through criminal investigation. Another report (Angira 2021) termed the issues raised as “flimsy,” and devoted much space to the promise by the Directorate of Criminal Investigation to permanently stigmatize children considered instigators of arson by making their conviction part of their permanent criminal record. Both the government reports and the media reports reinforce the view that the problem lies in individual pathology and that, therefore, the solution lies in excluding individual student actors from school.

There is a need to go beyond simply blaming the teenagers, to consider the teenagers actors within a specific social and institutional context, and to devote time to understanding that context so as to understand the behavior of the teenagers. Such effort has been made in recent scholarship (Cooper 2014, 2022; Wasonga and Makahamadze 2020; Malenya 2016). Cooper (2014, 2022), for instance, situates arson in the context of the Kenyan political culture in which the government is jolted into action only when citizens resort to drastic action. Cooper (2014) argues that students have learned to use arson as an “instrument of power that the structurally weak—like themselves can employ to serve their interests” (600). Furthermore, students are very intentional in their use of arson: they choose when and how to use it based on their circumstances (Cooper 2022 98), which implies that we must then look at school arson using the lens of students’ distinctive experiences in the Kenyan boarding school.

My chapter looks at the emotional and lived experiences of students. In particular, I look at the dormitory as a space within the boarding school, and how the dormitory holds different attachments for students, parents, and teachers that ultimately affect the way each group perceives arson, especially

when the target of arson is the dormitory. My research reveals an important disconnect between students, teachers, and parents regarding how the school dormitory is experienced and understood. A persistent theme was the shock of the parents and teachers that the students would burn the dormitory, suggesting that the students should have had an emotional attachment to the dormitory as their living quarters. The students, on the other hand, did not claim the same attachment and, in fact, saw the burning of the dorm for its symbolic and material value. The difference in the two perceptions indicates a major schism in the experience and perception not just of school, but even of education itself.

Yet this research also illuminated how the burden of making education a beneficial and life-changing experience for the young people in school is put on the students: Adults expect students to accept any hardships in their living conditions and be grateful for their chance at education. Meanwhile, the adults remain aloof and distant from what the students actually feel and experience. If the students are uncomfortable in what is truly a difficult educational environment, it is the responsibility of the students to adjust, and the adults are under no obligation to listen to or empathize with the students.

Further, there seems to be a disconnect between what adults think of “the promise of education” and what the students think. In focus group discussions with parents, a parent narrated to me how his child had argued with him about staying in school:

I was shocked when my son said that if he drops out of school and starts betting or opens a YouTube channel, he would make more money than someone with a degree. I would like him to concentrate in school for just four years [referring to the four years of secondary education in Kenya], get a good grade, get into a degree good course, and have a better future.

The skepticism the student expresses to the parent about the relationship between education and future success is not far-fetched. It is not uncommon to read in Kenyan print media analyses about the value of a university degree or about “useless” degree courses (Michira 2018; Ouko 2001). While adults might still see education as a key to the future, students are aware that the promise of education as a ladder for employment and a better life that was available to their parents is no longer available for them. There is uncertainty about what education guarantees and as Wiewiorka (2005) has noted, with reference to violence in France, precarity is one of the key elements of vio-

lence. The threat of an uncertain future, pressure to excel in examinations—where excelling does not guarantee employment—in a school environment with dehumanizing living conditions can increase frustration and anxiety that finally leads to violence.

ARSON IN KENYAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The phenomenon of arson in learning institutions is common in Kenya and it results in destruction of property and sometimes leads to death. The 2016 government task force report indicated that there were 483 incidents of school unrest reported that year, and of these incidents, 239 involved arson attacks (Republic of Kenya 2016). According to Cooper (2022), there was a consistent trend of fires in in Kenyan secondary schools between 2008 and 2018 in which at least 753 incidents were reported (81–82). An analysis of school arson incidents based on print media reports and government task force reports indicates that school arson occurs countrywide in boys' and girls' schools, public and private schools, and national, extra-county, county, and subcounty schools, but it is more prevalent in public boarding schools (or day schools with a boarding component) (Cooper 2022: 82).

One of the major factors affecting how students, parents, and teachers perceive the responsibility of the students is based on the ranking of the school. In Kenya, there is a stark inequality between the different schools in terms of facilities, staff, and prestige that is embedded in Kenya through a “tripartite hierarchy.” The top is occupied by a “tiny number of prestigious national schools at the top of the pyramid,” with extra-county and county schools in the middle, and subcounty schools (mostly day schools) at the bottom of the pyramid (Oketch and Somerset 2010: 15). The national, extra-county, and county schools are predominantly boarding schools. The boarding facilities in these schools differ. Subcounty schools, for instance, tend to have poorer infrastructure and tend to be more understaffed than county, extra-county, and national schools (Cooper 2022: 112). The hierarchical structure is a carry-over from the old colonial British structure of education that Kenya tried to Africanize at independence (Olson 1972: 51). The boarding school tradition was also inherited from the colonial government but has continued to be a feature of public secondary schools. Cooper (2022) has noted that “in Kenya, boarding schools have gained distinction for providing select students with educational advantages, thereby improving their chances at success in terms of eventual economic and social mobility” (113).

This reputation of the older schools is enhanced by the fact that the bulk of the first African elites who occupied key positions after Kenya's independence came from these schools. The belief among students that some of these schools confer advantages to "select students" is one of the factors that causes disaffection behind the recurrent arson attacks by students. In the focus group discussions with students in a school that experienced arson, a student alluded to the existence of this inequality and its relationship to examination success: "You know in this country if you join one of the big schools . . . it is as if you have already passed. But this one [referring to his school] *ni bahati tu* (it is a matter of luck)."

The underlying belief is that the end of secondary school examination is already unfair to lower-tier schools because the students in the "big schools" have better facilities and teachers, and that these schools have the material in advance; therefore, they teach to the test. This anxiety about examinations is one of the causes of school arson (Oburu 2020). The perception among students is that there is unfairness in testing, a common concern in the discourse on high-stakes testing (Kaplan 2004).

In terms of physical facilities, a typical Kenyan public boarding school is structured in such a way as to contain three major sections (or more depending on the stature of the school). First is the administrative/academic section consisting of the head teacher's office, staffroom, bursar's office, classrooms, school library, computer, home science laboratories, physical sciences laboratories, and the art room. The second section (students' living quarters) consists of the dormitories (with bathroom and toilet facilities either in-built or separate from the main dormitory building), school sanatorium, and the dining hall, kitchen, and food store. This area is usually a some distance from the main administration block, and so the surveillance of students by the teachers is significantly less pervasive in the dormitory area than in the administrative and classroom area. The third section is the teachers' living quarters, which are located far away from both the administration and academic section and the students' living quarters. Last, depending on the stature of the school and number of extracurricular activities offered, there may be additional sections, for instance, the chapels, multipurpose hall, school farm, and sports fields, among others.

Although arson attacks are directed at administration blocks, classrooms, and food stores, the most common target of attack is dormitories. For instance, in 2016, 228 out of 282 buildings set on fire were school dormitories (Republic of Kenya 2016). These data are what prompted me to investigate how students, teachers, and parents understand why the dormitory is tar-

geted. A closer analysis of the manner in which the students carry out the arson, and particularly why they target the dormitories, could provide useful insights into how the students are experiencing boarding school and schooling in general, and why some of the responses to date seem ineffective in preventing further arson attacks.

Government task forces have investigated school arson incidents and issued recommendations to prevent future school arson (Ministry of Education 1991, 2001; Republic of Kenya 2008, 2016), including the improvement of the physical accommodation facilities in boarding schools, which may often involve renovating old dormitories or building new ones. However, in one of the arson incidents reported in December 2021, students in a national school, which belongs to the more prestigious level of schools, set a newly constructed dormitory on fire. Students cited fatigue and lack of accountability among other grievances, clearly indicating issues besides the facilities, but the reports on this incident laid emphasis on the fact that the dormitory was “newly constructed” and modern (Auma 2021). The question of why students would set even a newly constructed modern dormitory on fire suggests that there is need to expand the discourse on school arson. The public discourse on school arson often reduces student grievances to “petty grievances” (Cooper 2022) and shifts attention to the “materialistic concern” of fixing the dormitories to allow schooling and school activities to “return to normal.” The focus of such analyses is on ending the visible manifestation of the problem—namely arson—rather than on understanding the foundations of the problem.

In this chapter, which is part of a larger study (Oburu 2020), I argue that the public focus on the physical damage to school property and individual pathology of the few “bad students” ignores the less obvious dynamics such as the lived experiences of the students and other contextual factors that precipitate misbehavior. I propose seeing the “school dormitory” in Kenyan public boarding schools as more than a physical space that provides accommodation for the students. Using the social representations theory (Moscovici 2001) and an analysis of newspaper reports and focus group discussions with teachers, parents, and students, I explore the possibility of dual meanings of a school dormitory and the implications of these contested meanings for our understanding of the recurrent arson in Kenyan schools. This approach provides an alternative to framing school arson as a problem of criminality and individual pathology that requires intervention measures to focus on tracking the “culprits,” punishing them, excluding them and/or reforming them.

It also opens opportunities for rethinking the way behavior problems that disrupt school activities are conceptualized and managed to avoid adopting strategies and policies that undermine schooling and the promise of “education for all.”

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

This study introduces a constructionist epistemology and a qualitative research design that incorporates the views of teachers, students, and teachers outside the framework of government task forces and print media discourses, although I use these to enrich the discussions presented in this chapter. I look at school arson from the point of view not only of a Kenyan researcher but also of a psychologist, teacher trainer, parent, and someone who attended boarding school to expand the discourse on school arson and challenge the taken-for-granted understandings of school arson.

Newspaper Articles and Government Reports

The starting point for collecting possible explanations for “why the school dormitory” came from the newspapers articles I collected and analyzed from Kenyan newspapers and task force reports by the Kenya government. In total, the study used 334 newspaper articles from the libraries and websites of Kenya’s two leading newspapers (*Nation Media Group* and *Standard Digital*) in terms of circulation (Ogola 2018). The search focused on articles published between 2000 and 2018 and which specifically attributed school fires to students. All four government reports specifically address the problem of arson (Ministry of Education, 1991, 2001; Republic of Kenya 2008, 2016). All the documents were uploaded onto ATLAS.ti v.8 for coding. I then used thematic analysis to identify in newspaper articles and focus group discussions the explanations for why the school dormitories were targeted with arson. Three data sets and two data analysis methods help meet the trustworthiness requirement in qualitative research through triangulation (Flick 2017; Nowell et al. 2017; Cohen et al. 2018).

Content analysis of newspaper articles from the two leading media houses in Kenya confirmed that the school dormitory is the building most set on fire during student protests. Among the 334 newspaper reports from the two media houses, 53 reports mentioned dormitory as the main target of the school fires. Dormitory fires were reported more often than all other struc-

tures, including laboratories, classrooms, computer laboratories, and libraries. These were media reports reported between 2000 and 2018. Government reports also confirm this fact. For instance, the 2016 special task force report mentioned that 282 buildings were set on fire and 228 of those were dormitories (Republic of Kenya 2016). These findings are troubling, and they point to a need to better understand why students target their own accommodation.

Focus Groups

I sought to find out from parents, teachers, and students why the dormitory is the most common target of arson attacks. I organized focus group discussions to explore several subthemes under the two overarching themes: *why the dormitory* and *suggested solutions to school arson*.

I used two types of purposive sampling to select the sample: typical case and extreme case sampling. Typical case sampling led me to select a typical boys'¹ secondary school in Kenya that had experienced incidents of arson, out of which I selected two schools as extreme cases—a national and a county school. A national school in Kenya admits top students from across the country, while a county school admits B students from across the country but reserves about 20 percent of the vacancies for students from within the county. The two schools that I selected as extreme cases were a national school, because it was not the norm for national schools to experience arson, although this seemed to change in 2016, and a county school that had eight dormitories set on fire in one night, which was an extreme degree of destruction. For comparison purposes and to increase the sample, two schools of equal status (national and county) that did not experience incidents of arson were purposively selected and included in the sample. In total, four schools were included in the sample. Two schools had experienced arson in 2016 and two had not. The sample was further stratified before the final selection of focus group participants.

A total of thirty-two parents, thirty-two teachers, and thirty-two students were interviewed in twelve focus groups, which each comprised eight participants. The teaching staff and parents were divided into two groups: male and female before a sample of eight teachers (four male and four female) and eight parents (four male and four female) were drawn purposively from each school. Care was taken to select parents and teachers who were knowledgeable about the school fires in 2016 and exclude parents and teachers who joined

1. More boys' schools than girls' schools were set on fire in 2016.

the schools after 2016. Only students who were enrolled in their respective schools in 2016 were included in the sample. The students who participated in the study were within the age range of fifteen to eighteen years.

I conducted the focus group discussions between October 2017 and February 2018, with specific reference to the school fires that happened in 2016. I used semi-structured interview schedules to explore the participants' views on school arson. Based on the content analysis of newspaper articles that showed that the school dormitory was the most targeted school building during arson incidents, I included an open-ended question seeking to explore possible explanations of why school dormitories were targeted. It is data from this question that informs the discussion in this chapter. I then applied thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012; Clarke and Braun 2015) to the focus group discussions to identify the dominant explanations for why the dormitory is the most commonly attacked structure by students in public secondary schools and to explore the possible solutions to the recurrent problem of school arson.

FINDINGS: ARSON AND THE SCHOOL DORMITORY

Reports of arson in Kenyan schools generate a lot of attention and discussions on local media platforms (print, radio, TV, and social media sites) and sometimes in international media as well as online platforms. The discussions convey bewilderment at the problem of school arson and the dormitory as the epicenter of arson incidents as captured in the headlines below:

Why are Kenya's students torching their own dormitories? (Mutiga 2016)

Over 100 Kenyan schools burned in apparent arson attacks (Yusuf 2016)

School fires: Who will stop this madness? (Standard Team 2021)

These news headlines, designed to capture the sense of shock and disbelief expressed in print media discussions, are alarming and they strengthen the view that there is something inherently wrong with the students. This is not surprising if we look at it from the point of view of media framing (Entman 1993, 2007; Gamson et al. 1992). The phrases "torching their own dormitories" and "stop this madness" are carefully selected to promote a particular

interpretation and understanding of school arson: There is something wrong with the individual student, and that is where the effort should be directed to solve the problem.

Including and excluding certain interpretations has the power to direct the discourse on school arson and limit the focus on other aspects or understandings of the phenomenon. For instance, reference to “their own dormitories” suggests an assumed understanding that students attach value to or have an emotional attachment to their dormitory and demonstrate a sense of responsibility to their “own space,” which contains their valuable belongings. This raises the question: Do students attach such value to the dormitories or the items stored therein?

In the next section, I consider the different themes generated from the focus group discussions.

Not Quite a “Home Away from Home”

According to the teachers, the dormitory is more often set on fire because of its location and the fact that it is hidden from constant scrutiny by teachers and administrative staff. Boarding schools are structured in such a way that dormitories are located further away from the classrooms, administration blocks and teachers’ living quarters. The students are therefore aware that they are not being monitored and they can plan to set it on fire without being detected. In response to the question “why the school dormitory,” a teacher from a school that experienced arson said:

TEACHER: It is an easy target.

INTERVIEWER: The dormitories are an easy target? How is that?

TEACHER: The dormitories are far from the administration office and the staffroom. . . . We rarely go there unless you are on duty. We just trust them to clean it. . . . It is like their home . . . away from home. You do not expect someone to destroy their home.

To the teacher, the dormitory is “home away from home” for the students, and this assumption makes the teachers drop their guard in terms of paying attention to the mood of the students.

But this statement suggests a significant disconnect between what teachers believe and what the students believe. Home is a significant concept. Home implies more than accommodation—it extends to feelings of security and belonging. How would a teacher feel that a dormitory is home for stu-

dents, while the students feel anything but, as the arson suggests? Clearly, students do not feel that they belong in school, which requires us to interrogate our assumptions. What is it that would cause so much disaffection that students would choose to set their home away from home on fire, and what would make teachers miss such significant sentiments in students?

In some of my interactions with students, I asked them what was so bad about the school that a dormitory had go up in flames. Their response confirmed that a dormitory is not really a home away from home. For students, it is a place with restricted living conditions: They would like “more space,” especially for storage, better mattresses, a bigger library, as well as a well-stocked library like the ones in the “big schools” that they listed. They respond to both the actual physical living conditions and the perception of inequality in the allocation of resources in schools across Kenya. The unspoken message here is that gaining admission to a “big” school increases the prospects of joining a university and guarantees better future opportunities. If teachers are to forestall this feeling of disaffection, they have to acknowledge the anxiety that high-stakes testing evokes, especially when one is not a student in a top-tier school; support students to challenge and think beyond the inherent disadvantage of being in a lower-tier school; and help them work toward reducing the anxiety caused by the pressure to excel.

Availability of Flammable Materials

For both parents and teachers, the dormitory was mostly set on fire because of the availability of flammable materials such as mattresses and painted metal boxes (which students typically use as suitcases) that act as accelerants that help the fire spread fast. This is captured in the quotation below from parents in a school that experienced arson:

PARENT 1: Because of the amount of flammable material, sprays, paints, and mattresses. It is easy to start a fire. . . . You just need a little fuel.

PARENT 2: There is nothing to burn in the classrooms. The dorm has more materials that help the fire spread.

This view that the school dormitory is a physical space that is targeted by students because of location and availability of flammable materials persisted in my discussion with parents. However, there still seemed to be underlying questions and doubts about the reasons given by the parents. It was interesting that they focused less on the individual pathology view held by the

teachers. Perhaps parents are cognizant of the fact that blaming the individual student might be an indictment of their parenting skills. This has been a common trope in print media discourse, with parents sometimes accused of pampering their children instead of allowing them to grow up.

A teacher in a school that experienced arson wondered why students would set their own belongings on fire and suggested that maybe the problem is “within them”:

Some of the students were surprised by the fire. But actually, what puzzled me a lot was that they burnt their own properties—their books, their clothes, their bedding, so . . . I was wondering aloud. The problem is within them, because if the problem was maybe mine or the other teachers, they would have actually destroyed something that is maybe related to me. Why burn their own dormitory. . . . The dorm is like their bedroom back home. Why burn it?

While parents focused more on the material aspects of the school dormitory, teachers focused on the individual students and suggested that burning their “own dormitory” is indicative of a problem “within them.” This is a form of responsabilization because the teachers do not see any contextual factors that would make children burn their dormitory.

Understanding what motivates an individual to resort to arson can be complex, and even using motivation as an explanatory model is challenging since, as Geller (2008: 143) notes, “Motivations are not easy to tease and they may be complex rather than unitary.” In the Kenyan context, with respect to school arson, this poses a unique challenge because teachers are not afforded any psychological support in the form of systematic psychological assessment programs for students. In the absence of a diagnosed pathology, communicative arson becomes the most probable explanation (Geller 1992). An individual may use arson to communicate anger and frustration, to initiate change, or to attract attention (Geller 2008). If we adopt this model, we still are left to grapple with what causes the anger or who did not pay attention to students, among other questions. Perhaps the fact that a teacher equates the dormitory with “a bedroom” suggests that the understanding the student has of a dormitory is different from that of the teacher. It might be important to interrogate how students view their dormitories, pay attention to how they experience boarding school life, and what exactly a dormitory represents to them. Setting their dormitories on fire negates the view that a dormitory is equivalent to “their bedroom back home.”

A parent in a school that did not experience arson made a similar observation, remarking that it is just “a few bad apples” who are pampered, who do not want to study and who do not understand the cost of building dormitories:

I think the fires are started by a few spoiled children who are pampered by their parents and who do not appreciate the cost of building dormitories. Some of them have never slept hungry. . . . I think if we remove those ones, the schools will be okay.

It is worth noting how an exploration of why students target the dormitory veers toward situating the problem within the learner and a possible solution, to eliminate the “few bad ones.” The discourse takes the beaten path of positivist mainstream psychology that blames the individual and sets the stage for exclusion because by removing the deviants and bad elements you allow schools to function normally. The adults suggest that there is something inherently wrong with the students that causes them to harm themselves. Their views might stem from discourses that promote the psychobiological model of understanding young people’s actions. When violent behavior is understood and problematized using this approach, it leads to reductionist explanations that also narrow the range of approaches adopted in managing the problem of school arson. However, we must pause and consider whether the problem of school arson has such a quick fix.

Quest for Freedom

The third subtheme from the focus group discussions was that students commit arson in a quest for freedom, which suggests the dormitory as a symbol of bondage. This theme was unanimous in discussions with all three groups of participants and in both the schools that experienced arson and those that did not. According to teachers, parents, and students, the school dormitory is targeted because it will occasion an accommodation crisis and force the school administration to send the students home, at least temporarily until the students can once again be accommodated at the school.

While all the participants agree on the idea that students are looking for freedom from school, the reasons for this quest for freedom are different. For the teachers, students would like to go home because they do not want to learn:

TEACHER: They are looking for an excuse.

INTERVIEWER: An excuse to go home?

TEACHER: Yes. . . . What I can tell you is that the students usually want to go home. Why? I cannot tell. Because we give them food, they have a place to sleep, and they are learning. Most of the time [arson occurs] when they do not want to do exams.

Contrasting this explanation with the fact of students' arson attacks suggests a disconnect between what students think constitutes a worthwhile schooling experience and what teachers and parents think. The teacher seems bewildered that food, a place to sleep, and going to class are not enough to satisfy a young person, probably because of the impression that the promise of education for a better life still holds among the general population of Kenya. Yet the reality is the public discourses on employment and on the usefulness of schools indicate that there are profound doubts that going to school guarantees a better life.

Likewise, with the high-stakes Kenyan examinations and a high failure rate, it should not surprise teachers that children dread examinations. For instance, an analysis of the 2022 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) shows that only 173,345 out of 881,416 students qualified to join university (Murimi 2023). The students are therefore anxious about not only their exam performance, but what it will also imply for their future. But the adults don't guide them on how to deal with these emotions during such a period of high pressure (Oburu 2020).

The parents take a view similar to the teachers', that students fail to appreciate the opportunities that are provided at school and to accept the hardships that come with the possibilities of a better future after school. Unlike the teachers, however, parents say the children are spoiled, wanting to go home to waste time, watch TV, play video games, and see their friends.

PARENT: I think they just burn schools because they want to go home and watch TV (*laughter from other parents*).

INTERVIEWER: When they closed last time because of a fire, . . . what are some of the reasons they gave you?

TEACHER: Mine said . . . he was not the one, but he knows others who just wanted a break from school. These children are just spoiled. . . . They do not know how hard life is.

For both groups of adults, the discourse tends to trivialize the students' grievances with the implication that students need to toughen up because life can be harder than what they are experiencing in school. The suggestion that stu-

dents are wholly responsible for their future, and so they need to sacrifice today for a better tomorrow, was repeated many times in the focus group discussions with teachers and parents. The adults appear to subconsciously avoid delving into the uncomfortable topics such as the need to focus on system failures that might provoke school arson.

For the students however, the main reason for burning the dormitory is because the dormitory can create a big fire with maximum impact which will finally force the administration to listen to them:

INTERVIEWER: So . . . why the dormitory? Why not the classroom or dry grass in the field? (*Laughter from students*)

STUDENT 1: You know, sometimes you want something big that will force them to listen to you. Sometimes you just want to go home because the conditions are bad. . . . You wonder . . . is this a prison?

STUDENT 2: You know, for the dormitories the effect will be intense compared to the classes . . . because of the mattresses and clothes. A fire like that . . . someone will listen.

STUDENT 3: Sometimes the dorms are filthy and congested and you wonder . . . Nobody is doing anything about it. So if it burns, they might rebuild it. . . . I know it will hurt our parents but . . . these guys do not listen to us. They don't care.

It is clear that teachers, parents, and students are all reflexively aware about the desire for freedom among students, but they all have different explanations. The adults cite the students' character as the main explanation for why they choose to burn the dormitories, that is, the inability of the younger ones to tolerate sacrifice today for a better tomorrow (lack of foresight and perseverance). Students, on the other hand, are thinking about their immediate circumstances, their unbearable living conditions and their desire to get the adults to listen. The discordance between the way the adults and the students think is so radical that it is not surprising that students say their parents don't listen and don't care.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO SCHOOL ARSON

It was inevitable that once I asked, "Why the dormitory?" the interviewees would eagerly propose solutions, which I analyzed separately as the second theme. The main suggestion of the students was that the living conditions in

the schools be improved, but more important, they insisted that they would like “to be heard.” However, the suggested solutions I would like to highlight in this section are those that readily came from parents and teachers, because they shed light on why the children persistently asked to be listened to.

For the parents and teachers, the suggested solutions revolved around punishment, control, exclusion, and securitization of schools, as illustrated by the conversation below:

INTERVIEWER: So you think if there were police patrols, there would no misbehavior?

TEACHER: Yes. . . . Just like my colleague said, I think it will make them fear a bit and they will avoid mischief. Police patrols should be increased to help the teachers.

TEACHER B: . . . I also think schools can be helped to install CCTV cameras. . . . That will help . . . if the students will know they are being watched and they will behave.

TEACHER C: . . . I think even there’s something the police use on the road . . . the . . .

INTERVIEWER: You mean the breathalyzer?

TEACHER C: Yes . . . yes . . . that one. Some of these students, maybe they are not sober when they start those fires.

In a very short span of time the teachers made a proposal to have schools fully securitized to help manage misbehavior among students.

In another exchange with parents, the issue of corporal punishment and exclusion of the “bad apples” came up:

INTERVIEWER: So, in your view, banning caning is the cause of the problem?

PARENT A: I strongly believe so, because now the teachers cannot touch them, and the parents cannot touch them . . . so they are free to misbehave.

PARENT B: We are helpless without the cane. . . . I think the government should think again about that law. . . . It is unfair to us parents. I think we need help.

INTERVIEWER: Bringing back the cane will solve the problem?

PARENT C: Yes. . . . I agree with the others. I also think the students who have caused problems in their schools should not be allowed to

transfer. Like in this school . . . the students who started the fire had transferred from another school. I think they should not come back to school; they can be taken to approved school [a child rehabilitation center or Borstal institution]

In these comments, both teachers and parents seem to propose a zero-tolerance policy toward student behavior. It is important to note that this response was common to both teachers from schools that had experienced arson and teachers from those that did not.

DISCUSSION

I set out to explore possible explanations for why the school dormitory is a major target of student unrest, gathering information from various sources: newspaper reports and focus group discussions with parents, teachers, and students from four boys' secondary schools. A comparison of the different sources makes clear that discussions of the dormitories in particular open up into broader issues at two levels. One level concerns the students' experience of schooling in Kenya, and the systemic and structural problems that cause anger and frustration, which students express through violent protests. The second level is related to the inherent problems of the policies to prevent and reactions to students' disruptive behavior adopted by parents, teachers, and government authorities.

The dormitory presents a symbol of all this dissonance and different understandings of the students, the teachers, and the parents. For the students, the dormitory is a symbol that embodies the totality of the negative boarding school experience and especially the harsh living conditions away from home that students are forced to endure. During the focus group discussions, a student commented that the living conditions made him wonder whether the school was a "prison." Why the use of the term "prison"? Perhaps as Giroux (2020) notes, schools are no longer "nurturing, child-friendly spaces" (97) but rather "military fortresses" meting out injustice and humiliation (99), and the students who live within these spaces seem to be perceptively aware of this.

Adults—the teachers and the parents—seem not to see the dormitory from the children's point of view. Rather, they express bewilderment that the students do not share the adults' own view of the dormitory as a "home

away from home,” or of education as a worthwhile sacrifice for a better future. Meanwhile, school administrators and government officials engage in a reductionist approach to students’ grievances and violent protests in general. This apparent tone-deafness of the adults might explain the recurrence of violent protests and perhaps why students would set even a new dormitory on fire. Capturing the full extent of school arson requires examining the lived experiences of the students; otherwise many of the solutions and policies put in place to solve the problem will not resonate with the students.

There is also a lack of appreciation of the stress and pressure students undergo in preparation for the high-stakes examinations that they have to sit, and whose results determine if they qualify to join university. In one of the focus group discussions, it was suggested that students were engaging in acts of arson to avoid taking examinations, betraying adults’ view of examinations as a petty concern, even though examinations have a major implication for the students’ opportunities after school. This is a paradox in itself because in Kenya both parents and teachers place responsibility for educational failure and success on the student. It is therefore understandable why students would be stressed due to pressure to pass examinations.

Slee (1995) has noted that when behavioral problems occur in schools, the usual reaction is to situate causes in the individual (22). This aspect was starkly clear in the focus group discussions, with teachers and parents especially, with regard to suggesting solutions to the problem of school arson. The focus on individual pathology reinforces the “bad-apples hypothesis,” which reinforces “a linear, deterministic and reductionist line of thinking” (Bantjes and Nieuwoudt 2011: 38) and forces intervention strategies to include “imposing punishment or surgically removing the malignancy” (Bantjes and Nieuwoudt 2011: 38).

The dominance of this psychologically based explanation for disruptive behavior constrains how we understand the problem of school arson in Kenya and especially how we conceive the solutions to the recurrent problem of school arson. It may also explain why attempts at solving the problem have predictably focused on the individual learner and leaned toward individual pathology, hence the common suggestion that “eliminating the bad apples” will solve the problem. Ultimately, this approach influences the adoption of a conservative approach to school violence (Arum 2003) whose bias is toward involving the criminal justice system for more control through securitization and surveillance, and includes advocacy for the return of corporal punishment, as suggested by parents and teachers in the

focus group discussions. However, as (Lunneblad 2019) argues, with reference to school violence in the Nordic countries, “It seems unlikely that the criminalization of unwanted behaviour can mitigate the complex social problem of violence in schools” (9).

It seems more prudent, in addressing school violence, to move beyond individual pathology and to look at historical, sociocultural, and psychosocial forces in the school setting that precipitate the violent behavior. This view is aptly summarized by (Slee 1995: 22): “Adding anti-violence programmes to the school curriculum is not an adequate response to the pervasive problem of violence. My call would be for an analysis of the organisation, curriculum, pedagogy, and culture of schools that contributes to the problem of violence as a first step.” Skiba and Peterson (1999) have warned against the sole reliance on zero tolerance to create safer schools (with regard to the American context) for two main reasons: First, by choosing control and exclusion in dealing with disruptive behavior we teach students that “preservation of order demands the suspension of individual rights and liberties,” and, second, we are creating an environment that entrenches “increasingly joyless schools, increasingly unsafe streets, and dramatically increasing expenditures for detention centers and prisons” (381). None of these options portend well for schools, schooling, children’s well-being, and society at large.

Ultimately, schools must be safe spaces for both teachers and students. In the Kenyan context, schools seem to be sites of a lot of contestation. Students know that schooling should yield good results that assure them of future opportunities, and this is also expected of them by both parents and teachers, but they are also aware that to attain the promise of a “good future” the school must work for them. They are perceptive and aware of what works, what does not, and increasingly aware of what needs to be improved. As parents and teachers kept noting during the focus group discussions, this is a “different generation.” Whether we call it a generational gap or a disconnect or disengagement by teachers and parents from the “modern child,” there seems to be discordance in how parents and teachers understand education, schooling, and the promise it holds for the future and how the students understand it. It is not the responsibility of children to create safe and responsive school climates; that is the responsibility of the adults (teachers, parents, and government). Therefore, when students voice concern or discontent and ask for better living conditions, it does not help to dismiss them and ask them to demonstrate more responsibility and an appreciation for what has been provided (food, clothing, a dormitory to sleep in, or school fees). If these are

provided but the conditions are still dehumanizing, the students will protest, and school arson may be one of the ways in which they protest.

There is need to focus on reducing frustration for both teachers and students. For instance, in my discussions with both students and teachers there was an expression of frustration by teachers because of the number of students they have to handle, coupled with a loaded curriculum. This is a probable explanation for why there is limited surveillance for the dormitories. It may also account for the disconnect between teachers and students especially. However, to focus on reducing frustration for teachers due to the high numbers of students and a loaded curriculum requires us to go beyond the school context. It means we have to question government policy (admitting more students than a school's capacity), and, inevitably, this forces us to shift focus from the conservative view, that students today are just spoiled, unlike children of an earlier, simpler past who understood their place in society, were respectful, and appreciated when simple basic needs were provided. If a school admits students beyond capacity without expanding facilities, there will be a problem of congestion. It is, therefore, not possible to dismiss students' concerns about living conditions. This frustrates not only teachers (in terms of providing individualized attention, providing a conducive learning environment, and meeting their socioemotional needs) but also students, who may act out because of feelings of neglect. This frustration is going to degrade the interaction between teachers and students and the general school climate.

CONCLUSION

It is no longer tenable to solve the recurrent problem of school arson without considering the social context and the worldview of the students. As Strom and Strom (2021) have noted, adolescents have unique experiences that qualify them as the most credible source of information on what it means to grow up in the internet age. Therefore, solving a problem involving adolescents requires that we learn from them. This is a lesson that is probably difficult for Kenyan adults who are embedded in a certain view of school as the only guarantee that children have for a better future.

Expanding the discourse on school arson in Kenya and taking into account multiple perspectives is definitely not a panacea for school violence. However, we can adopt approaches that do not demean students and that make schools safer. Second, as the discussion in this chapter has highlighted,

it is important to take multiple perspectives into account, adopting a collaborative approach in managing students' behavior where the students' views, concerns, and worldviews are acknowledged and acted upon to reduce the frustration and negative school experiences that encourage students to resort to violent protests and destruction of property to "force the administrators to listen." Preferably, multiple, complementary interdisciplinary approaches should be adopted in managing school violence in Kenya.

Last, we need to ask what schooling promises vis-à-vis what it delivers. Is the promise of education for a better future resonating with students? As for psychology as a discipline, in providing the psy discourses on which the bad-apples hypothesis is premised and thereby justifying policies that focus on surveillance, punishment, and exclusion, does it act as an alibi for systemic failures and policies that criminalize, pathologize, and exclude students from school, thereby undermining the promise of "education for all"? Violent tendencies may be biological, but violent behavior is influenced by contextual factors.

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PART II

Depoliticization

CHAPTER 6

Education Without Critical Consciousness

An Autoethnography

WANDIA NJOYA

As a high school student, I naively believed the promise that by going to school, we were becoming part of Kenya's commitment to knowledge, creativity, and national development. In retrospect, the explicit promise we were given was that our education was preparing us to become leaders. I was the one who assumed that knowledge and creativity were part of national development. I also interpreted that promise to mean that we would become like the nationalist leaders who fought against colonialism and whom we were always told about in the official state history. I looked forward to following in the footsteps of the university students and intellectuals who were members of what was commonly referred to as the "second liberation," the movement that fought for political pluralism in the 1990s (Chege 2009; Klopp and Orina 2002). I trusted that the schooling system was a place of freedom of thought and of commitment to the welfare of the Kenyan people, and I looked forward to my turn to translate that promise into the pedagogy in my classrooms.

The experience of being a teacher in high school, and later in university, presented me with a reality much different from what I had anticipated as a student. I was surprised to find an institutional and social hostility to achieving creative and democratic pedagogy in the classroom, while politicians, the private sector, and education administrators reiterated these same education goals in public and academic forums.

This chapter presents an autoethnographic account of that journey from the naive hope of putting ideals into practice, through my struggle to grasp the paradoxes I inadvertently became a part of, to my public advocacy in

challenging Kenya's Competency Based Curriculum, which was instituted by the government in 2018. As I will demonstrate, the trajectory was intensely personal, largely due to major contradictions in the public rhetoric and actual experience of education in Kenya. The inconsistencies in the Ministry of Education's explanations of the new system, and the gaps in Kenyan education research from which I sought answers, led me to suspect that the orientation of Kenya's education system was completely different from what the state said it was. Naturally, this realization was much slower than summarized here. It took the course of a decade, culminating in my raising the question that I attempt to answer in this chapter, which is this: What interest of the state is served by the state's involvement in education?

THE VALUE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography has increasingly appealed to scholars as a method to interrogate education, because under the era of neoliberal reforms, the teaching professionals find themselves atomized and expected to self-regulate in increasingly cruel working conditions. The conflict between the self and the institutional requirements often instills feelings of anxiety and guilt (Ball 2016) and leads to injuries of the soul (Gill 2016). Such emotional and mental injuries are invisible and, many times, unconscious. Worse, they afflict the very researcher who is expected to study the occurrence of such injuries in others. As a result, scholars have resorted to autoethnography to interrogate the nexus of power and injustice and to present the individual scholar as implicated, rather than distant from, that which the scholar interrogates (Foster 2017).

This methodological approach is not new to African scholars who were, as individuals, already entering the academy as colonial subjects, rather than as people with agency. To use one's experience as a mode of learning is therefore not new to the African scholar. However, with the advent of decolonial thinking, there is a renewed interest in scholars' self-consciously inserting their personal experience in their scholarship as part of their resistance against the "Eurocentric standard of conducting science from a neutral perspective" (Falola 2022: 28). Moreover, says Falola (2022), autoethnography allows the scholar to defy disciplinary barriers and consult the archive of all types of knowledge, be they scientific, rational, social, artistic, or spiritual. Using my experience, I will demonstrate how relying exclusively on one's rational and

academic tools to understand a phenomenon can prove inadequate, and how one can get fresh insights from emotional and spiritual realms of knowledge.

Because of this introspection, I will also make use of two concepts that are associated with the field of psychology. One is cognitive dissonance, a concept pioneered by Leon Festinger that refers to the phenomenon of holding two conflicting opinions and the tendency to seek to reduce the discomfort that ensues. The premise of Festinger's theory is that human beings always veer toward consistency, and when a person holds opposing ideas, that individual seeks to reduce the discomfort that emanates from the conflicting ideas (J. Cooper 2007). Since ideas are socially mediated and are often propelled by institutions, scholars have developed Festinger's theory to capture the dissonance between conflicting ideas that may also come from society and institutions. My narrative will demonstrate how, at different junctures, I tried to reconcile the idea I had of education with both what I was seeing in the education system and what public discourses were saying about education.

The second concept is that of gaslighting. Gaslighting is often used in the context of intimate relationships, where an aggressor seeks to minimize the victim's criticism of the aggressor by undermining the victim's sense of self-trust to make a judgment (Spear 2019). Spear argues that gaslighting also has epistemic dimensions, because it relates to "factors such as testimony, evidence, and reasons" (2019: 70). In addition, gaslighting sometimes presents itself in cases of epistemic peers—where the two sides "are approximately equal in their informedness, reasoning abilities, freedom from bias, and other cognitive performance and judgement-relevant factors" (79). Spear's analysis provides useful insights on how teaching professionals are disempowered because they are expected to have an expert opinion about public policy, but they face conversants who use institutional advantage to make the teachers cede power and then they accept policies that they would otherwise question. This goal is achieved by making the teacher question "not just her moral or psychological, but also her epistemic self-trust: her conception of herself as an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgment" (2019: 68–69).

A BURDEN TO MY COUNTRY

The starting point of my narrative is when I had "succeeded" in the education system by obtaining my doctoral degree in the humanities from a fairly reputable American university, and by becoming, a year later, the head of a depart-

ment teaching the arts. I was immediately confronted with the challenge of low student enrollment in our programs, and this was blamed on what was termed as the “irrelevance of the arts to the market.” As I have detailed elsewhere (Njoya 2022), this hostility is voiced by politicians, business leaders, and education officials who publicly lament that Kenya’s graduates are not meeting the nation’s needs because too many of them are studying the arts instead of studying the sciences, which are directly linked to industrialization and national development. The low student enrollment in our department programs, which I was now confronting, seemed to confirm those statements.

On the surface, this situation was a threat to my livelihood, given that the department and programs could be shut down for being “unprofitable.” However, in the background, the crisis was more existential. Accepting that the arts and humanities are, indeed, a waste of national resources and an obstacle to development would mean that, a scholar who had spent at least three decades as a student in that field, I would have to consider myself irrelevant and a burden to my country. It was painful to feel that way, and the pain was worsened by the irony that I was simultaneously admired for having studied up to the doctoral level, and in the United States for that matter.

However, the conclusion that I was of no use to knowledge and education was untenable for me. Around me I saw social problems that the arts and humanities could address, and so I knew that there had to be a space for such knowledge in Kenyan life. I therefore immersed myself in efforts to promote our programs within the university community. Outside the university, I would use social media to publicize our activities and to counteract statements by public officials against the arts. Our efforts won us publicity, funding, and even awards, but they were no match for the public statements criticizing the arts.

My administrative position gave me significant access to higher levels of the university administration and the Kenyan regulatory forums. It was at such forums that I saw that there was a contradiction between the rhetoric and the reality of education. Ideally, I was in a position to change the structures that made work in my department difficult at the ground level. In reality, any attempt I made to query the inconsistencies, whether at the institutional or public level, was silenced subtly, rather than overtly. The silencing would be largely moralistic, for example, through comments suggesting that questions betrayed a lack of optimism for the country or a lack of appreciation for the work that had been done by the administrators in putting together the policies that they required us to implement.

My clarity about what was going on was clouded by a dynamic that became more visible with the benefit of hindsight. Subconsciously, I was struggling with the feeling that, despite having been relatively accomplished in education, I had not understood the reality of the education system in Kenya that I was now confronting. I had been blind to that reality, yet part of my studies had included confronting the disappointment in Western education depicted in African fiction such as Cheikh Hamidou Khan's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In the two novels, the protagonists experience profound alienation and social failure when they complete their schooling in elite Western institutions, a failure that also has a negative impact on their physical health. Having interacted with such questions via this literature, I should have been more familiar with the implications for my own life. By some amazing trick of the mind, however, I could not see that I too was a victim of the same contradictions.

These personal dilemmas, which I found difficult to address within the institutions, led me to voice my thoughts on my blog and on other social media platforms. Eventually, I won three blog awards for social issues and cultural citizenship, and my advocacy, especially on Twitter, got me invitations to public discussions on education in the Kenyan mainstream media. Across all these platforms, my message was consistent: What we say we want from education is contradicted by our actions. I naively expected that my comments would be welcome, given that the liberalization of Kenya has been accompanied by affirmation of the "customer service" logic, even by the government, which included repeated statements that education administrators were interested in "feedback" from "stakeholders." I believed that the Kenyan public would appreciate voices like mine for finally giving a perspective from which to understand the roots of the dysfunction of the education system often reported in the media. To my surprise, I was confronted with a variety of moralistic, hostile, and evasive replies. It was often suggested that the questions I was raising were irrelevant or, worse, pessimistic, and I was indirectly rebuked for not having a positive attitude.

The consistency of this response eventually took a toll on my confidence and self-esteem. Many times I found myself wondering if I should concede that I may have had a bad attitude. I sometimes contemplated the thought that maybe I had wasted my life studying the humanities and should go back to school and study the sciences so that my country would consider me a useful citizen. Maybe it was true that the decades I had spent learning in the humanities were a waste, given that what I had learned was irrelevant.

A SIGN OF HOPE?

The most significant milestone in this psychological oscillation between self-worth and self-incrimination was the introduction of the new education system. The system was initially named 2-6-6-3, to mirror the outgoing 8-4-4, but eventually it was popularly referred to as CBC, short for the Competency Based Curriculum. The rollout of a new education system was announced in December 2016 and was to take place the following year (O. Wanzala 2016). In January 2017, however, the government announced that a pilot was being launched later in May rather than in January (Ngugi 2017). By May, the country's attention was absorbed by the national general election in August, and so the pilot of the new curriculum was launched after the elections in September, as the final term of the school year was beginning.

The announcement of the new system was important for me because CBC was promoted as a system that saw value in arts education, albeit as a subject "pathway" with career prospects. I hesitated to celebrate the hope that, finally, arts education would no longer bear the brunt of attacks by the education officials who had previously called arts education a waste of resources. I therefore consulted government documents (Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development 2017) and academic research to confirm the philosophical grounding that had made the government experience a change of heart. I was in for a surprise. My requests for the documents and details about the curriculum were not forthcoming.

My first opportunity to engage in a public conversation with government officials came in the same month, when I was invited to be part of a panel to discuss the new system at the studio of one of Kenya's most popular media houses. The panel included an official from KICD. Most of the concerns I expressed about the philosophy and the rollout of the curriculum were not answered. In the months that followed, I accepted several invitations to media houses and other forums to explain why I considered the benefits of the new curriculum to be suspect, and why much of the rhetoric of the government had no evidence to back it up (Njoya 2018). Few people understood what I was saying because in Kenya, the purpose of schooling is mainly for employment, and so most parents were more willing to believe that the new system would improve their children's career prospects than they were concerned about whether the curriculum was good for the children. It did not help that the Ministry of Education appeared to be tight-lipped or even hostile to questions about the curriculum. At some forums, officials would

simply respond that the curriculum was good because experts were involved in crafting it. Meanwhile, teachers from the Kenya National Union of Teachers also reported that the Ministry was using coercive methods to extract compliance from teachers, and some of its members had been interdicted for raising questions during the sessions for training teachers in the new curriculum (O. Wanzala 2019). Wilson Sossion, the secretary-general of the Kenya National Union of Teachers, was forced to resign following the failure of the Teachers' Service Commission to remit union dues of the members, and by some reports, the deregistration of several teachers from the union without consulting teachers themselves (Nyamai 2021). All these events were interpreted as the punishment of teachers for criticizing CBC.

In my case, however, the main response I received was not harassment but silence. The government played deaf and continued to talk in public as though the curriculum implementation was going on smoothly and there were no major concerns about the implications of the curriculum. However, the government gave contradictory statements on what exactly was happening with the new system. In January 2018, for instance, the promise to implement the new system was replaced by an announcement that what was happening was not a rollout but a pilot. In December 2018, the cabinet secretary for education announced that she had shifted her position and that the national pilot would be carried out for one more year (Keter 2018). Less than two weeks later, she made a complete turn around and announced that the new system would be rolled out in January 2019 (Kajilwa and Chepkwony 2018).

Meanwhile, reports appearing on social media about the new curriculum in the classroom bordered on the absurd. Videos emerged of children roleplaying a bride and groom in full wedding attire,¹ and more disconcerting ones of children slaughtering chickens (Musambi 2022) and simulating swimming in the grass.²

The dramatic aspect of these activities is a logical outcome of the competency approach that requires practical application of skills, and more than that, requires teachers to digitally send tangible proof of their class activities

1. One such activity was posted at "CBC kids wedding practical," JSquad Art Group in Kenya, December 8, 2021. YouTube video, 0:30. <https://youtu.be/U3R814Mc7eE?si=xzC-pzBWaDa6L3UM>

2. A montage of various videos from social media of school children simulating swimming strokes on the grass can be found at "CBC Swimming Lessons in Kenya," Safeguarding Watoto, September 16, 2022. YouTube video, 0:37. <https://youtu.be/pYjfdW-2MYc?si=2Qs5gfMX2VV TpQSw>

to the Kenya National Examinations Council. Questions also arose about the cost parents were paying to facilitate the class activities, with Kenyans wondering how children of the poor would be able to afford the constant requirements to consult the internet and print documents, in a country where only 18 percent of people have access to the internet, and where only 26 percent of the rural population have access to electricity (Ogejo and Ochieng 2020).

But it was the silence of the Kenyan academy that was the loudest. After two years of public engagement on the curriculum, I would still meet academics who would tell me how great the new curriculum was, apparently unaware that I had been on the media voicing concerns about it. Most publications by Kenyan educationists on CBC were about the challenges of implementing the curriculum, with little interrogation of the foundations of the curriculum. Sadly, the large majority of Kenyan academics have been complacent. An overwhelming number of publications on Kenyan education follow a similar format: They begin by citing the international policies of education to which the Kenya government is a signatory, after which they present data demonstrating how the government has fallen short of meeting those international targets, and then conclude with recommendations on how these targets can be met. Academic studies on Kenyan education take a technocratic, “non-political” approach, making no assessment of the education policy on its own terms and instead examining the success of the policy’s implementation by the state.

This impact of the silence was somewhat a form of gaslighting, because it shook my confidence in my sense of judgment. It was awkward to be alone and have no academic colleagues who understood my concerns. This situation confused me because when I first started asking questions, it was out of trust in the curriculum developers. I considered them education experts, which I was not, and I assumed that they knew the material well enough to clarify the issues. In the end, in a classic gaslighting disposition, I was disempowered by the fact that the positions I held had no sway, while those of curriculum supporters were backed by power and resources to implement the curriculum, regardless of what it implied for teachers and children. The media facilitated this disempowerment by constantly pointing to the fact that the curriculum would go on anyway. The Kenya government later echoed that assertion by adopting slogans to defend the curriculum, such as “CBC is here to stay” and “The train has left the station” (J. Wanzala 2021).

By some twist of fate, my eventual realization of the futility of my public engagement also coincided with my acceptance that I no longer had

the energy to prop up the arts programs in my university department, the responsibility that inspired my interest in the pre-tertiary education in Kenya. My stint in administration ended in an emotional meltdown. I was suffering from fatigue, moral injury, and emotional pain. I took a leave of absence and decided to no longer appear on the media to talk about the curriculum. Thankfully, during the break, I gained emotional relief from reading Gill's (2016) article on "hidden injuries," and later Ball's (2003) article on the "teacher's soul and the terror of performativity." Over the months that followed, I recognized that I was not an inefficient or ungrateful teacher but a victim of institutional and national dissonance in our education system.

I have presented this autobiographical narrative to demonstrate how my ability to critically look at the education system involved more than academic or rational knowledge. I was a fairly well-educated individual with international exposure, and yet that experience was not enough to burst the bubble of my belief in the national goals of Kenya's education system. I endured emotional pain and internal conflict but was unable to diagnose them because my attempts to understand the education system were blocked through discursive techniques such as blame for not having a positive attitude. It took an emotional experience—my own meltdown and empathy with other scholars describing similar experiences—for me to rationally understand that there was incongruence in the education system.

THE EDUCATION ALIBI

My path of reckoning led me to suspect that the lack of will to deal with the contradictions of the Kenyan education system emanates from the fact that the stated goals for education are an alibi for something else. I wondered if the real goals of education were other than what is proclaimed in policy documents and in public statements by actors from different sectors of Kenya. From my firsthand experiences and my emotional and moral injuries, it was clear to me that the processes at the micro level of education starkly contrast with the discourses of education at the macro, the national and the international, levels. The adamant hostility of the national discourses to acknowledge these contradictions led me to consider this possibility: Maybe, in reality, the state is not interested in Kenyans receiving an education. If that is the case, why not, and why would it make public affirmations to the contrary?

Logically, proving that state wants the opposite of access to education for

all Kenyans would require evidence of malintent or outright lies. Such evidence would be difficult to come by, short of intruding in top-secret state meetings and recording irrefutable proof of a plan to sabotage access to education and to dupe the public to the contrary. Moreover, such evidence is unlikely to be available, given that the state would not risk the high political cost of openly disavowing public education.

More important, it is likely that Kenyan education policymakers who refused to answer my questions sincerely believe in the benefits of the policies they are implementing but are unable to either see or mitigate the perverse effects of those policies. Even when they might foresee the problems, there is the possibility that optimism about policy coexists with pessimism about outcomes. In her study of Kenyan doctors who were implementing the government's proposed universal healthcare program, Prince observes that the doctors "expected it to fail and talked about its likely failure, yet still these officials strove to implement it, to make it a success and to improve it" (2022: 38). I have confronted the same combination of optimism and pessimism in my public engagements with supporters of Kenya's new curriculum. When I would point out the likely perverse effects of the curriculum, the reply would follow the same logic: We cannot have a perfect education system; let us implement it and improve as we go along (Muchunguh 2021).

In the absence of irrefutable proof of designs to sabotage education, the usefulness of the alibi framework emerges. As indicated in the introductory chapter, the alibi as a concept allows us to acknowledge the absence of irrefutable evidence while harnessing the real-life evidence or logical arguments that buttress our suspicions. That said, the intentions of the state are not important in this case if we distinguish between institutional logic on one hand, and personal intentions and behavior of policy officials on the other. It is possible for policymakers to have good intentions for education and believe that they are working out of a commitment to education, while, in actual fact, the commonsense institutional logic of the education system necessarily channels their work into contradicting that commitment. Such contradictions are related to the concept of perverse incentives, where policies end up giving people incentives to act in a way that contradicts the goal that the policy was intended to achieve.

Pointing to the contradiction between rhetoric, policy, and the reality of education in Africa is not new to scholarship. What the alibi approach brings to the conversation is what these contradictions *mean*. For instance, there is a wealth of scholarship and reports from bodies such as the World Bank and

UNESCO about the failure of education to be accessible to all Kenyan children at an equitable standard of quality (Mugo et al. 2016). However, many of these studies do not question why policymakers go ahead with policies that will not work. Besides adopting Prince's (2022) argument attributing to civil servants optimism despite the odds, one may also consider the idea of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011), or the successful disempowerment of citizens who feel that their opinion of a certain policy does not matter since they have been presented with a *fait accompli* (Njoya 2018: 148), as the government officials victoriously declared with the CBC (J. Wanzala 2021).

If we are to accept that the contradictions of education are not necessarily based on the faults, mistakes, or conduct of individual officials, we must turn to the logic of the institutions. What is the interest of the state and nongovernmental bodies in education policy, even when politicians and some government officials publicly declare that education is not worth the investment, and the education policies reinforce that impression? Why does the state not simply abandon provision of education? For the rest of this chapter, I will explore the possibility that state involvement in education emerges not from commitment to democracy but out of the need for political legitimacy and control. The evidence I will present is dominated by Kenyan reality but also includes other global actors, given that the school system we are considering here was established during colonial rule and remains intertwined with global "development" agendas and relations.

A RELUCTANT STATE

Scholars of European mass education have pointed out that nineteenth-century states did not initially intend to commit resources to schools. As far as British imperial interests abroad are concerned, therefore, the colonial governments did not initially anticipate establishing schools in their colonies (Jackson 2022). However, a mix of political pressure from settlers and Indigenous people, and fear of losing their political influence to the church, led the colonial government to finally get involved in education (Jackson 2022).

In Kenya, the colonial government was initially reluctant to get involved in schools for Africans, partly due to political pressure from the settlers who worried that education would upset a racial hierarchy in Kenya that restricted Africans to being a labor resource. Eventually, all three groups of Europeans—the colonial government, the settlers, and the missionaries—agreed that there

was need to direct African education toward technical subjects, albeit for different reasons (Bogonko 1983). This consensus on technical education was influenced by racist ideas about African intelligence but was also an alibi for the fear that “if literary education was offered to the African this would lead him into discerning and questioning colonialism and its malpractices. The experience of India had taught whites that technical education was the key to the survival of the colonial empire” (Bogonko 1983: 5). Eventually, the colonial government took an interest in schools for Africans with the hope of training a cadre of African civil servants who would domesticate colonial policy in Africa without Africans abandoning their own cultures (Sifuna and Otiende 1992: 188).

If Africans in Kenya attended school, therefore, it was largely due to the initiative of Africans themselves. The missionaries who established schools in Kenya did not envision education going beyond the ability to read the Bible, which they estimated was necessary for conversion and the spread of the gospel (Wamagatta 2008). It was the African converts themselves who built schools. The eminent historian Bethwell Ogot (2003) writes that several converts to Christianity were evangelists who built their own churches and also doubled up as teachers who built schools to accompany those churches. Many of those schools are still major schools in Kenya today, leading Ogot to credit the teachers and evangelists for “laying the foundation of the new education system in the country . . . through the initiative and sacrifice of Africans themselves, without government or mission directive or help” (22). In the other regions, writes Bogonko (1984), Africans wrote to the colonial government requesting assistance in building schools and even offered to provide additional resources for those schools, expressing displeasure in the missionary schools, which were limited in quality and resources and to the goal of evangelism. Interest in education also increased during the world wars, when education increasingly appeared as a way to escape the social problems caused by population pressure on land and by limited opportunities in the colonial economy (Wambaa and King 1976).

It is largely because of the African initiatives that colonial officials snapped out of their disinterest in African education, having feared that education would make Africans outgrow colonial control. In 1924, writes Ogot, the colonial government passed an ordinance that promised grants-in-aid to schools on condition that the schools came under the control of the churches started in their denomination (2003: 22). This move also introduced a hierarchy of schools, at the top of which was a European missionary who also

inspected the African, now dubbed “bush,” schools. Similarly, the missionaries and the colonial government abandoned their policy of not establishing secondary schools when Africans took the initiative to raise money and start a secondary school of their own (Clough 1980: 72).

Despite making concessions to support African education, the colonial government still sought to direct where the education would go. It offered grants-in-aid to missionary schools to compel the missionaries to offer technical education (Bogonko 1984). It further undermined education for Africans by underfunding schools for Africans compared to the schools for Europeans, and by disproportionately burdening African students with draconian examinations (Mwiria 1991). Part of the colonial government’s suppression of the Mau Mau military resistance included shutting down the independent schools and handing them over to the missionary-led churches (Natsoulas 2007), implying that the colonial government considered schools that were outside the control of the state or of missionaries a political threat. Other forms of containment of Africans’ education included discouraging Kenyans from pursuing higher education in the United States or even in London—seat of the colonial power that ruled Kenya—where the British government feared they would be influenced by communism (Ogot 2003: 73).

This containment of African education had implications for education policies after independence because the government was handed over to Africans whose education had been closely guided under the colonial system. At independence, the new government proclaimed that the schooling system was to serve two main purposes: to create a unified nation healed from the cleavages of apartheid that prevailed in the colony of the Kenya; and to train Africans to take over from the white civil servants and continue the project of modernizing Kenya’s economy (Sifuna and Otiende 1992: 240). The first formal education policy of the newly independent government, popularly known as the Ominde report, made the assumption that Africans could only access “development” through the schools established through colonialism and now under the control of an African-led centralized state. The report lectured Kenyans on the need to embrace modernity, to abandon any local initiatives and instead depend on direction from the state. At independence, therefore, the Kenya government’s approach to education remained largely utilitarian for the needs of the state. The government did not envision education as a public space for nurturing freedom and democracy, but as a site for developing human capital for the state apparatus and social control for the rest of the population.

This motivation of social control can be largely understood as what Odhiambo famously called “the ideology of order” (Odhiambo 1987). According to this ideology, the state is the agent of development, while citizens are passive recipients of development. The premise of this formulation of development is that if citizens engage in debate and question policy, in other words, if citizens are thinking, they cannot access development. Odhiambo observes that the ideology of law and order crept into the national public discourse soon after independence, in an effort to contain the enthusiasm of liberation and of the possibilities of the new nation. During the first years of independence, the Kenyan public sphere was characterized by thriving political debate and a diversity of opinions. Kenyans discussed different ideas on the path that the country should take and considered a full range of ideas on all spectrums. However, this optimism and creativity stood in contradiction to the state, because the focus of the new ruling Kenyan elite was on safeguarding the power it had inherited from the colonialists, supported by imperial powers who were committed to maintaining their influence in Africa beyond independence, especially given their fear of the influence of Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

To protect the power of the state, therefore, the government proclaimed that debate and ideas were a threat to stability and that order was the path to prosperity. From 1965 onward, the Kenya government began to actively shut down political debate by dictating the parameters within which Kenyan political discourse could take place. Ideas that went beyond the state’s defined boundaries were nipped in the bud, and the state “tacitly made political expression outside its own chosen agenda a criminal offense rather than a political difference of opinion” (Odhiambo 1987: 198). In his preface to the Sessional Paper of 1965, the policy paper that was the landmark in the new independent Kenyan state, the first president, Jomo Kenyatta wrote: “When all is said and done we must settle down to the job of building the Kenya nation. To do this we need political stability and an atmosphere of confidence and faith at home. We cannot establish these if we continue with debates on theories and doubts about the aims of our society.” The president’s statement essentially imposed a dichotomy between ideas, on one hand, and development, on the other. It also suggested that the Kenyan people could not be the agents of their own destiny. Development was a gift of the state, and the duty of the people was to accept this gift.

In the years that followed, Odhiambo says, political discussions that fell outside the state’s framework would “continually run into obstruction from

the state” (1987: 198). Indeed, academics, students, and artists would subsequently be fired, exiled, or killed for daring to think in a way that may or may not have been radical, but that definitely fell outside the state-approved discourse (Chege 2009; Klopp and Orina 2002). Even as the second president, Daniel arap Moi, expanded opportunities for education, he was ruthless in dealing with intellectuals whose ideas did not fit within the state paradigm. From 2002 onward, the political establishment managed to severely weaken Kenyan political discourse by squeezing out memory, truth, and critical thinking from the public sphere (Ojwang 2009).

This historical trajectory suggests that the impetus for state provision of education comes from the people. The persistence of Africans in their quest for schooling emanates from the fact that education is a human impulse. Education expresses the human will to survive, because it is through education that people individually and collectively understand their environment, affirm their values, and pass on their heritage to the next generation. The state piggybacks on this impulse and uses schools to train the next generation of cadres who will be useful in maintaining the state. Because this renewal of the state presents itself to Africans as employment, it puts pressure on the government to reduce the number of university graduates in order to avoid having too many graduates who cannot be employed by the state.

But while controlling education is the logic of the state, the state, paradoxically, has to provide education in order to maintain its political legitimacy. Since colonial times, education has been a pillar of the public’s political expectations of the state, and yet the state has struggled to meet that demand. Immediately after independence, more than half the schools were built on communal self-help basis (Musaazi 1986). These schools, known as *harambee* schools, were points of political activity that politicians were obliged to support, and schools were a major factor in determining election victories (Musaazi 1986: 52). Popular pressure also forced the government to improve the academic standards of these schools by providing trained teachers and by abolishing fees for the first four years of primary school, and later on for the first six years (Rharade 1997). Education was also a major factor in the election victory in 2002 of Mwai Kibaki, who campaigned on a platform of universal education. As Charton (2021) observes, universal education has been used by Kenya’s presidents “during periods of transition and political fragility in order to restore the social bond between society and its government.” A government that wants to remain politically relevant must have education as one of its pillars.

An additional impact of state involvement in education is the deflection of public conversations about the structure of the economy. Unemployment in Kenya is often attributed to the mismatch between skills taught in school and the needs of employers. The CBC, for example, was justified as preparing Kenyans for employment, even though the Ministry of Education did not provide the data indicating the skills that employers wanted from graduates. What's more, the direct link between the content of education and unemployment is largely speculative. Although a report by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (Onsomu and Munga 2010), which is a public institution, postulated that the higher rate of unemployment among graduates could be due to a skills mismatch, it also stated that a new technical curriculum would not address unemployment because "the problem was not in the education system per se, but a manifestation of economic and social challenges, including high population growth and failure of the economic system to create ample job opportunities to absorb graduates" (Onsomu and Munga 2010: 9).

Another angle from which to look at the problem of Kenyan youth joining the economy is that of inequality. Oxfam suggests that many resources that could provide social services to citizens are drained by poor implementation of a redistributive tax system, and by tax exemptions for the extremely wealthy (Mutava and Wanjala 2017). Moreover, Kenyan youth believe that corruption is a key factor in slowing down their prospects of economic advancement. Another study shows that a majority of youth considered "personal connections" more important than educational achievement in getting ahead (British Council 2018: 33). These conversations suggest structural change is more fundamental to a better economy than a curriculum, but that conversation is avoided by promising education reform that will provide children with better economic guarantees.

The state is therefore in an awkward position, where it faces a population that is demanding education and economic opportunities while the state lacks the capacity to meet those demands equitably and satisfactorily for all Kenyan children. However, withdrawing from commitment to education for all would be politically fatal, and so the state is compelled to keep shifting between promising remedies to an inadequate schooling system and tempering the ambitions of those who go through it. The result may not be that significant at an institutional level, but at the individual level it is experienced as a painful oscillation between cruelty and promise. That contradiction is

reflected in the young people surveyed by the British Council (2018), who expressed doubt that education will improve their chances at life but at the same time expressed the desire to get an education. As one respondent put it, “In Kenya education means both everything and nothing” (34).

EDUCATION WITHOUT CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The scenarios of education that I have described above are united by the theme of depoliticization, because in each of them various actors find themselves disempowered from engaging in public conversations about education. People who want to express their opinions or ask questions run into discursive obstacles that discourage thinking and conversation and, worse, penetrate the psyche and create doubt about one’s self-worth, expertise, and sense of judgment. This situation contradicts the essence of education, because education is the space where people gather to collectively strengthen their political muscles through speech and through generation of knowledge. Without speech, there is no politics and people have no agency, for speech is the means through which people gather to share, articulate their views, find solidarity, and act collectively.

The instinct of the state is to prevent speech, which is evident in limiting education to “practical” subjects that are assumed to require less interaction and fewer ideas. However, the state’s legitimacy also depends on meeting the public’s demand for education, and so the state compensates for that dissonance by providing education while at the same time preventing education from facilitating people’s thinking, because thinking allows people to transcend the control of the state. In essence, the state offers education without critical consciousness, letting people believe that education is for creativity and thinking while simultaneously blocking those who enter the system from engaging in debate, under the banner of gaining access to the fruit called “development.”

This performance of providing education while covertly blocking its complete fulfillment produces different forms of dissonance that are compensated for by making teachers and the students wholly responsible for outcomes of education. With the new system, teachers are now teaching large classes, more subjects (renamed “learning areas”), and with fewer resources, yet they are under greater pressure to deliver results that are measured by continu-

ous testing of students and intense managerial surveillance (Njoya 2021). The teachers are overburdened and unable to intervene in the lives of students, which in turn greatly contributes to the wave of student strikes in Kenyan secondary schools (Oburu 2020). The students, in turn, live under terrible conditions where they suffer bullying and violence from each other and from their teachers. They feel unheard by the school administrations and resort to extreme measures (E. Cooper 2022).

In the midst of these efforts to articulate what they are seeing in the school system, the Kenyan public is fed with narratives about truant teachers with little knowledge of technology, and about badly raised children who are in touch with modern life and gadgets that their parents' generation does not understand (Wanjiku wa Njoroge 2016). The gist of these narratives is to blame teachers, parents, and children for the faults of a system in which they are largely powerless. People like me who have more platforms for public engagement are depicted as ungrateful and lacking tangible solutions, which basically indicates that the public is better off not questioning education and instead leaving the task of fixing education to the experts.

CONCLUSION

I began this chapter by describing my experience of broken promises and emotional pain as a springboard for asking bigger questions about the state interests served by the schooling system. The evasive answers to my questions made me suspicious that the government's interest in education is "elsewhere," as the word "alibi" suggests, and not rooted in freedom, democracy, and knowledge, as I had originally believed. In pursuing this suspicion, I explored the contradictions in the political histories of education, which, I suggest, cause dissonance for teachers and students and lead to different strategies to compensate for the dissonance.

The autoethnographic approach of this chapter was designed to highlight the importance of examining education at the micro level, and more than that, taking seriously the emotional and intellectual interaction with the microprocesses of the education system. In essence, an autoethnographic approach to education can reveal the huge amount of information that is not malleable to statistics and measurements. Ethnographic approaches can help us interrogate whether education is a fulfilling experience for those who go

through it. More than that, they can generate stories with potential for political engagement across the social spectrum.

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CHAPTER 7

Educational Reform in Times of Crisis

The Dual Missions of Corporatized Education in Liberia

TYLER HOOK

As students lined up for morning attendance, it was clear this was no ordinary first day of school. Cameras flickered, reporters scurried about, and parents and vendors lined the side of the road. The occasion was the 2016 inauguration of a new “innovative” partnership between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and corporate school providers, intended to move Liberia’s educational system from a “mess” to the “best” (Reuters 2013).

The year previous, Ebola had closed schools throughout West Africa and caused a global panic. In the aftermath, promising “never again” (Brooks 2017), international investors, corporations, and the MoE came together to create what would become known as the Partnership Schools for Liberia pilot, renamed the Liberian Education Advancement Program (LEAP) in 2018. This partnership outsources school management and supervision of public primary schools to largely international for-profit providers. Described as a mutual partnership merging the best of the public and private sectors, LEAP aims to disrupt Liberia’s “traditional” or “status quo” educational system with a unique corporate led model that can be expanded throughout Africa (Werner 2017).

Talking to reporters that day, officials stressed that this new partnership was not a corporate takeover, but a way to improve investment and social welfare. Later in the day, as crowds died down, the press interviewed Ms. Anderson, the administrator of the school, who with a big smile on her face thanked the school provider and the education minister for changing the trajectory of the school and the country.

A year later, after LEAP had doubled in size, I visited the school. Ms. Anderson greeted me slouched over a table covered with papers and books. Stacks of more books surrounded her. A bucket on the floor collected water from a leaking ceiling. There were no students, teachers, or parents in the schoolyard. Piles of broken desks crowded the dark and damp hallways. When I asked how she was doing, Ms. Anderson gave an exhausted look. “I wish they had never come,” she said. “Tell them I take everything back.”

This chapter analyzes how educational systems are restructured in and through crisis, and how these changes are experienced by communities. It argues that corporate reformers use and manipulate crisis to impose corporate-friendly arrangements under claims of producing a “blended value” by merging profits and social development (Bugg-Levine and Emerson 2011), or “win-winism” (Richey et al. 2021), under a “conscious capitalism” (Mackey and Sisodia 2014; Buras 2011). Placing these arguments in historical perspective, I show how similar claims were used to justify colonialism and plantation systems in Africa (Hook 2023). I develop this argument through an analysis of LEAP, arguing that corporations and investors use crisis, social and educational reform, and notions of partnership as an alibi for profit making.

I begin my analysis by investigating crisis discourse before demonstrating how this has been used by corporate actors to justify their role in social development. I then present a historical analysis of crisis making in Liberia, drawing parallels between the contemporary notion of “blended value” and earlier corporate concessions intended to bring “civilization” and “development” to the Liberian interior. The chapter closes with a critical analysis of LEAP that is based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in schools and communities in Liberia. This ethnographic fieldwork included over ninety interviews with school personnel, parents, civil society organizations, school management, and MoE officials, and prolonged observations in schools and communities in five counties (both urban and rural), supplemented with visits to several other LEAP and non-LEAP schools. During fieldwork I spent one to three months in each location, attending LEAP and surrounding non-LEAP schools. I tried to revisit each location every few months to observe any changes to the policy over time, and how the experience and engagement of communities, the MoE, and corporate actors were evolving. Several key stakeholders were interviewed several times over the four years of research. In addition, I studied LEAP policy documents, official

presentations, press releases, and investor and provider social media accounts and financial records. Through this fieldwork and analysis, I show how these corporate partnerships allow both corporate and state actors to subvert democratic mechanisms of decision-making and accountability, dispossessing local communities while pushing onto them the costs and responsibility of development.

MAKING A CRISIS

Anthropologist Roberto Barrios (2017) argues that crisis is frequently invoked to describe a particular event as a historical or epochal turning point with the potential to lead to a utopian era. Invoking crisis assumes a norm—a time of noncrisis—with the new emergent or transition phase requiring specific action (Roitman 2017). Crisis can be declared at a variety of levels (personal, national, international) and describe both natural and human-made and human-influenced disasters.¹ While in popular usage, “crisis” often implies a level of inevitability, anthropologist Janet Roitman (2011) warns against an uncritical acceptance of the term. By treating crisis as a sudden diversion from an established “norm,” the current political utilization commonly redirects attention away from normative practices that create crisis, instead focusing on the aberrations (Barrios 2017).² Thus, although disasters and crises can represent real material or physical effects, they always include an element of social construction.

The official declaration of a crisis thus always contains a political dimension, deployed to serve particular narratives and truth claims, and as such can be propagated, contested, manipulated, and weaponized to various ends. Indeed, Stuart Hall (1978) finds that crisis operates as a kind of moral panic that furthers neoliberal agendas and paradoxically maintains the “status quo.” According to Hall, the institutions that declare a crisis typically position themselves as the ones best suited to solve it. In a similar vein, Naomi

1. Anthropological definitions tend to distinguish between crisis and disaster, though these are often used interchangeably in public policy, by government and corporate actors, and by academics and elites in other fields (Barrios 2017).

2. Anthropologist Janet Roitman (2014) complicates the conceptualization of crisis, noting how crisis is often understood “to be a condition, a state of affairs” that is “posited as a protracted and potentially persistent state of ailment and demise” (16).

Klein (2007) argues that crises are used by corporations and governments to impose market-based solutions. Klein finds that this “disaster capitalism” is characterized by accumulation by dispossession, where assets belonging to one group are captured and put in circulation as capital for another group. Here the “shock” of crisis or disaster is used by powerful private actors to gobble up wealth and assets, while the distressed and distracted populace has limited ability to resist this top-down assault. Crisis, therefore, is the “necessary pretext to overrule the expressed wishes of voters and hand over the country to economic ‘technocrats’” (12).

CRISIS AND PROBLEMATIZATION IN AFRICA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Crises in Africa and the Global South, while often very real and with serious material consequences, are not free from this element of manipulation. In development policy, crisis discourses are related to discussions of problematization and improvement (Li 2007). Rabinow (2005) notes that discourse of crisis presents an opportunity for the powerful to identify specific phenomena as “problems.” This “problematization” is a sociohistorical process shaping views of both the cause of the “crisis” and its potential solutions. Specifically, within development discourse, Escobar (2011) argues that problematization works to identify areas of the world (typically communities of color, the “Third World,” and “underdeveloped” nations) as “social problems” and “risks” to the health of the global community. Here Escobar (2011) argues that poverty, violence, disease, and other challenges are depicted by development institutions as resulting from “problematic” actions that obstruct political and economic development, justifying Western intervention. Africa especially is depicted by development organizations (particularly the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) and Western media as existing in a perpetual state of crisis and as a problem to be solved by Western technocrats (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Thus, problematization commonly erases histories of injustice and oppression, prescribing universal remedies created and administered by international experts and allowing for development to be “rendered technical”—fixable, simplified, and nonpolitical (Li 2007). This effectively excludes local and subaltern populations from any role in creating their own solutions (Pierre 2020), thus (re)producing exploitative and undemocratic systems of governance.

EDUCATION IN CRISIS

In education, crisis discourses are mobilized by a global education industry around notions of a “girl in crisis” (Kirchgasler and Desai 2020; Masquelier, in this volume), a “global learning crisis” (Sriprakash et al. 2020), and a budget crisis (Lipman 2015). These discourses make use of problematization, targeted particularly around communities of color (Sriprakash et al. 2020). Focusing on the US context, Baldrige (2017) argues that educational reforms following crisis “rely on narratives of damage and struggle whereby Black youth in low-income settings are framed as ‘broken’ and in need of ‘fixing’” (281). These narratives allow “white architects” to displace democratic forms of governance in order to implement the prescribed reforms (Watkins 2001). Lipman (2015) describes this as a “new colonialism,” wherein private actors “capitalize on crisis” by shifting assets and governance from local and Indigenous populations to donors, investors, and other corporate actors (249). Following this description, Offutt-Chaney (2019), in her analysis of reforms in New Orleans and Liberia, notes that these postcrisis reforms cannot simply be explained by “neoliberalism” but rather include an element of “anti-blackness” evident in the current marketization of Black schools in the United States and internationally. According to Offutt-Chaney, Blackness is presented by reformers as in “persistent crisis.”

FIXING THE CRISIS: NEW CAPITALISM AND CORPORATIZED DEVELOPMENT

At the 2008 World Economic Forum, Bill Gates called for a “new” capitalism with the “twin mission” of growing profits and “improving the lives of those who don’t fully benefit from market forces” (Gates 2008). According to Gates, “The challenge is to design a system where market incentives, including profits and recognition, drive the change.” While Gates dubbed this “creative capitalism,” similar logics have been promoted by a variety of corporate, private, and public actors through calls for a more “conscious capitalism” (Mackey and Sisodia 2014). Here economic and various other crises are seen as resulting from a combination of improper incorporation of the poor into the market and inefficient governance. Profit motives are therefore not the problem but the answer, just needing to be reworked into the proper social investments and incentives. What results is the merging of social responsibil-

ity with financial for-profit thinking, captured in such mottos as “doing well by doing good” (Berndt and Wirth 2018) and “win-winism” (Moeller 2018).

Although corporate involvement in governance and development predates the post-World War II era (Moeller 2018), contemporary forms of corporate educational governance expanded in the aftermath of the great recession (Ball 2012). Gond and Moon (2011) note that over the past century, corporations have shown a “chameleon like capacity” to incorporate new ideas after crisis, remaking themselves to suit the shifting forms of capitalism. This has enabled corporations to move from mere beneficiaries of development contracts and projects to key architects (Moeller 2018). John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods and proponent of conscious capitalism, claims that this represents a new corporate paradigm where “the profit motive, not government or charity, creates the kind of socially responsible world we want our kids and grandkids to grow up in” (Maddock and Vitón 2009).

Under the banner of conscious capitalism, corporations are now openly involved in designing, funding, and implementing development services and reforms, presenting themselves as ethical actors in the process, uniquely capable of solving the “global education crisis” (Kimmelman 2018). In fact, corporations are now considered essential by states and international development organizations in addressing pressing challenges in the world, often partnering with the state to tackle development and social issues. This was presented at the 2016 World Economic Forum, when then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon told assembled business leaders that “Agenda 2030 is our declaration of interdependence” and asked “all CEOs here to help us” in achieving the recently passed Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2016). These corporate partners are justified as filling a perceived governance gap (Bhanji 2008), providing technocratic governance, rationalist instruments, best practices guidelines, and distinct standards and protocols, combined with a focus on utilizing markets.

This supposedly more humanistic and ethical capitalism embeds markets and corporate governance in society, treating them as beneficial. Moeller (2018) describes this as encompassing a “corporatized development,” where the “practices, processes, and power relations of corporations” are transposed onto social development projects (23). However, while the merging of corporate profit and social impact is presented as a new paradigm, it reflects the logics of previous development paradigms (i.e., modernization theory and the Washington Consensus) that combined economic development with social and political development. Indeed, this view of the blended nature of

economic and social development has long been used to justify exploitive relationships, reflected in colonialism and later through structural adjustment and foreign direct investment, all of which deploy various crisis discourses to justify intervention (Amin 1973). In other words, the idea of a conscious capitalism is a simple product of rebranding, with corporations and their backers engaging in “theatres of virtue” (Rajak 2018) and forms of “reputation-washing” to present themselves as essential partners in social development and justify their profiting off crises they helped create.

CORPORATIZED DEVELOPMENT IN LIBERIA: THE COMPANY AS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

White Capital, Black Sovereignty: Concessions as Development

In the case of Liberia, the merging of profit with social development is embedded in the country’s history of corporate concessions. Concessions are agreements or “partnerships” between the state and companies, where the company is leased land and tasked with turning it into a productive and profitable landscape. In Liberia, concessions have been historically justified under the dual mission of profit making and “modernizing” or “civilizing” “underdeveloped” or “problematic” areas (Mitman 2021).

Liberia’s first concession dates to 1926, when the Firestone corporation purchased one million acres on a ninety-nine-year lease. From the beginning, this partnership was presented by the Liberian state and Firestone as a “civilizing mission” that would bring development to Liberia (Whyte 2017). For the Liberian state, the concession was a way of subduing and incorporating the underdeveloped interior, which was ruled by Indigenous communities often at odds with the Americo-Liberians who had established the country and dominated positions of power (Robinson 1990; Whyte 2016). The Liberian ruling elites viewed this internal divide as a threat to national sovereignty, especially following the Berlin conference that saw Britain and France expand their influence and threaten Liberian borders. When its attempts to secure the interior by force failed, fueling rebellions and bringing Liberia to the brink of bankruptcy, the Liberian government turned to foreign capital in the form of loans and company concessions (Robinson 1990). Anna Graves, a consultative member on the League of Nations Liberia Commission, presented the reasoning behind the Firestone concession in a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP):

“Liberia, terrified at the possibility of being sliced out of existence, considers that her safety might be greater if she welcomed an American concessionaire, for in protecting the property of its national, the United States might insist on the territorial security of the country where the National’s property was invested” (1933: 1). Black intellectual W. E. B DuBois, who viewed Liberia’s development as essential to Black sovereignty and liberation, also initially supported the concession, writing in a letter to Harvey Firestone, the CEO and founder of the Firestone Company:

I believe that in this way you can inaugurate one of the greatest and most far reaching reforms in the relations between white industrial countries like America and black, partly developed countries like Liberia if it can once be proven that industry can do the same thing in a black country like Liberia that it does in a white country like Australia: that is, invade it, reform it and uplift it by incorporating the native born into the imported industry and thus make the industry part of the country. (Cited in Robinson 1990: 46)

The Firestone Company also framed its involvement in Liberia as a dual profit-making and civilizing mission, with Harvey Firestone claiming they were bringing “American capital, science, and medicine” (Mitman 2021: 140) to “darkest Africa” (70). In correspondences with the US State Department, Firestone and US government officials emphasized the necessity of modernizing Liberia through incorporation into the global capitalist system and foreign rule. Sidney De La Rue, the US-appointed general receiver of customs and financial adviser to Liberia, claimed in conversations with Firestone that the company saw itself as “doing welfare work on a national scale,” by “establishing schools, hospitals, agricultural training schools, and so forth, for the development” of the Indigenous population (De La Rue 1924, cited in Mitman 2021: 69). This problematization of the Liberian hinterland as lacking development and governance and as presenting a threat not just to Liberian sovereignty but to the entire global capitalist system (Whyte 2017) was essential to the justification of the Firestone concession, presenting an alibi for corporate and imperial interests in the country and region.

A Mutually Beneficial Partnership: The State and Corporation in Development

Although the Liberian government and Firestone presented the concession as a mutually beneficial partnership, the government was in fact beholden

to the company, often prioritizing its needs and interests over those of the population. Dispossession of communal land and exploitive labor practices by Firestone led to resistance from Indigenous populations.³ To combat this, Firestone implemented a “program of improvement” that was “adapted to Liberian customs” and aimed at guiding workers and communities toward productive behaviors (Whyte 2017). The program resulted in the creation of company towns that provided workers and the community with housing, healthcare, and schooling, while also granting the company unprecedented surveillance over workers’ lives.

Education and formal schooling played a crucial role in this endeavor to discipline and subdue the local populace. In the early twentieth century, Firestone and the American Colonization Society implemented industrial schooling for those living in and around the concession area. The first school, the Booker Washington Agricultural and Industrial Institute (BWI), modeled after the Tuskegee Institute in the United States, opened in Kakata (near the Firestone plantation) in 1929. It was funded by corporate and private philanthropy, most notably the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and the Mellon, Carnegie, and Rockefeller foundations, organizations that played a key role in financing industrial education in the southern United States in the early twentieth century to help solve the “Negro crisis” by “incorporating Black Americans into post-slavery Southern political economy while simultaneously guaranteeing their subordination within the new systems” (Offutt-Chaney 2019: 6; Watkins 2001). The BWI in Liberia had similar objectives, including helping to train a “more efficient” workforce on the Firestone plantation (Offutt-Chaney 2019). In the following years, Firestone expanded investment in such schools, and in the 1940s created its own network of schools that still exists today.

The blended logic of economic and social development was strengthened in 1944 through the Tubman administration’s “Open Door Policy,” which opened Liberian land to “responsible” foreign companies tasked with exploiting the natural resources and developing the country. Tubman described

3. Firestone initially found it difficult to acquire sufficient labor for its plantation. The government responded with a yearly quota that forced chiefs to recruit men for employment at Firestone. Unsurprisingly, this labor was poorly paid and was highly coercive, leading the League of Nations to accuse the Liberian government of employing slave labor, seen in compulsory labor and the loaning out family members to pay debts. Firestone, one of the motivating forces behind these policies, presented itself as an innocent bystander, placing full blame on the government. In fact, Firestone used these accusations against the government to try to seize more control over Liberian finances and development (Mitman 2021).

these “partnerships” as necessary to compensate for Liberia’s deficiencies in capital and technical knowledge and to improve the “general welfare” of Liberians (Marinelli 1964).

“A State of Foreign Concessions”: “Growth Without Development” and Concessions Today

Despite promises that concessions would benefit the Liberian people, by the mid-twentieth century it had become apparent that this was not the case. Instead, though Liberia recorded the second highest GDP growth in the world during the 1950s, this wealth was going almost completely to elites and foreign firms, leading to what scholars and economists described as “growth without development” (Clower et al. 1966). The disparity between investment enclaves and surrounding communities created “two separate countries” (Akpan 1980: 78). Still and all, companies and political elites declared concessions a success. Unequal development, according to companies and the government, was the fault of the culture and structure of Indigenous communities, a “resource curse,” or simply not enough foreign investment and involvement (Whyte 2017). Thus, the failure of concession deals and corporate-centric development was used as an excuse to push for more of the same, resulting in Liberia becoming known as “a state of foreign concessions” (Church 1969: 431).

Following a coup and later a bloody fourteen-year civil war, concessions were once again promoted by international organizations like the World Bank to get Liberia back on track (Kaplan et al. 2012). In education, this led to the creation of the Education Pooled Fund and the Education for All Fast-Track Initiative. Though these were not directly linked to for-profit organizations, they once again served to outsource expertise and financing to international actors and donors.

Since the war, concessionaries have continued to promote a blended value of company profit and social development, captured on company websites and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports that highlight the number of local workers they employ, as well as their investments in the country, community, and social programs. Through these reports, companies portray themselves as engaging in “sustainable missions” with regard to the environment and labor, highlighting practices like “Free Prior and Informed Consent” on land issues, and workplaces “free from exploitation,” with plantation workers receiving good pay and benefits such as “free housing, free health-care, and schooling for their children” (Mano 2020). Many of these benefits

are written into concession contracts under headings of community youth programs, education funds, local employment plans, and social impact and action plans. For example, today, Firestone operates twenty-three schools serving twelve thousand students, provides free healthcare to five thousand workers a month, and has invested \$1.3 billion in Liberia since 2004 (Firestone 2022). However, many workers and community leaders view these deals as not going far enough to protect the community from the exploitative land and labor practices companies employ, including the use of child labor (United Nations Mission in Liberia 2006) and the lack of transparency and underinvestment in local community development funds (interview November 2021; interview March 2022). Meanwhile, these companies tend to undermine local governance by relegating the state to the role of monitor, with community stakeholders accusing the state of favoring companies and pocketing development funds. For instance, the Liberian Police Support Unit (PSU) helped the UK-based Equatorial Palm Oil (EPO) company arrest and assault Liberian community members who resisted EPO's efforts to seize land (Global Witness 2013). A similar case was shared with me by Bintu, the head of a group of civil society organizations in a county with a large palm oil concession. Bintu explained the relationship between the government and EPO thusly: "What the government has done, the government is benefiting, they are on the side of company, you know, at the detriment of the community. When community rise-up, the police call the PSU, who then torture or beat the community" (interview May 2022).

NEVER-ENDING CRISIS: EBOLA AND EDUCATION

Liberia's education system is in crisis.
—George Werner

The West African Ebola epidemic struck Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea from 2014 to 2016. Over the course of the crisis, approximately twenty-eight thousand cases were reported, resulting in over eleven thousand deaths, forty-eight hundred in Liberia (Fall 2019). Isolated cases in Europe and the United States helped the epidemic gain international attention, with media there portraying it as a global security threat (Arwady et al. 2015). The epidemic was officially declared a disaster by the US ambassador to Liberia on August 4, 2014, with the World Health Organization (WHO) and Liberian government follow-

ing a few days later. Ebola was also described by international institutions, like the World Bank, as an economic crisis, causing an estimated loss of \$250 million in economic growth in Liberia (World Bank 2014).

Western media outlets and public health authorities initially blamed the epidemic on the failures of the African states involved and international health agencies like the WHO, which were criticized for not acting quickly enough, having insufficient human resources, and inefficiently capturing reliable data (Gostin and Friedman 2015). With blame placed on the “corrupt” government, transnational corporations were positioned as saviors. Firestone received special acclaim for its handling of the crisis, with international reports praising it for “doing what the government could not” (Beaubien 2014). Reports generally downplayed these companies’ legacies of violence, exploitation, and experimentation, even as they acknowledged a pervasive distrust within communities toward Western medicine, doctors, and hospitals (Jerving 2014).

As for education, even prior to Ebola, international authorities and Liberian politicians considered Liberia’s education system to be “in crisis.” In 2013, then-President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf expressed a desire to drastically reform Liberia’s education system, calling it a “mess” in need of complete overhaul (Reuters 2013). Cited as evidence for this crisis were the facts that less than 60 percent of school-aged children attended school (Werner 2017), and 65 percent of women and 35 percent of men aged fifteen to twenty-four were illiterate (MoE, n.d.: 1). These shortcomings were attributed to failures in human capacity and a larger economic and budgetary crisis resulting in part from the civil war, with the education system reliant on international donors (MoE, n.d.).

With the education system already targeted as a problem, the Ebola crisis presented a disruption of the status quo and thus an opportunity to usher in broad reform. Then-Minister of Education George Werner claimed that Ebola provided a unique opportunity to “reimagine” education (Brown-Martin 2016), further writing in the epidemic’s aftermath: “Now is the time to be bold, to pilot and experiment” (Werner 2017).

CORPORATIZED REFORM: THE LIBERIAN EDUCATION ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM

The bold experiment was the outsourcing of school management to an international for-profit provider, Bridge International Academies (Bridge). In Jan-

uary 2016, George Werner, along with the World Bank and Bridge representatives, presented their plan to the local education forum. One country director of a civil society organization recalled this experience:

They set this up as a stakeholder meeting. . . . Sirleaf came in and then left. Typically, that is meant to look like an endorsement, a full endorsement. It was a theatrical presentation to stakeholders. Many of the stakeholders didn't know the background to Bridge. . . . Everything was literally set to go. Then it went to Q and A. That's when everything spoiled, because it was then when I got up and asked questions. . . . We found out that this was a public-private partnership. They did present it as a public-private partnership, but many didn't understand. . . . It was then that the challenge started, because suddenly everyone realized that they had been bamboozled into basically a full endorsement to take over schools. (Interview January 2022)

The initial outsourcing led to local and international pushback, including from the United Nations Special Rapporteur to the Right to Education, Dr. Kishore Singh, who in March 2016 called it a “gross violation of the right to education” (cited in Hook 2017: 7). In response, a more expansive partnership, called the Partnership Schools for Liberia, was formed, increasing the number of providers from just one (Bridge) to eight school management chains. This partnership was renamed the Liberian Educational Advancement Program (LEAP) in 2018.⁴

Considered a “grand experiment,” LEAP is described a multi-stakeholder PPP between a variety of actors—intermediary organizations and consultancy firms (Ark and Social Finance), corporate and private philanthropy (LGT Venture Philanthropy), non- and for-profit corporate school management chains (Bridge, Rising Academies, BRAC) and the Ministry of Education. This “innovative” solution to Liberia’s educational “mess” has the stated goal of improving student performance in primary schools by introducing external management and increasing competition within the education sector (MoE, n.d.). LEAP merges corporate structures and agreements common in Liberia (i.e., concessions) with corporate-backed, low-fee private schooling schemes seen in much of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the charter structures of the United States and United Kingdom (MoE, n.d.).

Many of the actors involved in LEAP present themselves as operating under a blended value that merges profit making with social impact. For

4. Renamed under new administration.

example, Social Finance, which helps manage LEAP, is considered a leader in social impact investing, and aims to transition LEAP to a “results-based funding model whereby operators are financially accountable for delivering quality, and funders pay only on the basis of outcomes being achieved,” and which “would create clear and sustained incentives for school operators to focus on inclusion and quality, whilst also ensuring accountability to government and funders” (Social Finance 2022). The two largest providers, Bridge and Rising Academies, are both for-profit companies that have historically operated low-cost private schools and that view profit as essential to their success, as it provides a “healthy incentive” and “enforces innovation, healthy risk-taking, and mutually beneficial relationships” (Paul Skidmore, cited in Airbel Impact Lab 2018). Investors in LEAP and its providers include the Gates Foundation, Zuckerberg foundation, Omidyar Network, LGT, Vitol, and the Mulago foundation, along with educational technology-based venture capitalist firms like Khosla Ventures, Rethink Education, and MHS Capital.

Reflecting previous development and capacity concerns, LEAP stresses the importance of “external expertise” to “bring in closer monitoring and performance management, innovative learning models, and additional resources” (MoE, n.d.: 1). This external expertise extends beyond the corporate school providers to the management and evaluation of LEAP, with Social Finance managing the project, and the Center for Global Development and Innovations for Poverty Action handling evaluation through a randomized control trial (RCT). The MoE’s role in managing the project is also outsourced to an Education Delivery Unit staffed mostly by international organizations (including the Tony Blair Initiative) and funded by Big Win Philanthropy, an international foundation that invests in education in Africa (Hook 2023). This convoluted partnership makes it difficult for civil society organizations and other local stakeholders to understand and engage with LEAP or to hold these institutions accountable, a situation further complicated by the fact that all actors (funders, intermediaries, providers, and the MoE itself) have shown an unwillingness to release financial and monitoring reports, something the MoE and investors had promised (COTAE 2017).

This lack of transparency is evident on multiple levels. Interviews with several civil society actors revealed that the process of procuring schools did not follow normal procurement rules, as one civil society actor related: “They never did a concession process with the providers. They never did a vetting process. They never told us how they would select any of the actors. . . . Then

they pushed the PPP model as pilot as a response to the backlash” (interview August 2019). This view is supported by the Coalition for Accountability and Transparency in Education, a local corruption watchdog, which stated in an initial report (COTAE 2017) that LEAP violated public procurement procedures meant to ensure competition and transparency in contracts. Instead, the recruitment “lacked transparency” and was “opaque” (17).⁵

Despite these accusations, ninety-three schools were outsourced to providers in the pilot’s first year in 2016.⁶ In interviews, local community members expressed how they were initially excited about the program, believing that the existing school system was indeed a “mess” due to underfunding and lack of consistent MoE engagement. Many parents and teachers were optimistic when a US-based company/provider came and introduced itself, promising to bring new investment to the school, provide every child with a free uniform and personal computer, and see that each student received a hot meal and that every classroom was staffed with a trained and qualified teacher. As John, the PTA chair of the parent-teacher association (PTA) at one LEAP school, said:

When [name of provider] came through the government, they told us a partner was in Liberia. . . . They came with an understanding of coming with their own uniform, computer. It was beautiful—everyone wants their child to advance. The system they were bringing was what happened in Europe. It was a pilot project, and we agree with them. . . . They came and it started very fine. (Interview December 2021)

All this seemed like a dream come true, particularly as school fees presented a major hurdle for most parents. Anan, a father of five, explained:

To push education forward is very low because no job. We have problem to put our children to school. We begging teachers: “Oh, I beg you, I beg you, I beg you” because the finance. Yes, begging the teachers to keep students.

5. The MoE states in official documents that it went through the normal procurement process, a two-step process in which eleven organizations submitted applications, nine organizations made the cut, and seven were finally selected. They note that Bridge was commissioned through a separate process (MoE, n.d.: 8). Providers and MoE officials had a difficult time explaining and documenting the procurement process when asked.

6. Expanded to 192 in year 2. As of 2023 there were 481 LEAP schools, approximately 20 percent of primary public schools.

You have to go to the teachers and beg them to give you time. (Interview December 2021)

CORPORATIZED DISPOSSESSION

While many community members were excited about the changes LEAP promised, the lack of local engagement during its rollout caused confusion and various forms of resistance. County education officers (CEOs), PTA members, teachers and administrators, and town chiefs frequently stated that school selection in Monrovia was done without community involvement (Hook 2023). Thus, when corporate providers arrived to claim a school, often just weeks before the start of the school year and even sometimes after registration, they received some pushback. This was particularly the case among providers who implemented single-shift schools and set class size limits at forty-five, which resulted in several thousand students being pushed out of the school, some even after paying initial school fees (Romero et al., “Can Outsourcing Improve,” 2017). One former LEAP school administrator I will call Sarah discussed the process: “We were in school one day and they just walked in and introduced themselves. They said they were in partnership with Ministry. They showed us device, we took aptitude test. They took five teachers out of the twenty-six.” Sarah explained how confusion over the outsourcing process led to community protests: “It was so bad. There were protest in the streets. Before [name of provider] there were many students. . . . When they came, there were 323 to 345 students, but before there were 900 to 1,000. . . . Parents took to the street” (interview September 2018). Over 200 of these disenrolled students were subsequently re-enrolled in a neighboring public school where staff created makeshift classrooms to accommodate them, as the administrator at this public school explained: “We just had to accept them here, even if they were already registered over there” (interview August 2018). Sarah claimed that the stress of the situation caused her to become ill and eventually miscarry. She was removed from the school after seeking too long a medical leave following her miscarriage (interview September 2018).

Once the provider had succeeded in taking over a school, community members expected the promised increased investment and improved quality to follow. Instead, many saw the provider and MoE disengage, particularly around issues of teacher payment and infrastructure. Though the memo-

randums of understanding and policy documents clearly lay out the roles of both the state and providers, with the state in charge of teacher pay and infrastructure and the providers in charge of everyday school management, materials, and teacher supervision, LEAP effectively enabled all parties to divert responsibility when convenient. Regarding the MoE, teachers and parents repeatedly expressed frustration over the lack of investment in schools, noting that the MoE no longer provided school grants that were essential for school construction and maintenance. When parents and school administrators approached school supervisors and other provider employees about these issues, they were met with the consistent retort, “It’s not in the contract” and told to take it up with the MoE. Yet, when they did, the MoE would simply push responsibility back onto the provider and broader community. In fact, on several occasions providers and the MoE encouraged community members to raise funds for school infrastructure themselves. Even this presented obstacles: To raise funds, the local PTA had to get approval from the school provider and the MoE, both of which were often reluctant to sign off due to concerns it would increase school fees, something outlawed in the contract. Brandan, an administrator who was dismissed after collecting fees to help with volunteer teacher pay and infrastructure, described his experience:

BRANDAN: We all sat in meeting and PTA chair said you can mount everything into information sheet. We allowed 5,100 LD [Liberian dollars]. We took information to CEO to approve. . . . The PTA chair signed. . . . CEO agreed. Bridge flagged the information sheet, and Bridge got concerned. Why is it that school is paying that amount? Because normally they told us that what we come up [with] in meeting is fine. But immediately Bridge told the CEO to take action against me and to refund the money. Everything that I collected from my parents, we should refund the money. And secondly, I should be removed from payroll, a whole lot of things. . . .

ME: Why did they say that?

BRANDAN: Because the school was collecting money with the absence of Bridge or Bridge is not informed. But Bridge has the policy that everything that is to be done at the school should be discussed at the school level and the PTA should be informed. And the PTA was present when we had the discussion and the chairperson accepted it, because we have volunteers, we have feeding fee to be collected. If

you want to do [that] on monthly basis, you won't get it. You know some volunteer teacher will not be in class. We decided to collect at once, and it became serious problem. (Interview February 2022)

LEAP thus placed new constraints on the ability of the PTA and community to invest in schools at the same time that it pushed costs onto them. This was also seen regarding teacher pay.

The objective of providers to ensure that a “quality teacher” was in each classroom resulted in several thousand teachers being dismissed and replaced.⁷ One provider dismissed more than half of its teachers in the first year, replacing them with volunteer teachers who were not on payroll (Romero et al., “Can Outsourcing Improve,” 2017). The effort to put these new teachers on government payroll was delayed, as the government had consistently struggled with payroll issues even before LEAP. Some providers offered stipends as compensation to teachers not on official payroll. However, these stipends were significantly lower than the standard teacher payment, typically amounting to only a quarter to a third of what teachers on payroll were making.

Observing one school over several weeks, I noticed the frustration of the administrator and PTA members. Three weeks into the school year, the school had not fully opened due to a lack of teachers. The school functioned by the administration (on payroll) teaching two to three classes at a time. The provider arrived at the end of the first month of the school year and pushed the PTA to raise L\$200 per student per month to pay for teachers. After the meeting, Jared, the PTA chair, told me they had no choice but to agree. When I returned a week later, teachers were back and the school was fully in session, but the administrator remained frustrated, claiming the provider simply “doesn't care for teachers” (interview December 2021). A few months later, classes were empty again and the school was a ghost town. When I asked the administrator what had happened, he said that the PTA was no longer capable of raising funds, so the teachers left.

While it is not unusual for the local community to pay for contract teachers in public schools, the high turnover in LEAP schools means more teachers are volunteers and in need of support. Given that these teachers are often deliberately placed in schools located outside of their communities

7. Teachers had no part in formulating LEAP but were left to carry out the policy to the best of their ability, or remake/resist it in various ways.

and normal social networks, many find themselves in a difficult predicament, often expressing to me their struggles. Paul, a teacher at a for-profit provider, shared his experience, noting that he arrived without any money or support from the provider, and so initially had to rely on the local chief for shelter. One day after an interview, Paul showed me his current dwelling. About a month earlier, the traditional clay hut he had been living in had collapsed during a storm. He was now staying in another rented room. This new room was small and dark, with crumbling walls. He was living there with his wife, who had finally arrived after months of being apart. When asked how he felt living and working here, he responded: “I feel like a burden.”

These conditions caused teachers, parents, and administrators to become increasingly frustrated with the MoE and LEAP providers. Many expressed feelings of discouragement over the “false promises” of LEAP. Some even wondered if the partnership had been canceled, so extreme was provider disengagement. Again John, a PTA chairman, shared his experience:

For the last year [name of provider] did not fully participate. Because maybe government or contract with government. The pilot project, but since then, I don't know if it has been canceled, but since then, I don't know, they bring books, but things have not been changed. I don't see them. (Interview December 2021)

In a neighboring community, a town chief tracked me down and, after introducing herself, expressed anger over LEAP's false promises. When I asked what she thought of the current provider, she responded: “I just want them to go!”

While the MoE and the providers often refused to increase investment in schools, particularly in areas they considered not in the contract, they were more than willing to claim responsibility for school successes. For example, Ms. Anderson, the school administrator mentioned in the introduction, told me that after years of trying to get the provider and MoE to pay for a broken ceiling that would cause her office to flood during rainy season, she one day cornered a prominent politician's wife, telling her how a renovation could be used as a photo-opportunity for her husband. The prominent politician ended up remodeling the school. However, weeks later the school's provider claimed credit for the renovation, using it as a marketing tool to demonstrate government support of the school and program.

PROFIT AND SOCIAL IMPACT: WIN-WINISM IN PRACTICE

One of the central justifications for LEAP was that it would create better transparency and accountability through corporate governance and data-driven investment. LEAP's corporate and independent providers were to act as "innovation hubs," generating competition that would benefit Liberia's broader educational landscape and lead to better educational performance. LEAP partners emphasized that program expansion would be "sensible, underpinned by principles of transparency, equity, quality and sustainability" and would be based on a "rigorous" evaluation (MoE, n.d.).

Despite these promises, providers and the government declared successes and expanded LEAP prior to the release of data and have maintained a lack of transparency and accountability to parents and local watchdog groups. In my interviews and conversations with MoE officials and providers, they have consistently declined to provide basic documentation when asked, including through the Freedom of Information Act, all while publicly touting their transparency.

What's more, some providers justified this lack of transparency through the very mechanism they claimed would hold them accountable: the RCT. Intended as a results-based method for guiding program expansion (with midline and endline reports), the RCT looks at a variety of indicators (student performance, teacher attendance, etc.) in control and intervention schools in hopes of assessing LEAP's impact. LEAP, however, expanded in year 1 several months before the release of the midline report, much to the chagrin of the RCT team (Romero et al., "Open Letter," 2017). When the report was eventually released showing mixed results, proponents took to Twitter posting snippets of the more favorable results under the hashtag #PSLWorks. The more nuanced elements of the RCT team's analysis, detailing unsustainable costs, high rates of student dismissal, and externalities (such as high teacher turnover) were ignored (Romero et al., "Can Outsourcing Improve," 2017). In interviews, a member of the RCT team stated that investors pressured stakeholders to scale before results were available and became hostile when the team's report extended beyond literacy and numeracy to include externalities (interview October 2022). This trend has continued, with expansion in subsequent years extending to school providers that showed little or no improvement, and even to one that was accused of covering up sexual abuse at its school (Young 2018).⁸

8. Eventually this provider was dropped due to international reports of the sexual miscon-

According to interviews and conversations with providers and other key decision-makers, scaling has largely been based on the provider's ability to raise funds, effectively favoring for-profits over nonprofits. This dynamic was frequently discussed by the nonprofit providers, with one claiming they simply can't compete with the larger for-profits. One international nonprofit NGO said:

It sends a different message that as a local NGO striving to provide quality learning at very low-cost to the most vulnerable children in Liberia, for-profit organizations are being favored by large philanthropic organizations. One would think the organization that performs better would triumph in terms of funding support. Philanthropies need to give their unwavering support to institutions like us that are going to highs and lows to strengthen an education system that is already facing grave challenges. (Andrew G. Tehmeh, country director of Street Child Liberia, cited in Tofaris and Romero 2020)

In my discussions with nonprofit providers, they consistently expressed feeling at a disadvantage with the MoE, the investors, and the intermediary organizations. For many, they simply didn't have the networks or capital to disrupt, innovate, and expand as the MoE desired.

It appears clear that the drive for profit and expansion (or scale) has generally won out over social impact in LEAP, exposing win-winism as another false promise.⁹ The lack of adequate schooling in rural areas was used as justification for the partnership, but instead of serving these "crisis" areas, many of the larger providers chose better schools in more accessible areas that promised better results and greater opportunity for expansion. But the impact of the profit motive in LEAP is perhaps most evident in the continued favoring of for-profits over nonprofits for investment, despite nonprofits often performing just as well as the for-profits, at lower costs, and without externalities like high teacher turnover and local resistance (interview October 2022; Romero et al. 2020).

duct and investors pulling funding. The founder subsequently fled the country. The provider has since rebranded under a different name and new leadership and operates one school in the capital. Investors claim they had no idea about the scandal, though the scandal was reported by local newspapers and was well known among the NGO community.

9. It is important to note that investors are increasingly trying to influence results and what gets released to the public. For instance, a prominent LEAP investor claimed on social media that start-ups shouldn't "do an RCT unless you already know the answer" (Starr 2022), and that the investor and company should have considerable influence over defining the boundaries of the study and what is publicly disseminated.

This view is reinforced through discussions with providers about data collection and accountability. LEAP promised to be driven by independently verified data. However, several providers interviewed stated that neither Social Finance (the UK charity acting as intermediary to help scale up and reward providers) nor the MoE actively verifies the data. According to these sources, this has resulted in the potential fudging of data. A former high-level supervisor claimed that one provider “is operating on a false database” (interview April 2022). Teachers and administrators generally support these accusations, with one school supervisor reporting that they were repeatedly instructed by a provider not to delete students from enrollment, and that students are pushed through the system, sometimes “two to three years after they left” the school. This supervisor and several teachers believe the reason for this is that it means more money for the provider, as the same supervisor claimed: “More enrollment, more money. We talked about this in [name of provider]. We would count and it was whole complete difference. We go and find students but find that students are gone one or two years” (interview April 2022).¹⁰

Notwithstanding these issues with data and lack of accountability, the MoE and corporate stakeholders have continued to claim that they have no choice but to expand LEAP due to ongoing learning and budgetary crises. Yet it is unclear whether LEAP is even delivering on its promise to increase funding, as operating costs are consistently pushed onto local communities.

Thus LEAP, while purporting to remedy various “crises” through market-based decision-making, good governance, and oversight, has potentially made it harder to hold any of the institutions involved accountable (Hook 2024). The Ebola crisis, which provided the opportunity for this intervention, and the learning and financial crises that justify its continuation and expansion, have been exploited to legitimize corporate governance and profit making in education under the cover of a “win-winism” where only one side seems to be winning. As one key international actor claimed regarding a for-profit provider: “[name of provider] is playing chess across countries. They don’t care what is going on here, unless they have a good headline to sell for funders” (interview October 2022).

10. Similar stories were told by upper management at other providers. On November 1, 2022, one for-profit provider was summoned to the Liberian House over charges of “defrauding” the government (New Dawn 2022).

CONCLUSION

LEAP stands as an example of how corporate actors negotiate and expand their agendas through claims of crisis and partnership. These “new” corporate paradigms and forms of capitalism continue the colonial era dual mission of delivering civilization (“improvement”) and economic development, reframed today as blended value. Just as the Firestone plantation was presented as delivering stability, good governance, and development to the crisis of the hinterland, LEAP and PPPs like it use the values of conscious capitalism to push a pro-corporate agenda that enables profiteering and displaces the local population while undermining mechanisms of democratic accountability.

As the global Covid-19 health crisis has become a global learning crisis, it is perhaps more important than ever to understand how corporations use crisis to advance their own objectives. Corporate actors have increasingly been called upon to fill funding gaps and help “reimagine” education. This is demonstrated, in part, by the Brookings Institute holding a virtual seminar in December 2020 titled “PPP in the Time of Crisis,” which held up LEAP as a model for crisis response, while describing the Covid-19 pandemic as an “enormous opportunity” to restructure the education system (Markowitz and Gustafsson-Wright 2020).

I returned to Ms. Anderson’s school several times between 2018 and 2022. In our last discussion, we sat on the walkway in front of the school as students played and Ms. Anderson graded papers. This likely being our last conversation, I asked what had changed since the provider took over. Ms. Anderson gave a quizzical expression, as if the question was silly, before looking around at the school grounds and answering, “Nothing.” Ms. Anderson’s response was not entirely true. The school had undergone several changes: New staff came and went, often leaving due to lack of payment, and student enrollment nearly halved. The school had also received new materials, training in pedagogical methods, and national and international attention. Yet all that appeared to have very little impact. Upon leaving the school, I noticed something else. The school provider’s sign, which once stood prominently on the side of the road, declaring the school and the partnership it represented, had been pulled out and tossed against the wall, seemingly discarded: the partnership broken.

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CHAPTER 8

“Preserving Girls’ Futures”

Girlhood, Schooling, and Development in Niger

ADELINE MASQUELIER

PRESERVING GIRLS’ FUTURES

On the first day of the International Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) held in Niamey, Niger’s capital, in July 2019, Alphadi, the FIMA founder and one of Africa’s most prominent fashion designers, made girls under fourteen years of age walk in wedding dresses alongside men four times their age.¹ He wanted to call attention to the problem of *mariage précoce* (early marriage), a practice humanitarian discourses have widely and uniformly condemned as a socially sanctioned form of sexual abuse. “I dress women and girls to make them beautiful and value them, not to marry them at thirteen,” Alphadi told his stunned audience. “To give the continent a chance to grow, we need to educate girls. Preserving the future of the girl means preserving the future of the whole nation, and we need to give the girl the respect she deserves,” he added (UNICEF 2019). For Alphadi, who describes himself as a fierce defender of children’s rights, the future of Africa rested on the shoulders of the girl child, provided she was not married off at an early age.

Though his denunciation of *mariage précoce* was directed at the entire

1. I thank the editors, Elizabeth Cooper, Erdmute Alber, and Wandia Njoya, for their incisive editorial suggestions. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. The research on which this chapter is based was made possible by grants from the National Geographic Society and Tulane University. A fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies allowed me to devote time to the writing. Finally, I thank all the people in Niger who have generously shared their knowledge and life experience with me.

continent, the fashion designer was particularly mindful of his own country. Niger has the world's highest rate of early marriage: roughly 75 percent of Nigerien girls are married before they turn eighteen, and over 30 percent of them are married before the age of fifteen, the country's legal age of marriage (DHS Program 2012). In Niger the importance attached to women's reproductive roles combined with the emphasis on female chastity for unmarried women frequently translates into a shortened girlhood for female adolescents (*budurwoyi* in Hausa, Niger's most widely spoken language). Many girls experience youth as a brief hiatus between the onset of puberty and the advent of marriage. It is precisely this hiatus that girls' rights advocates such as Alphadi seek to extend by delaying marriage so that girls have a chance to mature "properly" before they are burdened with the onerous duties of adulthood.

In this model of human progress, formal education (*boko* in Hausa) is the means for both delaying marriage and grooming girls for the future. It "safeguard[s] and manage[s] the female body in the formative interstitial moment between girlhood and womanhood" (Moeller 2018: 136), thereby guaranteeing that girls don't grow up too fast. By offering a framework for age-appropriate learning activities, schools ensure girls learn at the "right" pace.² The goal, to paraphrase Alphadi, is to foster the potential stored in girls by letting them be girls for as long as possible. A necessary extension of child-rearing, schooling is imagined as a protective space giving girls access to the resources they need to become goal-oriented, self-reliant women.

In the decades following Niger's independence in 1960, girls' education was a low priority.³ After the World Bank started advertising the economic benefits of educating girls in 1992, girls' education became a cornerstone of the Millennium Development Goals, and the call to "invest" in adolescent girls swept the development field. In the noughties, Niger saw the number of girls attending primary and secondary school consistently rise. In sensitization campaigns, advocacy programs, and development models, girls' education is now packaged as the noblest of enterprises, with the potential to remake society from the bottom up. According to this ethos, itself a mesh of feminist and financial logic, schooling unlocks girls' unique potentialities, previously stifled by outdated cultural norms. It builds girls into successful entrepreneurs who can jump-start local economies and lift their countries out of

2. I use the terms "school" and "schooling" as shorthand for "Western" education.

3. The French colonial administration, fearful of possible backlash in Muslim communities, did not build a broad education system in Niger. Girls had especially limited access to formal education (see Cooper 1997).

poverty. Put simply, sending girls to school lays the foundations for effective development in poor countries such as Niger. Alphadi aptly summed up the stakes when he quipped—in a videotaped message sponsored by UNICEF and aimed at global audiences—that “to preserve young girls is to preserve Africa, to preserve Niger, to preserve the world” (Haro and Abdou 2019).

But what exactly does “preserving young girls” entail? My chapter wrestles with this question through a critical consideration of girls’ education when it is stripped of the feel-good rhetoric that sets up “girl power” as the solution to the world’s most pressing issues. Given the prevalence of gender-based violence in schools in Africa (Dunne et al. 2006; Leach and Mitchell 2006; Parkes 2015), activists’ impassioned claims that schools protect girls from sexual and other forms of abuse and exploitation sounds a bit hollow, especially in Niger, where corporatized development has forcefully deployed the language of advocacy to obscure (and defend) its own agenda. The use of girls’ and women’s bodies to disguise imperialistic ambitions as humanitarian interventions has a long and troubled history in the Global South (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mani 1998). And why, some ask, is the emphasis on schooling girls when unemployment for graduates, especially female graduates, remains so high? Even setting aside the fact that high-profile children’s advocates like Alphadi typically oversimplify the relations between gender, schooling, and poverty, we are still left with the uncomfortable sense that girls’ education—a blanket term covering a bundle of issues relating to girls’ and women’s empowerment—is but a smokescreen, deflecting attention from other, less admirable initiatives currently underway. Indeed, the goal all along has been to curb population growth in countries with high fertility rates.

That girls’ education is a pretext to deploy the language of rights in the service of population control is no secret. Population experts have long heralded schooling as a critical way of slowing down population growth by delaying childbirth and teaching girls to have smaller, healthier, more financially secure families (Jejeebhoy 1996). Sixty years ago, William Goode (1963) was already suggesting that widened access to women’s education would result in delayed marriage and lower fertility. The problem is that when girls’ education becomes a ploy to impose policies and programs aimed at reducing family sizes, it provides limited incentives to establish a robust education system adapted to girls’ aspirations and responsive to the social and moral standards of local communities. The focus is on sending girls to school, not addressing their needs or the practical concerns of communities. In Niger most schools are a far cry from the safe spaces envisioned by Alphadi: As parents (as well as

teachers and students) often acknowledge, sexual harassment and sexual violence in school constitute an ever-present threat for adolescent girls, forcing many of them to abandon their studies amid concerns about rising rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, especially in rural areas. For girls, then, education rarely ends up being the much-touted “ticket to a better future.”

This stubborn gap between rhetoric and reality is what interests me. Among other things, it signals that girls’ education is an exceptionally effective framing device for rallying the masses behind emotional appeals. For instance, by casting girls’ education as an alternative to early marriage, activists draw heavily on narratives from the Global North that construct such marriages as a form of sexual abuse from which girl children should be protected. I became interested in girls’ education while researching mass spirit possession among teenage schoolgirls. What was originally a side project, linked to questions of gender and sexuality that built on fieldwork I conducted on the Islamic revival in the 1990s (Masquelier 2009), turned into a larger endeavor after I worked as a consultant for the World Bank in 2013, overseeing research on gender and agency in Niger. While interviewing teachers, parents, former students, youth, and school administrators about “mass hysteria” in schools, the conversation often spilled on girls’ education, its promises, and its pitfalls. This chapter is largely based on interviews and participant observation I conducted in Niger in 2015, 2016, and 2018. One caveat: While I criticize the instrumentalization of girls’ education, I strongly believe that girls should be able to access schools where they can feel safe and learn.

Anthropologists and other scholars have traced the workings of power in the making of development as an ideology, exposing the practices that enable experts to diagnose problems and devise interventions (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1999). They have pointed to the limitations of moral arguments deployed by human rights activists denouncing so-called child marriage and dangling education’s promises of a better life (Masquelier 2020). Others have unsettled the universalistic rhetoric of global humanitarianism, which frequently registers human rights violations through the prism of gender and relies on generic images of suffering women and girls to justify interventions (Abusharaf 2000; Fadlalla 2011; Tamale 2020). Significantly, while sectors like healthcare and agriculture have been thoroughly critiqued, education, despite being central to the current rhetoric of development, has largely escaped scrutiny. Mounting evidence suggests that while schools in Niger fail to address girls’ basic needs, public officials, celebrities, NGO workers, and girls’ rights activists remain wedded to the narrative that casts schools as the solution for “preserv-

ing girls”—itself a euphemism for the policing of female adolescent bodies and molding girls into “future-makers.” Despite widespread skepticism about schools’ capacity to fulfill young people’s aspirations of social advancement, education is invariably presented in official circles as critical to the infrastructure of “becoming” on which African nations like Niger rely to imagine their future.

In this chapter I trace the paradoxes and tensions embedded in the girls’ education project in Niger, particularly in the ways this project shores up yet also threatens the notion of school as a site of sanctified girlhood. Through an ethnographic focus on the Hausa-speaking town of Dogondoutchi, I discuss how the trope of Nigerien girls embodying the telos of national development has seeped into the language of the everyday, circulating as useful fiction but rarely generating the “friction” required to nourish aspirations. I show how, by smuggling the speculative logic of neoliberalism and the rhetoric of feminist empowerment, the development industry makes a compelling case for increasing girls’ school enrollment (and rescuing girls from the threat of early marriage) while doing little to improve their odds of getting adequate training and empowering themselves.

THE ECONOMIZATION OF LIFE

In 1992 then–World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers penned a one-page essay in *Scientific American* in which he cast girls’ education as the most effective way of ending poverty in the Global South. Advancing that “educating girls quite possibly yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world” (1992: 132), he called for a major overhaul of the global development agenda.⁴ The financial rewards of sending girls to school, he proclaimed, drawing from findings in comparative demography, could be measured in the number of maternal deaths, infant deaths, and births averted: In addition to making more money than their uneducated counterparts, educated women in low-income countries had fewer, healthier children; moreover, their daughters were more likely to receive an education. In fact, education enabled these women to break existing cycles of poverty

4. For an analysis of how the World Bank, through its stranglehold on development, has remapped the globe in stark economic terms while couching its interventions in humanistic language to widens their appeal, see Benjamin 2007.

and initiate instead what Summers (132) called “virtuous circles.” Given the high rate of return, investing in girls’ education, Summers argued, was not only cheaper than investing in other development programs, including family planning, but also cheaper than investing in boys’ education.

At the center of Summers’s crude cost-benefit analysis of development stood the poor, girl from the Global South, her body turned into an iconic site of financial speculations that went something like this: The longer she remained in school, the fewer the children she was likely to bear, the more empowered she would become, and the greater her chances of starting a business. The higher her earning power, the greater her contributions to her community (and to the overall economy) would likely be. Propped against classic neoliberal imaginaries of Third World empowerment, this generic girl was thus repurposed as an instrument of poverty alleviation (Murphy 2017).⁵ Once her capacities were harnessed by education, she would not only pull her household out of poverty but also help develop her entire country.⁶ Put differently, she became prime “human capital” (Schultz 1961), a previously untapped resource with tremendous potential for economic growth—provided, of course, she was not married off too early.

At a time when the imposition of structural adjustment programs mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund was gutting public education across the globe, this push for the “economization of life” (Murphy 2017)—an infrastructure of calculation that sets differential valuations of human life for the sake of economic futures—set the stage for the widespread corporatization of girls’ schooling, whereby corporate aspirations to “do good” and “do well” became “inextricably entangled around the bodies of Third World girls and women” (Moeller 2018: 195). Given the high rate of projected social and economic return, investing in girls’ education made good sense for corporations looking to brand themselves as socially responsible while also creating new markets for their products. By appearing to respond to liberal feminists’ calls for gender equality, behemoths like Nike, Starbucks, and Microsoft improved their public image even as they framed girls (and the women they would become) as the new frontier for corporate profit.

5. The girl in Summers’s essay lived in Pakistan. But she could just as well have been from Niger, Namibia, or Nepal.

6. The model assumes that if young women postpone childbearing, their economic prospects will improve. However, the evidence does not always bear this out. Countries like Vietnam, Pakistan, and Morocco have lower rates of adolescent fertility than the United States, the world’s richest country. To critics, this suggests the limits of a correlation between the prevalence of early childbearing and a country’s economic standing (Koffman 2012).

Premised on a modernist notion of desirable family size, this model of development welding together girls, fertility, and economic futures is now solidly entrenched among not-for-profit organizations advocating for gender equity and women's empowerment. At the World Bank, a narrow single policy based on the "schooling as contraception" approach has justified the funding of a range of programs aimed at raising literacy and lowering fertility (Alexander 2001). Since Summers first sounded the clarion call to empower girls, the promotion of female education has become a thriving industry, bringing together activists, NGOs, national governments, global governance institutions, and transnational corporations (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Despite evidence that sending more girls to school alone won't reduce fertility, billions of dollars are channeled toward girls' education in the poorest countries along with a narrative about the potential nested in the "Third World girl" that, once awakened, will put an end to global poverty.

The narrative has been criticized for appropriating feminist aspirations of gender equality to maximize corporate profit (Moeller 2018). Nonetheless, it has radically transformed the landscape of development by fashioning girls as "entrepreneurs-in-waiting" (Koffman and Gill 2013) who must be educated, not because they have as much right as boys to learn and widen their horizons but because they are a golden investment opportunity. Undergirding claims that brown girls are ideal investments is the common assumption that, unlike their male counterparts, who tend to be less accommodating, they make perfect workers. Not only are they deferential, docile, and nimble-fingered, but their labor is cheap (Hewamanne 2010). Ironically, this vision of a vulnerable, compliant workforce contrasts strikingly with the rhetoric of empowerment that fuels development initiatives centered on girls' education.

SAVING GIRLS

In Niger the notion of development that predicates the end of poverty on the capitalization of girls is most powerfully evoked in the commonly heard adage: "When you educate a woman, you educate an entire nation." Politicians cite the adage to stress the cascading benefits of girls' education. Development workers mention it to mobilize community leaders in the "battle against gender discrimination" (Anza 2000). Adolescent schoolgirls themselves reference it when writing about their aspirations to become doctors, lawyers, or judges and serve their communities. The adage (or some version of it) figures prominently in songs that teach primary school students about

the dangers of not attending school. In these songs, the cost of ignorance and prejudice is couched in the language of disease and disability: A child is struck by polio after being denied the vaccine, a girl pulled from school and forced into “child marriage” sustains a fistula during childbirth and becomes a social pariah,⁷ and so on.

By calling for investments in individual girls, not collective action to combat gender inequities, the rhetoric of female empowerment affords us a glimpse of the logic at work in neoliberal economics: Because the aim is to nurture personal aspirations and channel personal success, development projects are focused on “investing in girls as individuals, not building public school systems” (Murphy 2017: 124). Once educated, women are expected to operate differently from typical neoliberal subjects fixated on individual achievements. Rather than working to secure financial stability and success, they should reinvest the benefits of their education in their communities, drawing on their newfound agency to improve collective welfare and boost local economies. Thus, nested in the overarching alibi about education as salvation lies a fundamental contradiction: girls, as the personification of national progress, must demonstrate not only savvy but also sacrifice.

By holding girls as examples of the possible, this model of development also presupposes that the targets of its interventions will make the right choices even in the absence of choices (such as when poverty forces girls to abandon school) and that they will remain focused on the long-term objectives even when these objectives (graduating from high school, delaying marriage, etc.) are out of sync with local norms governing matrimony, childbearing, homemaking, and social reproduction. This girl—a product of finance, feminism, and philanthropy—is but a fantasy. Yet, because the rosy narrative she is associated with ethicizes external interventions by spotlighting the “bride child” in need of urgent rescue, she has become a useful fantasy, around which a whole developmental infrastructure has been designed for the single purpose of lowering fertility rates in poor countries.

In Niger, until recently the world’s least educated country, the past three decades or so have witnessed an unprecedented push to invest in national futures by widening girls’ access to education. In a clear instantiation of what Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill (2013: 86) call the “girl powering” of international development, foreign governments, transnational NGOs, corporate

7. Thanks to mass vaccination campaigns, Niger saw its last wild polio case in 2012, though there have been vaccine-derived poliovirus outbreaks (WHO Niger 2020).

responsibility projects, and other donors have funded campaigns promoting girls’ education and unveiled programs, including scholarships, conditional cash transfers, and basic school facilities, aimed at raising girls’ school enrollments and boosting their graduation rates. Operating on the assumption that Niger’s development hinges on successfully “futuring” girls, that is, grooming them so they eventually contribute to the advancement of the nation (Masquelier 2022), activists, NGO workers, celebrities, and public officials frame schooling as an antidote to cultural practices, like *mariage précoce*, said to thwart girl’s agentive potential.

In the fight for women’s emancipation, girls’ rights advocates rely heavily on a narrative centered on obstetric fistula, a birthing injury caused by prolonged, obstructed labor and believed to afflict girls who become pregnant before reaching physical maturity. Fistula sufferers have received unprecedented media attention in recent years, much of it centered on their alleged stigmatization (Heller 2018). By drawing the spotlight on early marriage, for which it impugns local “custom,” the fistula narrative invigorates global activism. However, it fails to address significant structural inequalities in the field of reproductive health.

Even when it goes unmentioned, the chronicle of fistula haunts the discourse of development, helping rights-based arguments position education as the best protection against the horrors of incontinence—themselves cast as the tragic consequence of drafting children into marriage. In 2019 Félicité Tchibindat, the UNICEF representative in Niger, claimed that education “is one of the best ways to protect against child marriage. Being in school helps a girl to be seen as a child, rather than a woman, and thus not ready for marriage” (UNICEF 2019). For her audience, the words likely summoned the *fistuleuse*, the generic fistula sufferer whose story has inspired countless skits, songs, and articles about the perils of early marriage. Each girl sent to school, Tchibindat implied, was a girl who would be spared the dangers of childbirth complications and the costly burden of fistula.

By casting schooling as the safer alternative to early marriage, the narrative of *mariage précoce* deployed by rights advocates and other actors diverts scrutiny from the educational experience itself. Once the language of gender rights is co-opted to prop up *boko* as a substitute for early marriage, girls’ education becomes a rescue project. The moral ground on which it stands is so high as to be virtually unassailable. By being framed as the solution to a bundle of related problems, including “child” marriage, uncontrolled fertility, poverty, gender inequality, and underdevelopment, it acquires a halo

that rules out any criticisms of the actual school experience. In the aid world, the equation of female education with family planning justifies interventions aimed at boosting girls' school enrollment (Cooper 2019). Yet as we shall see, even if education advocates circumvent the issue of contraception, which many Nigeriens, who value large families, associate with Western imperialism, they do not assuage parental concerns about debauchery.

Expert claims about the protective impact of education notwithstanding, most adolescent girls in Niger do not experience school as a safe place—a place designed to safeguard their physical virtue while providing age-appropriate stimulation. If anything, schooling may exacerbate the pressure to marry early in a society where, owing to the climate of heightened religiosity and moralization brought by various strands of Islamism (Masquelier 2009, 2018; Sounaye 2017), the physical appearance and public demeanor of *budurwoyi* are the object of intense scrutiny. Most schoolgirls expect to be married before completing high school. Though they have internalized the language of development that portrays them as instruments of poverty alleviation, they nevertheless remain bound to the cultural logic that ties a woman's worth to her fertility. Marriage is very much on their minds. Since parents see schooling as a risky investment that may not bear fruit, girls whose academic performance marks them as failures are often hastily married, lest they become a burden or dishonor their families by producing a child out of wedlock. Though some parents expect their daughters to pursue a profession, most have difficulty imaging futures for them that extend beyond maternity and domesticity. Above all they want to escape the stigma that attaches to illegitimate births, affecting entire families. Keeping adolescent girls home to preserve them from the sexual violence that is pervasive in school (of which I say more below) seems like a reasonable option, especially when the chores girls perform contribute to the family's welfare. The girls themselves rarely have a say, and no one expects them to challenge parental authority.

In rural communities, schools are often seen as disseminating values that do not adequately prepare girls to be good Muslim wives. Literacy and numeracy are seen as useful, but there's concern that much of the knowledge acquired in school is not appropriate for village life. *Boko* is sometimes said to give girls "big heads" and turn them into proud, conceited women, less likely to submit to husbandly authority, which could lessen their marriageability. Parents talk of girls (and boys) becoming disrespectful, while prospective husbands fear they will have to put up with "bossy" wives. At a time when religious elites have loudly condemned adolescent female education, going as

far as pressuring the National Assembly to defeat a law on the rights of girls to attend school until eighteen,⁸ the aid industry’s notion of female vulnerability is often at odds with many parents’ perception of what is right for girls.

THE LIMITS OF EDUCATION

With an average of 1.4 years of education per citizen, Nigeriens’ level of education is among the lowest in the world. In fact, Niger ranks last on the UN Human Development Index, a composite index of health, education, and income indicators. Sixteen percent of the adult population completed primary education, and only 2.1 percent completed secondary education (World Bank 2017). School is mandatory between the ages of seven and fifteen. Between 1992 and 2012, enrollment rates in primary schools rose from 18 percent to 70 percent (UNICEF 2017). Since 2012, thanks to significant investments in the educational system, the number of children enrolled in primary school has kept pace with population growth, netting more than 2.7 million. Nevertheless, overall enrollment rates remain dismally low. More than half of the children between the ages of seven and twelve are unschooled. The great majority of them live in rural areas (République du Niger 2019). Those who receive a formal education often combine schooling with work (World Bank 2017). Schools are ill-adapted to the needs of nomadic herders’ children, who move with their families in search of food and water for their herds. A recent initiative to reach these children has focused on setting up movable tent schools. Shifting the language of primary instruction from French to one of the four most spoken languages, including Hausa, is also expected to raise school enrollments.

Efforts to improve access to education notwithstanding, people widely acknowledge that most students receive inadequate schooling. “The instructional system has gone down,” I was often told. This assessment is corroborated by official reports on the worsening quality of education in past decades.⁹ In the words of a mother, “Children are not learning anymore.” “Now you give teaching jobs to people who can’t even read,” a retired civil servant said, alluding to the replacement of proficient teachers by poorly trained teachers,

8. Fearful of the political consequences of approving a bill denounced as “contrary to Islamic teachings” by some Muslim religious leaders, the Assembly overwhelmingly rejected the bill.

9. The Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the government to suspend classes across the country to contain the virus, exacerbated the situation.

following the implementation of structural adjustment reforms in the 1980s. In 2017 only one in three teachers held an acceptable level of competency (UNICEF 2017). Additionally, overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of teachers, and a lack of resources militate against the acquisition of basic skills, even when children complete their elementary education (Meunier 2000). Many teachers I spoke to saw themselves as both the instruments of a “broken” system and the victims of a political strategy that has severely constrained their ability to form the next generation of Nigeriens.

In both primary and secondary schools, retention rates are low, and repeater and dropout rates are high (World Bank 2017). In rural areas, primary schools often lack access to textbooks and basic amenities (potable water, electricity, etc.). They must also contend with high rates of teachers’ absenteeism (World Bank 2017) as low salaries compel teachers to seek additional sources of income. Under these conditions, sending children to school past primary level can be seen as wasteful, especially if the school is distantly located, adding transportation and lodging costs. A young man, who left school at fourteen to work in a gold mine in Ghana, told me that “basic literacy is useful. I can read the road signs when I travel. But I don’t need more. That’s why I left school. That and the fact the teacher beat me.”

For several reasons, girls’ education presents its own added challenges. Despite efforts to “feminize” schools, there remain substantial gender disparities. Though more girls receive a formal education than ever before, only 42 percent of girls (compared with 58 percent of boys) are enrolled in primary school and middle school. Poor girls from rural areas only have a 24 percent chance of completing primary school (République du Niger 2019). The gender disparities widen as the levels of education rise, such that girls represent only 35 percent of the student population in middle school. The disparities are even greater in high school. Many rural girls must live with a host family to attend high school—an unaffordable option for many. Girls and their families also cite corruption (bought grades, etc.), favoritism, and sexism in the classroom as factoring in the decision to abandon school.

Since the 1990 democratic transition and the emergence of a robust civil society, the spread of reactionary Islamist rhetoric in direct opposition to elite feminism has contributed to the undervaluation of women’s formal education and the moralization of women’s place in society. Islamist groups denounce the dangers of secularism and the corrupting effect of *boko* on adolescent girls, arguing that the preservation of female virtue justifies

their exclusion from school. They claim that a girl’s highest aspiration is to become a wife and mother, while her parents’ most important obligation is to arrange her marriage at an early age so she can be safely entrusted to a husband before “she spoils.” In contrast to Koran schools, which impart religious knowledge and traditional morality, the French-based school system is said to expose adolescent girls to material and moral temptations. Sending girls to school also means depriving households of their labor, especially in rural areas. Faced with scarce resources, some parents privilege sons’ education at the expense of daughters’—unlike sons, daughters are not seen as future breadwinners.

In past decades the payoffs of *boko* have been disheartening. Unemployment rates among graduates are high, and women’s employability lags behind men’s. Given the added costs for girls (such as unwanted pregnancy), many families see girls’ prolonged schooling as a risky investment. There is talk of female education as the pathway to prosperous futures, but Nigerien parents, especially in rural areas, are often unconvinced that keeping girls in school past primary level yields high returns. Marriage and motherhood remain the surest means for girls to earn financial security and social recognition, which is why many families prioritize their daughters’ domestic contributions to the detriment of schoolwork. This is not to say that formal knowledge is not valued: Many parents acknowledge that *boko* “opens the mind.” They agree that some skills gained in the classroom are useful for the income-earning activities (trade, animal husbandry, etc.) women might one day engage in. Nevertheless, marrying daughters before they complete their schooling offers better guarantees of financial stability while also expanding alternative sources of support, such as husbands providing for in-laws.

SCHOOLS: SAFE PLACE OR TRAP?

“Once girls become interested in boys, they don’t study anymore. They just want to get the boys’ attention. Their parents must find husbands for them before they come home with a *ciki* [lit. womb; pregnancy],” is how Malam Boube, a Koran teacher, explained why adolescent girls did not belong in school. Schools, Malam Boube implied, were sites of debauchery where girls became sexually active despite their parents’ best efforts to raise them as virtuous Muslims. For morality’s sake, parents should arrange their daughter’s

marriage before her sexual purity was compromised. Adolescent girls, Malam Boube further implied, were lustful and irresponsible. When a girl displayed an excessive interest in young men, her parents had little choice but to pull her out of school and marry her.

Testimonies I collected from schoolteachers echo Malam Boube's views:

Relations with boys is what prevents girls from studying properly, especially now that everyone has a cell phone. Girls have Android phones. So, braids, makeup, credit for their phones, and everything else, the boyfriend [pays for].

The girls in my class are always on Facebook and on WhatsApp. It takes all their time. Uploading sexy videos, fashionable outfits, *tchadiens* [henna tattoos], skin-tight clothing—they put *everything* on the net! They don't have the money to be connected, so the boyfriends pay for all this while their parents can barely feed their families. [The girls] put sexy photos of themselves on the net; it is totally unsuitable for Muslim girls.

We have a word for debauched girls who dance and spend their time at the *fada* [young men's tea circle]. We call them *MCiette*. There are many at the school where I teach. Mothers don't pay attention [to their daughters' involvement with boys], and then they wonder how they got pregnant!

In these testimonies, girls are described as immodest, dissipated, licentious creatures who attract young men's attention and have sex with them in exchange for money, clothing, and phone credit. They entice male students by wearing come-hither outfits and posting inappropriate photos of themselves on digital platforms. Their use of social media has reshaped the classroom into a space where virtual activity (texting, posting, and chatting online) has replaced formal learning.

In a society where female immodesty is often associated with Western contagion, schoolgirls are the object of intense scrutiny. Those who eschew veiling—a sign of Muslim virtue—are criticized for contributing to the climate of immorality. As bearers of the family's honor, girls are expected to maintain their virginity or, at the very least, ensure they won't become pregnant. Yet they receive limited sexual education in public schools and none in Catholic and Franco-Arabic schools.¹⁰ Owing to the taboo against

10. The defunding of education in response to structural adjustment mandates of the 1990s is partly to blame for the inadequacy of sexual education.

sexuality and the fact that mothers typically avoid discussing reproductive health, few girls are aware of their options or know how to prevent pregnancy. Knowledge of sexuality, it is widely assumed, is dangerous: It may encourage sexual activity among unmarried girls. Moreover, since the AIDS epidemic and the rise of Islamism, contraception has become associated with STDs and illicit sex, including prostitution (Cooper 2019). As such, it is tainted and should not be made available to women, least of all unmarried girls. Mothers focus on their daughters’ *tarbiyya* (education in the home), which provides the moral, ethical, and material foundations of life. Girls are taught to be cautious around men and not let themselves be charmed by them, but mothers don’t go into details. Above all, *burdurwa* must preserve themselves for their husband.

Though public schools are free, poor parents must weigh the investment they make in their children’s education (including the cost of books, fees, and uniforms) against the hoped-for payoffs, such as financial assistance from at least one gainfully employed child. By pulling a daughter out of school when she shows no academic promise, they are divesting themselves of a burden. Though poverty is often blamed for academic failure, people also speak of the “poor choices” a girl made, throwing herself at men instead of studying (the existence of clandestine prostitution is widely acknowledged). They talk of the “boys” being behind girls’ loss of interest in their studies and bemoan the availability of mobile devices that let *budurwoyi* contact young men without their parents’ knowledge.

Particularly striking is how the above testimonies differ from the sanitized picture the development industry paints of schools. Recall that in the international aid and NGO world, school is presented as a haven for girlhood—a place where girls develop safely under close supervision. Tangled up with this picture are the multiple iterations of the previously cited adage about the concurrent development of girls and nations. By claiming that “when a girl goes to school, the whole country grows,” public officials signal that, under the right circumstances, the processes of maturation the national body and the bodies of schoolgirls undergo mirror each other. In this progressivist model, education sets in motion not only the development of girls but also the “girling” of development, engendering a kind of synergy between individual and national growth thanks to the cascading benefits of female empowerment.

But here is the rub. For Nigerien parents, maturation—the physical and sexual development taking place during puberty—is precisely what places girls at risk in school, where the absence of a robust moral education allegedly

encourages illicit sexual encounters.¹¹ At puberty, a girl in Niger enters a risky liminal stage: She is no longer seen as a child, but she has not yet been entrusted to a husband. Because her sexuality is not safely harnessed by marriage, she is especially vulnerable to the taint the revelation of *zina* (sex outside marriage) would produce. The problem here is not her age but her unmarried status, which her schooling only prolongs. As long as she is unmarried, she remains vulnerable since any signs of pregnancy would threaten her future, besides shaming her family.

Some parents acknowledge that they are “forced to choose between two evils” (Cooper 2019: 253) and that, by marrying daughters at fifteen, they opt for the lesser evil. Safiya, a longtime friend, told me she initially encouraged Rabi, her youngest daughter, to complete her schooling but that “it was up to [Rabi’s] husband, now that she was married.” She did not say it, but we both knew that her daughter’s chances of returning to school were almost nil.¹² The young woman had married a twenty-seven-year-old mechanic shortly after leaving school at sixteen, and given birth to a daughter less than a year later. It all happened quickly after Safiya learned that Rabi was seeing a boy at school, whom she and her husband did not approve of. Marriage meant Rabi would never become a teacher, as both mother and daughter had once hoped, but Safiya was relieved that the risk of an illegitimate pregnancy no longer clouded her daughter’s horizon. For this mother of seven, the dread of the *shege* (bastard) far outweighed her misgivings about Rabi’s aborted education. Besides, she assured me, Rabi liked her husband and was happy. Far from smoothing a girl’s path to womanhood—a path otherwise riddled with pitfalls, as the World Bank and other development agencies proclaim—school can be seen as reducing a girl’s life options in a country with endemic un(der)employment among school graduates.

TEACHERS AS SEXUAL PREDATORS

The sexual dangers girls are exposed to in school are not limited to encounters with classmates. Male teachers are widely known to engage in sexual

11. In 2004 a study of sexual violence against girls worldwide reported that over 50 percent of the girls in secondary schools stated they had been personally victims of sexual harassment or rape and over 45 percent of them had witnessed sexual violence (UNICEF 2004).

12. Once married, a woman needs her husband’s permission to attend school (Samandari et al. 2019).

improprieties with female students. The absence of disciplinary oversight of teachers combined with deficient parental support has created fertile grounds for the sexual harassment of female students by male teachers. A recent high school graduate remembers:

A teacher once called me on the phone and said he loved me. I was confused and alarmed. I was in his class, you see. The next day I did not dare look at him. How did he get my phone number? Then I remembered he had met me when I was going to the market to buy spices. He asked for my cell phone, pretending he needed to call a friend. I told him I didn’t have any credit. But he called his own number and hung up before his phone rang. Then he erased his number on my phone so I couldn’t tell who he had called. I tried to find out, but I saw my credit was unused, so . . . I didn’t worry [about it]. I never talked to him after that. I avoided him. . . . I didn’t ask for anything, but I always received decent grades.

Schoolgirls are often pressured to accept their teachers’ sexual advances in return for gifts. In the words of Madame S., a high school teacher: “I know a girl; her parents paid for private lessons so that she would do well in school. She and her older sister had a private lesson with a male teacher, but he was weird. He wanted to talk about love and seduce them, so they complained to their parents, and that was the end of the private lessons.”

There are other reasons parents are concerned about the “cost” their daughters may pay for education. Girls who refuse to give in to sexual harassment can file a complaint against their harassers, but in practice they rarely do. Shame often prevents adolescent girls from confiding in their mothers. They lack the social support that would enable them to safely extricate themselves from a tricky situation, especially in rural areas where teachers are treated with great reverence whereas girls occupy the very bottom of the social ladder. Additionally, girls may be discouraged from speaking up because doing so may harm their reputation since they will end up shouldering some of the blame for what happened. Schoolgirls are thought to be more knowledgeable about sex than their unschooled counterparts (due partly to the sex education they receive in school) and more likely to forget their *tarbiyya*. Sex education is an object of concern for those, including Islamist organizations, who believe unmarried people need not know about sexuality or contraception. Meanwhile, harassers rarely face serious consequences for their actions. Teachers are expected to abide by a set of best practices, but

they are not required to take a pledge of ethical conduct. While there is a protocol for firing teachers who abuse students, unless the case ends up in court, the abuser is simply sent to another school.

Economic hardship, intense peer competition, even marital aspirations play a role in a girl's decision to exchange sex for gifts. Some girls have affairs with teachers hoping the relationships will lead to marriage. Despite the dread surrounding out-of-wedlock pregnancies, impoverished mothers occasionally turn a blind eye to their daughter's dalliance: In the short term, the economic benefits derived from the liaison outweigh the risks. Teachers are known to pay for clothes, beauty products, school fees, and even water bills, or provide gifts in kind, like firewood, in exchange for sex. For girls from impoverished families who are threatened with marriage if they perform poorly in school (marrying girls is a strategy for shedding off dependents), receiving good grades in exchange for sex eases parental pressure even if, paradoxically, it also increases their chances of becoming pregnant and leaving school.

For these and other reasons, schoolgirls are frequently accused of pursuing male teachers. Some are suspected of engaging in prostitution. A young English teacher told me some of his female students wore a lot of makeup and adopted provocative postures when sitting in class so that he could see "their legs and part of their bodies they are supposed to cover." A young woman recalled how in high school, two of her former classmates vied for the same teacher's attention:

My friends liked a teacher. They both sent him messages while he was teaching. He would respond. But they were jealous of each other. . . . When they went to his classroom they would put on makeup as if it was a holiday, and one of them arrived late on purpose so he would notice her. And they would hang out at night. He came to [my friend's] house after the *isha* prayer [the fifth prayer of the day] and picked her up on his motorbike.

Adolescent girls are often blamed for flirting with, even luring, male teachers. Drawing on the image of the jealous co-wife, the above narrative, of which I heard several versions, paints a picture of schoolgirls as perpetrators of *zina*—a crime condemned by Islam. Besides pointing to the feminization of blame in premarital sex, such narratives undermine the notion that schools offer protection from sexual exploitation, pregnancy, and other threats. They provide ammunition for Muslim religious leaders, including prominent

political figures, who draw on pervasive anxieties about women’s sexuality to warn audiences against the perils of exposing girls to *boko*.

MARRIAGE, PEER PRESSURE, AND MERITOCRACY

In 2015 the women’s magazine *Marie Claire* published the story of Balkissa, a Nigerien girl who struck a deal with her parents that allowed her to stay in school for another five years after they tried to marry her when she was only twelve (Keenan 2015). Balkissa loved school and earned excellent grades. When she turned seventeen, her family arranged a marriage for her. Balkissa, who wanted to become a doctor, sought refuge at an SOS center in Niamey the night before the wedding. Then she took to court the uncle who had set up the marriage. She won her case, and after completing her schooling, enrolled at university (Keenan 2015). Rights activists deploy stories such as Balkissa’s—stories of girls who refuse to be the “child brides” of men two or three times their ages—as shining examples of the emancipatory power of education. Female students themselves pen poems about the benefits of education or essays about defiant girls challenging parental authority (and social norms) to remain in school. But for every story I heard about a girl defying her family’s efforts to marry her, I heard the story of another girl who joyfully left school to get married—a cautionary tale of education’s contradictory effects (Dyson 2019). Though some teachers fight on behalf of their female students and though kin occasionally support a girl’s scholarly aspirations, jubilant reports of schoolgirls taking their destinies in their own hands are not the norm in Niger.

In contexts of heightened religiosity, adolescent girls face enormous pressure—including peer pressure—to conform to pious norms of Muslim femininity and domesticity. Unmarried eighteen-year-old girls are frequently teased by peers for being “old maids.” I asked Halima, who attended a teacher’s training program, about the incompatibility between schooling and marriage. She explained:

HALIMA: We were eight [girls] in our cohort. Some got married in CM2 [fifth grade]. Other girls, when they failed the BEPC [ninth-grade exam], took off for the bush and danced. They didn’t want to stay in school. Of the eight of us, only three passed the BEPC. The other five are married. Some of them have four children by now.

AM: Why do girls want to get married?

HALIMA: They want to marry since many of their peers are already married. They want to be like them. It's not always parents who wish to marry daughters early.

AM: Can teachers intervene to prevent marriages?

HALIMA: Teachers try to influence the parents and convince them of the usefulness of schooling. But often the girls don't study. They think of marriage.

Though education is widely promoted as an intrinsic good, for many *budurwoyi*, Halima suggests, schooling is no match for marriage in the quest for stable futures. Schoolgirls may boast of embodying their country's prospects by invoking trite expressions, but the much-touted correlation between female adolescents' developmental history and Niger's emergent economy remains a cliché. Put differently, for *budurwoyi* forced to negotiate the chasm between "school" as an abstract, idealized space of learning and the actual establishment they attend, marriage is what enables them to "get ahead" while ensuring they are provided for. It positions them on the expected life course, giving them the social recognition they yearn.

In the way it is pitched as a form of investment, education demands sacrifice on the part of laboring households: Parents may sell part of the harvest to send a daughter to a distant school. Meanwhile, education's recipients are offered a double-edged invitation: They must develop themselves or carry the burden of their own failure. Yet in an era of limited employment opportunities, those who have stuck to the plan don't always seem better off. Meritocracy is unattainable. Given the climate of uncertainty, Halima implied, many girls are unwilling to sacrifice their reputation for the sake of pursuing what looks like a pipe dream. Foregoing education to marry makes sense for those for whom "investment" stands for investment in people. In other words, producing children is a strategy for diversifying risks and opportunities based on the recognition that not all individuals are equally successful: Adult children will likely tap different resources (the state bureaucracy, farming, the market, etc.) to make a living and support dependents, including elder parents. In the end one cannot reduce the failure to keep adolescent girls in school to the "problem" of unwanted pregnancy, to which contraception would provide a technical solution, for other costs and calculations are at stake, as I tried to show. "Recovering the voice of women" (Alidou 2005: 156) by attending to the agency of girls and their families—a capacity for action that arises out of

specific conditions of subordination—is critical for grasping how Nigerien girls' experience of education is shaped by local understandings of gender, morality, and empowerment.

EDUCATION ALIBIS

Poverty reduction schemes in agriculture and healthcare have been subjected to critical evaluation. By contrast, the field of educational development, shielded by multiple alibis that have cast an overwhelmingly positive image of schools and schooling, has escaped this kind of scrutiny. It is as if the calculus driving the instrumentalization of girls as a prime lever of national development somehow overrides all other concerns, including the well-being of the girls themselves. How the systematic push to send girls to school in Niger, a push initially orchestrated by the World Bank, has escaped comprehensive critique through the deployment of certain education alibis, including education's pledge to empower women, has been the focus of this chapter. Interestingly, education did not figure in the World Bank's initial mandate; it only became a critical part of that mandate after human capital theory—and the conjectured link between broad-based education and economic growth (Bloom et al. 2003)—legitimized a shift in investment from infrastructure to individuals (Moeller 2018). In the new cost-benefit paradigm, underdevelopment is diagnosed as a deficiency of human capital, which must be rectified by investing in girls, that is, by sending them to school. In school, girls theoretically forge the tools to shape their destinies while postponing marriage and maternity.

In Niger, girls' education has become the central axis of a developmental ethos aiming at transforming female children into resourceful women so their productivity can be harnessed to poverty reduction. Because they promote a gender parity approach without passing judgment on broader programs, like structural adjustment programs, that disproportionately harm women and girls (Moeller 2018), initiatives centered on female education can build consensus among a range of institutional actors and stakeholders and accommodate diverse, even contradictory, agendas. For instance, in the way they hitch economic productivity to delayed reproduction, educational policies dovetail with the goals of population reduction that are central to the development industry's vision of global progress. By allowing the language of empowerment to shroud the narrative of fertility control, education becomes

the perfect alibi for smuggling “progressive” views of the ideal family to challenge “traditional” models of social reproduction. Once the rhetoric of rights is stitched to the economic utilitarian logic driving educational development, the policies it promotes are virtually unassailable—or so it is assumed in liberal circles.

In this chapter I argued that embedded within the “schooling as humanitarian rescue” narrative is a series of alibis that circulate as expedient fictions, obfuscating the broken promises of the education system in Niger, including the failure of many girls to graduate from high school or even middle school. At a basic level, by diverting attention to vulnerable girls needing protection, the rhetoric that casts schooling as an anti-“child marriage” intervention, a human right, or a strategy to achieve gender parity obscures the fact that, for the global aid industry, the priority is to curb population growth, not enhance women’s lives. As such, it detracts from the low quality of education most girls receive. A closer look at discourses centered on girls’ education further reveals a set of fundamental contradictions: First, girls are portrayed, on the one hand, as vulnerable beings in need of protection from patriarchal traditions and, on the other, as promising subjects endowed with the potential to pull their country out of poverty. Additionally, by portraying schools as havens sheltering girls from the lasting harms of *mariage précoce*, girls’ rights activists and other actors conveniently occlude what every parent of school-aged children knows, namely that schools are places of sexual violence. One must also mention that in contexts of pervasive joblessness, employment is especially limited for female graduates, contradicting the developmental rhetoric that portrays education as *the* pathway to social mobility. Finally, the vision of the *good life* many girls (and their families) entertain is not easily reconciled with the development industry’s models of female empowerment and social mobility. In sum, when girls’ education becomes harnessed to the larger goal of national development, policy and public attention are monopolized by emotionally charged ideals and crucial discussions on how to address girls’ needs and create safer school environments are sidestepped.

A recent investment in girls’ education has resulted in the construction of a dozen boarding houses that provide free housing and food to rural girls attending secondary school. Dozens more are planned. Though intended to boost girls’ attendance rather than improve the quality of education, the project, implemented under Mohammed Bazoum’s presidency, represents one step in the right direction: It tackles poverty and sexual violence, two principal deterrents to girls’ education. Since the 2023 coup that installed a military

junta, however, the future of the project is very much in doubt. To consolidate its power, the junta, mindful of the centrality of religion in Nigerien society, acknowledges Muslim preachers expressing support for the regime. Meanwhile, Muslim collectivities are pressuring the junta to expunge references to secularism from the Nigerien constitution, introduce Islamic education in public schools, and make Arabic the official second language of Niger.

These developments signal that the Western model remains out of sync with Muslim norms and social expectations. While the development industry brands girls as clusters of potentialities—uniquely promising individuals who, with the right dose of supervision, will one day serve as the vanguard of a prosperous social order—many parents, knowing a woman’s success is assessed through the lens of procreation rather than (economic) production, are primarily concerned with their daughters’ reproductive futures. Schooling puts at risk these reproductive futures by delaying marriage and promoting forms of female empowerment that challenge moral imperatives reliant on the definitions of women as bearers of large progenies. Ironically, for these parents, the sight of young girls parading in Alphadi’s 2019 fashion show would be scandalous, not because the girls dressed as brides, but because they participated in an event that has long attracted controversy in Niger for its wasteful spending, its ties with foreign interests, and most of all, its promotion of immodest femininity.

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CHAPTER 9

Exam Securitization as Alibi

Education and the Distrustful Paradigm of Governance in Kenya

ELIZABETH COOPER

A small crowd of rowdy teenage boys, jostling against each other in familiar and friendly ways, are seen stumbling around in the dark, encircling a small fire burning on the ground. They are jubilantly shouting all sorts of defiant and vulgar things. The handheld phone camera that is filming swirls and jolts to capture one boy's face and then another, as they shout for attention or quickly invent something to shout when the camera lands on them. One boy exclaims they just cheated on their school exams. Another boy hollers that a particular government politician—who led the policing of the school exams—can suck his dick.¹ It looks like they are having fun together, celebrating themselves as daring through their bragging, but it soon becomes repetitive, and the video cuts off.

But that was not the end of the event. The video went viral. Within days of its being uploaded to a private citizen's social media account, the country's major news media began reporting on it, broadcasting clips from the video on TV and making it available for viewing through their online platforms. A few days later, the country's president made the boys' video a focus of a high-profile speech staged at the State House, and he rhetorically addressed the boys, warning, "We will show you what this nation does with cheats and people who have no respect for their elders" (Rift Valley News 2018). The arrests of the boys were then reported. Their faces and names were publicly

1. Author's translation.

broadcast, both in reportage of the original video and during their media-filmed arraignments in court. Eight sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys were suddenly nationally infamous.

For what possible reasons would a short video clip of young people bragging about cheating on their school exams and crudely insulting some politicians become a national sensation and scandal? Why such hypervigilance over the shouting in the dark of a few adolescent students? While the event itself might seem inconsequential, the fact that it was transmogrified into a prolonged and pointedly controversial public airing provokes questions about the dynamics at play. The case is exemplary for political and social analysis because it was purposefully made into an example by national politicians, national media, and a public audience engaging with it as newsworthy. It thus provides opportunities to examine the construction of a particular kind of spectacle to do particular kinds of work.

The case described above of the boys swearing and bragging around a midnight fire occurred at Ambira Boys High School in western Kenya in November 2018. The location and timing are crucial to understanding the particular public furor that was roused. School examinations, usually held in November, are constructed as national events, characterized by conspicuous exertions of effort and circumspection. They are experienced by many people as objects of intrigue, in relation to both the allure that they can decide fates the suspicion that they will prove faulty. In this chapter, I study various experiences associated with the intrigue of school exams in Kenya to reflect on how different people relate to the idea that formal education can be trusted as a means of merit-based life chances. From this multilayered consideration, I make the case that exams specifically, and education more generally, are exemplary sites of struggle in governing ideologies and relations in Kenya, and they should therefore be appreciated as politically relevant.

The government's securitization agenda for exams is one obvious way that governing ideologies and relations are implicated in exams and education in Kenya. I examine how politicians exploit exams and their securitization as opportunities to evidence the government's commitment to upholding a meritocratic system for deciding individuals' successes and failures. Hence, when "cheaters" are exposed, as the Ambira High boys were, government officials may choose to seize the opportunity to make examples of them, thereby brandishing their own reputations as anticorruption protagonists and encouraging citizens to believe that the integrity of the education system is intact and can be trusted as a means of ensuring life's opportunities are

awarded according to merit (or conversely, a lack of opportunities is deserved due to individuals' faults). Indeed, "safeguarding educational integrity" is the government's preferred discursive framing for pursuing suspicious, combative, and punitive approaches toward students, parents, teachers, and principals during the periods of primary and secondary students' final exams. I argue that the government's emphasis on "safeguarding educational integrity" serves, however, as an alibi for safeguarding a system that is not functioning to create opportunities generally, and certainly not equitably, for ordinary Kenyans who play by the rules.

The alibi approach to interrogating a situation seeks to account for how a particular claim to be doing one thing can serve to distract and even conceal another causal relationship (Cooper et al., this volume). In this case, I discern two implications of what I identify as the alibi of securitizing educational integrity in Kenya. First, I allege that governing politicians use the national spectacle of securitizing students' school exams to propagate distrust of ordinary Kenyans as a means to legitimate and familiarize a disciplinarian and heavy-handed governing approach to the general population. So that implication is not quite an alibi: Indeed, rather than hiding this interest, governing elites in Kenya tend to publicly espouse this as their imperative agenda. There is noticeable progression from accusations that students, parents, and teachers are ready to cheat on school exams to denunciations of all Kenyans as potentially immoral and disorderly, thereby justifying a disciplinarian approach to keeping Kenyans in line.² The second implication of securitizing exams and by association "educational integrity" is more defiantly an alibi: These actions serve to distract attention away from contradictory evidence that socioeconomic chances are not determined by merit in Kenya, but rather are extremely limited, and often decided by preexisting social and economic advantages. Indeed, the abundant evidence of inequality's reproduction, including through the education system, should provoke questions not about how efficacious the "educational integrity" agenda is in safeguarding a meritocracy, but rather how the "educational integrity" agenda sustains a meritocracy hoax.

Above I have pointed to how some politicians seized on the Ambira High boys' boasts about cheating as an opportunity to figuratively flex some muscle

2. This was particularly noticeable during Covid-19 public health restrictions. For instance, the cabinet secretary for health publicly criticized Kenyan citizens for being "indisciplined and difficult people" and therefore jeopardizing everyone's security (Agutu 2020).

for the public. But what came first was the boys' inspiration to cheat and to boast about their cheating. The gleeful defiance those boys exhibited in those few free moments suggests that they did not regard the exams or the actions taken to "safeguard the integrity of the exams" as deserving of their respect or obedience. Their celebration of their cheating indicates an alternative perception that playing by the rules is for the gullible; The boys believed their perspective was the savvy one. Moreover, their "midnight bonfire" and the many public discussions it inspired are evidence that exams, and education, are not experienced as unidirectional mechanisms of control by governing authorities over ordinary Kenyans. They are sites of struggle, reflecting multiple relations of distrust in political society, as well as fodder for theorizing governance—and the viability of meritocracy—in Kenya.

In the rest of this chapter, I elaborate my assertion that exams are exemplary sites of struggle in governing ideologies and relations in Kenya. I first explain my corollary argument that scholars interested in political relations, subjectivities, and governance systems should recognize education as a relevant focus, and that the study of exam systems and exam cheating can hold specific relevance. I then account for how secondary school exams are counted as significant in Kenya and how students are "encouraged" to understand that exams sort futures according to what individuals deserve. There are multiple practical and discursive means of inculcating the idea that individual students are responsible for earning success or failure through their individualized educational effort. I pay particular attention to students' exposure to religious messaging about how God rewards the virtuous with good exam scores. The last sections of the chapter describe the complexity of distrustful relations between governing authorities, school heads, teachers, students, and parents in Kenya that surface during secondary students' final exams. This leads me to my final discussion of how exams are used in various ways to propagate the idea that responsibility for success or failure in Kenya is down to the individual and the individual's deservingness. I argue that this fixation with safeguarding a supposed meritocracy provides enough cover to let governments—and the public education sector—evade responsibility for ensuring equitably safe and fulfilling life chances for all citizens.

The chapter draws from ethnographic observations conducted over four months in a girls' secondary boarding school in 2016, open-ended interviews with students, graduates, and teachers from more than a dozen secondary boarding schools in 2016 and 2018, and analysis of media and government reports as well as public discourse circulating through social media. It is part

of a larger study focused on experiences of education and protest in secondary schools in Kenya (Cooper 2022).

TAKING EDUCATION SERIOUSLY

One of my aims for this chapter is to demonstrate the righteousness of thinking about exams, and education more broadly, in terms of political relevance. I do this through accounting for the relations and intentions of suspicion and acrimony between actors that I contend we can recognize as political actors, even when not engaged in “politics” per se: that is, the difficult and often overlapping relations between workers (e.g., teachers), public service users (e.g., parents and students), and government (both politicians and bureaucrats), and I analyze ideological and practical ways of governing, as well as resisting particular ways of being governed, that are not conventionally recognized as “political.”

Scholarly interest in school exams tends to be confined to a minor thread of interest in comparative or policy-focused education studies (Buckner and Hodges 2016; Vinson et al. 2011). Exams, and more broadly education, are very rarely granted focused attention in academic works dedicated to political analysis. For instance, the 2020 *Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics* (Cheeseman et al. 2020) contains forty-nine separate thematic entries in addition to its introductory chapter, highlighting an impressive scope of political analysis; in addition to chapters focused on specific political administrations and elections, as well as conventional political science topics of study like constitutions, the *Handbook* extends its study of politics to include chapters focused to the political roles of the Christian Church and Islam, social media and traditional media, the police and military and gangs, the informal economy, and so on, yet education and schools receive no specific attention and are mentioned only in passing in several thematic chapters describing government budget allocations and strategies for increasing political participation.

Such omissions obviously reflect foremost on what gets categorized as politics in academia, and education’s omission is clearly a trend in the conceptualization and study of politics generally, rather than only in the Kenya case. However, political analysts’ neglect of how education, and indeed school exams, relate to ideas and practices of political governance in Kenya seems irresponsible oversight. I regard this as complicit in holding education apart—as if functioning above and untouched (i.e., innocent) from pol-

itics, as well as unimportant for political society. This neglect should prompt questions as to what agendas determine research: Is it the interests that are generated in aloof domains of scholarship, or the actual struggles that people engage in to assert their political and material priorities?

In contrast, Kenya-based outlets that combine journalism, public commentary, and scholarly analysis tend to give serious and extended attention to children's education, including their school examinations. An important example is *The Elephant*, an online platform for analysis that is guided by an editorial philosophy founded on the principles of Pan-Africanism and an editorial board comprising well-known critical and publicly engaged scholars and activists. *The Elephant* has published multiple long-form analyses, podcasts, and op-eds concerning how education is experienced and its many implications for Kenya. That platform's concern with analyzing and reimagining state-society relations in Kenya translates into featuring education as prominently as elections, economic policies, ecological threats, international relations, and labor disputes. Such domestic recognition makes the neglect of education in politics scholarship even more conspicuous.

The arguments in favor of considering exams and education experiences for their insights to political relations and governance are not limited to the Kenyan context, of course. Michel Foucault ([1977] 1995) made a forceful case for appreciating the significant innovation of examinations as "a constantly repeated ritual of power," serving as a "space of domination" in which those being examined (i.e., students) are subjected to a technique of surveillance that disciplines through its very exercise and logic. He saw the examination as "a new type of power over bodies," describing how its disciplinary power was integrated through its practice of constituting the individual as a "describable, analysable object" made visible in relation to a corpus of existing knowledge, and through its corollary of constituting a comparative system. Such a system of surveillance makes it possible "to qualify, to classify, and to punish" as each individual is made into "a case" that can be "described, judged, measured, compared with others . . . trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc." (Foucault [1977] 1995: 190–191). These ways of knowing could be applied by a governing authority, of course, but Foucault was particularly interested in how they could seep into people's ways of knowing and judging themselves, thereby conscripting individuals in their own discipline and governance.

While Foucault's analysis attends to the insidious ways that examinations wield power and effect in society, other scholars have observed how high-

stakes testing of students can also create an “education spectacle” with far-reaching implications for the narrative framing of education and the practical consequences of such framing (Vinson et al. 2011). Reflecting on how the education spectacle plays out in contexts like the United States, Daniel Attick (2014: 4) notes that public discourse is inundated with the “consumption” of students’ published test scores, sidelining critical inquiry regarding the purposes and experiences of education.

Using exams to generate data for characterizing the quality of education is a global practice encouraged through leading education and “development” funding agencies like the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Gates Foundation despite understandings that exams are poor—and possibly harmful—learning technologies for children and young people (see Harber 2021 for a review of harms associated with exams). The justification for exams is to furnish policymakers with a way of judging an education system and designing solutions to fix the problems such data reveal (World Bank 2020). Of course, the kinds of problems that can be exposed are limited by the kinds of data collected through exams. Here again, examinations work as “an observing hierarchy” and “normalizing gaze,” with global education funding organizations positioned to exercise power through ways of judging success or failure and authorizing interventions.

Many scholars analyze exam cheating across different contexts in relation to what it reflects about ethical and behavioral norms and social trust in societies (Dejene 2021; Heyneman 2009; McCabe et al. 2001). Researchers studying the social meaning of cheating on secondary exams in Jordan and Morocco, for example, argue that “cheating is one way youth contest the putative meritocracy of the state to reclaim a sense of control over their lives” (Buckner and Hodges 2016: 603). They note that cheating is a social practice, involving students as well as their friends and families, who understand it as a way “to prevent educational institutions from proscribing their futures” (Buckner and Hodges 2016: 605). Meanwhile, a study of secondary students in Ethiopia reports that “academic cheating is a ‘normal way’ of functioning at secondary school” (Dejene 2021: 8). Some students noted that it would be strange and deviant behavior for a student to refuse to cheat (i.e., help others with answers) and that such a student might be considered “unkind” (Dejene 2021). In that context, those who prioritized their individual competitive results over helping others might be considered to have failed the test.

I also wish to contribute insights to how exams specifically, and an education system more generally, not only reflect, but also generate, relations of

trust and distrust. However, instead of making the logic and practice of exam cheating my focus, I attend to the work and effects of exam securitization (i.e., acts to prevent exam cheating). In this, I seek to highlight how exams—and the encompassing education system—are exploited as sites of potential controversy to reinforce as well as challenge modes of governance and control.

PUBLIC STRESS ON SCHOOL EXAMS

It is not overstating to describe students' final primary and secondary school exams as periods of national mobilization across Kenya, involving millions of children and adults.³ The primary and secondary school exams, usually held at the end of the school year in November and December, are the apex of years of students' efforts—and their families' efforts—to persevere through the education system. These cumulative tests are designed to determine young people's eligibility for further education and associated potential career trajectories.⁴ Kenya's public secondary education system is tiered, and a student's cumulative score on their required Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exams decides which tier of public secondary school that student will be eligible to enroll in.⁵ Those with the top exam scores—approximately 3 percent of all KCPE graduates—are eligible to enroll in the country's top-tier national schools, while approximately 35 percent of KCPE graduates are eligible to enroll in the mid-tier extra-county and county schools, and those with lower KCPE scores—just over 60 percent of all exam takers—are only eligible to enroll in the bottom-tier subcounty public secondary schools.⁶ Generally,

3. Over 2.5 million students sat for their final primary and secondary exams in November and December 2022 (Anyango 2022).

4. The emphasis on exam scores to restrict educational advancement has a pronounced history. Kilemi Mwiria (1991: 265) explains how, during the colonial period, exams were used as “eliminating devices” against Africans.

5. Policy guidance for the new “competency-based curriculum” (CBC) seeks to reduce the emphasis on exams, favoring teachers' continuous assessments of students' progress. However, exams will still be very influential, and it is very unclear if such policies will dislodge the reliance on exams as measures of students'—and teachers'—performances.

6. These figures are based on the KCPE 2020 results, in which there were 1,179,192 test takers and the government implemented a policy of 100 percent transition of KCPE graduates to secondary education. This transition policy means that even those students who scored poorly on the exam were admitted to secondary education: 25 percent of KCPE test takers scored between 100 and 199 marks out of a total of 500 (Okoth 2021). They were eligible for sub-county schools.

national, county and extra-county secondary schools are better resourced, and their students fare better in secondary examinations. Therefore, admission to the top tiers of secondary schools is associated with a student's better chances at progressing to tertiary education and other selective career opportunities. This opportunity is conditional, however, because a student admitted to a top secondary school in the country must usually secure additional financial support to actually attend it. The majority of public national, county, and extra-county secondary schools are boarding schools, or combined boarding and day schools, and thus require selected students to have additional financial means to pay for boarding costs. Thus, access to private financial resources is still highly determinative for secondary education opportunities.

Just as the final primary exam results determine a student's placement in the tiered secondary education system, results on the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams determine eligibility for tertiary education. This is an intensive set of tests. Administered over a span of two weeks at the end of Form 4, students sit separate exams for a minimum of seven subjects, at the end of which each student is given a score that reflects an aggregate grade. University entrance has been restricted to those who score a composite score of C+ or above on their KCSE exams, and, of course, graduates with the top secondary school exam results earn places in the most competitive programs. Just 17.5 percent of KCSE exam takers in 2021 scored the minimum university entry qualification of a mean grade of C+ or above; however, this is a marked increase from just 11 percent in 2017 and 14 percent in 2018 (Abuya 2022; Republic of Kenya 2018). Graduates with a KCSE result of C or C- are eligible for various diploma and certificate courses at colleges around the country, while those who scored a D+ may be eligible for Technical and Vocational Education and Training programs. Approximately, 60 percent of secondary school finishers scored a D+ or less in 2021, reflecting a trend characterized as "indicative of a secondary education system that has failed more than half of the students that sat for KCSE" (Abuya 2022).

Recognizing that primary and secondary exams function as massive sorting exercises of young people into those with improved chances and those with diminished future prospects, many students, their families, and wider communities conceptualize those exams as vital conjunctures, moments when different possible futures hang in the balance (Johnson-Hanks 2002).

An estimated 13 percent of secondary students attend private schools, which also reflect a range in enrollment criteria, quality, and student exam scores.

As such, children's readiness for exams—and by extension, schools' readiness for exams—become a major focal point for communities that include school personnel, schools' boards of governors and associated religious leaders, children's families and friends, and the public media. Government officials encourage this popular attention to school exams by staging media events at primary and secondary schools, usually to “inspect” and “encourage” students' preparedness for their exams. The story arch's plotting is similar every year and climaxes in a week of media coverage of exam results, with stories and images featuring celebration of individual students' and schools' successes, as well as any controversies related to the exam results and whether they are trusted. Visual media issue images of teachers and adult family members jubilantly hoisting onto their shoulders children who have achieved high exam scores, and narrative frames emphasize how students' scores were the result of hard work and determination (for more, see Cooper 2022: 99–100). The release of the exam scores is thereby construed as a national celebration of a supposedly meritocratic system: The messaging emphasizes the idea that those who succeeded deserved to succeed due to their individual efforts and talents and, by association, that those who did not pass the exams well also deserve the more limited life chances that will follow.

Before reaching that climactic point of the academic calendar, however, there is a lot of activity invested in preparing students for their exams and ensuring the “integrity” of the exams. The first set of activities zeroes in on students' responsibility for preparing themselves for good exam results. The second involves the government's suspicious and securitizing approach to governing the population to ensure their compliance. In the next two sections I describe each of these in turn. It's important to account for these different targets of the emphasis on “educational integrity” because they each diffuse, and layer, the message that blame for failures resides in individuals and not in the systems in place. Considering these different emphases in a combined analysis also shows that there are multiple relations implicated in upholding the notion of a functioning meritocracy that is decided by individuals' virtues or threatened by individuals' vices.

SANCTITY OF EXAMS UNDER GOD'S WATCH

Secondary students are “encouraged” to prepare themselves for success, and thus protect themselves from failure, through preparing themselves for

their secondary school exams. The propagation of the idea(l) that exams serve as a meritocratic sorting exercise for young people's life trajectories becomes concentrated in an emphasis on whether individual students are good enough—in committed hard work and talent—and thereby deserving of promising futures. This idea is impressed upon students in many ways. One significant emphasis is on the value of students' discipline, which is conspicuously institutionalized and promoted in boarding schools, as I describe elsewhere (Cooper 2022: chapter 6). Indeed, one of the main reasons students and parents explain their preference for boarding schools is that these institutions are designed to ensure students' disciplined attention to their studies and thus eventual exam readiness. Such preferences reflect how the structuring of the education system around summative exam scores encourages the understanding that self-discipline is more influential for academic success than "intellectual giftedness" or "natural talent." Common boarding-school-based strategies for ensuring students are prepared for exam success include intensified study schedules (e.g., with early morning starts and late-night ends), repeated use of "mock" or practice exams, and the use of pain in the forms of corporal punishment or humiliation to motivate students to try harder (see Cooper 2022: chapter 6). As one teacher explained to her students after administering cane strokes to them following their poor results on a practice exam: "I want you to feel that pain so you can improve" (field notes, Central Kenya Girls Secondary,⁷ October 20, 2016).

In 2016, Kenya's cabinet secretary (CS) for education, Fred Matiang'i, decreed that no students or principals would be allowed to leave their secondary boarding schools throughout the final twelve-week term because such movements of people might facilitate various mechanisms for cheating on the final exams. The CS's "lockdown" of boarding schools was intended to keep students under tighter surveillance and control. Interschool extracurricular activities such as sports tournaments, arts performances, and academic competitions were canceled. The restrictions also included the cancellation of the tradition of family members and friends joining students at boarding schools just days before the start of exams to participate in prayer sessions focused on students' readiness for those exams. Matiang'i and other education officials had cast aspersions on the readiness of parents to abet students' exam cheating (Wanzala 2016). Therefore, families were temporarily banned from students' lives in the name of safeguarding educational integrity. Interested in

7. This is a pseudonym for the school.

how these restrictions would be experienced, I led a small team of researchers to conduct ethnographic research in two public (i.e., government-funded) boarding secondary schools in the Embu region during that year's final semester and exam period.

Despite the "lockdown" restrictions, in the weeks leading up to the 2016 final exams, there were several prayer sessions held at Central Kenya Girls Secondary Boarding School focused on how the students were to orient themselves in relation to the exams. These revealed that students are also encouraged to believe the idea that exams reflect educational integrity and meritocracy through the message that God is watching them to ensure they are rewarded according to their virtues. For example, on a Sunday two weeks before the final exams, the students at Central Kenya Girls heard the school's regular Catholic priest say that "God will be angry" if the girls did not do well in their exams.⁸

On the Thursday before the Monday start of the exams, a special prayer session for the Form 4 students was hosted in the school's assembly hall. The visiting priest opened the session with the question "Are you anxious?" to which the girls all cried back in unison: "No!" The priest then asked, "Are you prepared?" to which the girls all responded "Yes!" Later the priest asked the students for the average grade that the school was aiming for, and the students responded in unison, "8.6." The priest commented,

Ah, that's very good. You'll get it. It means you are a good school. You'll get there. I know you will do well in the exams. That is why we are here praying for you. . . . You have been here for four years, now you are here for the exams. You know your Master; you can trust him. [The priest shifted his gaze from the students to above, his arms extended, as he addressed God.] Give them courage. Give them joy. Our hearts are open for you.

8. Even when schools are classified as public, or government run, most have "sponsors," many of which tend to be religious organizations. Sponsors are not supposed to have influence over admissions or curriculum, but rather offer support and guidance to the school as a whole. Central Kenya Girls Secondary Boarding School is sponsored by the Catholic Church. The church coordinates the weekly school's religious services on Sundays, which students are expected, but not required, to attend. In 2016, just under 10 percent of the 320 students at Central Kenya Girls identified as Muslim, while other students identify as Christian, including Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical. The few Muslim girls in Form 4 at Central Kenya Girls attended the prayer sessions led by the priests, explaining to us that they were not required, but chose, to do so.

The priest asked the teachers that were present to pray for their students, which they each did in turn, quietly with their heads bowed, and the girls strained to hear them, but could not.

At the end of the service every person moved around the room to shake hands with many others, saying to each, "I wish you well." And then students lined up, holding their math books, calculators, and pencils, and moved one by one to stand in front of the priest at the front of the room; when they reached him, he sprinkled some holy water on each of the girls' books, calculators, and pencils. Once this was done, the priest walked around the hall, sprinkling a little water, and saying blessings at every chair and table where the students would soon sit their exams. As he did this, one teacher raised her voice to address the students:

TEACHER: We don't expect you to let us down. Will you let us down?

STUDENTS (*in unison*): No.

TEACHER: After the exams, you will be getting good . . . ?

STUDENTS: Jobs.

TEACHER: And you will have money to pay for many other people.

STUDENTS: Yes.

TEACHER: And whether you will succeed or not is your . . . ?

STUDENTS: Choice.

TEACHER: You can be sure that we are praying for you. If you are in this room and something is asked in a way you don't know, call upon God. He will be there. God wants you to achieve, not to fail.

Religious messaging is one of many different influential mediums propagating the idea that students' exam results, and thus overall educational success or failure, reflect a meritocracy. This is another way of producing the idea that school exams are a test of the individual's righteousness and thus deservingness. Religious counsel concerning education tends to couple a students' faith in God with their hardworking ethos as the determinants of their success. In return, the school exams are used as an opportunity to influence young people's religious devotion. Accordingly, children's school exams help us to appreciate how the interests of religious institutions can align with those of the state, and indeed capital, to promote a mutually reinforcing ideology of individualistic effort and value. Each uses children's exams as one more site to reinforce agendas of submission to an ethos of working hard, holding faith, and ultimately accepting your life's trajectory as just.

But faith in the inviolability of the exam process does not always hold. Despite the extensive emphasis on the moral significance of exam readiness and eventual success, exam cheating appears as a perennial threat to the public's confidence in school exams as merit-based sorting technologies. In the next sections, I account for how notions of cheating figure in the spectacle made of school exams in Kenya.

EXAM CHEATING AND SECURITIZATION

Exam cheating has a notorious history in Kenya. A particularly memorable episode in recent history occurred in 2015–2016, when national media reported that just before secondary students sat for their final exams at the end of 2015, “a syndicate involving teachers, police and students collude[d] to leak exam papers” (Angote 2016). That was despite extensive securitization efforts. The government's examination council had arranged for the exam papers to be stored in police stations as a precaution against their being stolen and leaked in advance. However, that security precaution led to corrupt police officers cashing in: Investigations found that one police officer made Sh240,000 (USD 2,365) by opening the sealed envelopes containing exam papers, photographing the papers with his mobile phone, and selling the images to a teacher who went on to sell them to students, parents, and other teachers (Angote 2016). The teacher in that case deputized his school's head boy to collect Sh5,000 (USD 49) from each of the 115 students scheduled to sit the secondary education examination. He also shared the exam copies with other teachers around the country and ended up making Sh1.5 million (USD 14,785) (Angote 2016). The leak was uncovered, however. The education CS at the time, Fred Matiang'i, declared “war” on the menace of exam cheating (Wanzala 2016). His first acts in waging this war were the dissolution of the Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) with accusations of KNEC officials' complicity with exam irregularities, the arrests of nearly two hundred people, including police officers, for exam malpractice, and the cancellation of final exam results for more than five thousand secondary students across the country.

While the reaction was well publicized, that case was not extraordinary. Exam cheating is reportedly a widespread business in Kenya.⁹ Stories after

9. Kenya is also often profiled in global and domestic media as a major player in the globalized market of academic cheating. For example, in 2021, the BBC published a report entitled “The Kenyans Who Are Helping the World to Cheat.”

stories are reported through public media about the many different ways that exam cheating occurs.¹⁰ Commonly reported tactics include education officials selling exam questions before the exams begin and university students writing the answers for students to purchase, hired exam takers (termed “mercenary service”) showing up in place of actual students to take the students’ exams, and students smuggling into exam centers the answers or formulas they will use (e.g., as temporary “tattoos” on their bodies, written as “table top guides” on desks, or through cell phones hidden in toilets) (Kigotho 2012). So-called examination cartels have been identified as the problem, especially by politicians like Matiang’i, for whom the framing of shadowy “bad guys” to fight works well. However, investigative reports, and everyday commentary, indicate that anyone involved in a relationship of exam cheating might be considered part of a supposed “cartel” (Cooper 2022: 73–76).

The government’s determined war on exam cheating has made the exam period into a highly securitized national logistics operation. It is also a highly publicized operation, featuring regular public statements and photo opportunities staged by the education CS and other officials. Indeed, as the education CS declared his war on exam cheating in 2016, his efforts and public statements focused on preventing exam cheating became a well-publicized campaign and made his political reputation. As longtime anticorruption activist John Githongo (2017) put it, those efforts “turned the Education Cabinet Secretary into the anti-corruption Cabinet Secretary.”

With education officials seeking to close every “loophole” that might lead to exam cheating, the logistics—and public reporting of these—have become very intensive. First, drawing from government officials’ statements, the media report that the exam booklets are not even produced in Kenya: The questions are physically (not digitally) transported to another (undisclosed) country where the exam booklets are made, with a specific watermarked barcode printed on each exam page so that any copy can be traced back to that specific paper, and sets of the exams are then shrink-wrapped in plastic before being flown under guard to regional centers in Kenya (Advance Africa, n.d.; Nation 2022). Once in Kenya, the exam papers are transported by armed police convoys to shipping containers that serve as regional storage depots. The storage containers are placed under twenty-four-hour armed police surveillance, and two police officers are assigned to each school during exams.

Exam securitization employs extensive surveillance personnel. In 2019,

10. The same is true of other places as well (e.g., for Morocco and Jordan, see Buckner and Hodges 2016).

seventy thousand security officers were reportedly deployed to safeguard the primary and secondary year-end examinations, and plainclothes police officers conducted undercover operations to further investigate any possible exam cheating (Nyaundi 2019). According to the government's detailed protocols, the deputy county commissioner and subcounty director of education are the only individuals provided with keys to the local area's exam storage containers, and each day of the exam period, the "examination centre managers" (i.e., schools' principals or head teachers) must collect the papers from the distribution containers in the morning and transport them directly to the school in the company of a police officer.

This makes headteachers of schools personally responsible for the integrity of the exam process. Their travel between the distribution containers and their schools is supposed to be timed, and the Education Ministry has tried to ensure that head teachers only use school vans or "government-procured means" to travel from the storage depots to their schools so as to prevent opportunities to hand off exam papers to private drivers or others along route, with the education CS observing, "We cannot be too sure of what is happening to our exam papers as those insecure means of transport snake past all manner of corners and bushes" (Muiriri and Kinogu 2021). According to government rules, headteachers are the only individuals on a school's premises that are allowed a mobile phone during the exam period. Moreover, head teachers' phone activities are reportedly tracked by intelligence officers based at the "Nairobi Command Centre" for any possible exam leakages. Justifying this surveillance, the education CS in 2019, George Magoha, stated, "We know all the tricks" (Muiriri and Kinogu 2021). Casting further suspicion on schools' teachers, the education CS used one of his many public statements in 2022 to instruct that "the greatest enemy during this examination is the cellphone; the security officers must be going to the toilet regularly to check if the examination centre managers [i.e., head teachers] and students have hidden cell phones there for the purpose of exam cheating" (Nyamai 2022).

Even as the nitty-gritty elements of securitizing the exams delve into such unglamorous terrain, the overall effect of this highly publicized campaign is an engrossing national drama of "good guys" versus "bad guys"—honest, hardworking Kenyans versus cheaters, the government versus criminals. The spectacle of the sanctity of the exams propagates many ideals. In administering the same examination to all eligible individuals, the examination system is supposed to represent a meritocracy, in which a person's talents and efforts

are objectively appraised to determine the distribution of limited opportunities. And the securitization of exams handily services as marketing of politicians' reputations as determined corruption-busting leaders who warrant sweeping authorities to safeguard the nation from itself.

However, despite the charisma and propagation of this moralizing framework, and despite the seemingly intensive determination of government safeguarding measures, exam cheating reportedly continues (Abuya 2022). During the 2022 exams, several exam leakages were detected, and arrests were made. The Directorate of Criminal Investigations issued a public statement, widely reported across Kenyan media:

In spite of the concerted efforts that the Ministry of Education led by the Cabinet Secretary and KNEC officials have employed to uphold the integrity of administering the examination, the efforts are being jeopardized by crooked government officials at county levels. An elaborate web of fraudsters comprising of school heads, security agents, parents, and college students, in some parts of the country have conspired to give lazy students an unfair advantage over their counterparts who worked hard and prepared for their examinations. (Okubasu 2022)

That statement is pretty standard of such statements. What is striking in that typical statement is that it draws no easy categorizations of which segments of the population are a threat; the entire society is a possible threat, including government officials, security agents, educators, parents, and students. There is no one left to trust in the education sector—apart from a few determined politicians and their appointees. The suspicions are pervasive, starting from the top, filtering through every relationship. The ludicrous untenability of this situation was analyzed by Joseph Warungu, a former secondary school teacher in Kenya, who published an article for the BBC in 2016 under the title “What Exam Cheating Tells Us About Distrust in Kenya.” Part of his essay reads like a poem:

There is a crisis of trust in Kenyan society.

The government cannot trust the teacher to prepare the students for exams without cheating.

The teacher cannot trust the government to oversee the exams without cheating. The student cannot trust himself to pass the exam without cheating.

And so in comes the tough steel containers to try and safeguard trust.

Of course, many Kenyans do not endorse the government's campaigns so narrowly focused on securitizing primary and secondary students' exams. As one author observed in an article published in the *Standard* newspaper in 2018, the Ksh1.5 billion spent by the Ministry of Education to stop exam cheats "won't go to school feeding programmes, neither will it go to bolstering the free education system" (Bichachi 2018).

The Kenyan public's cynicism regarding politicians' lack of genuine concern for and commitment to education is informed by multiple cases of failed initiatives and suspected corruption. Most recently, the abrupt introduction of a new national "competency-based curriculum" has played out as a national drama of bewilderment as to what's going on; ridicule and outrage at the uncertain expectations for teachers, students and parents; and more distrust of what interests are motivating education planning (Cooper 2022: 174–180; Nation Television 2019; Njoya 2019). In 2021, the president of the Law Society of Kenya filed a petition in court to represent some parents' challenges to the government's lack of consultation and preparation prior to implementing the new curriculum (Muthoni, n.d.). That court challenge explicitly frames the suspicions and antagonisms of the education sector as an example of the government's failures to govern with consent. The government's approach to education reform has left teachers, parents, and students feeling even more insecure and mistrustful of what rules are being implemented (and why) and how they might succeed in this system.

GOVERNING WITH DISTRUST

This analysis of the multiple, intersecting, and dynamic relations of distrust reveals the education sector to be antagonistically splintered and consequently in much disarray. Yet this may work for some to exploit. Antipolicy—that is, "discourses, measures and policies whose stated objective is to combat or prevent bad things" (Walters 2008: 267)—tends to take a technocratic approach to spurring change, rather than a transformational approach. This can work to sustain a mode of governmentality. An educational field in contentious disarray can distract attention from political engagement with the substantive work of educational reform agendas. While blame is often cast in the name of assigning responsibility, it can also become a diversionary substitute from comprehensively questioning political accountability and ethics. Indeed, "blame shifting" is a commonly recognized strategy of modern gov-

ernance, used by a government to excuse itself from responsibility for negative policy outcomes (Mortensen 2012; Hood 2002). However, what I have described above is not only an opportunistic rhetorical move by government representatives (although sometimes it is, as seen in the opening vignette of the spectacle made of the Ambira boys), but also a more comprehensive effort to instill a particular governmentality that denigrates ordinary Kenyans as probable cheaters and failures.

Let us consider the effects of the government's determined exam securitization agenda. Taken individually, each of the exam securitization practices discussed above can appear petty in its narrow targeting. This narrowness seems efficacious for scapegoating individual cases at the expense of pursuing systematic reforms. Considered as a coordinated approach, the anti-cheating campaign seems intended to eliminate fraud from the education system so that it can function in a pure fashion. The inference is that, cleansed of any fraud, the system would work perfectly. However, because such purity has yet to be achieved, we are left to imagine possibilities. To do so critically, we may contemplate: If all of these disciplining methods were to succeed, how would the education sector be experienced? Would the purging of operational inefficiencies in the system unleash streams of new flourishing? With increased confidence in its integrity, could education be counted on to deliver its promises of a fair distribution of life chances? More concretely, if every possible case of exam fraud is eliminated, will a purely meritocratic system of allocating opportunities be guaranteed?

In the current system of unequal access to educational quality, the answer must be no. First, the sorting effect of the existing meritocratic system is skewed: students with access to greater financial resources, families with pre-existing "know-how," and the educational "head start" that both tend to confer mean that they dominate the few who are selected to the top-tier schools in Kenya, and thus are educationally advantaged over the majority of their peers. These early advantages accumulate: A student's better primary school quality and primary exam results lead to better secondary school quality and secondary exam results, which lead to far greater likelihood of tertiary education and formal employment prospects. Second, and more significantly, however, is the extensive public distrust regarding whether even that compromised kind of "meritocratic" sorting is applied in the broader political economies of recruitment and rewards in formal employment sectors, where nepotism and other forms of social and financial influence are believed to be more relevant (Mwangi 2021; Oindo et al. 2021). With such a lack of confi-

dence in the viability of opportunities being decided by pure merit, we should consider what the “war” on exam cheating is really about.

I contend that the government’s exam securitization actions publicize the idea that a meritocracy is still possible and promising for the majority of Kenyans, and a goal that Kenyans should collectively rally around (and thereby rally around the government’s securitization efforts). At a more practical level, the government’s claim to be pursuing exam security serves as a convenient alibi for legitimating disciplinarian modes of governing the population. Moreover, in treating all children, parents, teachers, principals, and other public servants as potential cheats seeking to undermine the integrity of a public system, politicians are sowing distrust that can be the explanation for why education doesn’t deliver on its promises as a meritocracy should. The practices reviewed above of government surveillance to stamp out exam cheating are purposefully dramatic attempts to publicly assign responsibility to individuals for what is going wrong in the education sector and society more generally. The governance of education, however, has far too troubled a history in Kenya to be issued any kind of leniency from distrust. In Kenya, children and their families, teachers, principals, and education officials are far too knowing and skeptical of the manipulated governance of public projects to let their own doubts slip too far away from their ways of knowing and navigating.

One important insight from this case is that we cannot maintain the simple idea that people experience education as a leap of faith, adopting a stubborn optimism to sustain their attachment. This is not to deny that education can still serve as a tentative vessel for hope (Jakimow 2016; Stambach 2017; Ansell et al. 2020). Rather, the insight is that imaginaries of education are not only vulnerable to disavowal by evidence of failed returns, a form of reckoning that can only be achieved through temporal extensions. Education is experienced as suspicious in the present, and there can be very antagonistic relations structuring the educational experience.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that the education sector is experienced as a field of struggle concerning particular governing ideas, practices, and relations. I specifically attend to how children’s national school exams are influential in generating distrust in society, while simultaneously working as mechanisms

of control. In the first place, I describe how individuals are encouraged to isolate credit or blame for success or failure in themselves. This is an organizing principle of the existing education system, and people's actions (e.g., choosing a boarding school to increase concentrated study for exams) reinforce the idea(l) of education functioning as a meritocracy, and particularly a meritocracy decided by personal discipline. In attending to how students are counseled to believe that their exam results will be decided by their virtuousness, and specifically God's recognition of their virtuousness, I highlight a fundamental way that exams are used to reinforce acceptance of the claim that the existing system is meritocratic. This emphasis on how individuals are righteously judged fractures societal relations, and specifically the potential for collective solidarities. It also concentrates individuals' questions about what they deserve into evaluations of their self-worth, distracting attention from other potential factors that can contribute to advancement or decline.

Most blatantly, exams provide opportunities for "the state" (i.e., in this case, politicians and their administrative and security enforcement agencies) to emphasize a suspiciousness toward the general population and thereby to authorize their disciplinary authority in society. The insistence on exams as tests of educational integrity encourages the fracturing of other relations: it leads to multiple accusations and ultimately conflicts about deficient integrity between "the state" and teachers, parents and students and teachers, and "the state" and parents. Even as some individuals can claim or empathize with multiple roles (e.g., as former student, parent, and bureaucrat), blaming practices work to isolate some potential identity groups from others.

I argue that efforts to make children's school exams signify a functioning meritocracy provoke conflicts between actors, which is particularly ironic given that those efforts are made in the name of safeguarding the public good. This way of perceiving school exams provokes larger questions about a core contradiction of the education sector as it is organized today: While education as a whole is promoted as a public good through its agenda of strengthening collective economic and political future well-being, in its propagation as a meritocracy, the education sector promotes an instrumentalist and individualistic competitive logic that encourages acrimony and conflict.

Through a lens trained on school exams, and clashes in the education sector more broadly, we can appreciate how the aggrandizing rhetoric of education as a public project and public good smooths over the multiple frictions that exist between societal actors seeking to derive value from education. Indeed, as this case demonstrates, perhaps we should be reconceptualizing

education as also a damaging force, rather than only a unifying and beneficent force, and attending to the harmful effects it can have across society. That argument already animates decolonizing analyses and agendas that focus on the epistemic violence of education systems that marginalize and disparage local and Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Dei 2018; Nyamnjoh 2012). It is also an argument made from assessments of how inequality and marginalization are reproduced through education (Dei 2019; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Mfum-Mensah 2018; Part III, this volume). In this chapter, I contribute a different way of considering how relations of distrust and hostility are exacerbated through a fetishization of children's school exams as signifying a fair and effective system of determining limited opportunities in life.

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PART III

Production of Inequality

CHAPTER 10

The Paradox of South African Schooling

An Analysis of Multiple Exploitations of the Education Alibi

SURIAMURTHEE MOONSAMY MAISTRY

In this chapter, I examine the role of education in the postapartheid era in South Africa. I contend that there is a need to be critical of the rationalization that not everything should or can function perfectly given the country's apartheid legacy, and that patience is required as the state attempts different educational policy initiatives that might facilitate equality. I trouble the notion of an overemphasis on education policy renewal and implementation as demonstrable acts of commitment to addressing inequality and poverty in South Africa, noting that in the postapartheid era, education policy was conceived with the vision of unifying the nation and creating a more just and equal society. I provoke the following question: How has education in South Africa, while purporting to provide the means for emancipation, continued to deliver outcomes that are anything but such means, especially for the poor? How has such policymaking diverted scrutiny from a focus on structural fixities like the lay of the proverbial economic land, namely, gross inequality that continues to plague contemporary South African society (Mtapuri and Tinarwo 2021)—a situation where economic inequality has worsened in postapartheid South Africa? The effects of economic inequality can be felt in all spheres of South African society, and they are particularly pronounced in education. School education in particular is characterized by extremes, comprising a small, affluent middle-class system for the economically elite (comparable to that of any developed country) and a parallel system that caters for the precariat—poor, unemployed, and low-level working class (Spaull 2013).

I argue that much of what has transpired in postapartheid South Africa as it relates to education policy might well be considered pseudo-activity—policy implementation activities that lay claim to certain progressive agendas but, in actuality, have made marginal progress in addressing key socio-economic issues such as education and economic inequality. If anything, policies like the South African Schools Act (1996) and the Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding have in fact compounded apartheid-inherited school inequality in South Africa. I am acutely aware of the danger in glibly holding apartheid policies as alibi for current failings in South African society, as such an argument might be expediently used to try to absolve the current regime of its responsibility for the nondelivery of a dignified life experience for the vast majority of the country's citizens. However, in this chapter, I analyze the historical impacts of the apartheid era as well as continuities in producing inequalities in education through the postapartheid period. In an attempt to challenge the alibi of education policymaking, I want to argue, first, for a careful examination of the genesis of the mooted idea of education for emancipation and, second, for a degree of skepticism about what Žižek refers to as pseudo-activity, in attempting to achieve the goals of social justice and equality.

The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active,” to “participate,” to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, “do something,” while academics participate in meaningless “debates,” and so on, and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a “critical” participation, an exchange of whatever kind, to silence—just in order to engage us in a “dialogue,” to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. (Žižek 2017: 174–175)

In applying this insight to the South African education context in the postapartheid era, I present an account of what might be deemed pseudo-education policy activity (policy proliferation)—initiatives that have not delivered positive outcomes, especially for the poor.

To prepare for that analysis, I begin this conceptual chapter by first providing a brief historical overview of the South African socioeconomic context. I invoke the concept “alibi” and draw on relevant literature to critically appraise how a series of different education-focused policy initiatives have worked as alibis for different kinds of agendas, with each linked to enduring inequalities in education. I specifically attend to policies designed in the

name of advancing “freedom of choice” in schools, ensuring uniformity in curriculum and standards, and promoting English as the language of educational instruction. I then consider how political rhetoric by iconic political figures (like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu) has been used to encourage the poor to hold faith in education and remain patient for it to facilitate equality in South African society. I end with a synthesis of how the Covid-19 pandemic revealed gross schooling disparities that persist between racialized people and economic classes in South Africa despite decades of policy initiatives.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

In 1652, the first European colonizers arrived at the southern tip of Africa. South Africa, as an occupied colony, changed hands between the Dutch and the English several times. While the country cut its formal ties to the colonial motherlands in 1910, settler colonial governance continued up until 1994, when the first democratically elected government was instated under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC). A defining feature of South Africa in relation to other countries on the continent is its relatively recent emergence from apartheid, a political system in existence from 1948 to 1994, characterized by political, social, and economic discrimination against the majority nonwhite population.

This condensed version of South Africa’s checkered history masks and dilutes the centuries of human atrocities and the denial of human dignity that has been the lived experience of people of color in South Africa. This subjugation was not confined to the Indigenous population but enforced also on the growing mixed-race group (racially classified as Coloured under apartheid), as well as to other nonwhite race groups, such as Indians who were brought from India to work as slaves on the British-controlled sugarcane plantations on the east coast. Apartheid, an institutionalized governing policy, was powerful in systematically separating the races geographically and socially. This enforced separation of racial groups was applied to all aspects of the lived experience of people, from separate schooling to separate residential areas, hospitals, and public amenities (even beaches).

In analyzing South Africa’s transition, Paulus Zulu reminds us of the three principles that are pivotal to any democracy: namely, liberty, equality, and

fraternity, and contends that while we achieved liberty and fraternity to an extent, equality has largely remained elusive. He notes that democracy “is merely an arrangement of systems and a means to nobler ends or values and not an end in itself” (Zulu 2013: 21). Achieving equality though relies on the notion of obligation and higher degrees of distributive justice. A striking feature as it relates to inequality is that Indigenous communities, that is, Black and Coloured South Africans in the main, continue to be ravaged by poverty and underemployment (Maistry 2021). Zulu’s observation as it relates to the lack of obligation and ineffectual distributive justice demands further interrogation.

Apartheid denied people of color access to quality education facilities, teaching resources, and teaching personnel. Bantu education, the education system for the nonwhite masses, was intentionally designed to offer curricula that would maintain people of color in low-level, unskilled labor, with extremely limited or, in most instances, no benefits such as medical insurance or retirement security (pension). Black women in particular were earmarked to be domestic servants, with no legislation that would ensure humane conditions of service or any degree of worker protection. The apartheid state attempted to make Afrikaans (the language of Dutch settlers) compulsory in all schools in South Africa, a move that that triggered a landmark political uprising in 1976 that was led by Black school youth in Soweto, a large but severely impoverished township on the outskirts of Johannesburg (the richest city in South Africa).

Apartheid segregation of living areas has had enduring effects for the inequality of education. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 was a political decree by the apartheid government that forced Black ethnic groups into small concentrated unsustainable homelands, referred to as Bantustans, effectively stripping Black people of their South African citizenship and forcing Black men in particular to leave their families for extended periods of time to work in South Africa. After the ANC came into power in 1994, all homelands were reincorporated into South Africa. School education for children under eighteen was made accessible and compulsory, unified under a central national government policy, namely, the National Education Policy Act of 1996.

Of particular significance for this chapter is that economic deprivation and poverty remain a stark and shameful feature of these geographical areas despite their reintegration into South Africa—the schooling sector in these

areas continues to produce dismal outcomes under untenable conditions, with poor parents and children still enduring economic hardship reminiscent of apartheid. Moodley and Adam (2000) asserted more than two decades ago that the most significant indicator of the damaging effect of the apartheid system was severe economic inequality based on race, an observation that still holds in current times (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Mtapuri and Tinarwo (2021) remind us that South Africa is arguably the most economically unequal country in the world, a pattern that has worsened in the postapartheid era, with concentrated affluence alongside widespread poverty.

The apartheid regime was able to exercise its dominance through sovereign (military) power, effectively restraining colonized South Africans over a long period of time. The killing of iconic political activists like Steve Biko while in police detention is but one example of the brutality of the apartheid regime. This brutality extended to all dimensions of the lives of colonized peoples, resulting in a systematic attempt to destroy Indigenous knowledge systems (epistemicide) by European colonizers, a project that, while having devastating consequences, fell short of its complete oblitative objective. As Kumalo rightly reminds us, the Black archive has in fact survived through apartheid (Kumalo 2021).

In the section that follows, I discuss the schooling context within which postapartheid education policy was implemented. I draw attention to the precarious conditions under which policy was to be given effect and how education continues to be used as plausible motivation for patience and hope, despite evidence that they are not being rewarded.

MARKET-BASED FREE CHOICE AS ALIBI FOR UNEQUAL AND DIFFERENTIATED SCHOOLING

Individual freedom of choice is a central tenet that neoliberals extol and guard irrespective of the current (highly unequal) South African socioeconomic context. Transactional neoliberal market persuasions have moved with considerable pace and stealth into education (and health) systems of the world. Reeves asserts that, with regard to education, two somewhat contradictory strains are at play, namely, that of “market-based free choice, in which individual consumers (parents, students) are empowered to choose their schools, and a master narrative on curriculum and teaching, in which knowledge and

how it is to be delivered and measured is prescribed” (2018: 98). This particular scenario is germane in the South African education context.

Arguably the more lucid and overt manifestation of individual freedom of school choice is the economic class hierarchization of the schooling sector in South Africa, which was reinforced by the South African Schools Act of 1996. That act allowed public schools the freedom to self-determine and charge school fees, a policy move that was strongly advocated for by the affluent white community in South Africa. The effect of this is that over a period of two decades, school fees have been systematically used by rich schools to exclude poor children, a situation that might be described as rich public schools taking on a semiprivate character. While school funding is centrally controlled and administered, not district based, schools located in affluent suburbs serve a parent community that can afford to pay the higher school fees that these “semiprivate” entities are allowed to charge. Maistry (2022) describes the patterns of movement of the middle class to richer schools, which are perceived to offer a better overall product. Affluent schools in South Africa are well resourced, have superior sporting and teaching facilities, and have much smaller class sizes than poor schools. The poor, mainly Black children are marginalized and have to be content with the schooling that they can afford (Ndimande 2016). It is not uncommon to find embarrassing affluence in school education facilities coexisting with destitution and squalor within a radius of five kilometer in urban areas in South Africa, where large informal settlements inhabited by poor, unemployed shack dwellers coexist in close proximity of affluent suburbs. The poor schools that service the informal settlements do not charge fees but rely on the state for funding. While this might be regarded as an affirmative policy, these allocations are highly inadequate. Such schools regularly face budgetary shortfalls and often struggle to pay for basic needs such as water and electricity (Maistry 2022). The effect is a bifurcated schooling system—neoliberal stratification of the schooling system in which rich schools consolidate and strengthen while poor schools deteriorate (Maistry and Africa 2020).

Freedom of choice, then, while at face value a noble aspiration and value, simply means that postapartheid South Africa’s liberation of choice of domicile (and school) has rendered a highly unequal schooling system based on the market principle of price formation through supply and demand for school education packages, namely, the tangible and intangible benefits that might accrue to a child as a result of being in a particular kind of school.

EPISTEMIC ACCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF A TOXIC SCHOOLING SYSTEM

South African scholar Wally Morrow (2009) coined the term “epistemological access.” He argued that achieving social justice is likely to be elusive if children are merely afforded physical access to schools and universities. His contention was that “learning how to become a successful participant in an academic practice,” that is, acquiring epistemological access (Morrow 2009: 78), is crucial and that prevailing human and material conditions either enable or constrain epistemological access. A key enabling factor is the presence of a competent teacher with strength and depth in both subject content knowledge and pedagogy, a factor the distribution of which has been historically skewed in favor of the affluent sector of the education system. Spaul, in his critique of the dualistic nature of South African school education asserts,

The strong legacy of apartheid and the consequent correlation between education and wealth have meant that, generally speaking, poorer South African students perform worse academically. Although racial segregation has been abolished for 18 years now, schools which served predominantly White students under apartheid remain functional, while those which served Black students remain dysfunctional and unable to impart the necessary numeracy and literacy skills students should be acquiring by this level. (Spaul 2013: 436)

While Spaul avoids reference to teachers and teaching, preferring to refer to schools rather than the agents that deliver the curriculum, the reality is that poor Black schools are populated predominantly by Black teachers, an apartheid legacy that has not altered in any significant way in the postapartheid era. I am aware of the dangers of presenting a reductionist argument that castigates all Black teachers as incompetent. This is in fact furthest from the argument I wish to lead, which is that education policymakers, in their policy-borrowing initiatives under the new dispensation, simply ignored the state of existing teacher competence. In essence then, while it may appear that all children (rich and poor) have access to the same school curriculum, curriculum delivery and learner performance is materially different across the socioeconomic school spectrum. Richer schools have greater flexibility in textbook choice and teaching and learning materials.

In an empirically grounded book titled *Pedagogy in Poverty*, Hoadley (2017) reported on the effects of two decades of curriculum reform in

postapartheid South Africa. The title of this study is an interesting and apt play on words, as it captures two mutually reinforcing phenomena. The first issue is the exposure of poor pedagogy, especially in Black schools. The second is that this poor pedagogy is given effect in socioeconomically deprived contexts.

While Hoadley's study was not on education in the context of poverty per se, the study's key revelation was that pedagogy, especially in Black schools, was severely wanting. The genesis of the crisis of extremely weak pedagogical competence of Black schoolteachers can be traced back to the harsh and inhumane deprivations that Black people's education was subjected to under apartheid. Per capita spending on white children under apartheid was five times that of Black children (Gustafsson and Patel 2006). Teacher education (training) for Black teachers was severely underfinanced, poorly administered, and of questionable quality, designed to render the Black community in a perennial state of underprivilege as it related to educational outcomes.

The first postapartheid audit of teacher qualifications revealed the full extent of the unevenness in teacher competence across the races. Unqualified and underqualified teachers made up significant percentages of the total Black teaching force, with many teachers in the system holding grade 12 school certificates as their highest qualification. Many held one-year and two-year teaching diplomas, a condition that came into effect with the conceptualization of Bantu Education Act of 1953. The outcome was "a marked deterioration in the qualification levels of teachers under Bantu Education. Together with an increase in teachers without matriculation (Grade 12), came a significant reduction of professionally qualified teachers. This would no doubt affect the quality of education offered, especially when compared with whites" (Christie and Collins 1982: 69). The effect of historic neglect and weaker capacities for curriculum innovation continued to be reproduced in a system that made individual teachers responsible for determining curriculum and meeting national standards.

To compound the plight of the poor in impoverished schools inhabited mainly by Black children, many of these schools were notorious for being heavy-handed and authoritarian in their approach to teaching, with rote learning as the dominant form of learning (Hoadley 2017). Corporal punishment was rife, and while now illegal in South Africa, child humiliation using violence still prevails in many schools. "Confused, over-worked and under-qualified teachers were unlikely voluntarily to give up corporal punishment when they considered it their only means of keeping order in class. Teacher resolve to continue using corporal punishment was strengthened by asser-

tive and rebellious students who challenged traditional concepts of classroom authority” (Morrell 2001: 292). Poor children are more likely to be victims of corporal punishment—a disturbing finding revealed by a fairly recent study (Mahlangu et al. 2021).

In the context of frail teacher competence, the new South African government commenced a series of education policy initiatives, advancing education as the main deliverer of emancipation. The state’s first major policy blunder was the introduction of outcomes-based education in 1997 in a policy initiative titled Curriculum 2005. Its intention was to change the autocratic, authoritarian culture of schools and classrooms and to bring about uniformity across the schooling system. Importantly, it was touted as the emancipatory savior of future generations of South African children. However, the success of this school curriculum policy was premised on its implementation in resource-rich school contexts, by highly competent schoolteachers who could self-select content knowledge as they facilitated learning of identified learning outcomes. This first national curriculum in the new democratic era, namely, Curriculum 2005, received widespread criticism (see, for example, Jansen 1997) and, as was expected, enjoyed relative success in well-resourced schools with competent teachers but produced dismal outcomes for schools not quite ready for this kind of curriculum (Hoadley 2017). The national curriculum has since been revised twice with far greater content knowledge specification and prescriptive sequencing.

After several revisions, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy is now in place. A common, centrally controlled curriculum and assessment regime for the entire schooling system was deemed crucial to unifying the previously racially fragmented system in which different race groups determined their own curriculum and assessment protocols. Given the systematic neglect of the Black schooling sector in South Africa, it is not unreasonable to expect that curriculum and assessment standards would have been uneven under apartheid. The argument for a uniform curriculum and assessment policy made good political sense at the time, as it was premised on providing the same content knowledge and assessment practices to children of all races.

UNIFORMITY AS ALIBI FOR NOT RECOGNIZING DIFFERENTIATION

While the policy of uniformity had political appeal, what ensued was an uncritical imposition of a new curriculum without due consideration for the competence set of those tasked with implementing it. The wholly uneven

resource contexts and different levels of teacher preparedness for implementation thereof meant that those previously disadvantaged sectors were further disadvantaged. Aspiring for uniformity in the schooling sector became an alibi for uncritical curriculum and assessment policy implementation. Given the struggles that teachers encountered relating to self-selecting subject content and assessment protocols, the new curriculum has now swung in the direction of greater prescription, resulting in an emerging performance discourse that now permeates the curriculum (Bertram and Mxenge 2023). Neo-liberal ideas as manifest in competition, performance, individual freedom, and meritocracy are alibis for the swing toward performance assessment as opposed to assessment protocols that are predisposed toward social justice (Murillo and Hidalgo 2017).

Advocating for differentiation in a society still recovering from centuries of unfair differentiation (apartheid) is a politically charged issue that has potential to trigger particular sensitivities. Yet differentiation as it relates to language choice (medium of instruction) for the white Afrikaans-speaking community was highly successful during apartheid, as evidenced in the establishment of schools and universities, the production of textbooks, and substantive financial support for the development of academic journals and research organizations, heavily geared toward the production of knowledge in the Afrikaans language. The conceptualization of an architecture of differentiated but equally effective subsystems within a unified national education system, however, has been presented by the state as too complex and expensive. It was a project that new government just did not have the political will or the economic resources to undertake (Sayed and Kanjee 2013). The argument was that it would be too costly and take too long to develop neglected African languages (and teaching artifacts) up to a level that would be appropriate for use as mediums of instruction. This, together with the economic currency of English, compounded the alibi for uniformity.

ENGLISH FOR UPWARD MOBILITY AS ALIBI FOR NONINVESTMENT IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

A number of well-meaning policies and supportive institutions were also established in the early post-apartheid years with a view to promoting multilingualism and improving the status of the languages spoken by the historically disadvantaged African majority . . . However, despite these laudable attempts, English has become the dominant language

of both government and business, even though it is the home language of only about 10 percent of all South Africans.

—Posel and Casale 2011: 450

There is little contemporary debate as to what should be the official languages of teaching and learning in postapartheid South Africa—a distinct *fait accompli* in many respects. From the perspective of decolonial critique, it is evident that the two colonizer languages have retained high-level currency, with English reigning as the dominant medium for assessment across all school subjects. Much of the focus of the scholarship on language in South Africa has been on code switching (see, for example, Mabule 2015) and bilingualism (Makalela 2017).

Despite centuries of systematic linguisticide on the African continent and in South Africa in particular, African languages have survived and have been officially recognized by the country's constitution, which explicitly states that citizens have “the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 29(2)). However, the push for developing proficiency in English, as promulgated through the South African education system, has been a convenient alibi for subverting the development of Indigenous languages. Taylor and Fintel remind us that “although there are 11 official languages in South Africa, Afrikaans and English are the only languages with a developed academic literature and in which it is possible to write the secondary school leaving examinations” (2016: 76). This is the outcome of the apartheid government's continued investment in English and Afrikaans and its neglect of Indigenous languages. While the state has granted official status to Indigenous languages, there has been no commitment to the development thereof. This is a case of recognition without obligation (Zulu 2013), a situation where token acknowledgment trumps distributive justice, that is, sourcing and earmarking funds for the development of marginalized African languages. Here again is an example of an assimilationist mentality at work.

English is construed as the obvious medium of instruction, as effective communication in a highly competitive economic society depends on one's proficiency in English. Accordingly, preference for English is constructed as free-will choice or decision of parents and children—with its undertones of imposition masked. The “all for English” language of instruction from grade

4 onward is deemed most beneficial for successfully navigating the economic world, thereby absolving the urgency for investing in Indigenous language development. English proficiency, that is, being fluent in English reading and writing, is a significant determinant of the salary Black South Africans are likely to receive in the labor market (Casale and Posel 2011). The vast majority of Blacks choose to learn English given that it “is widely perceived to be the language of upward mobility, leading to a preference for instruction in English from as early as possible” (Casale and Posel 2011: 76). Developing English proficiency becomes an alibi for the lack of investment in the development of Indigenous languages. The argument that this is what parents actually want for their children to be successful is yet another alibi, as it gives credence to the motivation for noninvestment in the development of Indigenous languages.

Leading African decolonial scholars (like Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) draw attention to the systematic marginalization of Indigenous languages and the lack of investment in their development (linguicide). This marginalization could be considered unsuccessful given the resurgence of activism for restoring the status of Indigenous languages in South Africa. This argument is not an attempt to trivialize the near extinction of many Indigenous languages in South Africa and across the world. There is a somewhat “slippery slope” one traverses when one makes the claim that there has been resilience and a determination to survive, an argument that is built on the provision of substantively frail evidence of the revival of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous languages in the postapartheid era. While this kind of reasoning valorizes the contention that progress is being made on these issues, it can also be expeditiously used to argue for acknowledgment and acceptance of what might well be marginal increments in progress—a convenient alibi for the status quo.

A relatively underexplored area of the school curriculum is the extent to which it is used to advance certain ideologies that (un)wittingly reinforce inequalities present in South African society. In the last decade, several studies have been conducted on the programmatic curriculum (school textbooks), looking specifically at the underlying ideology and inherent moralities in content presented in school textbooks. These studies reveal the subtext of supposedly innocent or neutral content that schoolteachers teach and children consume. Gender discrimination and gender stereotyping are still a strong feature of business textbooks, with males projected as more likely to be successful as managers and leaders (Pillay and Maistry 2018). Similarly, neo-

liberal ideology parades unquestioned as it relates to conceptualizations of entrepreneurship where it is uncritically advocated for as a way to break free from poverty, yet the context within which the majority of poor children live severely constrains their ability to access capital, markets, and the creation of sustainable small businesses (Maistry and David 2017). The subtext of the pro-entrepreneurship propaganda in school textbooks is that equal opportunity for success and progress out of poverty is now available to everyone. The poor are blamed for failure to take advantage of such opportunities and should not expect the state to be performing a welfare function. Neoliberal globalization and economic growth discourse are also presented in an uncritical fashion (Maistry and David 2018), yet South Africa continues to have a dismal record of equitable sharing of the national product. Discourses that legitimize contemporary poverty (Ramdhani and Maistry 2020) parade without critique in school textbook content served up to unsuspecting learners. Moreover, South Africa's apartheid history continues to be used as excuse for contemporary poverty.

CHALLENGING THE RHETORIC OF “HAVE FAITH AND BE PATIENT FOR EDUCATION TO BEAR FRUIT”

What has become evident is that powerful rhetoric prevails, especially through utterances by iconic political leaders, aiming to convince the poor of the need for education (as inherently emancipatory), and to remain patient as education does its job of facilitating equality in South African society. The consistent message is that the poor should be content with political emancipation as first step, and that through increased access to education, economic emancipation will be eventuated. The common refrain is that economic emancipation (i.e., the rise out of poverty) remains a long-term aspiration that might accrue in marginal increments, which the rank-and-file poor should patiently accept.

Nelson Mandela's “obsession” with education as deliverer of economic emancipation, as reflected in many of his famous statements about education as a powerful force for social change, often goes unquestioned. Utterances in political speeches like “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” and “The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation” have an embedded idealism—rendering

them axiomatic when they should in fact be challenged. Maistry (2021) cautions that rhetoric around the rainbow nation, social cohesion, and nation building has been powerful in convincing the masses of South Africa's poor to remain patient and to trust that education will, in the long run, deliver emancipation. Vianello and Lanfranchi (2015) caution about the casual argument that "not everything functions perfectly" in an education system—a default position that is often taken up in South Africa. The argument that the marginalized in South Africa need to be patient has to be constantly challenged and refuted.

COVID-19 AND THE PLIGHT OF POOR CHILDREN IN POOR SCHOOLS

Prior to the onset of Covid-19, hard national data on the extent of this neglect was not readily available in the public domain. In fact, the state appeared wholly unaware of the resource context of South African schools as it relates to basic needs such as the availability of potable water and toilet facilities. As Covid-19 transmission and fatalities became a serious concern across the world, and given the need for social distancing, exemplary sanitation, and personal hygiene brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, the national Department of Education was forced to conduct an audit of the national school infrastructure. The outcome of this audit was the release of the National Education Infrastructure Management Report of April 2021. It revealed some quite startling data. Of the total of 23,726 public schools, 90 schools had no electricity supply at all, while 3,343 had unreliable electricity supply. Just over 5,800 schools had unreliable water supply—a serious health hazard in the context of a pandemic. More than 5,000 schools did not have flushing toilets but used dangerous pit latrines. Seventy percent of all schools had no library, while 80 percent did not have science laboratories. Fifty-eight percent of schools did not have computers, and only 20 percent had access to the internet for teaching. Ten thousand schools had no sports facilities—not even an open field for children to play on.

Covid-19 might be regarded as a watershed moment, as the state could no longer conceal the extent of the depravity that exists in a large part of the education system. This state-mandated audit did not exactly reveal anything new that the research field on poverty and schooling had not been reflecting for many years. Maree, a leading South African researcher, notes that "the

primary, secondary, and tertiary education system in South Africa has always had to deal with major challenges such as the large numbers of learners in classrooms, inadequate learner support material, lack of clean water, insufficient and unhygienic ‘bathroom’ facilities, poor quality of teaching, and inadequate support, especially in disadvantaged communities” (2022: 1). That deprivation exists in especially African township schools and rural areas is also not new to the media and the general South African public. The difference in this case was that these national data were internally generated by the state itself and, given the mortality implications, the state had no choice but to react. Maistry (2021: 10) notes that school closures during the lockdown heightened attention to the daily struggles of poor children, especially those who relied on school feeding schemes for their daily sustenance.

In response to the national health crisis that the pandemic had created, the state set up a Ministerial Advisory Committee for Covid-19, comprising a mix of experts both from the science community and from the social sciences. The idea was to develop a research (evidence-led) policy response. Sayed and Singh caution of “the risk of placing uncritical faith in science as the sole basis of policy making in the time of a fast moving, dynamic and transmuting pandemic,” arguing that there is seldom consensus within these fraternities (2020: 25). With regard to the education policy response in particular, they cite the case of the “South African Paediatric Association (SAPA) and . . . (prominent) academics broadcasting support and advocacy for school opening,” despite the fact that many poor schools had yet to meet the minimum standards in terms of water sanitation and social distancing. The state, however, was intent on ensuring the school academic program be concluded within the designated calendar period, arguing that the carryover of programs would overlap with the subsequent academic year and prove to be disruptive. Delaying the exit of high school graduates from the schooling system was deemed likely to create bottlenecks, and both rich and poor children would suffer the consequences of delayed progression. What was clear was that schools were at different levels of readiness to reopen. Poor schools simply lacked the resources (capital) to invest in infrastructural upgrades required to bring them up to the desired safety thresholds. Richer schools, however, were better able to respond to the restrictions that the pandemic had imposed. Sayed and Singh (2020: 21) contend that the “reality is that the ‘deficiencies’ in education in South Africa are deep and reflect structural inequalities between the rich and the impoverished.” The continued closure of schools and universities was deemed to be too costly both in the short term

and in the long run. Delaying the exit of high school graduates would mean delaying potential remuneration that might accrue to those who entered the job market or delayed entry into tertiary programs. The power of school education to uplift society was again used by the state machinery as rhetoric around saving the academic year became louder. The argument was that the education of children was at stake should the academic year not be completed within the calendar time frames on which the South African schooling system is based.

The reopening of schools presented a multitude of challenges for both affluent and poor schools. Affluent schools over the years had developed the financial capacity to employ more teachers and expand their physical infrastructure by building more classrooms, science laboratories, teaching resource centers, gymnasiums, sports complexes, and libraries, which they could readily adapt to create more space that social distancing required (Maistry 2021). Poor schools, on the other hand, already plagued by overcrowded classrooms and with restricted ability to manipulate space, had to resort to a system of split classes in which children were subjected to alternative-day attendance. This meant that poor children had to contend with reduced contact time with teachers as compared to their richer counterparts. What has become clear is that claims by the state to have made significant progress through expanded education provision are unfounded, as the Covid-19 virus drew particular attention to the extent to which even the basic needs of poor children in poor schools were unmet.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS . . .

While masquerading as a lever for liberation and socioeconomic emancipation, the architecture of schooling in South Africa, with its systemic discriminatory access to power(ful) knowledge and increasing bifurcation, renders education's malfeasance manifest. The much-vaunted "freedom of choice" virtue presents a convenient alibi, even though its attempts at addressing systemic inequality have been confounding. The economic currency of English as a medium of instruction has resulted in the neglect of African languages, to the detriment of Indigenous African children who get deprived of instruction in their mother tongue. The stark unevenness of the lay of the proverbial economic land is likely to make schooling ineffective in advancing the socioeconomic health of the economically and linguistically marginalized. If

anything, school policy in South Africa has systematically reproduced marginalization and accentuated inequality. The toxicity of apartheid-era schooling for Black children and the poor competence and commitment of teachers have had enduring effects. While much has changed in the last decades, the dysfunctionality of especially poor South African schools is still a matter of concern (Jansen 2017; Spaull 2015)—a situation aggravated by infrastructure neglect, especially of the poor. Apartheid schooling’s atrocities have mutated under the guise of national social cohesion discourses and neoliberal ideology, further entrenching centuries of deprivation and socioeconomic exclusion (Motala and Carel 2019; Sayed et al. 2020; Maistry 2022).

There appears to be fixation of the poor subject as the sublime object of a postcolonial ideology—simply an inherent transgression, a tolerable collateral damage. In critiquing emancipatory politics, Žižek contends that we need a radical antagonism, “the difference which cuts into the social itself in its universality, which admits no big Other . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . indifferent towards formal democracy” (2011: 393). In drawing on both Fanon’s and Žižek’s conceptualization of proletarian struggle in postcolonial societies (like South Africa), Vogt argues that the process of installing a government through democracy is not as important as encouraging an incessant intolerance for economic discrimination, that we must remain faithful to lost revolutionary causes and reinvent new spaces for revolutionary solidarity (Vogt 2013), that we must constantly challenge alibis that sustain inequality. School education policy has been guilty of sustaining this inequality. If anything, education policy formulation and implementation is tantamount to pseudo-activity, as it has in fact exacerbated the divide between the schooling experiences that rich and poor children receive. Yet school education continues to be advocated as the deliverer of socioeconomic emancipation, which the poor are led to believe will eventuate should they remain patient. What is clear is that school education outside of a holistic approach to addressing the basic needs of the poor has not been successful in delivering socioeconomic emancipation of South Africa’s poor.

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CHAPTER 11

The Immorality of Pregnancy and Truancy as Alibi

Uncovering Systemic Discrimination
in Access to Basic Education in Tanzania

AIKANDE KWAYU

Tanzania is one of the many countries that report impressive increases in primary and secondary school enrollments. The government has put an emphasis on universal access to education since 2001 and announced fee-free education in 2016. Yet the problem of high rates of school noncompletion—in everyday language, the term “dropouts” is often used—remains. For instance, in 2022, a total of 329,918 students in primary and secondary schools dropped out: more than 55% of these were boys (182,213); while nearly 45% were girls (147,705) (Chanzo Reporter 2023). And while there has been prominent attention to enrollment, persistently high dropout rates are not prominently featured in political and policy discourses in the country.

Truancy is the single biggest factor used to explain school dropouts in Tanzania. The Tanzanian government’s data for 2018 show that of the students who dropped out of secondary schools, 88 percent of those cases were due to “truancy” (PO-RALG 2018). Other reasons given for dropouts are death, indiscipline, and pregnancy. In this chapter, I address how truancy and pregnancy are understood in Tanzania, and the implications of these understandings and their translation into policies and practices in the country’s education sector.

One key factor nestled into the data and policies on school dropouts in Tanzania is a gendered moralizing of boys and girls. Critically, the data show that dropout rates are more prominent among boys than girls, and the main factor is “truancy.” However, the government and education stakeholders, including financial donors, talk more often about the dangers of girls dropping out of school than boys. One reason given for this special attention to girls is the understanding of girls as more vulnerable than boys to socioeconomic pressures, including the risk of family pressures on girls for “early marriage” as well as pregnancy. This attention on girls is global. Adeline Masquelier’s chapter in this book scrutinizes the global interest in girls’ education and critically questions the focus on girls’ education instead of taking collective action to combat issues affecting public education as well as gender inequalities. Clearly, boys also face many challenges that lead them to leave school before finishing. However, the issues affecting boys’ dropout rates seem to be bundled under the category of truancy—without any effort to more carefully understand the contributing factors.

Girls’ rights to be in school are much more keenly emphasized than boys’. Particular demonstrations of “moral behavior” are expected from girls to maintain their access to education in Tanzania. For example, it is expected that a girl should not be pregnant during her school-age years if she wants to complete education. Public statements to emphasize girls’ moral behaviors are regularly made, but there are no specific statements or policies that place such restrictions on boys’ access to school. The cultural construction of “morality” becomes a problem girls experience more acutely than boys in their pursuit of education.

In this chapter, I argue that the categories of truancy and pregnancy used to explain school dropouts, and the moralizing discourses that accompany them, are alibis for systemic discrimination against children. These categories and discourses work to blame boys and girls for dropping out of school and thereby shift blame away from the government’s failure to provide basic education for all in Tanzania. They have the effect of individualizing blame, tagging individual boys and girls as morally deviant (i.e., “bad” boys and “immoral” girls) and using this deviance as the explanation for their not finishing their education. In doing this, the government excuses itself from the responsibility of systematically addressing the main challenges girls and boys experience in their access to and completion of education.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the role of societal and political context in interpretation and implementation of education policy in Tanzania. Cultural norms and creation of meaning in issues of morality and discipline are crucial to understanding teen pregnancy, access, retention, and completion of education. In light of that, the data collection and analysis is based on experience and insights gained in working in school committees as well as serving as a board member; insights gained from conversations with schoolteachers and students between 2017 and 2022 while serving in those committees and boards as well as in consulting for education-based NGOs in the country; and documentary review of different sources, including education data, policies, guidelines, circulars, legislation, budgets, programs, education stakeholders' reports, speeches and statements, news articles, and commentaries.

Together, the statistics and public statements help us appreciate how school noncompletion is defined, measured, and explained. I pay particular attention to how truancy and pregnancy are treated as explanations for school noncompletion. My analysis shows that these explanations are morally loaded, with the implication of justifying the individualization of blame for school dropouts, and thus the individualization of responsibility for education's completion. Further, I note how access to education is shaped by ideas of morality in Tanzania, leading to a normatively contingent interpretation and implementation of access to education. In the case of Tanzania, the prevalent idea that education is meant to both discipline and instill morality legitimizes the idea that education is deserved only by those who demonstrate discipline and morality.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN TANZANIA

In Tanzania, the constitution and Education and Training Policy commit the government to ensure access to education for all children. There is a long history of both domestic and international demands that have influenced universal access to education. Tracing domestic education policy from the 1960s helps us to examine how changes reflect different political, economic, and sociocultural influences. Following independence in the 1960s, the main driver of education in Tanzania was "education for self-reliance,"

which supported the socialist approach adopted in the country. Education for self-reliance was meant to produce a community that would be baptized in socialist ideals and an egalitarian society (Nyerere 1967). The policy did not, however, commit to universal access, nor was there an emphasis on gender equality. In 1974, a policy was passed to make primary education in Tanzania universal and compulsory for both sexes (Ishumi and Anangisyé 2014). Furthermore, the country had a vision of “education for liberation,” which also promoted universal access to education.

However, the enrollment of boys exceeded that of girls. This inequality is attributed to the cultural practice of retaining girls at home to perform household duties and eventually fulfill the parents’ wish for a daughter to be married off at an early age (Ishumi and Anangisyé 2014). Given that girls tend to work more hours than boys on household chores, there is a direct link between that and earlier marriage in that the domestic work experience makes the girls more valuable and “ready” for marriage (Beegle et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, universal access to education continued to be the state policy until the economic policy of privatization was introduced in the country. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s development partners pushed for the “limited state” approach to public services, which had a detrimental impact on universal access to education, as the government delegated part of education service provision to the private sector. The concept of “cost sharing” through requiring private tuition fees and contributions at the basic education level led to decreased enrollment (Vavrus 2002). Girls were more affected by these changes as parents prioritized paying fees for boys rather than for girls (Mack 2009). Gender dynamics come into play when issues of fees and prioritizing occur at a household level (Makudi 2002).

In 2001, the Tanzanian government began a renewed attempt to achieve universal primary education (Carlitz and McGee 2013). This shift was partly influenced by external donors under the “education for all” (EFA) framework, and it was matched with resources by the Tanzanian government. The World Bank gave a USD 150 billion loan for primary education in 2001 and was influential in the scrapping of primary school fees. In general, there is a coordinated education development funding structure composed of all education donors in Tanzania. This group is known as Education Development Partners Group and operates under working groups based on different themes or policy proposals. Between 2010 and 2012, the total funding from the group amounted to USD 400 million (Global Partnership for Educa-

tion 2013). Given that the national education budget in 2011–2012 was TZS 2 trillion (equivalent to USD 133 million) (UNICEF 2017), the donor group's significant financial infusions could be very influential on the government's adoption of various policies. Furthermore, the working groups come with significant skills and capacity, thus increasing the potential of influencing policy directions.

Nevertheless, the political economy and governance culture of the Tanzanian government gives room for a politician, and in particular the president, to influence the policy process, both in implementation and/or interpretation. As I will discuss in a later section, the president's statement in 2017 against allowing teen pregnant girls back to school was in contrast to the government's EFA policy. Similarly in 2021, the new president allowed girls back in school and implementation of the same followed. Thus, as much as international actors and development partners such as the World Bank might influence policy, oftentimes political statements that align with the cultural norms and political will of the regime can be more powerful than policy on paper.

To strengthen partnership and a collective voice, some of the key donors for basic education put their funds in one basket known as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). In 2016, Tanzania introduced a fee-free policy for basic education (i.e., preprimary to secondary level). Following the introduction of fee-free education in 2016, GPE increased its funding support from USD 90 million to USD 112 million between 2018 and 2020 (Global Partnership for Education 2020). The purpose of this funding was to get more children into school.

These efforts, both EFA and fee-free education, led to increased enrollment, in particular for girls. Current education data show that there are slightly more girls enrolled in primary school than boys. For example, in 2022, 883,011 girls enrolled in standard 1 (the first year of primary school), while boys' enrollment was at 866,111 (PO-RALG 2022). Retention and transition to secondary school remain a challenge. According to the 2015 data, there were 776,089 girls enrolled in standard 1 (PO-RALG 2017), but only 438,411 (56 percent) of them transitioned to secondary school in 2022. Of the 792,289 boys enrolled in 2015, 411,702 (51 percent) transitioned to secondary school in 2022. As I review below, the Tanzanian government attributes such low retention and transition rates to the factors of death, indiscipline, pregnancy, and truancy. Pregnancy and truancy are recorded as the main causes for school dropout in Tanzania.

THE PROBLEM OF DROPOUTS

The problem of children missing out on basic education has been examined with a focus on causes (Abuya et al. 2013; Ananga 2011; Sabates et al. 2010). The different terms used to describe school-aged children who are not attending school for one reason or another are noteworthy. As mentioned above and examined further below, the Tanzanian government and public media tend to use the term “dropouts” to refer to children who do not complete basic education. In globalized policy, the term “out-of-school children” (OOSC) is used to describe school-aged children who are not in school for various reasons (UNICEF 2018). OOSC could never have registered for school, delayed registering for school, or left school after registration. UNESCO defines dropping out as “early school-leaving” (UNESCO 2005), which means exiting formal education before completing the program cycle (Ananga 2011).

As shown in the Tables 1 and 2, there were over 66,000 primary school-aged dropouts and less than 66,000 secondary school-aged “dropouts” in 2017 (PO-RALG 2018). In the same year, UNICEF estimated that there were about 3.6 million OOSC in Tanzania, including 1.3 million children of primary school age and 2.3 million children of secondary school age (UNICEF 2018). The government’s count of dropouts accounts for only a small percentage—less than 4 percent—of UNICEF’s estimated tally of all OOSC in Tanzania. This suggests that there are systematic challenges facing children in Tanzania that hinder them from being in school—either by not enrolling at all or by dropping out after they have enrolled.

The government of Tanzania identifies four factors—death, indiscipline, pregnancy, and truancy—as causes of school dropouts. However, other studies give us light toward other specific challenges that lead to dropout. These challenges are, in significant ways, related to poverty. One challenge is the requirement for students’ families to privately purchase school supplies and pay additional school levies, which have remained in place despite fee-free education policies. Scholars have compiled four specific factors that explain dropouts. These are child-level factors, including gender, age, cognitive skills, and nutritional and health status (Aloise-Young et al. 2002; Hunt 2008); household factors, including parental education and income (Chimombo 2005; Guryan 2004; Hanushek et al. 2008); school factors, such as distance to school, quality issues, and costs (Chimombo 2005); and community factors, such as levels of development and the economy. UNICEF (2018) notes similar factors specific for Tanzania to include poor school infrastructure, com-

Table 1. Dropouts in Tanzania Primary Schools: Reasons and Numbers

	Boys	Girls	Total
Death	1,575	1,180	2,755
Indiscipline	113	93	206
Pregnancy	0	1,040	1,040
Truancy	34,747	27,395	62,142
Total	36,434	29,708	66,142

Source: PO-RALG 2018.

Table 2. Dropouts in Tanzania Secondary Schools: Reasons and Numbers

	Boys	Girls	Total
Death	335	250	585
Indiscipline	1384	603	1,987
Pregnancy	0	5,443	5,443
Truancy	32,360	25,325	57,685
Total	34,079	31,621	65,700

Source: PO-RALG 2018.

munity economic activities, distance to school, and students' lack of school requirements (e.g., uniforms and meals). Other reasons that UNICEF documents as put forth by schools (where research was done) are similar to those given by the government, such as pregnancy, deaths, parental restrictions, bad youth groups, and truancy. The scholarly literature reveals loss of interest in education as one of the major reasons for school dropouts, alongside several other factors such as migration, school absenteeism, death of both parents, and separation of parents, the community's poor perception of education, students' lack of school necessities, peer pressure, family obligations, early pregnancies, and early marriages (Ouma 2017).

Many of these factors, unfortunately, have their effects because the government still treats education as a privilege rather than a right. It is this conceptualization by which the government, even with the introduction of fee-free education, still distances itself from responsibility for the school dropout problem. As highlighted in the introductory chapter of this volume, this is a case of "responsibilization," in the sense that the children, parents, and community are held responsible for ensuring children go to school and are blamed if they do not. The government treats the existing challenges to

children's education as largely private responsibilities, rather than a problem of the politics and policies of education. This shifting of blame from government to parents and students is a means by which the government excuses itself from being accountable to its own policy commitments, which include universal access to education. As much as the government signs onto international policies and frameworks such as EFA and fee-free education, it does not address foundational problems at the community and society levels that hinder children from attending school. This echoes Masquelier's argument (this volume) that the focus on girls' education in Niger and globally does not address problems in public schools and gender inequalities in the society.

Truancy and pregnancy are identified in the government's statistics as the first and second biggest factors for school dropout in Tanzania. However, these two factors blanket over many other reasons children leave school before completing the program cycle. As other studies have highlighted other reasons for children being out of school, it seems likely that these two factors obscure underlying challenges that education policy and related government policies are not addressing.

In light of the above, I focus my argument in this chapter to show how pregnancy and truancy serve as alibis that make the government seem innocent in ignoring the challenges that young people face in accessing and completing school. Putting forth reasons that shift blame to children, parents, and community, as opposed to accepting governmental responsibility, allows the government to implement an education system that excludes many young people.

I further argue that the apportionment of blame is upheld by moralizing discourses that are propagated by the government's policy and taken up by a majority of citizens who are unconscious of their ramification on access to education. Pregnancy and truancy are characterized as caused by students' moral deviancy and deserving of punishment, including expulsion from school or "voluntary" dropout by students themselves. In that process, moralizing discourses about youthful deviance uphold the pregnancy and truancy alibis for not tackling systematic discrimination and decreased access to education in Tanzania. Such moralizing puts blame on individual students rather than the system that does not meet students' life challenges.

In the sections below, I focus on how moralizing discourses about pregnancy and truancy are used to shift the blame from systemic factors to children, who are actually the victims.

Debates about Pregnant Girls' Rights to Schooling

I give money for a student to study for free and then, she gets pregnant, gives birth and after that, returns to school. No, not under my mandate.

—President John Pombe Magufuli, June 2017

Former President Magufuli's 2017 assertion was translated into a total ban and the expulsion of all pregnant girls from primary and secondary schools in Tanzania. It exacerbated a moral justification for entrenching discrimination against girls in accessing education. In Tanzania, issues of access to education, particularly for girls, emanate from contradictions in policy and legal structures. The laws for marriage (Marriage Act, 1971), for example, allow girls under eighteen years old to be married with parental consent, although it only allows boys over the age of eighteen to marry (see also Msuya 2021). This is a contradiction to EFA, since Education Regulation/Circular 4 (2002) prohibits married girls from attending school. The Regulation/Circular—titled “Expulsion and Exclusion of Pupils from School”—provides three reasons for expulsion: (1) misbehavior that endangers the general discipline or the good name of school; (2) commitment of a criminal offense—including an offense against morality; and (3) entering into wedlock (Nkata et al. 2021). There is ambiguity in determining what are the offenses against morality and what might “endanger” “the good name” of a school, which provides even more room for discrimination against girls. Moreover, when a girl is married, it is very possible that she will become pregnant, and pregnant girls are at even more risk of being denied access to education.

The UN Human Rights Commission has consistently raised concerns about this allowance of early marriage, and the government defends it on the basis of cultural norms (EqualityNow 2019). In 2019, a human rights activist, Rebecca Gyumi, filed a constitutional case against this particular provision of the law, arguing that it should be illegal for girls to be married before the age of eighteen since they are still children. She won. However, the government appealed and the law still exists. The attorney general defended the government's position, stating: “Disparity in the minimum age of marriage is a compromise to accommodate customary, traditional, and religious values in marriage.”

This law and the government's defense contradict the constitution, which provides for access to education for every child. The contradiction between the law and social practices in rights to access education is widespread and

has been noted in the literature (Iddy 2021). The danger in the legal provisions for girls to be married as young as fifteen, and the government's stated commitment to this age limit, is girls' exclusion from education.

Tanzania has a long history of socially constructed morality and controversy surrounding whether pregnant girls or mothers should be allowed to continue with education. Pregnant girls were not allowed to go back to school in the 1960s and 1970s. The National Education Act in 1978 called for interventions against student "misconduct" and "offences against morality," and this provision was invoked by schools to expel pregnant girls (Stambach 2013). In the 2000s there were efforts to relax the ban. A guideline to enable pregnant girls to return to school was published by the Ministry of Education in 2009. However, parliament—in general—did not give adequate support for this provision, and consequently there were no policy or legal changes to support the move (Nkata et al. 2021).

The 2015 manifesto of the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, stated its intention to return all girls to school, including pregnant girls. Still, the foundational cultural norms informed by socially constructed ideas of morality, combined with weak institutions that give prominence to personal preferences, have not allowed a systematic approach to universal access to education. This is why the president could ignore even the manifesto of the very party that put him in power.

Pregnant girls have long been cast as undeserving of education, due to what leading politicians and others have characterized as their moral deviance. During Jakaya Kikwete's administration from 2005 to 2015, girls were blamed for being pregnant as a result of their own hyperactive desires. Although Kikwete did not ban girls from schooling, he placed the blame on them. His wife, Salma Kikwete, a member of parliament, became one of the prominent voices that supported President Magufuli's ban of pregnant girls from school, stating that "allowing teen students to continue with studies after giving birth would mean that the government is supporting child marriage" (The Citizen 2017). In connection with that claim, Salma Kikwete blamed the girls for promoting indiscipline in school. "Contamination" of behavior seems to be a cross-cutting justification for expulsion of pregnant girls from school (The Citizen 2017). The argument is that leaving them in school will encourage other students to engage in "bad behavior" and promote indiscipline. Blame is assigned on both moral and biological grounds in that something innate in girls is assumed that needs to be managed and contained. The objectification of girls' bodies informs the narrative that further

puts blame on them. This biological and moralizing discourse and practice of blame results in stigmatization and further isolation of girls.

Furthermore, the barring of pregnant girls from school is linked to a societal conception that pregnancy outside of marriage is a “shame” and moral offense in the community (Maluka et al. 2020; Hokororo et al. 2015). There is also an idea that pregnant schoolgirls can endanger a school’s good name, a danger linked with the conceptualization of school as a moral space within the society (Dilger 2021; Mgonda 2020; Mashimi 2022). Girls in school are expected to conduct themselves in ways that are perceived as morally correct and that will keep them from becoming pregnant. Communities, faith spaces (e.g., churches), and schools in Tanzania condemn unmarried pregnant girls. This discrimination against them leads to unhealthy choices, including unsafe abortions and not attending clinics when girls decide to keep the pregnancy (Plummer et al. 2008). Some girls in Tanzania, consequently, go for an abortion often using unsafe and clandestine methods of their own as a way of avoiding the shame associated with pregnancy, as well as to avoid being expelled from school (Stambach 2013; Plummer et al. 2008; Mgonda 2020). Parents would, sometimes, support abortion to avoid stigmatization of the family and the girl’s expulsion from school. Even though abortion is illegal in Tanzania and can be punishable up to fourteen years in prison, stigmatization is apparently regarded as more dangerous than legal prosecution. It is in light of these community perceptions that politicians stand against pregnant girls’ right to education.

External donors have demonstrated an interest in securing educational access for pregnant girls and mothers, setting up a clash with the Tanzanian government. For example, the World Bank project for girls to access secondary school known as “SEQUIP”—Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project, funded with USD 500 million—was frozen in 2018 due to the president’s ban on pregnant girls’ access to education (Tsehai 2020). The project’s main aim was to provide responsive learning environments for girls and to improve rates of completion of quality secondary education (World Bank 2020). However, in 2020, the World Bank relaxed its restriction and released the fund (Igoe 2020). This exposed the weakness of donors in standing up for their decisions in the face of real politics. The World Bank’s release of the funds before the government had lifted the ban remained a setback for girls. The World Bank compromised with the government by settling on “alternative education pathways” (Tsehai 2020) instead of emphasizing the unconditional universal right to formal education. Consequently, the moral and

cultural barriers for girls' access to formal education remaining in place were effectively given more importance than the internationally agreed standard of universal access to education.

Indiscipline, which has also been cited in government statistics as one of the separate reasons for school dropouts, is an ambiguous factor and creates more alibis for governmental inaction. The government has published several regulations/circulars to ensure and enforce “morality” and “discipline” in schools. For example, Regulations/Circular No. 24 (2002) provides guidelines for “using corporal punishment” against misbehavior and indiscipline; and Regulations/Circular No. 6 (2022), “Managing Morals/Discipline Among Students,” puts forth guidelines designed to ensure morality in schools—including directives for each school to establish a “morality” committee. Nevertheless, indiscipline remains equivocal, as it is not defined and is thus in the hands of teachers to interpret. Indiscipline—as seen in the statistics—can result in students dropping out, but it seems likely that, in fact, students are forced to leave school after expulsions due to behavior that is classified as indiscipline. Indiscipline is another blanket reason that provides cover for schools and governments that do not hold themselves accountable for all children's right to schooling. Instead, it upholds the idea that access to education is a privilege for those who exhibit proper discipline.

The difficulty in defining indiscipline has been noted in the scholarly literature (Araújo 2005; Stambach 2003), for example, how teachers' perceptions of pupils' attitudes influence their conception of indiscipline. Furthermore, the literature underscores the power of government and political discourse on indiscipline and its impact on schools (Stambach 2003). As discussed above, the government's guidelines on indiscipline provide a free space for teachers to interpret what indiscipline entails. Political discourses have also influenced perception of pregnant schoolgirls, as observed above. Thus, teachers' interpretation of what entails indiscipline is most likely influenced by public and official discourses.

In November 2021, the new president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, announced that all pregnant girls should be allowed to go back to school. This was followed by a Regulation/Circular No. 2 (2021) titled “School Re-Entry for Primary and Secondary School Students' Drop Out for Various Reasons.” This circular has allowed all dropouts, regardless of the reason for dropping out, to return to school—if they had not been out of school for than two years. Critically, the re-entry policy is still restrictive, as some teen mothers may not be able to go back to school within two years after they have given birth.

The government and donors alike talk more about pregnancy and indiscipline than about truancy, although, according to the government's own statistics, truancy is the leading cause, for both girls and boys, of dropping out. But how is truancy defined and counted? It is important to uncover what truancy entails. In the section below, I expose its use as another alibi for the government not addressing the root causes that keep children out of school, hence practicing systematic discrimination in providing access to education.

Truancy

The government of Tanzania records truancy as the biggest cause for children dropping out of school. While more boys than girls are identified under "truancy," girls are five times more likely to drop out of school due to truancy than pregnancy. However, as highlighted earlier in this chapter as well as, critically, in chapter 8 of this volume, both donors and government focus on pregnant girls' access to education. Such a focus exacerbates hostility to girls due to stigmatization and constructed moral judgments, while leaving aside the greater problem of truancy.

Truancy is described as "missing school without permission," and it is considered a serious offense in Tanzania's basic education system in that it can lead to expulsion from school. The government's Education Regulation/Circular No. 5 (2011) directs schools to suspend all students who have missed school for thirty consecutive days and deregister those who have missed school for ninety days. These punitive measures do not solve the problem but further discriminate and deny access to education. There have been attempts to reduce the punishment; for example, Circular No. 4 (2012) directs schools not to expel any student who is a national examination candidate and to instead apply another punishment; and Circular No. 2 (2021) gives an expelled student who has not stayed home for more than two years a chance to return to school. Nevertheless, these are cosmetic attempts and do not guarantee access to education or address the causes of truancy and dropouts. It is also important to note that the 2012 and 2022 circulars did not annul the 2011 circular. They only amended it. Truants are, thus, considered to be undisciplined students who do not deserve an unconditional right to education. The way truancy is punishable in Tanzanian schools underscores the conception that education is a privilege and not a right. The circulars have a moralizing aspect in that truants are characterized as undisciplined children, or children of undisciplined families and/or communities.

A number of studies explore issues of truancy in primary and secondary

schools in Tanzania. These studies focus on the reasons for truancy, which are similar and often related to those of dropping out. They include hunger (Seidu et al. 2021); menses (Sommer 2010); parental guidance (Kalinga 2013); lack of basic needs (Mlowosa et al. 2014); distance to school (Kalinga 2013); and bullying at school (Wilson et al. 2013). Another significant discussion in the literature regarding truancy is on its relationship to low performance. Low performance is a result not only of missing school but also of other factors that are associated with truancy, such as hunger, distance to school, and weak parental support. Low performance and dropping out are mutually constituted in one leads to the other, much as missing school (truancy) results in low performance. Low-performing students are sometimes forced to repeat a class, which can discourage them from staying in school. For example, students who do not pass the standard (grade) 4 National Assessment Exam must repeat the class. Such a policy encourages dropout. Repeating a class has a psychological effect for children partly due to stigmatization (Tott 2014; Eisemon 1997). Thus, detailed and critical analysis of the factors leading to truancy is not only a good step toward uncovering what the category obscures, but also illuminates potential ways of addressing the problems leading to dropout. Clearly, truancy comprises many different kinds of challenges children and young people experience in their access to education, experiences of schooling, and integrating schooling with other dimensions of children's lives.

The factors leading to truancy all indicate limited financing and resource allocation to schools. Failing to provide school meals can mean some children are too hungry to focus on learning, for example, and this is a resource concern that the government is not addressing. Pregnancy in schools as related to gender equality and accessibility to girls is also a function of budget (Action Aid 2018). Girls might find themselves in vulnerable situations as a result of lack of school supplies. Poverty at home and the government's limited budget to provide school supplies contribute to girls' vulnerability. Moreover, the budget framework is not specific to girls' education, such as ensuring sanitary resources, adequate toilets, and water supplies. Research shows that girls may drop out of school due to lack of sanitary towels and limited guidance to puberty and menses management (e.g., Sommer 2010).

Data on the education budget show that the budget allocated for fee-free education is not adequate, and disbursement is even lower. The internationally agreed share of the education budget to ensure access to all is between 15 percent and 20 percent of the national budget (UNESCO 2016), yet Tanzania

does not reach that percentage. In the 2018–2019 budget, the allocation was 14.3 percent, while in 2019–2020 it dropped to 13.6 percent. In general, it is difficult to gauge the budget's sensitivity and attention given to vulnerable pupils, both girls and boys.

Even with high enrollment rates, budget allocation matters in ensuring retention, and other quality-related aspects of education are important. However, retention and quality maintenance are difficult when even the already limited allocated budget is not disbursed in total. For example, while TZS 285.93 billion was allocated in the 2018–2019 budget for fee-free education, only 58 percent of that budget (TZS 166.28 billion) was disbursed. In the 2019–2020 budget, TZS 288.50 billion was allocated, but only 73 percent, or TZS 211.28, was disbursed to fund the fee-free education. The fee-free education support is mostly composed of “capitation grants” that are allocated to schools based on their numbers of students. Analysis of the data shows that the average disbursed capitation grant is less than TZS 5,000 per student, as opposed to the planned TZS 10,000 for each student. With such limited allocations to schools, addressing issues that lead to children who are out of school becomes an unaffordable luxury. Teachers and school management teams tend to use the limited amount of funds they receive on basic supplies for lesson delivery. Meals, for example, become difficult to offer, as are other supports that would assist vulnerable children in staying in school.

JUSTIFYING EXCLUSION FROM EDUCATION

It is too simplistic to blame children for “dropping out” of school due to truancy and pregnancy. These explanations for children missing out on completing their education do little to expose the inequalities in education access. UNICEF (2016) observes, “The children who are not enrolled in school are often those from the most socially marginalized communities, including children with disabilities, children from ethnic-minority communities, children excluded because of gender barriers and children living in extreme poverty.” Other study findings confirm similar factors for school dropouts in Tanzania. The Tanzanian government blankets over all of these challenges and many more when it reduces blame to individual boys and girls who are judged as “truants” and girls who are excluded from school due to pregnancy.

This kind of use of blame is informed by the social construction of morality in the Tanzanian context, which shifts responsibility of ensuring uncondi-

tional and universal access to education from the government to individual students. Students are required to be “responsible” for their behavior if they want to stay in school. Furthermore, students and parents are also expected to be responsible in provision of resources to support education; even in fee-free education arrangements, parents are still required to provide school supplies (e.g., uniforms, books, pens) and pay different contributions if they want their children to stay in school. Lack of sufficient resources, as seen in the findings above, is one of the factors leading to children missing school.

Concerning standards, both domestic and international, there is a shared problem of not being specific enough to enforce universal access to education. International development policy frameworks for access to education are often general, just as the Constitution of Tanzania is with regards to access to education. The Tanzanian constitution provides for the right to education, but it lacks specific provisions recognizing girls and women as a disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or marginalized group facing many challenges in education, including unfair discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have highlighted the problems of different children’s access to education and the government’s avoidance of responsibility for providing access to all. The chapter exposes the government’s neglect of the real causes of the problems leading to children leaving school. The government’s policies and actions blanket over the real causes with morally loaded categories of students’ truancy and pregnancy. These two factors are alibis for allowing systematic discrimination against the children of Tanzania by not allowing access to basic education. The moral justification of truancy and pregnancy as causes of dropout shifts the blame from the government to individual students and their parents. This justification also finds support at the community level, as the Tanzanian society is informed by the social construction of morality that negatively judges pregnant schoolgirls as well as truants. The moral framework and consequent justification look at these two issues as part of high level of indiscipline in school that needs to be addressed by expulsion of the students. The government’s circulars show that there are other types of “indiscipline” acts that are subject to corporal punishment, but pregnancy is considered dangerous as it can contaminate good behavior in school, and thus it is punishable by expulsion. Missing school for a number of days is also punishable by expulsion.

The real causes of school dropout are socioeconomic, however. Such concerns as truancy and pregnancy are consequences of root causes that are not addressed. Hunger and distance from school, for example, have to do more with children's economic situation rather than any indiscipline or immorality. Household poverty and the government's limited resources and poor prioritization of those resources to address poverty explain the dropout rate. The national education budget is inadequate and not even fully disbursed. These inadequate resources hinder universal access to education, as not all enrolled students are retained to the end of the school cycle. Nevertheless, the government seeks to morally justify exclusion of some children from schooling and to shore up public support for treating education as a privilege for some rather than a right for all.

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CHAPTER 12

Education Between Desire and Rejection

The Perspectives of Young Illiteracized Peoples on Schooling in Benin

ISSIFOU ABOU MOUMOUNI

This chapter aims to shed light on how people with little or no school education in the Republic of Benin experience their lack of education, and how they imagine and position themselves in relation to school education.¹ It highlights the ambivalent image that characterizes the school in Benin. In popular discourse and general perception related to social success, school is both desired and discredited. Its introduction into Beninese society has given rise to forms of inequality that are maintained and/or reinforced by reforms undertaken by the state.

Both political and developmental discourses have multiplied around the domain of education. It is also one of the main sectors through which expectations and hopes for the future are developed. In the aftermath of independence, African governments demonstrated an awareness of the important role that education could play in the processes of social and economic development (Amoussou-Yeye 1996: 5). Education is often placed at the forefront of the sovereign obligations of governments. It is conven-

1. This chapter presents part of the field data produced as part of the implementation of the research project entitled “Learning Beyond the Classroom: Coping with Illiteracy in Urban Literate Environments in Bolivia and Benin.” This is the place to thank the Cluster Africa Multiple, which fully funded this research project. I would also like to thank all the participants of the “Education Alibi” conference for their comments on my presentation at this conference. My thanks also go to all those who read the first version of this chapter and whose observations and constructive comments made it possible to improve it.

tionally recognized as central to achieving human development, technical progress, and economic and social growth. The education paradigm, as conveyed through global policy campaigns, presents school not only as emancipatory but also as a vehicle for equal opportunity and human progress (Jacquemin and Schlemmer 2011: 8; Banque Mondiale 2018: 38). From the laudatory discourses of political actors and development institutions, it is clear that education enjoys special prestige. The political interest in education is reflected in the many structural and normative initiatives taken by various successive governments. These initiatives involve the introduction of reforms to promote education with diverse objectives and orientations. The various reform measures taken and implemented during the different phases of the history of education in Benin have been aimed not only at giving people access to education but also at making education an instrument of social and economic development.

In Benin, as elsewhere in Africa, success has long been associated with school education. Since the colonial period, school has contributed to the emergence of social actors who have acquired an admirable and respectable material and social status within their social environment. The products of school represented, as Banégas (2003: 40) points out, the embodiment of social ascension and mobility, and particularly material ease and privilege (as, for instance, owning a beautiful two-story house and/or several means of transportation). From then on, school has been perceived as a means to social success. However, with the socioeconomic and political transformations that have taken place, this positive and progressive vision of education—while still maintained in political and development discourses—comes up against daily realities that call into question the emancipating role attributed to education. One factor spurring such questions about the relevance of schooling is public notice that illiteracized² people have also met with social and economic success. Despite the ubiquity of the need for literacy in daily life, actors with little (or no) formal education have achieved social and economic success, while others with schooling backgrounds have not. This chapter aims to contribute to the debate on the social representations of school in relation to social success from the perspective of people with no (or very little) school education experience. What are the ideas and experiences that illiteracized people have of school? What are their opinions and impressions of school

2. I call these “illiteracized” in order to acknowledge the individual and societal processes that make them regarded as “illiterate.”

in relation to their activities? How do they perceive themselves in relation to those who have been to school but have later not secured a job?

In order to answer these questions, I am using case studies from northern Benin. Drawing from these, I argue that school, which had previously been the almost exclusive marker and means of social success in public opinion and in policy literature, has lost that significance in the eyes of those without school experience. In the current socioeconomic context in Benin, formal education now has only an instrumental value. The emergence of new figures of social success embodied by people without any (or with little) schooling experience are recognized as evidence of this. School is perceived as merely a provider of basic skills that are useful for applying in an environment dominated by literacy practices.

This qualitative study draws from case study and semi-directive interviews that were conducted with actors aged at least twenty-five years who had either no experience of schooling or only the third year of primary schooling. In addition, interviews were conducted with people older than sixty to trace their changing perceptions of school since its introduction by the colonial administration. My stay in the field enabled me to build up a close relationship with the actors and to talk to them in their professional environments on different microterrains (market, workshop, sales area) where they are confronted with the challenges of writing. The regular visits encouraged exchanges in the form of conversation, enabling the actors to confide freely and easily share their experiences of the lack of schooling. These visits were an interesting opportunity to find out their perceptions of education, which were reflected during our discussions and in relation to specific situations.

In total, these formal and informal interviews were carried out between April and December 2022, in both private and professional settings, with around thirty people (eleven elders and nineteen youth) living mainly in urban areas. The interviews were conducted in the local language, Dendi or Baatonu, depending on the actors interviewed. These firsthand empirical data were complemented by documentary data, which made it possible to review educational policies and their link with the production of illiteracy in Benin.

EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF ILLITERACY IN BENIN

In the Republic of Benin, the former colony of Dahomey, the production of illiteracy has been strongly linked to educational policies since the colonial

period. In the following, I therefore highlight the processes of promotion, maintenance, and/or (re)production of illiteracy in relation to the school. Literacy has long been generally considered synonymous with schooling (Audrey 1989: 589). Concomitantly, the concept of illiteracy, as a marker for those who were not enrolled, emerged with the introduction of Western schools, which succeeded in swallowing up other forms of literacy, such as learned through Koranic schools, which had been since early colonial times places for writing and reading in Arabic. According to popular discourses in Benin, Western-style schooling stifled other forms of literacy.

French is the official working language of Benin, and it remains the reference point for defining illiteracy. In fact, in the imagination of many Beninese, literacy is evaluated in terms of competency in the French language acquired through formal schooling. Thus, a person is considered literate if he or she has been to school, has a minimum level of education (the level of *certificat d'étude primaire* (Primary School Certificate; hereafter referred to as the CEP), and has not lost his or her reading and writing skills. Many Beninese citizens, regardless of their ability to read, write and calculate in one of the local languages (e.g., Baatonu, Dendi, Fongbe, Fulfulde), still consider themselves illiterate if they cannot read and write in French. Furthermore, the acquisition of reading and writing skills in French outside the formal school setting hardly seems to grant one the status of being literate. Some people still consider themselves illiterate despite their ability to read and write in French, on the simple grounds that they have not attended school. In this regard, one woman I met during my fieldwork reflects:

I didn't go to school. I have black eyes. However, I can read in French and I can write a few words. I can also express myself in French. I got these skills during my apprenticeship. Our boss speaks to us in French and so do many of the customers who come into our shop. It is also where I learned to write the names of the customers. (Zénabou, Parakou, February 15, 2022; my translation from Baatonu)

Nɔni ɔnkunu gi is the expression used by Zénabou, which means literally “black eyes owner” This is one of the expressions commonly used in Baatonu to qualify the illiterate. By using this metaphor, Zénabou considers herself illiterate not because she lacks literacy skills, but primarily because she did not acquire her skills in a formal school. Such a self-flagellating consideration, shared by many interview partners, seems to elevate formal schooling to the status of the only way to acquire literacy.

However, other actors with a low level of education (fifth grade) also consider themselves illiterate.

Besides this discursive construction of illiteracy, the insufficiency of state schooling remains a fundamental factor in the production of illiteracy as a social status. In Benin, the first type of European schools were created on the eve of colonization in a context of commercial exchange. These schools were opened within the places of commercial transactions (forts and trading posts alongside the coast in the south of the country) set up to provide the basics of a Western school education (Lange 2000; Garcia 1971). This schooling was selective in that it was only made accessible to a very limited number of Africans. The beneficiaries of these basic teachings acquired skills in the practice of European languages and notions of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Lange 2000: 53). These actions of schooling thus led to a division of the society with the emergence of the first minority of literates on the one hand and the majority of illiterates (without access to school) on the other. Those who attended school were seen as *évolués* (“developed”) or cadres, highly distinct from the others. Thus, schooling became an important instrument of social distinction and the creation of a small elite of people considered literates.

In Benin, the first primary schools were established through the activities of Christian missionaries, which gave rise to the installation of Protestant schools in 1843 (Ouidah, Grand-Popo, and Agoué) and the creation of a Catholic school in 1861 (Ouidah). It was these missionary schools that paved the way for the advent of secular French schools (Garcia 1971; Coovi 2016). With this development, schooling under the colonial regime was institutionalized. If the missionaries, through their schools, intended above all to prepare the cadres of their future Christianity, the civil administration, through its school education service project, wished to train Indigenous auxiliaries for the governance and therewith facilitate the exploitation of the colony (Garcia 1971: 66). The educational policies of the colonial period aimed to train and equip the colonial administrative services with local agents capable of reading, writing, and speaking French in order to facilitate trade relations with the Indigenous chiefs (Da Silva and Tossou 2014: 25).

The establishment of the school system during the colonial period would thus be an important factor in producing and maintaining notions of illiteracy. During the era of utilitarian education (1903–1924), when the school was supposed to train actors capable of helping the colonists, students were selected and recruited for the preparatory school. Only the best were admitted to the elementary school, and the others, who were the most numerous,

returned to their families regardless of their desire to continue with their education (Garcia 1971: 82). This utilitarian policy never really changed until independence in 1960. The colonial administration had adopted a selective educational policy, which only envisaged the training of an elite of collaborators capable of contributing to the assimilation of the peoples.

After independence (1960–1972), education policy remained based on the colonial model, with the education system oriented toward the service of national development. During this period, Benin was initially based globally on the postcolonial political system with strong ties with France (Lauwerier et al. 2013). Despite the recommendations of the Conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa held in Addis Ababa in May 1961, the former colonial power continued influencing the education system with the curriculum and French textbooks. This Conference had aimed to give African states the opportunity to define their priorities in terms of education. However, in 1962, the texts that were to govern the Beninese education system were drafted by French development workers (Da Silva and Tossou 2014: 27).

From 1972 to 1990, during the Marxist Leninist phase, Benin experimented with a new political orientation that was accompanied by a new education policy. Henceforth, the school was perceived as an instrument for grassroots development. Thus, rather than being a school that privileges highly intellectual activity, it was now meant to provide mass education (Amoussou-Yeye 1996: 6). However, the school was still not accessible to the entire population. The formal education system catered to only 10–15 percent of the predominantly urban population (Da Silva and Tossou 2014: 39), thus contributing to the continued illiteracy of rural populations.

A new education policy was adopted in 1990, following the “*Etats généraux de l'éducation*” that year. The Beninese government developed a clear vision for the education sector, which envisaged, among other things, making basic education compulsory for all school-age children (Ahanhanzo et al. 2006: 7). Benin increased the number of schools and in 2006 introduced free primary and secondary education. From 2006 onward, the real changes concerned the expansion of access to school education. However, the political decision to promote schooling was accompanied by the lack of school facilities in all localities and the lack of measures to oblige parents to enroll and keep all school-age children in school. Despite the efforts made by the state to implement its education policy, a significant number of children remain out of school. For example, in 2015, less than two-thirds ($n = 2,768,522$) of children aged three to seventeen were enrolled in school out of a population of

4,338,795 school-age children (UNICEF Benin 2017: 64). Moreover, in 2021, among those who had the chance to be enrolled, the primary school completion rate was 65.4 percent (UNICEF 2021).

From this discussion, one can see that the different educational policies, which have influenced the production of illiteracy since the colonial period, are united in their failure to provide access to school for the entire population. The unequal geographical distribution of schools has resulted in inadequate and spatially disparate access to school education. The resulting under-schooling has contributed to the maintenance of illiteracy in Beninese society despite the promises made by every one of the evolving education policies. The production of these differences has shaped ordinary Beninese perceptions of the influence of formal education in their society.

SCHOOL PROMISES AND EARLY PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL IN BENIN

From its institutionalization during the colonial period to the present day, the population has developed an ambivalent perception of the school. This perception, however dynamic, is shaped by the hopes—whether disappointed or honored—placed in this institution. Formal education was expected to deliver to graduates wage employment, recruitment into the public service, and livelihoods through private enterprise or community development projects. These different expectations are considered necessary to achieve social success. Initially perceived as an almost exclusive factor of social success, school seems to be losing this privilege to be considered an instrument guaranteeing social success, although it is still linked to it.

From the colonial period until the 1990s, formal education held great promise. Indeed, the appearance of the first civil servants who were products of the education system and deployed in the administration was the starting point of the strong enthusiasm for schooling. Because of the opportunities for collaboration with Europeans and the possibilities of mobilizing available financial resources, the school was, during the colonial period, perceived as a possible means of social and economic success (Lange 2000: 54). The first beneficiaries of school education (the students who advanced) took positions such as schoolteachers; monitors; civil auxiliaries, including interpreters; and clerks, all of which were considered prestigious by their peers who were unschooled or who had not advanced in their schooling.

These encouraging educational promises continued to dominate people's imagination until after independence, when the needs of the administration and emerging modern businesses allowed for the recruitment and employment of graduates of the education system (Baba-Moussa 2017: 632). Moreover, with the emergence of the *évolués* produced by the schools, embodying not only social ascension but also material ease (Banégas and Warnier 2001: 6) in the perspective of the populations, the school came to be perceived as a privileged key to access the salaried economy and social success (Jézéquel 2003: 416). Here social success is generally appreciated through the prism of the "material culture of success" (Rowlands 1994: 106).

This positive and promising image of the school was exacerbated during the socialist period (1972–1990), during which a policy favoring the integration of all graduates of the school into employment was implemented. Indeed, in addition to the political will to support schools that trained actors capable of self-employment, the recruitment of graduates was almost total to satisfy the demand in the administration. In addition, the state had put in place a system of support for students that created a desire for schooling. Schooling was almost free, and some students in secondary school received a small allowance. In addition, after obtaining the primary school certificate, the student was guaranteed to find a paying job. As a result, the image of the school was that of an institution that provided employment and thus was a vector of hope, social well-being, and prosperity. Some of our interlocutors are still nostalgic for that period, when one felt certain that after studying to whatever the level, the graduate would obtain a salaried job. To this effect, Issiakou, one of my interview partners, aged sixty-five, who had not been enrolled in school, declared: *An keu kua an kan mon*, which means "If you went to school, your life will not be missed."

In addition, this image persisted despite the fact that recruitment to the public service was halted in the context of the implementation (1989–1999) of structural adjustment programs (BAD 2003: 1), because the development and structuring of the cotton sector led to the opening of responsible positions that school dropouts have occupied within local farmers' organizations. The operation of these organizations required the presence of actors with literacy skills. With the boom in cotton production from the end of the 1980s, school dropouts started taking over the daily management of farmers associations called *groupement villageois* (GV). The little literacy they had was more than enough to ensure the management of farmer's organizations (Maboudou Alidou 2014: 85). Thus, they held positions of responsibility such as secre-

tary on the board of the GV or manager of the Union Sous-Préfecturale des Producteurs. Therefore, they grew in importance and became role models in their localities because of the financial resources they mobilized and the material goods they accumulated (motorcycles, more modern houses, equipment of rooms, etc.). Moreover, they were blessed with various social and economic privileges that distinguished them from the others in their village (Maboudou Alidou 2014: 86).

However, as employment opportunities became scarcer and concomitantly schools produced increasing numbers of graduates, the hopes of finding a salaried job began to fade and give way to despair. This changing context contributed to the construction of a new image of the school as a producer of the unemployed. As Ahodekon and Kponou (2019: 51) put it, with more and more unemployed people coming out every year, school is losing its value to the extent that parents are no longer sure that it guarantees a better future for their offspring who attend. We are thus witnessing a kind of breakdown in confidence that has contributed to shape a different image of formal education. This is particularly evident in the perspective of people who are not enrolled but who are considered to be new figures of social success.

DOUBTING SCHOOL AS A MEANS TO SUCCESS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE UNSCHOOLED

Banégas and Warnier (2001: 10) in their paper on new contemporary figures of social success, pointed out that success in Africa is materialized through emblematic objects mediated by money. Thus, the villa, car, video, and possibility to use bank services are the main characteristics of success. Moreover, Banégas and Warnier have drawn attention to the fluctuating, shifting, and contextual nature of success. They indicate that social and moral representations of success vary from one society to another and that there are scales of success that change over time and space (Banégas and Warnier 2001: 9).

In Benin, social representations of success combine these material and economic dimensions with symbolic, temporal, and human characteristics. In this sense, one of my respondents, Mémouna (forty-five years old, who had not been enrolled in school), expresses what she considers to be social success.

For me, social success is the possession of material goods (a piece of land, a house, a car), an economic activity that allows one to be self-sufficient, to have consideration in society, and to take care of one's children and parents properly. When a person accumulates all these elements and loses them before death, as was the case of Aladji Amouda, for example, he has not succeeded socially. Social success is something that you live with from the moment society confers it on you, until death. (Parakou, November 7, 2022)

Mémouna's ideas are widely shared by my informants, with some nuances. According to the unschooled people interviewed, social success is not reduced to the accumulation of material goods. It is defined through several indicators, including starting a family (having a spouse and children), financial autonomy, a personal home with good standing, and good means of transportation (e.g., a car of a well-known brand name). In addition to these material and human elements, there are temporal considerations. Good social success occurs during the working age (between twenty and sixty-five) and accompanies the individual until his death. This temporal dimension is evident in the following remarks by Alassane:

A fifteen-year-old child who has acquired material wealth is not yet socially successful. On the contrary, he is to be feared. He lacks wisdom and a sense of responsibility because at this age he is normally still in the hands of his parents. Generally, these precociously rich young people become arrogant, disrespectful, and their wealth abandons them before old age. At the same time, for a seventy-year-old person who has just had enough property, and who now wants to marry a woman and have children, he has not succeeded because he cannot enjoy this property for a long time. (Parakou, November 22, 2022)

It is clear from these remarks that social success has its age and is linked to an idea about an appropriate life course. It should ideally begin with the age of majority, which corresponds to the socially accepted age for founding a household. Contrary to Alassane, other actors believe that it is also a social success to become rich in later life because, according to them, social success also consists of being able to leave a good inheritance to one's offspring. It thus takes into account both the present and the future.

Interestingly, while school plays an important role in social success, it is

almost relegated to the background in the current context in Benin. Indeed, as I mentioned above, school has long been considered an almost exclusive springboard to social success. Until the end of the 1980s, it was practically the products of the school that defined social success. Nevertheless, the economic crisis of the 1980s, with its consequences such as the cessation of systematic recruitment of graduates, has led to the rise of unemployment, which increases according to the level of education (Baba-Moussa 2017). Indeed, according to a study conducted in 2012 by the Institut National de Statistique et d'Analyse Economique, the unemployment rate in Benin was 12.5 percent for individuals with higher education and 8.4 percent for those with secondary education. This study also showed that the unemployment rate of individuals with higher education was about ten times higher than that of unschooled individuals. Moreover, the employment rate of uneducated youth was 78.2 percent, compared to about 31.8 percent for secondary school students (Baba-Moussa 2017: 633).

School now appears to be losing its credibility in terms of access to social success, but it is occurring at a moment when school is demanding more investment from parents. While the public sector claims that schooling is free, parents are always asked to pay a subscription to make up for the lack of resources provided by the state. Consequently, from the perspective of many young people with little or no schooling, in terms of professional success, “the individual profitability of schooling” (Thibaud 1974: 370) is not very enviable in relation to the investment that it requires (see Alber, this volume). In this regard, Sariki, a trader with no schooling experience, gives his point of view on the contribution of school to an individual’s social success in these terms:

For me, wealth is given by God. And I even think that school is like a waste of time. Because the one who went to school still has to look for a job after he graduates. And when he gets a job, his salary is limited. On the other hand, when you are in business, you earn your living quickly, and no one can know what you acquire. (Parakou, April 1, 2022)

This statement highlights the limited employment chances for graduates from schools and universities. Except for the lucky ones, nowadays, obtaining a degree, even a professional one, does not necessarily guarantee a profession. Rather, graduation appears to be a transition between two adventures: When the race for a degree ends, the quest for a job begins. This understanding of school as a waste of time is maintained by the distressing observations of the

increasing numbers of graduates in search of employment each year. Because of the unemployment of most school graduates, school no longer presents the image of an institution that ensures job placement (Ahodekon and Kponou 2019: 51). If one wants to succeed in life from the beginning of one's social majority, school is certainly not a good option. Except in exceptional cases, a bachelor's degree (equivalent to at least eighteen years of study without academic failure) is currently the minimum level required to seek (but not guarantee) a job whose remuneration does not necessarily offer possibilities for the accumulation of resources capable of conferring social success.

To corroborate this progressive loss of esteem for schooling, I refer to the post made on August 27, 2020,³ by Abraham Gbaglo, a Beninese citizen who studied linguistics at the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin), on his Facebook page:

I ask myself today, why put a child in school? Why are the school doors always open in my country? Why spend millions on a child who after sixteen years of education becomes at least a burden to his parents? What is the use of our diplomas? . . . Those who have quickly understood and whom we call "crazy" are those who give us food today. They are the ones who become our PATRONS. You parents, don't force your children to study, even less long studies. Stop having an illusion between being intellectual and being respectable and/or being yourself. The path of the millionaires, of the billionaires, is not the one that leads to the doors of the school. (My translation from French)

The post is about his impressions of the Beninese school. On his Facebook page, he titles his impression as follows: "L'école béninoise, un gaspillage et un perte de temps" (the Beninese school, a waste of time). This post and the various comments that followed sufficiently reflect the current distressed perception that people have of the school. Illusion, despair, dismay are all qualifiers that characterize this popular perception of school.

During my exchanges on the factors of social success, my various interlocutors clearly minimized school in favor of religion. They regularly mentioned the place of spirituality in the accumulation of wealth, which remains a fundamental element of social success. "It is God who gives wealth" to whomever he wishes. Pronounced out of humility and/or gratitude to God, this phrase

3. <https://web.facebook.com/groups/508623569164415/user/100011320723224/>

remains the most widely shared by all of my informants without schooling experience. They attribute their social success to God's will and at the same time question or at least relativize the postulate of the school paradigm that presents school as the only gateway to social progress, human development, open-mindedness, and the development of the capacity for analysis and discernment. This can be seen in the following words of Rachida, one of my unschooled informants:

I thank God because among those with whom I spent my childhood, there are some who found work. Others did not find a job. It could be that if I have been with them, that I have a job or that I do not have a job now. Moreover, as God saw, in the school my food was not there [i.e., my future was not there]. You know that God plans everything and leaves nothing behind. Some people work. Others do not work. Even among our father's children, there are five children, who have graduated from high school. They do not work. In addition, when I find something like money or food, I give it to them, and their wives and children eat. I cannot be jealous of them. Maybe I feel sorry for them. From time to time I give them a thousand francs, as the hand does not reach the back [meaning, "I'm not rich, I don't have sufficient money]. When they [the five children] come among us, the one who has the yam, the mahogany, he sells to be able to help them. (Parakou, November 8, 2022; my translation from Baatonu)

This is how Rachida explained her position, as somebody who was not enrolled, toward those who are schooled. As Rachida exemplifies, my informants, almost unanimously, recognized that it is God who grants wealth. Generally, the unschooled but economically prosperous actors do not show jealousy toward their educated brothers and sisters. As can be seen from Rachida's words, she was not lucky enough to go to school. On the other hand, she has learned weaving that allows her to support herself, to take care of her children, but also to help financially her siblings who went to school but who did not get jobs that would have allowed them to be financially independent. This precariousness of her brothers leads Rachida not to envy them, and mitigates the regret that she had of not having been schooled. She even feels that she could have been in the same precarious situation if she had gone to school. Many who have not attended school but are economically successful share this feeling of Rachida's. The general perception that emerges is that it is a waste of time to complete one's schooling without finding a job and be

obliged to learn a trade or to return to the village to engage in agriculture to earn a living. Returning to agriculture, learning a trade, or undertaking other income-generating activity is considered incompatible with the diploma obtained. It seems like starting all over again and makes people regret the time spent at school.

SCHOOL PERCEIVED AS A FACILITATOR OF SUCCESS

Paradoxically, despite this image marked by disappointment, school is still desired by actors with little or no educational experience. Their discourse is filled with regret for not having been to school. These regrets are fueled not by the revenues that school provides to graduates, but rather because of the constraints they face in their daily activities.

Like any citizen, illiteracized persons have to go to public services for administrative formalities or to the hospital for treatment. Traders are confronted with bureaucracy related to their field of activity, and artisans in the handicraft sector have been forced by reforms to adapt to the related bureaucratic practices. Not knowing how to read or write makes them subject to the goodwill of state agents. This can make them more vulnerable to malicious behavior. Because of their inability to read the written norms in their domain of activity by themselves, they are often victims of overcharging, overpayment of fees, and swindling. Moreover, one can implicitly see in the following words of Amidou, an illiterate trader and transporter whom I met during my fieldwork, his regret at not having been to school:

All my children go to school, and I have enrolled them so that they do not suffer like me in my travels. It is not necessarily so that they can find a job. For me what is important is that they know how to read and write. Sometimes you find yourself in situations where even before you find someone to help you with the translation, it is already too late. In addition, I always say, if I had gone to school, I wouldn't be at this stage. It's true that God gives, but I would be further along. (Amidou, Parakou, February 14, 2022)

Similar to Amidou, many unschooled people still think that their social situation would be better than what they are experiencing if they had gone to school. Here the image that school presents is one that promotes social status. They believe that school fosters open-mindedness and a greater capacity for

analysis, which are indispensable for any evolution in activities. Thus, the desire for school is determined by the needs of these unschooled actors. It is not driven by the desire to accumulate wealth, but by the need for ease of communication and procedure in their business. Thus, some of these actors do not hesitate to engage in literacy processes by enrolling in very expensive (sixty-nine euros per month) literacy or adult education courses taught in French. It is to ensure that their children avoid the same difficulties that they educate them at least at the secondary school level. Obtaining the diploma of *brevet d'étude du premier cycle* (BEPC) is the ideal, but not necessary. They consider that this level is the minimum for a citizen to be able to adapt to the economic and professional environment. With this level, the citizen would have acquired the essentials, which consist in knowing how to read, write, and understand administrative things to reduce the vulnerability to being deceived in exchanges with his economic and professional environment.

We no longer think about the state's employment when we put our children in school. Nevertheless, if it allows them to express themselves in French, to write and to read, it is already good. It doesn't matter which class is reached, as long as the child can defend himself. When he is lucky enough to get a job, it's not necessarily what he's going to give us as parents that counts. Sometimes people come to you, the parent. They ask you to help them contact your child to help them in his administration or elsewhere. It is already a source of pride for us parents. (Latifatou, shopkeeper, Parakou, November 18, 2022; my translation from Baatonu)

In any case, it is safe to say that school is still necessary, as many of my research partners stated, to facilitate administrative and professional relations. School is perceived as necessary but is not a guarantee of social success. It provides an opportunity to integrate oneself into the literate and bureaucratic environment in order to defend oneself and provides a certain social prestige. The representation of school as a waste of time is maintained by its inability to allow the accumulation of resources from the first moments of active age. As indicated above, the school is now a bearer of uncertainty. This perception of school as a waste of time revolves around a comparison between those who have dropped out of school to devote themselves to an income-generating activity or to learn a trade, which they exercise to earn a living, and those who have completed their schooling but are unemployed.

The school requires investment in time without guaranteeing a better future. In the same post, Abraham Gbaglo pointed out a Beninese reality. He writes:

To have the license, for those who have a well-made head, it will be necessary to do sixteen years of study. Those who have embarked on different trades . . . have become big bosses with several apprentices. Others have opted for trade and have today become great businessmen, millionaires or even billionaires. Even those who have chosen to become farmers live better because many have luxury vehicles, trucks that interest them, owners of several rentals. Even if there are some who do not have any of that, they at least manage to meet their basic needs and have children who call them “Daddy,” “Mommy.” However, you, who have the certificate of primary studies, the baccalaureate, the license, the master’s degree, and even the doctorate, what do you do with your diploma? How many graduates feed on their degree? Barely 20 percent or at most 30 percent. Well, despite your degree, today you work for those you used to call “crazy.” After your diplomas, you become a petrol seller, mobile money agent, mason’s assistant, etc. and that is if you get the chance. (My translation from French)

My informants see school as an asset, a facilitator of success in activities, and perceive its lack as a handicap in many activities. There is a general recognition that, nowadays, it is best to go to school first even if you want to work in the field. However, they remain convinced and make it clear in our conversations that inspiration for a career and the ability to carry it out successfully are not acquired solely through school.

CONCLUSION

People’s commitments to education are ambivalent. Much of this ambivalence stems from people’s personal experiences and observations. Unemployed educated people do not see it as useful because of the disappointment of their expectations to find a job at the end of their training. Moreover, the social success of unschooled actors has made some reconsider the usefulness of school, or consider schooling as just one potential asset rather than the sole means of social success. Those who have not experienced it see it as a means of improving their performance and output in their activities.

Through all of this ambivalence, school still confers social prestige, a prestige coveted by those who did not go to school, even when they have fairly good social well-being. Schooled individuals are not admired for their social status built on their wealth; rather, they are admired because of the skills they possess to participate in an environment largely dominated by literacy practices that ask for the need for writing in daily life.

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CHAPTER 13

Privilege of Prayer

Moral Becoming as Class Formation in Postcolonial Tanzania

HANSJÖRG DILGER

In postcolonial Tanzania, the promise of universal education has guided the formulation and implementation of education policies. During the socialist *Ujamaa* period, this promise was applied mostly to primary education, but also to adult education and training and educating the peasantry (Stambach 2000: 41ff.). This promise was also guided by the ideal of creating a “free” and “equal” society, and it included the nationalization of all private and faith-oriented schools in 1969. After transitioning to a neoliberal market economy in the early to mid-1990s, the goals of universal education were extended to the secondary education level as well. In particular, they were translated into a number of reform measures in the wake of privatization and the global push for “quality education for all” (Mushi 2009; Dilger 2022: 52–56). Since the early 2000s, a growing number of private schools—which include both secular and faith-oriented schools—together with the equally fast-growing public schools, have contributed to broader access to education on all levels (Amankwah et al. 2023).

As in other parts of Africa, church-run schools—along with other private and nongovernmental schools (Fichtner 2012; Dilger and Schulz 2013)—have played a seminal role in establishing access to education under these circumstances. These schools generally operate on the basis of—partially very high—school fees and consequently attract a middle- and upper-class clientele, even if they are open to students from different religious and denominational backgrounds. Under these conditions, such competition between

different types of educational institutions has rarely improved social equity (Hunter 2019: 125). Instead, the rapid diversification of Tanzania's educational landscape over the last twenty years has coincided with the formation of a highly unequal spectrum of middle-class positions that can be understood as a complex assemblage of affective, material, and symbolic aspirations toward "the good life" (Spronk 2020: 471)—to be achieved not exclusively, but importantly also through education (Lentz 2020: 451–452).

In this chapter I explore how the push for universal education in the context of globally driven reforms has revealed, and given rise to, new social and faith-based inequalities and contestations in postcolonial Tanzania (cf. Ndaluka and Wijzen 2014; Wijzen and Mfumbusa 2004). I argue that faith-oriented schools—not only the newly (re)established schools of the former mission churches, but also from the evangelical (Stambach 2010) and parts of the Islamic spectrum (Dohrn 2017)—have benefited strongly from national and global efforts to increase access to education, and the corresponding decline of the quality of public schooling (Dilger 2013). Building on ethnographic research in two Catholic schools in Dar es Salaam, I show how the students and staff of these schools have become caught up in conflicting perceptions of development and inequality, on the one hand, and the promise of training and becoming academically and morally superior citizens, on the other. I demonstrate that while Catholic institutions are struggling to maintain their public reputation as promoters of "social justice," their *other* public mission—and the everyday practices and interactions in the schools where I did fieldwork—were geared toward the fine-grained embodiment of a privileged social and moral status in the urban setting. In the context of this volume, I propose two interrelated arguments.

First, I argue that the privatization of the education sector and the corresponding push for universal education by national and global agencies have allowed faith-oriented schools to engage in multiple—though contradictory—goals of establishing themselves in Tanzania's education market as providers of access to a good life. These agendas can be understood as institutional "imaginaries" (Churcher et al. 2023: 8) that orient not only the aspirations and actions of the people working and studying in Catholic schools but also of those students, teachers, and families who are seeking to become a part of them. Against this background, Catholic schools pursue two diametrically opposed goals. On the one hand, they position themselves as drivers of national development and the universal access to education and, in so doing, claim to contribute to the eradication of poverty and illiteracy (Dilger 2022:

180). On the other hand, the same schools are fashioning themselves as the providers of “excellent education,” especially when appealing to their middle and upper-class clients from different religious and denominational backgrounds who invest significant amounts of money to provide their children with the best possible education (cf. Phillips and Stambach 2008: 157ff.), often with uncertain outcomes (see below). The question of which of these schools’ competing self-images is visible and relevant for whom in which context—and how these mutually exclusive agendas may serve as an alibi to pursue the other respectively (see the introduction to this volume)—does not have an unequivocal answer. Rather, *each* of these agendas can be enacted publicly as the *main* ethical mission of these schools (cf. Bochow et al. 2017: 451) in specific situations—without being questioned openly, by the public or the schools themselves, with regard to their mutual incompatibility.

Building on this argument, I demonstrate, second, that the conflicting missions of serving both the underprivileged *and* the privileged parts of the population are not simply two different forms of institutional self-representation that do not match with these schools’ de facto internal structure and practice (cf. Dilger and Warstat 2023: 235). Rather, these schools’ diverging, and potentially conflictive, agendas are navigated by students and staff in context-specific and flexible, as well as critical and self-reflexive, ways. Taken together, these navigations shape the students’ and staff’s moral becoming (Dilger 2022: 15–18) in the context of class formation and the growing social inequalities of the neoliberal market economy. By moral becoming, I refer to the embodiment of values that guide the everyday learning and teaching of students and teachers with regard to different aspects of their lives, including the self and others; body and dress; socioreligious status and difference; and the overall goals of learning and work. By reflecting on and embodying the values of their institutions, students and teachers acquire a “moral habitus” (Winchester 2008: 1755), which is the result of an intersubjective process that connects, and cuts across, the bodies and minds of the involved actors (Csordas 2008: 119). Furthermore, this embodiment of values contributes to the active building of school environments as sociomoral spaces that are both locally “emplaced” (Faubion 2011: 144) and simultaneously entwined with the ambiguous dynamics of national and transnational development, urban stratification, and class formation (cf. Fitzgerald 2017: 230–231). Under these circumstances, the (self-)categorization of Catholic schools as “excellent institutions” instills a sense of prestige (cf. van Dijk 2020: 188) among students and teachers, who often consider themselves to

be studying and teaching in socially and morally superior schools. At the same time, such perceptions of privilege are contested when, for instance, teachers—who usually come from rural and less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds—find themselves in a hierarchically subordinate position with their middle- and upper-class students and their families.

In conclusion, I argue that the focus on moral becoming reveals the way in which students and teachers negotiate their middle-class positions not only as a form of economic improvement or social status but also as an embodied, and ambivalent, “feeling of [the] structure” in which they (are struggling to) live (Spronk 2020: 471, with reference to Ahmed 2010). If middle class is a position that is not simply “out there” (Spronk 2020: 47) but has to be “done” through active boundary work and diverse cultural practices (Lentz 2020), paying attention to the “moral ordinary” highlights how individual subjects become capable of “acting upon” and reconciling mutually exclusive public self-images of their educational institutions—and the value orientations that are involved in them—in everyday life (Mattingly 2012: 179, 177). This focus also emphasizes that the moral becoming of students and teachers in the context of social inequalities and class formation is a “discontinuous” and “partial” (Lambek 2015: 309), and often fragmented and partially conflictive (Dilger 2017: 515; 2022: 14), process that involves both continuities and ruptures in relation to larger urban and societal transformations (see also Coe and Pauli 2020: 10).

The ethnographic research on which this chapter is based was conducted in 2008–10 in two Catholic schools (one primary school, one secondary school with an advanced level) located in central Dar es Salaam. Over the course of several weeks, I participated in the daily lives of these schools, conducting informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with staff and students, focusing on one classroom in each school. The research also included a questionnaire on the sociodemographic profile of the pupils and their families and the pupils’ expectations for the future, as well as a drawing project in the primary school. I also attended church services in the neighboring cathedral together with students and teachers in order to understand the role of religious practice for moral becoming in the everyday practices and interactions of the schools. To understand the two schools in the larger context of colonial and postcolonial socioreligious inequalities and politics, I studied their institutional histories and connections with various religious as well as nonreligious actors (government ministries, faith-oriented development organizations, religious leaders) within and outside of Dar es Salaam.

For this purpose, I also reviewed literature on the topic of public and private education from secondary sources, including articles in Kiswahili and English newspapers, as well as statistical data on the performance and ranking of different types of schools in Tanzania. The study was part of a larger research on the moral becoming of students and teachers in six Christian and Muslim schools in the city (Dilger 2022): As Baumann and Sunier (2004: 21) argue, it is only through comparative fieldwork that “pointed contrasts and surprising internal consistencies” become visible within and across educational settings, thereby allowing researchers to understand how the ethical imaginaries and orientations of these educational institutions are embodied in both unique and similar ways.

FROM MISSION TO MARKET: CHURCH ENGAGEMENTS WITH EDUCATION IN (POST)COLONIAL TANZANIA

By the late 2000s, Christian schools—in Kiswahili: *shule za kanisa* (schools of the church) or *shule za dini* (religious schools)¹—had become the main target for “quality education” (Sw: *elimu nzuri*) among Tanzania’s middle- and upper-class families. These schools were established usually by the Christian (mainly Catholic and Evangelical-Lutheran) churches from the mid-1990s onward. Other *shule za kanisa* had been founded by (German, British, and other international) mission churches in the colonial context but were placed under national administration in the context of the postindependent *Ujamaa* policies² and returned to the churches in the wake of privatization. All of these schools operated primarily on revenue obtained by charging sometimes very high school fees and did not receive financial support from the government, for example to pay teachers’ salaries or to improve infrastructure. Furthermore, most of these schools operated under the roof of the Christian Social Services Commission (CSSC), which was established as an umbrella organization for

1. During my research I conducted many interviews and informal conversations in Tanzania’s national language, Kiswahili. English, Tanzania’s other official language, was used mostly in the school settings themselves, where English is the mandatory language of instruction on the secondary and tertiary levels. Furthermore, in privately established church schools English was also used on the primary level—in contrast to public schools, where Kiswahili is the mandatory language of instruction from grades 1 to 7.

2. Tanzania’s socialist *Ujamaa* (Sw: extended family, kinship) period lasted from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s.

the coordination of the social welfare activities of the former mission churches in Tanzania in 1992. As the CSSC works closely with the Tanzanian government to provide social services, the organization became a symbol of the continued marginalization of the Muslim population in the country, especially among Muslim revivalist organizations (Jumbe 1994: 114ff.).³

In Tanzania and other parts of Africa, religious organizations have a long history of providing social services (Quarles van Ufford and Schoffeleers 1988; Kaiser 1996), often in close collaboration with colonial and postcolonial governments (for the field of schooling in Tanzania see Leurs et al. 2011: 14). In colonial Tanganyika, Catholic and other church-run schools became prominent providers of education after World War I, when favorable conditions were established by the British colonial administration for including Christian churches in social service provision (Dilger 2014: 57; 2022: 45ff.).⁴ While Muslim families were especially reluctant to send their children to these schools due to concerns about proselytization (Pels [1999] 2013: 226), the numerical dominance of mission schools in the education sector left few alternatives for realizing their educational aspirations.⁵ Equally important, the strong dominance of Christian, and especially Catholic, schools in the provision of education during the colonial era laid the foundation for long-lasting inequalities in society with regard to religion, region, and social background. According to Mushi (2009: 84), “At the time of independence, most of the educated people in the country were Christians who later became dominant in politics and government.”

3. No national census on the category of religious affiliation has been made in Tanzania since the 1960s. In congruence with the Tanzanian government, the US Department of State claimed in 2007 that Muslims and Christians in Tanzania were each 30–40 percent of the population, with the “remainder consisting of practitioners of other faiths and indigenous religions, and atheists.”

4. Before 1919, there was initially an overall reluctance of the colonial government to involve the Christian missions in educational work—which coincided with the good working relations between the German colonial administrators and the local Islamic elite (Pesek 2000: 98), as well as colonial perceptions of missions as a potential threat to their own authority (Nimtz 1980: 12). The situation of the mission societies and orders changed with the report of the Phelps Stokes Commission in 1923, which triggered a flourishing of (non-German) Catholic mission schools in subsequent years (Dilger 2022: 45ff.).

5. The East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS)—an organization that was funded by the Aga Khan in 1945—established its own schools in the final decades of British colonial rule. However, these schools catered mostly to the Shia Muslims of Asian origins (Kaiser 1996: 62–63) and less to the significantly larger number of “African (Sunni) Muslims” (Nimtz 1980: 86–87). The EAMWS was dissolved by the *Ujamaa* government in 1968.

After independence, President Nyerere and his socialist government made active efforts to eliminate existing differences based on religion, class, and regional or ethnic origin in working toward implementing their postcolonial vision of society. In one of Nyerere's early speeches from 1961 (Kaniki 1974), he emphasized that neither religious nor ethnic difference was to play a role in the new societal and political order, and that all Tanzanian citizens were to benefit:

Our nation shall be a nation of free and equal citizens . . . We have said that neither race nor tribe, nor religion or cleverness, nor anything else, could take away from a man his own rights as an equal member of society. This is what we have now to put into practice. (Quoted in Heilman and Kaiser 2002, 700)

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, numerous programs were launched for the reduction of inequalities in the education sector (Stambach 2000: 41ff.), including the introduction of a quota system for all regions of the country and nationalizing mission schools. However, despite the partial success of these measures—for instance, with regard to the decline of illiteracy rates (Stites and Semali 1991: 53–55)—the goal of reaching universal access to education continued to face massive challenges in the light of Tanzania's growing economic and political problems (cf. Lugalla and Ngwaru 2019). From the mid-1980s onward, the country pushed toward the adoption of massive structural and economic reforms, but in 1994 Cooksey, Court, and Makau still stated, “The high degree of overlap between class, religious, ethnic, regional, and gender inequalities makes education a potential minefield for future politicians and policymakers” (229).

In 1995, Tanzania's government embarked in the privatization of the education sector, thereby creating the conditions for the subsequent diversification—and segregation—of the educational market. In addition, from the early 2000s onward the country launched a series of internationally supported programs for increasing enrollment rates in primary and secondary education, including the sector development programs for the implementation of the “education for all” goals (following the Dakar agreement in 2000) and the “Big Results Now in Education” program in 2013 (Swai 2019). In their essence, these various programs—cofinanced by credit-cum-grants by the World Bank and other international organizations—aimed, first, at the expansion of the public education sector, for instance through the strength-

ening of the so-called community schools.⁶ Second, these transnationally co-funded programs had the goal of enhancing the *quality* of public education, which had suffered massively in the wake of the rapid expansion of the public education sector, as it was unable to provide the human and material resources necessary for such an ambitious undertaking.

In contrast to public schools, private—and especially church-run—schools benefited strongly from the growing weakness of the public education sector and students and families’ quests for educational alternatives. In the early 2000s, a World Bank–funded study expressed concern about the low competitiveness of market-dependent schools, which were said to be of poor quality with regard to educational standards (Lassibille and Tan 2001). However, the widely shared perception of a “learning crisis” in Tanzania late in that decade (Sumra and Katabaro 2014: v) triggered a dramatic shift in the relationship between the private and the public educational sectors, making nongovernmental, usually fee-charging, schools increasingly attractive to students and their families.⁷ In particular, these massive shifts enhanced the reputation of the Christian schools, which, in the early 2000s, were still lagging behind (Lassibille and Tan 2001: 164). In the late 2000s, the Christian schools had become the preferred option for a good education, especially for rural and urban, middle-class families who were able to afford their services.

On the leadership level of the Catholic Church, the breathtaking move that the *shule za kanisa* had made from marginal to top-ranked providers of education within barely a decade was not discussed openly. In 2008, I had an interview with the then auxiliary bishop of Dar es Salaam, Methodius Kilaini. According to Kilaini, the church’s history of social service provision was a story of success that was interrupted neither by the two world wars nor by the *Ujamaa* regime. Thus, the relationship between the churches and the

6. The community schools, which had first been established during the *Ujamaa* period, were constructed by communities and financed by the government in regard to recurrent costs (especially teacher salaries)—a model that was in line with the World Bank’s preference for participatory development and community ownership at the time. Furthermore, Lassibille and Tan (2001: 152) found that community schools that were established during the 1990s were relatively strong in their performance, and thus surpassed their predecessors of the 1970s, which had been abandoned previously in the wake of structural reforms because of their alleged failure “to be understood as a concept by rural populations” (Buchert 1994: 141). This temporary success of community schools quickly ended with their massive expansion into the public education sector in the wake of education-for-all policies.

7. In contrast, the attendance of public primary schools are “free” apart from the payment of schoolbooks and uniforms. Public secondary schools charge comparatively modest fees.



Figure 1. Cartoon by Marco Tibasima for Human Rights Watch illustrating the continued “Barriers to Secondary Education in Tanzania” (2017).

Source: <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/photo-essay/2017/02/14/barriers-secondary-education-tanzania-cartoons>

Tanzanian government remained good overall after independence, despite initial irritations among church representatives about a growing “Marxist approach in [Tanzania’s] development strategy” (Sivalon 1995: 184). However, church officials realized quickly that the new political system had little concrete “effect on the church’s involvement in the provision of social services” (Sivalon 1995: 185)—though its emphasis shifted from formal education “to socio-economic development, rural health and non-formal education projects” (185). Against this background, many church leaders and priests began to embrace the socialist system actively by framing the values of “family” and “community” in increasingly Christian terms (87–88). Furthermore, when the *Ujamaa* government launched its villagization program in 1973, some grasped the enforced resettling of rural populations to *Ujamaa* villages as an opportunity for expanding control over their own rural parishioners (Jennings 2008: 86–86).

On the basis of their continuously good collaboration with Tanzania’s various governments, Kilaini argued, the Catholic Church, as well as other former mission churches, had been able to continue playing a central socio-

political role in *contemporary* Tanzania. When I asked the former auxiliary bishop how he would describe the Catholic Church's engagement in the country—as “development,” “charity,” or “social justice”—he vehemently opted for “development” that was simultaneously guided by “social justice.” According to Kilaini, the Catholic Church had established “unique structures” through which its various suborganizations were able to reach people directly: “We have passed the period of charity,” he said. The Catholic Church, he insisted, was no longer satisfied to “fill potholes”; instead, it asked: “*Why* do we have holes?” (emphasis added). However, despite this explicit institutional commitment of the church to the building of a just and equitable society, the actual work of Catholic social service organizations often had very different social effects.

During the time of my research, there was widely shared public agreement on the Christian schools' overall significance for a successful education sector, in which the former mission churches claimed to “own and manage . . . more than 10% of education services in Tanzania” (Christian Social Services Commission n.d.b), and on the alleged moral and academic superiority of these schools. These assertions were often coupled with statements—by teachers and students as well as administrators in public and private settings—about the perceived weakness of government schools, which had been imagined as foundational for securing a “good life” (Sw: *maisha mazuri*) and, potentially, a job throughout the 1990s. This discourse was also linked to the perception of a “learning crisis” in public schools, in which pupils were not sufficiently protected from the (strongly gendered) “moral dangers” of urban life from the perspective of parents and students themselves (see Kwayu, this volume). Ms. Martin, an official of the CSSC, expressed a similar perception by underlining the allegedly strong commitment of the teachers and staff of “church schools” to achieve students' good performance. She ascribed her perception to the fact that these schools had to compete with other fee-based institutions over better-off clients in the educational market—and contrasted this impression with the operation of public schools, which “do not have to worry about the money”:

In church schools, teachers are responsible for their work. If you don't perform well, no parent will take their children to this school. It is like a business for attracting students so that your school can work. Government schools have a fixed budget and don't have to worry about the money. Even my own

children have the vision of going to a church school because they will score a high division there.⁸

In the following section, I will show how the moral becoming of the students and staff in the schools of my study has become entwined with, and conducive to, the growing segregation of the educational market and the ambiguous dynamics of class formation in Dar es Salaam.

FOR GOD AND OUR NATION: SOCIORELIGIOUS INEQUALITIES AND MORAL BECOMING IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The St. Joseph schools, where I conducted my research, include a primary school and a secondary school with an advanced level (the “high school”), which are located in the inner-city area of Dar es Salaam, right next to the St. Joseph Cathedral and the offices of the Archdiocese of Dar es Salaam (see Figure 2). The buildings were erected by the German order of the Benedictines, who established the primary school in the early twentieth century. After the end of World War I, the Vatican asked the Baldegger Schwestern—a German-speaking order of nuns under the Franciscan order originating from Switzerland—to take over the work of the Benedictines, who had been expelled from Tanganyika by the new British governor. After independence in 1961, both the primary school and the secondary school (at the time without the advanced level) that was established by the Baldegger Schwestern in 1956 were nationalized. In the early 2000s, the Tanzanian government returned the schools to the Catholic Church, which opened the corresponding high school in 2010.

In 2010, Sister Sandra Stich, a teacher by training who had arrived in Tanzania from Switzerland in 1962, still resided on the premises of the St. Joseph schools.⁹ During our interview, she spoke affectionately about the socialist notion of “self-reliance” (Sw: *kujitegemea*), which was good, she said, because “the people still knew that they have to work.” Today, she claimed, students were just “looking for money.” According to Sister Sandra, education had become dominated by the payment of very high school fees, which could be

8. Anastasia Martin, interview by author, October 10, 2008, Dar es Salaam.

9. “Nationalization” in the case of the St. Joseph schools referred to the school administration, which was assigned to Tanzanians teachers. The school buildings, and the territory on which they stood, remained the property of the Archdiocese of Dar es Salaam, and the (mostly retired) sisters from Switzerland continued residing in them.



Figure 2. Inner yard of the St. Joseph's Millennium High School with the St. Joseph's Cathedral in the background.
Photograph by Hansjörg Dilger.

afforded only by the “upper class” (*obere Klasse*). In her critique, she included also the St. Joseph schools that had been placed under the administration of a Tanzanian and Kenyan¹⁰ order of nuns respectively by the church. On the one hand, she said, she was well aware that the sisters of these orders had to charge high tuition fees in view of the services they provided, which included meals in both schools and boarding in the high school, among others. On the other hand, she claimed that the students of the high school, especially, were “losing connection” to the “real life” and were competing with each other for status. As she put it:

One day, one boy arrived with a big trolley. What is such a suitcase for in the school? But this is also a kind of competition, isn't it? Nyerere said that competition is capitalistic. These young people have competition, not in learning but in material things [*in Dingen*]. Who has more money can show off. Young people need to compete, but not in having but in being [*nicht im Haben, sondern im Sein*].

10. Shortly after I completed my fieldwork, the primary school was also taken over by a Tanzanian order of nuns.

The students' middle- and upper-class backgrounds confirmed how their families were able to afford the very high school fees of the two St. Joseph schools.¹¹ The majority of the students' fathers were businessmen or employed in finance and accounting, while the remainder worked as engineers, lawyers, or in some other white-collar job. The mothers worked mostly in business or economics as well as in various other white-collar employments in the public and private sector. In this context, students shared the general experience that investing heavily in their education usually led to a successful outcome in terms of their career prospects. At the same time, education on its own (i.e., independent of the social and professional networks that were crucial for securing employment, especially in the public sector) was hardly ever a guarantee of such success, and investing in high school fees was therefore always a risk for families in terms of how it would pay off in the future (see Quaretta, this volume).¹² However, the schools played a central role in (re)producing not only "a materially 'successful' elite" but also "an expanded Catholic middle class" (Grace 2003: 48). Thus, while the St. Joseph schools had the policy of admitting students from *all* religious and denominational backgrounds, the majority of the primary and high school students (around 70 percent) were Roman Catholic, while the remainder belonged to the Protestant churches (25–30 percent) or had (in very few instances) a Muslim background.

The students and teachers of the St. Joseph schools were highly aware—and often proud—that they were studying and working in unique educational environments. They expressed this perception of being "the chosen other" (Simpson 1998) in a discourse that compared the conditions of studying and teaching at St. Joseph to both public and other—mostly less, but sometimes also more, successful—private and church-run schools. Multiple students whom I talked with claimed that Christian schools like St. Joseph had good teachers and learning materials, were well managed, and made them "spiritually strong." One of them was Tahir¹³ (eighteen), one of the few Muslim students of the high school, who would have preferred to attend a well-performing government school or, alternatively, the Feza boys' school, which

11. In March 2010, the maximum annual payment for a student's education at the high school amounted to TSH 3,715,000, which equaled about USD 2,690 at the time.

12. Such a perception was widely shared by my interlocutors within and outside the schools I studied, and was also confirmed by anecdotal evidence from school leaders about the career prospects of former graduates.

13. All names of the students, teachers and administrators appearing in this section are pseudonyms.

he referred to as a “Muslim school” (cf. Dohrn 2017).¹⁴ However, when he was not admitted to Feza due to his insufficient grades on the ordinary level, he opted for St. Joseph High:

First of all [we learn] to be good people here, [more] than in government schools [where] you can do many things that are immoral, like smoking. Also, if you see the results of Form 4 from last year, the top ten schools in Tanzania were, first, private schools and, second, they were Christian schools.

The close connection between the moral disciplining of students, on the one hand, and the aspiration for a strong academic performance, on the other, was tied intimately to the Catholic schools’ overall goal of training pupils as future members of society and the nation, and the notion of “serving God.” Thus, the high school had the school slogan “For God and Our Nation” and aimed at providing an environment that was “conducive to excellent learning, civil maturity, accountability, moral integrity, personal responsibility, and human dignity” (St. Joseph’s Millennium High School, n.d.). It also had the goal of “leading the students in their care to a greater fidelity to God, a sense of justice for all and a love of neighbor that will form responsible leaders for the future.” In their everyday operations, this agenda translated into a combination of secular education (based on the national curriculum) and moral education (which included the moral disciplining and joint prayers at the morning assemblies as well as the mandatory attendance of church services, among others).

Similar to the students, the teachers of the two St. Joseph schools shared the perception that they taught at a school that was “distinct.” Many of them also emphasized the good reputation that their schools held in public opinion and considered their teaching experience at St. Joseph an important milestone in their careers. For instance, Mr. Kaduri (thirty-three years old) placed the employment at St. Joseph in a wider biographical perspective in which he aimed for the best possible employment in the future: “With teaching at this school, we are also preparing our CV. . . . If they see the name Saint Joseph [in the future]—you can teach at any school you like.”

Advancing their social position in life was a central concern among the teachers, who often came from rural areas and poorer socioeconomic back-

14. The Feza schools, which are linked to the Gülen movement, were among the top-ranked schools in Tanzania at the time of my research.

grounds. Thus, while class formation in the St. Joseph schools was mostly a matter of transgenerational continuity among the students, it was a matter of upward social mobility for the teachers—as well as their extended families, who often depended on them financially. In general, the teaching profession has had a low reputation in Tanzania for many decades due to poor remuneration and working conditions (Towse et al. 2002), a perception that has worsened with the structural adjustment reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and that includes the perceived discrepancy “between the rhetoric of education as the foundation for development and the [low] importance attached to teachers and teaching” (Towse et al. 2002: 645). While working conditions were better in many of the private (and especially Christian) schools, most teachers aspired for an improvement in employment—either in a better school in Dar es Salaam or a different profession (Towse et al. 2002: 645). This aspiration was expressed by Mr. Usman (twenty-seven years old), whose parents and siblings had supported him in his own education. He saw it as his obligation “to look out for them [his family]” in return—*before* thinking about his personal progress in life. When I asked him about his “dreams” for the future, he said:

You know, I want to be somebody in society. A very famous businessman, that is my dream, possessing my own properties, possessing my own house, fancy houses, cars, etc. But first I have to work to support my family. When the parents [work] for you to get [an] education, they expect something in return. So I have to pay the price because my parents and siblings supported me unconditionally during my studies.

In the context of middle-class formation in Tanzania’s Christian elite schools, the sense of belonging to a privileged group of people was interwoven with the dynamics of differentiation *beyond* (Pauli 2018) as well as *within* (Lentz 2015: 26) the institutional environment. Among the teachers at St. Joseph, this “middle-class boundary work” (Lentz 2015: 26) within the space of the schools included perceptions of inequality, which they articulated with regard to the elevated socioeconomic backgrounds of students and parents. They contrasted their own experience of growing up in modest rural environments with that of the St. Joseph students, who came from families who lived in the wealthy areas of Dar es Salaam, in houses in which children had separate rooms in flats or houses that were inhabited exclusively by the families. They also noticed that the students were brought to school by the



Figure 3. Premises of the St. Joseph's primary school and the adjacent residence of the Baldegger Schwestern with parents' fancy cars parked in front of them.

Photograph by Hansjörg Dilger.

school bus or were dropped off in a fancy car by their parents. In this context, the teachers experienced this kind of class disparity as “a loss of respect” (Hartmann 2008: 69).

The teachers' perception of their own lower social status was pronounced in the high school. Thus, Mr. Kaduri said that it was “challenging” for him to teach students from wealthy families because they would “look down” on him. When I asked him how he personally felt about the implication of Catholic schools in the growing social stratification of Tanzania society, he said that he did “not like it” because he felt that it was his actual responsibility as a teacher and Christian to teach children from less privileged families:

MR. KADURI: Kids from wealthy families—sometimes they look down at you. Maybe you wear jeans, and he or she wears a watch of [TZH] 50,000, so [they think] “I am taught by a very poor teacher.” [For the rich people] teaching as a career is meant for [people] who are less intelligent and very poor. So we are [creating a] classed society.

HANSJÖRG: It seems like the church is playing a role in this process, too.

MR. KADURI: As a Christian I don't see it as a good thing. I wish that I

could teach [in rural areas], because people from the villages do not have good teachers. But unfortunately I cannot, because I need the money.

The dilemma that Mr. Kaduri felt with regard to being torn between his moral obligation as a Christian toward society *as a whole*—versus his actual teaching of students *from wealthy families*—was also expressed by the school management. Thus, while the leadership of the Catholic Church—as well as official commitments of the CSSC to serve “all people impartially” (Christian Social Services Commission n.d.b)—embraced a public self-image of promoting equity through education, the staff members of the schools were conscious of the stark discrepancy between the ideals of the Catholic Church as a promoter of social justice, on the one hand, and the actual societal implications of their everyday work in one of the growing number of Catholic “elite schools” (Connell 2016: 40), on the other. For instance, the headmistress of the St. Joseph high school, Sister Leonora, said that while it was important to create a distinct school environment with particular services in a highly competitive educational market, she was simultaneously very much aware of the divisive social effects that such competition had:

You know, I am a Christian, but sometimes I think that the church divides society. I studied at the university, and the students who had gone to the Christian schools looked down on the others. But we can't stop doing this just because there are some things wrong.

At the same time, and in close connection with their sensation of “doing wrong,” the school leadership felt a strong responsibility toward less privileged communities in the wider educational and urban setting of Dar es Salaam. This sensation of a “critical citizenship” (James 2019: 40ff.) that aimed to improve other people's lives *beyond* their respective families and congregation (Lentz 2015: 35) translated into the organization of charity events at the primary school, including the annual visits of and donations to an orphanage in the city (Dilger 2017: 529–30). In addition, the high school offered a limited number of free places at the school for well-performing students from poor families. While the cardinal of the archdiocese supported the initiative through church funds, the school administration kept the names of the sponsored students secret. As the headmistress stated:

Only the top management knows. All [these students] came from government schools but performed very well. We called their parents and told them: “Go and buy uniforms and books if you can.” But we don’t tell this to the others because if the others know that they are helped, they look down on them.

In this sense, thus, working and studying in one of the Christian “elite schools” has come to serve a double function. On the one hand, it serves as an alibi for the church to realize its institutional commitment to building a “just” and “equitable” society through material support of socially disadvantaged groups and families. On the other hand, it has become an opportunity for the staff—and partly the students¹⁵—of the St. Joseph schools to translate their moral obligations as Christians into concrete engagements for the sociomaterial improvement of less well-off people’s lives. However, most of these engagements were born out of charitable motivations and did not have a significant impact on the structural inequalities in education in the city of Dar es Salaam as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Catholic schools have been at the forefront of the provision of education—and the corresponding production of socioreligious inequalities—in large parts of Tanzania’s colonial and postcolonial histories. Especially after World War I, the mission schools of the Catholic Church and Catholic orders became the main providers of education in Tanganyika in the context of British colonial rule. They also represented the primary educational spaces for the formation of the country’s later social and political elites (Mushi 2009: 84)—much to the grievance of Muslim organizations and activists who experienced this educational dominance of Christians as oppression (Said, n.d.; Ndaluka et al. 2014: 62). After independence in 1961, all missionary—and other private—schools were nationalized by the socialist government in 1969. They became significant players in the provision of schooling only again with the privatization of education from the mid-1990s onward, as well as the establishing of the CSSC in the early 1990s. Since then, the CSSC has advocated “for a conducive envi-

15. While scholarships for individual students were kept secret in the school, some students and teachers did know about them. One primary school pupil informed me about two “orphans” in her class who were “sponsored by the sisters.” She said that the “whole class made an effort to make them feel welcome in our school!”

ronment for accessible and quality education in Tanzania” (Christian Social Services Commission n.d.a), especially in rural but increasingly also in urban settings.

Contrary to the CSSC’s original goal to establish equity through the provision of social services, church-run schools were quickly caught up in the logics of market competition. Today, Catholic schools are among the top-ranked—and also most expensive—schools in Tanzania, with regard to both their academic performance and their perceived ability to provide high-quality secular and moral education. Such perceptions encourage families to invest high fees in their children’s education, although the returns on such investments are always uncertain, since getting a job in Tanzania today can depend on networks of patronage and “good connections.” This shift toward becoming—again—the top-ranked providers of primary and secondary education was not least due to World Bank–funded programs that aimed at increasing primary and secondary school enrollment from the early 2000s onward, but simultaneously reinforced the segregation of the rapidly growing, and increasingly diversified, educational sector (Dilger 2013). In this context, the national and globally supported push for universal education was not only decisive for (re)positioning Catholic—and other faith-oriented—schools in the leading ranks of Tanzania’s educational market. This globally driven development also evokes the question how the conflicting agenda of the Catholic schools to *provide education for all*—and their simultaneous promise to *train the country’s social elite*—coalesce in the everyday making and remaking of students and teachers as subjects of these schools. It also beckons the question how the (re)configuration of students’ and teachers’ subjectivities in these schools is entwined with the dynamics of class formation and the production of social inequalities in Tanzania at large.

As I have shown in this chapter, the students’ and teachers’ quests for a good life in the faith-oriented schools of my study were inseparably entangled with the various political and economic settings in which the country’s educational market has been established since independence. These political-economic contexts define these schools’ structural and curricular frameworks, for instance through the implementation of global and national policies and reform agendas, including the push for universal education; they also implicate them in nation building (Coe 2005; Fumanti 2006; Phillips 2011) and the production and reproduction of the sociopolitical and sociomoral order at large. Under these circumstances, the students of Christian schools are engaged in maintaining the class positions of their fami-

lies, while teachers see their job mostly as an opportunity for upward social mobility—potentially *beyond* the field of education into business and other economic domains (cf. Voigt 2021). Closely entwined with their catalyzing effect for processes of urbanization and class formation, the mere existence of faith-oriented schools—and their position in Tanzania’s educational market today—is entrenched in the wider reconfigurations of the relationships between state, society, and the neoliberal economy in African countries over the last decades (Mbembe 2001; Ferguson 2006). The (partial) withdrawal of postcolonial African states from the provision of social services to their citizens, and the simultaneous push to provide education *for all*, has triggered the entrance of a wide range of private and nongovernmental—secular and religious—actors into the field of education, all of which play a role in molding children and young people into “good moral citizens.”

The ethnographic focus on the moral becoming of students and teachers in Catholic schools shows that their negotiation, and the active making, of middle-class positions is an ambiguous process that simultaneously reflects the contradictory institutional agendas of their schools. In particular, I have shown that the everyday operations of the two St. Joseph schools in Dar es Salam are guided by conflicting “imaginaries” that are operationalized and embodied in situated and flexible ways. In the context of universal education policies, both agendas are thereby not just mutually exclusive, but also may be understood as complementary missions that have come to serve as mutual alibis for pursuing the public goals of Catholic institutions *simultaneously*. Thus, on the one hand, the agenda of serving disadvantaged parts of the population gives legitimacy to those strands of the work of the Catholic Church that present themselves—and are broadly perceived—as social justice and/or charitable engagements. On the other hand, their performance as highly successful—and usually very expensive—schools allows Catholic institutions to pursue their charitable work by cultivating, and practicing, an attitude of social responsibility among their middle- and upper-class clients—and to contribute to the emancipation of Tanzanian youth in general. At the same time, however, it has become clear that in the schools of my study it is especially the *second* agenda of being excellent providers of education that is driving their work (and their public perception among families and students) in the educational market and that is crucial for the ways in which Catholic schooling has become implicated in the contested dynamics of capitalism, class formation, and the deepening of social inequalities.

Highlighting the mutual frictions between institutional imaginaries—

and the moral contradictions that students and teachers face with regard to their embodiment—does not mean that Catholic schools are “doing worse” (see Fisher 1997; Dilger 2009) than other public or private institutions in the context of universal education policies. As social science research on education and schooling has shown, educational projects are *always* involved in the production of social inequalities—even if they are inherently guided by the ideals of equity and justice (Ergas 1982; Aiston and Walraven 2024). In wide parts of Africa, universal education requires the engagement of a diverse range of educational actors, as public schools will rarely be able to provide access to different levels of education for *all* groups of a society (see Fichtner 2012). This being said, the focus on the education alibi allows for a more critical look at how the diverging institutional agendas of specific educational actors have translated into concrete—often contradictory—societal developments on the ground. In the case of the Catholic schools in Tanzania, this focus on the education alibi can serve as a starting point to reflect on how they have done so with regard to delivering their promises to society, and how their implication in the large-scale forces of the market and development have reconfigured their ethical agendas—and the actual social effects of their work—over the last decades.

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