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The Yokes of Gender and Class: The Policy Reforms and Implications for Equitable Access to Education in Kenya

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Kenya, a former British colony, attained its political independence in 1963. Despite its political independence, Kenya inherited a colonial education system that was based on segregation and exclusion because of race, culture, class, and gender. This is a qualitative analysis examining the education system in Kenya. In the analysis, we explore gender and class barriers that may inhibit education for women in Kenya. We review existing secondary literature on policy documents; reflect on our experiences and observations; and also reflect on interviews with Njeri and Nyokavi, who live in the 21st century 'post-colonial' Kenya. As Kenyan women from subsistence-farming backgrounds, we, the authors, seemed destined to remain at the very bottom of the hierarchical education structure established during the colonial period. We explore the impact of contemporary, globally and locally mandated education policy reforms and emerging social service provision partnerships. These are often packaged as policy reforms and viable strategies of a just, equitable, and fair distribution of opportunities for all, meant to correct the colonial disparities. Our arguments are informed by the system's discursive framework (Wane 2000b) and the anti-colonial discursive framework (Amadiume 1989, 1997; Dei 1999, 2000; Oyewumi 1997; Wane 2002). The analysis authenticates that, since independence, Kenya has realized tremendous educational growth at all levels. However, such educational reforms have resulted in the exclusion of many children who are from low socio-economic groups, in essence replacing the racial segregation of the colonial system with cultural and class-based inequities of the post-colonial society.

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Introduction

The colonial legacy of segregation and inequitable distribution of resources and the unprecedented pace of global change, characterized by, among other things, the continual relocation and displacement of populations, have created significant socio-economic inequities in Kenyan society. The rapid population and political transformation has, in turn, resulted in the pressing need for related structures, including educational systems and organizations, to reflect and respond to the growing diversity and inequity (Iseke-Barnes and Wane 2000).

Drawing from the shifting socio-economic and political scenario, this paper examines some of the policy reforms, through both documentary sources and our experiences. We discuss how such reforms, on the one hand, have influenced educational growth but have also contributed to the marginalization of children from low-income groups, the girls in particular. Using systems and anti-colonial discursive frameworks, we analyze multiple equity issues arising from various cultural and class dynamics and their implications for access to education. Further, systems discourse enables us to explore interconnections between schools, students, and society (Wane 2000b). In addition, we are able to examine the relationships between class, gender, and culture. An anti-colonial discursive approach, on the other hand, affirms the pedagogic need to confront the challenge of social diversity and the urgency of creating an educational system that is both more inclusive and better able to respond to the varied local concerns about formal schooling (Dei 2000). This is a qualitative analysis examining the education system in Kenya. In the analysis, we explore gender and class barriers that may inhibit education for women in Kenya. We review existing secondary literature on policy documents, and, using vignettes, we reflect on our experiences and observations and also reflect on interviews with Njeri and Nyokavi, who live in the 21st century 'post-colonial' Kenya. The paper is based on work in progress on comparative policy analyses of Kenya, India, and Canada, which attempts to interrogate how equity could be created through schooling (Reva, Wane, and Gathenya, Creating equity through schooling: A cross-national study of Kenya, India and Canada). Our discussion is grounded in the global educational goal of Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO 2000), in the context of the current figures for children who have not attained formal schooling.

This analysis builds on the work of scholars such as George Dei

(1999; 2000), Annette Henry (1998), Linda Smith, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), Vivian Gunn Morris and Curtis L. Morris and Angela Valenzuela (2000), to name just a few, who are questioning the inadequacy of social, educational, and political practices that do not speak to the variety of human experiences or to the diverse history of events and ideas that have shaped human growth and development. Examining educators', administrators', and learners' locations, the politics of meaning in education, and issues of bias in education can highlight the problems associated with institutions of learning as sites for the reproduction of social inequalities (Wane 2000b). The theoretical and practical underpinnings of cultural studies, critical pedagogy, feminist studies, anti-racism education, and Aboriginal education are important avenues that assist in the interrogation of power inequalities and bias in educational settings and society (Wane 2000b). Employing critical educational pedagogies and social theories makes it possible to articulate a pedagogic discourse to understand the political organization and relationship of school and society. Assumptions of what constitutes the norm, what qualifies as valid knowledge, and what alternatives to the dominant discourses exist are some of the pedagogical challenges to be confronted (Wane 2000a).

As educators, we must counter the negative effects of oppression and address areas where critical work is needed. We acknowledge that this is not an easy task but rather one that will require a great deal of sensitivity and knowledge to address the intersecting issues of equity in our classrooms. As Waterfall (2000) eloquently puts it, 'To do so effectively requires that our praxis be informed by a solid framework. Without such a framework our good intentions can end up reinforcing and exacerbating the reality of inequity in [education]' (Waterfall 2000, xviii). In order to illustrate the issue more clearly, we will employ vignettes to reflect on the complexity of the educational experiences of girls in Kenya.

Njeri, an Eight-Year-Old Kenya Girl, Beats the Odds

It is six o'clock in the morning. Njeri is walking briskly to school. She has two miles to get to her destination. This morning she cannot sing her recently learned hymn, nor can she chase the butterflies or pick some flowers. She is saying her times tables: $12 \times 1 = 12$, $12 \times 2 = 24$, $12 \times 3 = 36$, $12 \times 4 = 48$, $12 \times 5 = \ldots$. Oh! She cannot remember. She examines her arms and legs where she had written her times tables, to see whether the numbers are still visible. But, alas, she forgot to preserve those spots when washing her arms and legs this morning. The alternative is to re-

cite them before the teacher, so she tries again, starting from the very beginning: 12 × 1 = 12 . . . . This time, she remembers up to 12 x 8, but she cannot remember 12 × 9. She tries once again, and, this time, she is determined to get it right. She does not want to go to school on Saturday as a punishment. What upsets her is knowing that the teacher will force her, and those of her classmates who cannot recite their 'homework', to bring firewood and water from home. That is a long distance to carry firewood or water. She feels that this is not a fair punishment and on a Saturday . . . . That is the only full day to play with her friends or to help her mother. Sunday is too short because she has to attend Sunday school and learn all the Bible verses. She wonders how much adults have in their brains if they have to memorize everything. However, she pauses to enjoy the rays of the sun and the silver beads formed by the morning dew. She wishes these beads were real, because she would have loved to make a necklace for her teacher. Well, maybe one day she will make a coloured beaded necklace for her. She has been observing her grandmother make necklaces and following her instructions on how to thread together these tiny beads.

She goes back to her times tables, but her thoughts run away again. She is thinking of her sister Nyokavi, who has been out of school for the last two years. Her parents wanted her to go on, but something happened, she is not sure what, something to do with not passing her exams and being sent to a secondary school that requires a lot of money; her father referred to it as an *Harambee* (let us pull together) school. But she needs to get this times table: 12 × 10 = 120 . . . . Once again, she is distracted. She enjoys school but sometimes her teacher does not ask her to answer questions even if she raises her hand. She hears the sound of the bell and starts to run as she completes her times table: 12 × 1 = ...

Drawing from this vignette of Njeri's educational experience, we will now begin to examine the diverse forces at play in Kenya's system of education. Although Njeri is only a young girl, probably eight or nine years old , she yearns for an education, but even at this young age, she is quite skeptical regarding her future opportunities.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS

As we reflect on the above scenario, Njeri's experiences resonate with us, and we ask ourselves, How many Njeris are going through similar challenges? We faced similar challenges when attending school in the 1960s and 1970s and believe we were able to excel in school not by being the

smartest in class but by overcoming cultural, economic, and daily learning challenges that defeated our less determined, and perhaps less lucky, peers. There were few or no writing facilities to record what we learned. Hence, we had to commit to memory all the new knowledge that we were learning in school. To learn and remember the relevant mathematical times tables and the alphabet, for instance, we recited them over and over while walking to school or to the river to fetch water, while tilling the land or minding the young ones or searching for firewood. Many times we had to write on our hands or legs to help us remember anything new that we had learned. The standardized examinations were organized in such a way that one was expected to remember what was taught right from standard (grade) one to standard seven (now eight). What made it even more challenging was that most of the materials we were expected to learn (memorize) were foreign and reflected little of the world in which we lived. Our daily chores, in particular, often required us to seek the skills elsewhere, as school did not prepare us for these essential tasks. We experienced contradictions and confusion. The knowledge we acquired in school had no relevance at all to our home life. And the more we learned about other countries and foreign languages, the more we became alienated from our roots (Wa Thiongo 1985).

This created a sense of dissonance and confusion, as most of what we learned in school emphasized how primitive, backward, and evil our traditional knowledges were. Our indigenous languages (mother tongues) and traditional beliefs were discounted – such 'primitive' practices were never allowed within our school compounds. At school, the sole medium of communication was English. Later, Kiswahili and religion were offered in some schools, depending on the religious denomination of the school – Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Muslim, Hindu, etc. This rigid enforcement of language practices caused further complications for us, since we could not communicate with our parents in English at home, as they did not speak the language. Consequently, at home we had to switch back to our mother tongue. The situation became difficult when we attempted to discuss issues such as the biological functions of human bodies, which we were learning about in school. According to our tradition, this was taboo. When we tried to question such practices as circumcision for girls, for example, we were alienated. This was because circumcision was a particularly thorny issue around which there was no consensus in the community. Often girls were withdrawn from school to be circumcised and were then barred from going back to school. Al-

though others chose to run away from home to escape the ritual, remaining uncircumcised often resulted in the girl being ostracized by peers, family, and the community. Growing up as girls and attending school in the post-political independence era, we were among the few who broke many traditional norms both at school and home.

Our respective parents were unusual, as they encouraged us to pursue education when it was not the norm. Many girls were married off as soon as they reached puberty. It was also rare to see parents sell their land to put girls through school or for the community to come together in the spirit of *Harambee* to raise funds to educate a girl. The expectation was that girls should bring in more property in the form of a dowry (cows and goats), not deplete the family wealth by attending school. Today, we find ourselves in North American institutions of higher learning, participating in the education not only of Kenyan children but also of children of the world. It may appear, at one level, as if we have relinquished our traditions and our cultural roots and embraced all that is Western. On the contrary – education has provided us with choices as well as challenges. We are able to examine our culture from a different perspective, choosing to embrace and retain only those values which have significance for us.

In order to explicate some of the dilemmas, we will briefly examine the systems discourse and anti-colonial thought to see how the two discursive frameworks speak to the system of education in Kenya since the attainment of political education.

A SYSTEMS DISCOURSE

A systems discourse is a discursive framework that illustrates the functioning and relationships of sub-systems within the larger society, illustrating systematic power imbalances, as well as methodical barriers that are embedded within the various sub-systems of the larger society. This discourse enables us to examine the ways in which social institutions both create and sustain interconnectedness and interdependency. Using this framework, we are able to explore more fully the dilemmas, tensions, and fears that educational institutions may experience as a result of their multiple roles within given systems (Wane 2000b). In order to examine the Kenyan educational system, we believe that it is necessary to re-examine the wider socio-economic and political context and, in particular, the colonial and neo-colonial education structures that con-

tinue to shape access to Kenyan education and quality patterns to the present day.

Anti-Colonial Discursive Framework

Anti-colonial discourse is rooted in 'recent movements for social change' that question concepts of 'normative' and/or 'universal' standards by recognizing that such concepts are limited and limit the perspectives of a particular gender, class, and/or race (Amadiume 1989, 1997; Collins 1990; Dei 1999; Hooks 1994; Oyewumi 1997; Wane 2002). In this way, anti-colonialism is a social theory that interrogates power relations inherent in the interrelations between subordinate, colonized groups/societies and dominant, colonialist societies or cultures. Anti-colonial thought entails writing and speaking about the experiences of slavery, migration, suppression colonialism, neo-colonialism, and resistance (Dei 2000; Ashcroft 1995). The overall aim of an anti-colonial framework is to provide the critical tools for deconstruction of representations of neo-colonial structures (Dei 1999; Mudimbe and Appiah 1995). For instance, the academic imperial structures currently control and shape the destiny of African education development in general and education in Kenya in particular (Eshiwani 1990). The aforementioned critical tools may provide a forum for theorizing some key challenges that have kept many Kenyan children from the doors of formal schooling.

Interrogating various configurations of power relations embedded in knowledge production and currency is also a key component of anti-colonialism. The approach acknowledges the dual, and at times conflicting, roles of education in (re)producing and/or counteracting racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, sexual, and class-based inequalities in society. Further, anti-colonial discourse problematizes the marginalization of certain voices and ideas in the educational system. It also critiques the pedagogic and communicative practices of schools and the delegitimation of the knowledge and experiences of subordinate groups. It is a framework within which schools are viewed as institutional structures, sanctioned by society and the state to serve particular material, political, and ideological interests. In this context, marginalized groups are treated as subjects of their own experiences and histories (Dei 2000). Critical educators argue that questions of difference (class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, etc.) are consequential for schooling in today's contexts (see. e. g., Dei 2000).

In order to contextualize these issues, we will now provide a brief historical overview of the Kenyan context, including the land, its people, and relevant socio-economic and political environments.

Kenya at Independence and Beyond

'Everyone has the right to education,' states the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 (Republic of Kenya 1964/5, 1988, 1999). Even earlier, in 1963, the Kenyan government made a political commitment to Kenyans that education would be accessible to all, regardless of religion, ethnic background, gender, geographical location, race, and/or class (Republic of Kenya 1964/5, 1988). Yet reports such as Oxfam International (2001), and UNESCO (2000), showed that in the years 2000 and 2001, respectively, more than 113 million children had no access to primary education, in addition to 880 million illiterate adults. By the late 1990s, between 11% and 20% of the school-age population were out of school (Abagi 2000). In some regions, close to 80% of eligible children were out of school (Republic of Kenya 1998). Regional, gender, racial, and other socio-economic factors continue to permeate education systems, resulting in inequitable access to quality education. Consequently, in many parts of the world, the quality of learning and the acquisition of human values and skills fall far short of the aspirations and needs of individuals and respective societies. The *Education for All* (UNESCO 2000) assessment demonstrates that there has been significant progress in the educational development of many countries, including Kenya. However, the developing world is still too far away from achieving the EFA goal and, like many others, may not do so by the newly set date of 2015.

Despite these vast disparities across countries, education is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right (UNESCO 2000). Education has been identified as the key to sustainable development, peace, and stability within and among countries and thus is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the 21st century, which are affected by rapid globalization. Given the still extensive need for improvements, the timeline for achieving EFA goals has been shifted from year 2000 to year 2015 (UNESCO 2000). We must question, however, the implications that these postponements will have for individual and societal development. When children are denied basic education, their ability to support themselves as adults and to provide for their basic needs and the needs of their families is compromised. For instance, the *Education for All* (UNESCO 2000) assessment for Sub-

Sahara Africa indicates that, despite notable gains by various countries to expand education opportunities, nearly a half of these disadvantaged groups are in the region. It is estimated that in this region alone more than 41 million school-age children, 56% of them girls, are out of school (Abagi 2000).

Njeri's scenario reflects the reality of what is happening in the education sector in Kenya (a Sub-Saharan African country) despite the noble goals of the EFA. The expansion of educational opportunities has been a longstanding objective of the government since independence in 1963, as stakeholders continue to perceive formal education as a basic tool for individual and national progress. This belief is supported by research that has established the connection between formal education and socio-economic and political benefits (see, e. g., Abagi 2000). When formal education opportunities are available to girls and women, the benefits are even greater. This wisdom is enshrined in a local Kenyan saying: *Wathomithia muiretu, ni wathomitha mbururi.* ('When you educate a girl, you educate a whole nation.') Hence, the issue is not that people need to be convinced of the need to educate girls – rather, it is why, despite this acknowledgement, girls continue to be marginalized in terms of access to quality education. On the positive side, at the primary school level, girls' and boys' enrolments are almost at par. This is a significant achievement, given the large gender gaps in enrolments at the time of independence. At the post-primary levels, however, the strategies to improve girls' enrolment and retention figures have not had as much impact as at the primary school level. This disparity may be attributed to the persistent belief system that posits girls as investments. In other words, girls are seen as temporary members of the family who will eventually move out as wives for the benefit of their new families. Consequently, girls' value to the family is associated with the dowry that they can expect to bring to the family when married. Within this socio-cultural environment, the cost of educating girls is not considered a wise investment. Hence, the less spent on the girl the better.

Trends in the Education System Since 1963

The economic situation in Kenya has had a significant impact on the educational system. Within the last two decades, the living conditions of the vast majority of Kenyans have stagnated or worsened, while those of the few at the top have improved beyond anyone's dreams, thus further widening the gap between the extremely rich few and the extremely poor

majority. This adverse socio-economic growth is reflected in the outcomes of the education system, where an increasing number of children do not attend school because many of them cannot afford to (see, e. g., Gathenya 2001, 2002; Oxfam International, 2001; Wane and Gathenya, 2001), and many school-leavers are unemployed (2002). In our discussions as authors, we often asked ourselves, What went wrong? What happened to an education system whose growth was exemplary in the East and Central African regions up to the mid-1980s? To analyze how education services intertwined with the socio-economic and political set-up in shaping contemporary trends, we provide an overview of Kenya's education system since 1963.

The vision and national goals of education are expressed in the *Kenya Education Commission Report* of 1964 (a. k. a. Ominde Report, Republic of Kenya 1964/5), which provided a framework for operating a unified education system in independent Kenya. The new nation inherited a colonial education that was described as a 'caste' system with rigid boundaries for different communities, which meant that there were separate schools for Europeans, Asians (and Arabs), and Africans, in that order of priority. Within this racially segregated system, 99% of the public education budget was spent on European and Asian schools, while 1% was allocated for the African schools (Republic of Kenya 1964), in a country with a population that was predominantly African. Besides funding hierarchies, the education and training curricula were designed on these racial classifications within a philosophy of 'education for one's station in life'. The African was educated/trained for manual labour and religious discipleship, the Asian for middle-level technical labour, and the European for management and governorship of his/her colonial territory. It is no wonder, then, that at independence universal education access, equity, funding partnerships, standardization, and improvement of curriculum became key issues for policy planners and practitioners. The findings of the Ominde Commission (Republic of Kenya 1964/5) captured these issues and made recommendations that resulted in rapid expansion within a single national education system. But the inequities in access, quality, and relevance still exist despite many reforms designed to improve the provision of education for all.

Since 1965, there have been subsequent education commissions (e. g., Republic of Kenya 1976, 1988, and 1999a, respectively, a. k. a. Gachathi, Mackay, Kamunge, and Koech Reports) that re-emphasize the six goals of education laid down in the 1964/5 Ominde Report and articulated in

the 1999 *Kenya Country Report* (Republic of Kenya 1999b). These national educational goals are (1) to foster national unity; (2) to serve the needs of national development; (3) to promote social justice and morality, social obligations and responsibilities; (4) to foster positive attitudes and consciousness towards other nations; (5) to provide for full development of talents and personality; and (6) to provide and equip the youth with knowledge, skills, and expertise to enable them to play an effective role in the life of the nation. We will now explore whether these goals have been attained, and if not, why not.

Following recommendations by the above Commissions and other research/evaluation surveys (e. g., Republic of Kenya, 1995, 1998; Republic of Kenya and UNICEF 1995), the Kenyan government has planned and implemented numerous structural and program reforms in attempts to meet these educational goals and to address identified challenges. The current 8 : 4 : 4 system of education (eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education, and four years for a basic bachelor degree) is one such systemic reform implemented since 1985. It re-shaped the previous system of 7 : 4 : 2 : 3, modeled on the British system, that involved seven years of primary education, four years of ordinary level secondary education, two years of advanced level secondary education for a small percentage, and three years of university education. Promotion between levels is based on merit, as measured by academic performance in national standardized terminal examinations.

MAJOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM: THE 8 : 4 : 4 EDUCATION SYSTEM

Until the end of 1984, at which time major reforms were implemented, formal education in Kenya was based on a 7 : 4 : 2 : 3 system of education cycle. The concept of the 8 : 4 : 4 system of education was developed to respond to the challenges of national development with the youth as active participants. Besides the structural reforms, the 8 : 4 : 4 system of education was planned with a more vocational orientation (Republic of Kenya 1988). The systemic reform that resulted in the shift to the new model emanated from the Mackay Report. The broad-based changes to the educational system were introduced as a means of responding to the challenges of national development. The Mackay Report formed the framework for the revamped system, although the report did not contain details of when or how the new education system could be implemented. The most important changes that were introduced involved the reor-

Table 1: Gross enrolment rates in primary school by gender, 1990–1998

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
MF	101.8	91.4	91.0	87.8	88.5	86.8	86.4	87.7	88.8
M	104.0	93.4	92.0	88.9	89.1	87.4	87.3	88.7	89.4
F	99.6	89.5	90.0	86.7	87.8	86.4	85.5	86.8	88.2

Source: UNESCO 1999; Republic of Kenya 1994.

Table 2: Primary school completion rates by gender, 1990–1998

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Boys	45.7	46.4	44.7	44.5	44.6	43.0	45.1	46.3	44.6
Girls	40.5	41.6	48.2	42.2	43.0	42.1	43.5	45.8	48.1
Total	43.2	44.1	46.4	43.4	43.9	42.6	44.3	46.1	47.2

Source: UNESCO 1999; Republic of Kenya 1994.

ganizing of the system to an 8 : 4 : 4 structure, the creation of a second university, and an enhanced vocational program. Despite the country's budgetary constraints and local and international education and training policy implications, soon after the Mackay Report was released, the government made a political announcement launching both the second university and the proposed 8 : 4 : 4 restructuring. Issues of policies, cost, inequity, relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness of the system were questioned and reviewed (Abagi and Olweya 1999, 2000; Republic of Kenya, 1995, 1998; Republic of Kenya and UNICEF 1995). It soon became apparent to most Kenyans that, although the goals of education are 'well' articulated, they have not been realized or translated into meaningful sustainable and quality programs accessible to all (see, e. g., Republic of Kenya 1998; Republic of Kenya and UNICEF 1995). Granted, many Kenyans, in particular Africans and women, have benefited from the reforms that have focused on access, equity, quality, and relevance. However, the system has been inefficient and ineffective on many fronts, despite the heavy investment in education within a framework of innovative funding partnerships and shared management responsibilities. Waste through low enrolment, participation, and retention rates, coupled with high repetition and dropout rates, has been identified as a key indicator of the system's inefficiency by the government (Republic of Kenya 1998, 1999a). Primary and secondary school gross enrolment rates, for example, have been on the decline from 1990, as indicated in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of secondary school enrolment by gender in selected years, 1963–1998

	1963	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998
Male	68.2	72.4	70.4	64.1	59.3	61.8	57.2	54.1	53.3
Female	31.8	27.6	29.6	35.9	40.7	38.2	42.8	45.9	46.7

Source: UNESCO 1999; Republic of Kenya 1994.

As noted in Table 1, at the primary school level, the gross enrolment rate (GER) in 1990 was 104.0 for boys and 99.6 for girls. The average for both girls and boys was 101.8. There was a sharp decline in 1991 and 1993. In 1995 and 1996, it was 86.8 and 86.4, respectively. In 1998 and 1999, there was some improvement in GER. In 1997, GER was 86.6 for girls, 88.7 for boys, and an average of 87.7. In 1998, the figures were 88.2 for girls, 89.4 for boys, and 88.8 for both. Besides, primary school completion rates were consistently below the half – 50% mark. In 1995, it was 43% for boys and 43.5% for girls, with an average of 44.3%. In 1998, it was 46.4% for boys, 48.1% for girls, with an average of 47.2% for both boys and girls (Table 2). Boys' enrolment in secondary school has remained higher than that for girls over the years, as shown in Table 3, an indication of how girls in Kenya continue to remain at the bottom of the education ladder.

Further still, the implementation of the 8 : 4 : 4 system introduced new pressures to the educational system, and the ramifications are still being felt. For instance, in 1990, after four years of secondary education, a double cohort entered university (the Form VI or 'A' level group). It is generally believed that the public universities have not yet recovered from the administrative, space, class size, and curriculum challenges of the double intake, as enrolments never dropped to their previous levels thereafter. The demand remained high, leading to the entry of the private universities (from zero to sixteen) into Kenya's higher education market and the expansion of public universities from one to five universities. The 8 : 4 : 4 curriculum was supposed to be more practically oriented, to curb the high unemployment rate generated by the high population growth rate in Kenya, by offering a wide range of employment opportunities to the school-leavers. The aim was to vocationalize education through a curriculum that provided relevant technical and vocational skills at the three levels of the schooling system for improved self-employment, salaried employment, and/or life-long education and training. Within the 8 : 4 : 4 system, Standard 8 school-leavers would have opportunities for further

technical training, without necessarily going through the formal post-primary school system. This would be in line with the government development strategy of creating jobs and generating income by expanding the informal sector. However, policy planners did not anticipate the large number of students who would continue in the system.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES WITHIN KENYA'S CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Drawing on Njeri's educational experience as a point of reference, the following will analyze the pertinent issues within Kenya's contemporary education system.

Primary Education

Primary education is the most 'general' of all kinds of formal education and is supposed to provide the foundation for further learning and for the long-term strategy of eliminating illiteracy. The basic goal of primary education is to prepare all children who attend school to participate fully in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. This stage of education is supposed to be universal and free but not compulsory. The curriculum is uniform throughout the country and is developed by a national panel at the Kenya Institute of Education. Until 2001, all students were expected to take all eleven subjects, namely: Kiswahili, English, Mathematics, Science and Agriculture, Home Science, Arts and Craft, Music, History and Civics, Geography, Religious Education, and Physical Education. At the end of Standard 8, students would be examined in eight papers that incorporated all eleven subjects. At the time of writing this paper, we learned that this curriculum had been reviewed, resulting in fewer subject areas for study and examination. Once again, it is a frantic time as education policy-makers and practitioners adjust to the latest reforms, including the preparation of a new curriculum and new teaching and learning materials – and the training of teachers to implement the changes.

The government aim and stated commitment is to provide education to all Kenyans; yet approximately 30% of the primary school-age children have no access to formal school education. This is because of lack of equitable distribution of the educational resources. In addition, the system is structured in such a way that only some (fewer than 50%) of those who complete primary education make it to the secondary level,

and even fewer (approximately 20% of those who complete secondary schooling) have access to further education and/or training.

Secondary Education

Kenya's secondary education is organized around fully funded public/government schools, community or religious funded schools, and private, unaided schools. Parents and community members, through self-help *Harambee* efforts, built most of the public and community schools. Private schools are individually run and owned and are usually very expensive and beyond the reach of most Kenyans. Since 1991, all schools have been categorized as either public or private, based on respective funding and management model options (Republic of Kenya 1998). In policy, the categorization made sense administratively but not practically. Ideally, this categorization should have been ratified through a revised Education Act soon after the 1991 policy statement. To date, there are still grey areas, as indicated by the fact that, while some schools are labeled private, they are managed by religious organizations and therefore receive partial public and community assistance. Although these schools could be labeled public, thereby reducing the confusion, many private proprietors fear that with the public label comes loss of controlling power in terms of planning, management, and accountability.

Despite this innovative partnership in secondary education development, many children have no access to secondary education. In our vignette Nyokavi, Njeri's sister, has completed her primary education, missed a government secondary school, joined a *Harambee* one instead, and then dropped out. She has been out of school for the last two years. When Wane (one of the authors) interviewed her in 1998, she was tearful for most of the three-hour encounter. She kept repeating to herself:

> What can I do? Who can I turn to? I would like to buy my parents a bigger farm. They have sold everything to put my big sister, Wawira, through secondary school [Wawira completed four high school years] and pay for Nyokavi. It is sad that my parents could not afford to send Wawira to university. She was so desperate for higher education that would have meant a good job. Now she would like to come and live with us, but she feels she is better off on the streets of Nairobi. As for me, all I want is a secondary education.

Cost-sharing and other resource demands mean that most families cannot afford to send their children to either the public or the private secondary schools. Within this policy, parents are expected to pay tuition and development/building funds (e. g., for construction of classrooms, workshops, laboratories, dormitories, staff houses, and kitchen/dining halls), buy expensive uniforms and books, and contribute towards meeting their respective schools' recurrent expenditures, including salaries for non-teaching staff and the purchase of school buses. Alternately, faced with increased fiscal challenges, some schools have discovered unique and rewarding cost-cutting strategies, which include income-generating and other self-reliance activities such as making their own uniforms, growing their own food, keeping livestock for school use, and marketing and applying shared-text-book policies. Other schools have introduced Parents and Teachers Associations' bursaries and scholarship schemes to assist children from poor families and/or orphans. But such efforts are like a drop in the ocean because the need for such assistance in all cases exceeds demand.

University Education

For a country that had only one constituent university college at the time of independence (in 1963), Kenya's university education has expanded remarkably, not only in terms of the number of institutions and enrolments but also in the scope of the degree and other programs, both on-location and long-distance. For example, the student population grew from 452 undergraduates in 1963 to over 40,000 by 1999. This unprecedented growth is not without challenges. Following the structural and other systemic reforms of the mid-1980s, the double cohort intake of 1990, the cost of implementing the new curriculum, and putting up additional required physical facilities resulted in unparalleled costs to the government, individuals, and other stakeholders. The structural adjustments programs introduced in the 1990s that led to budget cuts in education and other services meant that the households had to bear most of the additional reform-driven costs.

Student unrest has become almost an annual certainty of the public universities' life, in part due to space, human resource, and other shortages. At least one or more of the five universities are closed each year due to student and/or staff strikes. While attending one of the universities, we (the authors) lost more than two years (each) due to extended closures. Students normally complain about congested and dilapidated learning

conditions, curriculum, tuition hikes, and/or political unrest in Kenya or elsewhere in the world. In the 1970s, commemoration of the Soweto Massacre (in South Africa) often triggered student demonstrations that would begin peacefully and end in battles between police and students, leading to closures.

With the entry of private universities into Kenya's education scenario, those families which can afford to do so send their children to these universities or overseas, chiefly to India, Britain, and the US. In comparison, fewer students are sent to Canada, Australia, and Germany. The community *Harambee* efforts have been instrumental in enabling some children from the lower middle-income groups to attend public, private, and/or overseas universities. The government has also introduced a loan and bursary scheme at the university level to assist those who pass but cannot afford to meet the required payments to join university. However, as in the secondary education programs, the need for assistance exceeds demand.

COMMENTS ON CURRICULUM

The Kenyan school curriculum has been broadly criticized, as both the curriculum and assessment are modeled on mainstream, high-income groups' experiences, thereby further marginalizing many children, especially those from remote rural areas and from the slums in the urban towns. There is enormous pressure to succeed in the examination and selection-based system, which encourages many students to resort to examination-oriented rote learning, often at the expense of more critical learning. It has even been suggested that the school curriculum contributes to violence in schools due to the overwhelming pressure borne by students to pass examinations in a curriculum that is so examination/selection-driven. The system is structured in such a way that schools strive to compete in national examinations, sometimes at the expense of the health of students, teachers, and/or parents. Slow learners are prevented from proceeding to the next class and/or taking the national examination, so as not to lower their respective schools' standards. Many repeat one or more classes several times, and some of them give up altogether and drop out of school.

Excelling in the educational system as it currently operates often requires extra tuition/coaching, special textbooks, and long hours of continuous study at school and home. Those who cannot afford the extras are unlikely to succeed. As we reflected on our educational experiences,

we concluded that it is no wonder that, in this context, the many Njeris, Nyokavis, or Wawiras never make it to college – not because they are not capable but because there are far too many systemic barriers that are beyond their control. The wonder is that any children from low-income groups, and particularly the girls, make it at all.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS AND QUALITY PARTICIPATION

Prior to Kenya's political independence, women's access to formal education was extremely limited, although we acknowledge that African men's access was hardly any better, given the British colonial policy that restricted Africans in general from acquiring a decent education. Specific data are difficult to trace, however, as earlier education commissions (pre-1985) rarely focused on women as a special target group in educational planning. As most statistical data were not recorded by gender, enrolment growth hid the disparities between boys' and girls' participation in education. A new chapter in gender and diversity awareness was launched in 1985, as the end of the first International Women's Decade was marked in Nairobi, Kenya. Affirmative action strategies were put in place to ensure that girls and children from marginalized regions were better represented at all levels of education, training, and employment.

There is evidence that, in some parts of Kenya, girls' enrolments increased at a faster rate than boys' enrolments during the affirmative action period (Republic of Kenya 1995; Republic of Kenya, 1998). At the primary school level, girls' enrolments are almost equal to boys' enrolments (49 girls : 50 boys), while in some districts within Eastern and Central Provinces, more girls than boys attend school. Regional differences are marked, however. In the nomadic arid and semi-arid regions, total enrolments are much lower than in the rest of the country, and girls' enrolments still lag far behind (Republic of Kenya 1998).

A number of significant factors contribute to the lower rate of academic achievement by girls, limiting their access to competitive fields: cultural, structural, and other social barriers; lack of job incentives; and lack of proper role modeling and counseling, among others (see, e. g., Abagi 2000; Republic of Kenya and UNICEF 1995). Cultural values and cultural demands on girls' time may also inhibit many from getting quality basic education. In Kenya, girls are socialized to believe that marriage comes first. Most girls in Kenya are married before the age of 21. By this age, only a few girls have been able to go through the formal edu-

cation ladder and training to become professionals, and there are very few women role models. As a result, few girls are exposed to opportunities and few aspire to higher education and training and top management jobs. Although the government has stepped up counseling services in all schools, the effect of this has not yet been seen, because the system provides few support systems for girls to proceed from one level to the next. Many are shut out because they become pregnant, and there are few occasions where students are taught about female–male relationships, chiefly due to cultural and/or religious taboos that restrict individuals who could be entrusted with disseminating such personal information. In this context, the school is among the chief suspects, with parents fearing hidden agendas and the passing of culturally unacceptable sexual information to their children.

Of those who go further in school, many opt for arts-based subjects, eschewing the sciences as overly masculine. Those girls who deviate from the norms by receiving higher education and/or entering male-type jobs are still seen as less likely to get married, or, if they do, as unlikely to make good wives and mothers. As a result of the aforementioned cultural beliefs, the majority of women choose academic paths, which limit their options later in life, often relegating them to a low status and low-paying jobs.

IMPACTS OF SYSTEMIC EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

The inherited colonial education posed many difficulties and challenges with respect to issues of access, quality, equity, relevance, and participation within new policy/program structures and the philosophical shift. Despite frequent evaluation and research into the system, recommended reforms have not met many objectives. Most frustrating is not the failure to provide education to all children but that positive trends have been reversed since the late 1980s, a period that coincides quite closely with the era of the global economic structural adjustment programs. Further, resources allocated to education are not always effectively or efficiently utilized, leading to the exclusion of low-income groups while subsidizing the public and private education accessible to children from middle- and upper-income families. For instance, communities have been known to collectively put up schools by *Harambee* efforts, only to find that some children in the same community are to be excluded from the same institutions because they cannot afford the policy-mandated fees and other levies within the cost-sharing service provision framework. Con-

sequently, some parents who helped to put up community schools soon discover they cannot afford to send their children to the same schools. Since only those who can pay the required amounts gain admission, the poor end up supporting the rich.

So while Kenya introduced cost-sharing (among the government, parents, and communities) in attempts to improve education access, quality, equity, and relevance, the outcomes have seen further marginalization of children from low socio-economic groups, including street, slum, and nomadic children, girls, and the disabled. As in the case of Njeri's family, passing the cost burden on to parents has had devastating impacts on some. Njeri's parents, having sold most of their land to send their children to school, were left almost landless, and yet none of the children had made it to the post-secondary level or found employment.

In retrospect, considering our similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, we recognize that, had our communities not come to our aid through *Harambee,* we too would not have made it past primary education. We argue that, while individuals have responsibilities to bring up their children, government has a responsibility and is accountable to all citizens, particularly since every Kenyan household is subject to one form of taxation or another. Provision of free, quality education so that no children will be denied access because of their inability to pay is a policy commitment (Republic of Kenya 1988, 1999a; UNESCO 2000). The gap involves translating that commitment into practice. The future cost of not educating any child far outweighs any current savings through budget cuts and the balancing of account books. Kenyan parents and communities are not abdicating their responsibilities; they have been supportive and contributed tirelessly to the growth in education and training. The onus is on the government and those in power to explore, perhaps more actively, alternative, innovative ways of mobilizing resources available to support education for all and to develop clearly defined strategies for achieving this goal. The question should not be who should or should not access education, but rather how we can provide quality education to all.

In recent years, there has been an alarming escalation in the number of children in Kenya who are homeless and/or who try to survive on the streets of large urban centres and rural towns (Bagayoko 1999; Gathenya 2002). Many of these children have parents living below the national poverty line or are orphaned victims of ethnic clashes and/or HIV/AIDS. A 1994 estimate put the number of street children in Nairobi at 50,000.

Table 4: Kenya's Human Development Index score, year 2003

Indicator	Year	Score
Life expectancy at birth	2001	46.4 years
Adult literacy (age 15 and above)	2001	83.3%
Combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment	2000/01	52%
GDP per capita	2001	$980
Life expectancy index	2001	0.36
Education index	2001	0.73
GDP index (HDI) value	2001	0.38
Human development index (HDI) value	2001	0.489
Overall ranking	2002	146

Source: United Nations Development Programme 2003.

Kenya's ranking on the Global Human Development Index (HDI) has dropped from 113 in 1991 to 125 in 1994 and further declined to 146 in 2003 (see Table 4). This implies that the overall human development status of Kenyan people is declining, not only in absolute terms but also in relation to other nations.

The population of poor people will most likely continue to rise, given the deteriorating economic climate, the loss of some donor agencies and NGO support, and the increased numbers of children being forced to leave school to support their families. The future economic and social development of Kenya is at risk unless the rights and needs of children for sufficient levels of health, education, and psycho-social growth and development are protected. Street children in Kenya range in age from the newborn to the young adult. Demographic data reveal that most street children had some education but that all had been forced to leave school early (that is, before completion of fourth grade) due largely to poverty, lack of support, and the need to provide income for other family members. When an informal education program was provided for them, they were eager to learn (Gathenya 2002). With support, some even returned to the formal schools, where they performed well, some proceeding to university and to other post-secondary education/training programs. The education provision crisis is not unique to Kenya (UNESCO 2000) but is indicative of a global trend of non-participation by an increasing number of children that calls not simply for local and international innovative preventive and intervention strategies but for the com-

mitment to transform these strategies into practice. Without resource commitment and political will, all local and global efforts to address the gaps turn into rhetoric. Solutions that address gaps in education alone have not worked before, and we now acknowledge the need for an integrated holistic approach that takes into account the basic human needs of excluded groups more broadly.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have reflected on our similar educational paths that brought us to Canada to pursue graduate studies and considered how both of us could never have succeeded without the determination, sacrifice, and support of our families and communities. As girls and the only children of our respective families with PhDs, we understand the opportunity lost when so many Njeris, Nyokavis, and other Kenyan children are denied such chances. To date, both of us continue to support those among our siblings who did not make it to secondary school, despite the fact that some had passed the secondary entrance examination and wanted to proceed but could not afford the required levies. This is common among Kenyan families, who often have to choose to educate just one child – as this is all they can manage to do – with the hope that the one child will find employment and earn enough to look after the rest of the family. We also realize that we were among the lucky few not to have met the misfortunes of Nyokavi's and some of our peers, who were thrown out of school once it was known that they were pregnant. As late as 1991, the education policy included pregnancy as one of the grounds for expulsion from school. Quite obviously, some policies and strategies geared for educational improvement and articulated in Kenyan key policy documents (see, e. g., Republic of Kenya 1998) also contribute, perhaps often inadvertently, to the exclusion of children from certain socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

There is a powerful correlation between the incidence of poverty, low enrolment, poor retention, and unsatisfactory learning outcomes (Dei 2000). Ensuring that girls and boys benefit equally from education requires nothing less than the integration of gender, class, regional, and other equality concerns into the design and implementation of relevant inter-sector policies and strategies. The importance of gathering and carefully analyzing reliable desegregated data at local, national, and international level is evident. Further, ensuring that equity is enshrined in

the educational system will require a firm commitment from all levels both within the educational system and governmental hierarchies.

To achieve the EFA's stated goals of educational improvement, the government of Kenya has acknowledged the need to rekindle the spirit of *Harambee,* self-reliance, in an environment of improved professional work ethics and with the commitment to providing basic services for both the individual and the public good. The African philosophy of mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability means that the government can count on its people's support, and vice versa, only if both parties are ready to keep their side of the bargain. Only through such a collaborative approach can the government hope to deliver on its promise – made at the attainment of independence in 1963 – to ensure the equitable distribution of resources, including equal access to education regardless of class, race, creed, ethnicity, and geographical location.

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