

Effects of Hidden Costs of Fee-Free Education On Students Academic Attainment in Public Secondary Schools in Karatu District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study aimed at investigating the effects of hidden costs of fee-free education on students' academic attainment in ordinary level secondary schools in Karatu district, Tanzania. The study employed convergent research design which used both qualitative and quantitative designs. The study was conducted in 14 public secondary schools selected randomly from 31 public secondary schools in the Karatu district. The sample size was 318, consisting of four students selected using systematic random sampling whereas fourteen parents, fourteen Head of School's and fourteen Ward Executive Officers were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi structured interview guide. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The study found that hidden costs had severe effects on students' academic attainment. Other negative phenomena found to result from hidden costs include truancy and lack of concentration in class. Based on the findings the study concludes that there are serious negative consequences associated with hidden costs and consequently, in free education provision, hidden costs can be counterproductive, potentially able to decrease the chances of attaining the objectives of free education provision. The study recommends that strategies in free education provision should further expand to counterbalance costs of education. Strategies targeted at enhancing general improvements in people's wellbeing and livelihood are also measures required to enhance the capacity of parents to shoulder the burden of education.*

Key words: hidden costs, fee-free education, attainment

INTRODUCTION

Education is a basic human right and the best investment that we can make to guarantee a sustainable future and leave no one behind (UNESCO-RTE, 2019). It is a very important sector in developing human resources and fostering a mindset to enable economic prosperity in Tanzanian

(URT, 2018). Investing in human resource development allow individuals to contribute effectively in development of a country (Areba, 2015). The Tanzanian government recognizes the value of investing in human capital in order to fight diseases, poverty and ignorance among its citizens (Shukia, 2020). In ensuring access to Education For All in Tanzania, the current Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 in Tanzania is dedicated to ensure the provision of fee-free basic education (Ntwima, 2022) whereas fee-free secondary education was introduced in 2015.

The introduction of fee-free education in Tanzania and its implementation in public secondary schools faced lots of challenges, as some stakeholders believe that they are not supposed to provide any contribution for their children education (Magesa and Mtebe, 2022). In response to understand the principle behind fee-free education, the government of Tanzania introduced various circulars one of which is Circular No 6 (URT, 2015b) which clearly explained the roles of parents in fee-free education whereas they were supposed to contribute for uniform, food for day scholars, medical expenses, mattress, bedsheets and personal hygiene items for boarding school students. These efforts altogether increased the secondary enrolment in Tanzania schools for 43 percent of the expected enrolment (Shukia, 2020).

However, despite the increase in enrolment rates among secondary school students, fee-free education has been reported to be bounded by high indirect costs/hidden costs which seems to threaten educational goals (UNESCO 2005 in Tarimo, 2020). Hidden costs are those costs and expenses that parents and guardians incur, including the uniform, transportation costs, meals contribution for day students, academic trip costs, and other contributions.

Studies have revealed that the introduction of fee-free education is not the only solution to increasing academic attainment since hidden costs associated with free education have been found to have significant effects on student's transition, completion, participation and performance (Areba., 2015; Ndiritu., Magoma and Mugiraneza., 2020; Alio and Chui., 2023;), whereas in addition to that, abolition of school fees may not necessarily lead to improved accessibility (Shukia., 2020). While prior research has focused on revealing the impacts of undisclosed expenses in the delivery of free education, the majority of these studies are based on global cases. Therefore, there is a need to record data specific to the Tanzanian context. In Tanzania, despite the increase in enrolments in all levels of basic education, recent studies have shown that the completion rates in lower secondary is low (World Bank, 2024). This study sought to assess the effects of hidden costs of fee-free education on student's academic attainment in public secondary schools in Karatu District in Arusha-Tanzania. The study is pertinent to revised version of Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 which ensured the provision of free basic education (URT, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was based on Human Capital Theory and Social and Cultural Reproduction Theory. The reason for adopting Human Capital Theory is due to its emphasis on viewing education as

investment in human capital which results into increased productivity and economic growth by reflecting on individual's socio-economic background (Leoni., 2023). The study also adopted Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory because it contends that education is a key factor in legitimizing social inequalities and class relations as it gives privilege to students from wealthy families discriminating those from poor families (Kosutic., 2017). According to Kosutic (2017) the educational system is the key factor in legitimizing existing social structures and class relations, because it is based on standards and knowledge of the upper classes whereas it gives more privilege for students from rich families. The reproduction of family wealth, and intergenerational wealth transfers are often attributed to the achievement gap in education (Korn 2015 as cited in Serna & Woulfe, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed mixed research approach in which convergent design was used in the study where both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, analyzed and interpreted. The study involved fourteen public secondary schools in Karatu District selected randomly. Out of 1,138 form four students of the visited schools, 318 were systematically selected. Fourteen parents, four (4) head of schools and four (4) ward education officers were selected using purposive sampling. The quantitative data from students was collected using questionnaire whereas qualitative data from parents, head of schools and ward education officers were collected using semi structured interview. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using statistical package for social science (SPSS), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to assess the effects of hidden costs of fee-free education on students' academic attainment. Data on various findings are presented below:

Effects of hidden costs of fee-free education on students' academic attainment

Hidden costs of education may have adverse effects on educational attainments due to difficulties in meeting essential costs of education (Njoroge, 2013; Alio and Chui 2023). The opinions of respondents were sought on whether hidden costs in free education provision have effects on students' educational achievements. As shown in Table 1 below, majority of the respondents (94.4%) held that hidden costs of fee-free education has negative effects on students' academic attainment.

Table 1: Participants responses on whether hidden costs in education affect educational attainments n=305

Hidden costs affect educational attainments	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	288	94.4
No	17	5.6
Effects of hidden costs on educational attainment		
Poor performance	185	27.0

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School dropout	212	30.9
Truancy	152	22.2
Indisposition to learn	65	9.5
Lack of concentration in class	71	10.4

Source: Field data 2024

Table 1 further shows that the identified effects include school dropout (30.9 %), poor performance (27.0%), lack of concentration in class (22.2%), truancy (10.4%) and indisposition to learn (9.5%). This indicates that the effects of hidden costs in fee-free education is multi-faceted, and this lowers students’ academic performance as well as completion rates especially for those who could not afford them. This could be the result of students failing to pay their dues, leading to a lack of focus on their studies and ultimately dropping out of school.

During the study, one of the Head of schools opined that:

“the expenses are a heavy load for students from low-income families, as most students who do not finish their studies come from such households”. (HOS A, Private Conversation, 11th July 2024).

The finding of this study is in line with the study of Alio and Chui's (2023) which found that even with the implementation of free education, there were still persistent issues of low completion and high dropout rates. This indicates that the hidden expenses connected to fee-free schooling hinder the educational success of students, particularly those from low-income households, by denying them access to education. The results as shown in Table 1 also pertain to Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, highlighting that children transform their cultural knowledge into academic achievement in the education system, resulting in increased educational success and future socioeconomic prosperity (Jæger & Breen, 2016). This indicates that additional expenses could prevent students from lower-income households from succeeding academically, leading to lower performance and increased rates of drop out, all of which are signs of poor academic achievement. In relation to the effects of hidden costs in free education, the study also sought to determine if there are differences in educational outcomes among students weighed down by hidden costs and those not severely affected by it. The data in Table 2 below show that majority of the respondents (87.5%) believe that there are variations in academic performance among students burdened with hidden costs compared to those who are not.

Table 2: Differences in academic performance between students burdened with hidden costs versus those who are not n=305

Whether there are differences in academic performance between students burdened by hidden costs versus those who are not	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	267	87.5
No	38	12.5

Basis of differences		
Irregular attendance	138	24.9
Punctuality	61	11.0
Provision of needed school materials	87	15.7
Indisposition to learn	79	14.3
Lack of concentration in class	189	34.1

Source: Field data 2024

On the basis of such differences, larger proportion (34.1%) of respondents attributed the differences to a lack of concentration in class, while 24.9 percent pointed to irregular attendance. Other aspects indicated include lack of necessary school materials (15.7%), lack of interest in learning (14.3%), and lack of punctuality (11.0%).

This information shows that students burdened with hidden educational expenses encounter various difficulties such as inconsistent attendance and lack of focus in class, resulting in reduced academic performance. These findings are supported by the study of Ndiritu, Magoma & Mugiraneza (2020) which revealed that hidden expenses can lead to stress, causing mental disruptions and ultimately leading to lower academic achievement. Hence, undisclosed expenses of schooling could lead to psychological and mental issues for students, particularly those from low-income families who cannot afford these costs. This is further confirmed by HOS C in a face-to-face interview, where they stated that *'it is true that these costs cause disturbances to students and this in turn may make them less attracted to school hence fail to concentrate in their studies.'* (HOS C, Personal Communication, July 3, 2024). This indicates that when students are affected by these hidden expenses, such as being punished, sent home, or missing out on school activities, they experience more stress, potentially leading to decreased academic achievements. The study pertains to the Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, suggesting that students with cultural capital receive preferential treatment from teachers, leading to a conducive learning environment and improved academic outcomes (Jæger & Breen, 2016). This presupposes that students facing hidden expenses are likely to experience decreased academic performance as a result of disparities in classes, leading to sporadic attendance, diminished focus on studies, and potential dropout rates that impact their academic achievement negatively.

The study also sought to determine whether there are differences in completion rate between students who are having difficulties affording hidden costs and those who are not. Data presented in Table 3 below indicate that most of the respondents (89.5%) affirm that there is a disparity in completion rates between students facing hidden costs compared to those who are not.

Table 3: Participants responses on whether there are any differences in completion rates between students who struggle with hidden costs versus those who do not n=305

Difference in completion between students burdened with hidden costs versus those who are not	Responses	Percentage
Yes	273	89.5
No	32	10.5
How hidden costs cause difference in completion		
Poor attendance	193	40.4
Poor enrolment	80	16.7
Poor participation	126	26.4
Indisposition to learn	75	15.7
Others/specify	4	0.8

Source: Field data 2024

On how hidden costs affect completion, (40.6%) of those surveyed cited poor attendance as a major factor, while 26.4% mentioned poor participation in class. Other ways through which hidden costs affect students' completion as indicated by respondents were poor enrollment (16.7%), indisposition to learn (15.7%) and others which were specified as drop-out, skipping classes, mental health issues, and anxiety. A key information observed that:

“Hidden expenses continue to impede equal access to secondary education, placing students at risk of being excluded or going hungry if unable to cover these costs. This causes them to dislike attending school and they make the choice to leave school”. (WEO 4, Private Conversation, July 19, 2024).

Hidden costs contribute to feelings of unfair treatment, causing students to develop a strong dislike for school and ultimately leave. This information suggests that students who face additional expenses in fee-free education may struggle to finish different levels of schooling because of multiple reasons such as poor attendance and indisposition to learn as they face a lot of disturbances from school. The study findings are in line with the findings of Areba Ayodo and Chemwei (2015) and Alio & Chui (2023) which show that even with free secondary education, additional expenses lead to decreased completion rates.

This shows that while the government's outstanding and praiseworthy initiatives to implement free education for all as to guarantee equal opportunity and high completion rates, additional expenses still pose a challenge in achieving that objective, affecting especially students from poor economic background. The findings of this study relate to the Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, which suggests that students from low-income backgrounds may lack equal access to resources, experiences, and support systems as more privileged students, leading to barriers and obstacles

that impede their academic attainment (Edward, 2024). This means that additional expenses in education prevent students from low-income families from completing their studies.

Hidden costs of fee-free education could impact young females by compelling parents and guardians to halt their investments in their schooling, due to the demands of household chores, early marriage, and the necessity of sanitary products (Cordeiro, 2024). Hence, this study also sought to determine the effects of hidden cost of education from gender perspectives. Data in Table 4 below indicate that majority of respondents (83.0%) were of the opinion that hidden costs of fee-free education negatively impact female students more than male students.

Table 4: Participants responses on whether more female than male students are affected by the hidden costs of education n=305

Hidden costs affect more female than male	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	253	83
No	52	17
How hidden costs affect female than male students		
Transportation costs resulting from concern for female safety and security.	40	13.5
Meeting female gender specific personal and educational needs.	220	74.1
Choice of the female to abandon education due to marital expectations as well as household work burdens that demand women attention.	37	12.5

Source: Field data 2024

Regarding the ways through which hidden costs affect female students more compared to male students 72.4% of respondents attributed it to meeting specific personal and educational needs related to gender, 14.1% associated it with transportation costs related to female students' safety concerns, and 13.5% mentioned that some women choose to forego education due to marital expectations and household responsibilities that require their attention. This finding suggests that the additional expenses of schooling impact female students more than male students for various reasons namely, specific needs of female students, decision to leave school because of marriage expectations, and parental favoritism towards males which can all hinder female student's right and opportunity to learn. These results align with research conducted by Areba (2015) and Zakaria (2019) which showed that expenses for female necessities such as sanitary pads, and parental preference for boys, result in girls staying at home until marriage. This means that some families consider hidden expenses of fee-free schooling to be quite costly, leading parents to choose to educate their sons over their daughters. Regarding this, one of the parent's state that:

“The additional expenses impact a greater number of female students than male students. In truth, educating female students is more expensive than educating male students because of their gender and specific personal needs. This results in

an increased burden of covering the extra costs required for their needs”. (Parent 14, Private Conversation, 18th July, 2024).

In addition, the Ward Education Officer opined that:

“Female students from low-income families are disproportionately impacted by hidden education costs because their needs are greater than male students. If these needs go unmet, it may lead to students giving in to temptation, resulting in unintended pregnancies”. (WEO 3, Private Conversation, July 16, 2024).

This finding suggests that the additional expenses associated with free education can prevent female students from pursuing their specific personal and educational requirements based on their gender. Financial struggles caused by hidden expenses in fee-free schooling may force parents to favor male students over female students.

The study further sought to determine the effects of hidden costs of fee-free education on classroom management. Failure to cover the hidden costs of free education by parents could lead to students being disrupted in school during lessons, which could impact classroom management and the overall learning process Kraft (2020). Data from Table 5 below show that majority of respondents (74.4%) held that hidden costs in free education affects classroom management.

Table 5: Participants responses on whether classroom management problems are part of the effects of hidden costs in free education n=305

Hidden costs cause classroom management problems	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	227	74.4
No	78	25.6
Ways on how hidden cost cause classroom management problems		
School dropout	128	23.3
Poor performance	137	24.9
Truancy	49	8.9
Indisposition to learn	98	17.8
Lack of concentration in class	138	25.1

Source: Field data 2024

Furthermore, in response to how these hidden costs cause classroom management issues, results in Table 5 show that factors identified include lack of concentration in class (25.1%), poor performance (24.9%), school dropouts (23.3%), indisposition to learn (17.8%), and truancy (8.9%). This finding indicates that hidden expenses in fee-free education lead to students’ dropout from school, truancy, and lack of concentration in class leading to issues with classroom management as they disrupt effective teaching and learning processes. Positively, Ndiritu, Magoma & Mugiraneza (2020) found that there is good behavior among students who are able to

cover their education expenses and this improves classroom control. Students in this context are regular and punctual in school attendance and maintain general discipline, and this ultimately improve classroom management for teachers.

As reported by one Head of school;

“Managing a class with students who are not fully present is challenging; sometimes they leave early because they have not eaten. Additionally, certain students are unable to acquire the necessary school uniform and choose to wear regular clothes instead, leading to potential disruptions and classroom management issues”. (HOS A, Private Conversation, 11th July 2024).

This finding implies that the hidden expenses in fee-free schooling lead to issues with classroom management because of numerous disruptions in the course of interaction with the students. This results relate to the theory of Cultural and Social Reproduction, indicating that students from privileged backgrounds have a process of socialization in a way that they ‘*possess the code of the message*’ through which they are able to decode the messages transmitted in the class (Egyancosh.ac, 2024). This suggests that students from wealthier backgrounds possess social and cultural advantages that aid in their adjustment to the classroom setting, resulting to smooth classroom management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

The introduction of fee-free education policy in Tanzania have in one way or another impacted willingness of parents to contribute education expenses. This resulted to a lot of disturbances to students who failed to pay these hidden costs like being sent away or excluded in some important school activities depriving them study time hence lowering their academic performance. The disturbances and interruption also causes poor classroom management leading to lower academic performance. Moreover, these hidden costs affect students from disadvantaged families resulting to irregular attendance, dropout, lack of concentration in class as well as indisposition to learn which contribute to lower academic performance and lower completion rates, thus weakening their chances to attain educational goals.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the government should revise the policy of fee-free education by considering hidden costs of education so as to ensure that all students especially those from disadvantaged families have equal access to education. Also government and other education stakeholders should add more efforts to cover some aspects of hidden cost like meals so as to retain more students at school in order to guarantee higher completion rates and greater education attainments.

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