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Maasai Youth Mobility and Education: Saikeri Case Study

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Summer 2012

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges that the Maasai youth in the village Saikeri of Kenya face as they seek to use education as a means of social and vocational mobility. Through personal observations and interviews of teachers, students, and adult members of the community, I investigated the way that education in Saikeri is structured and whether or not the village education system is an effective medium for mobility for the youth of this minority population. My time in the village revealed to me that the challenges facing the students of the primary school were varied and intricate. Cultural norms, familial expectations, poverty, and a lack of infrastructure and resources all contributed to an setting in which the students, despite displaying desire and motivation, were unable to harness their education and channel it towards improving their futures.

Methodology and Challenges

The majority of my research was gathered through the use of interviews. Because I felt collecting information from a varied population would best serve my purpose, I categorized my subjects into the following groups: adult members of the community, teachers, and students. I interviewed 24 students (half female, half male), five teachers, and two adults for varying lengths of time. Due to some language challenges I enlisted the help of the teachers to help explain my research to the student subjects. With the permission of the subjects, I recorded the interviews in a field journal as well as on my laptop.

While conducting my research I encountered several challenges. One such challenge was the language barrier. This was not an issue in the case of the teachers who had college educations and were fluent in English. However I had to choose students from only the upper classes to ensure they had the necessary English skills to understand and participate in the research. The nature of my study also presented a challenge in that I was only conducting research in one

particular village and thus my research might not be a good representation of Maasai education in other locations.

Background

In the summer of 2011, I boarded a plane headed for Nairobi, Kenya. I had signed up to volunteer at a rural Maasai primary school near Ngong Hills for about a month and so I departed, armed with school supplies and several rolls of toilet paper. During my time in the village of Saikeri I developed an affectionate relationship with my generous host-family, was gifted a newborn calf, fell asleep to the distant laughing of hyenas, watched giraffes feeding near my lodging, and even learned a bit of the Maasai language. It was an experience that resonated deeply in me, but it was also one that would not stand for being written off as a memorable vacation or good life experience. This was in large part due to my young host-sister, Chepto, and the many children who attended the primary school. As I helped the teachers, I was presented with scores that could only be described as abysmal. But these failing grades began to mean more one afternoon when the teachers told me that a girl had fainted. They suspected that at the age of fourteen, she was pregnant and would have to leave the school. During our forty-five minute walk back home that evening, Chepto told me that she wanted to go on to become a pilot and travel the world. While I encouraged her to continue with her studies, I was beginning to realize that the education and future of these Maasai children were embedded in a complicated web of economics, infrastructure, administration, and culture. At the end of my designated time I had already decided I would return to Saikeri and not a year later, I found myself applying for and receiving the William F. Clinger, Jr. Award which would that return.

Education Structure

The Saikeri Primary School was originally composed of grades from nursery to class eight. When I returned this summer, the village had created a separate nursery school for children

under the age of five, which is the age of admittance to the primary school. Although the age of admittance is five, there are late entries as old as eleven or twelve. These are usually children who were kept at home because of domestic chores such as tending to livestock or looking after younger siblings. School begins at seven a.m. and ends at four-thirty p.m. Students have a break to play games along with a lunch break (I would like to note that virtually none of the students had food). The school runs on a trimester system, and English, math, science, social studies, Kiswahili, and CRE (Christian Religious Education) make up the subjects taught.

As I mentioned previously, the grades students have been receiving in these subjects are generally horrible and barely passing at best. Anthony Mjeru, a teacher of English and social studies for six years at Saikeri, stated that the general age of graduation if the student does not repeat grades is fourteen. However he also stated that currently the range of student ages is five to seventeen or eighteen. I questioned the teachers regarding the percentage of students who complete primary schooling without repeating a class and received a range of answers. Anthony estimated that about forty percent of students complete primary without repeating while others reported that the number was approximately sixty to seventy percent of students. What I did glean is that it is common for a student to fail and reenter a grade, and not uncommon for this to happen more than once to a student during their years in primary.

Secondary school in Kenya is the equivalent of high school in America, and attending secondary school is a serious goal for most students at Saikeri. David Lemayian Rayian, a teacher of math, English, and social studies, explained that in Kenya there several levels of secondary schools which all require different exam scores to qualify for admittance. National schools are the most prestigious and require a score of at least 400. Below these are the district schools which require a score of 350, provincial scores which require at least 300, and finally local boarding schools which require a score of at least 250. Most students continuing to secondary education from Saikeri enroll in local boarding schools and rarely qualify for provincial schools. The teachers stated that approximately three-fourths of graduating students continue on to secondary

schools, although this does not indicate that all those who enroll are able to finish. It is common for students who have managed to enroll in secondary schools to drop out because of reasons such as inability to pay tuition, pregnancy, inability to adapt, or because their parents needed them to return to assist with livestock or children.

Challenges to Education in Saikeri

Having seen the grades and learned about the generally poor performance of Saikeri students, I sought to discover the underlying causes. I began by turning to the students themselves to assess if their feelings about their education might be affecting their performance. During the student interviews I asked questions to gauge the students' enjoyment of school as well as their motivation to do well. The 24 students that I questioned unanimously replied that they liked attending school, and they unanimously desired to go to secondary school and even university. When asked why they enjoyed school, many replied that they wanted to make money and help their families while others expressed the desire to become better people. They expressed aspirations to enter professions that require higher education; they want to become doctors, pilots, nurses, teachers, surgeons, and engineers. Interestingly, many of the students also said that they wanted to work outside of Saikeri, in a city or even in a different country. It became apparent that in most cases, the problems with youth education and mobility are not rooted in a lack of ambitions or desire to attend school. The students -almost unanimously- believe that school dues represent their greatest obstacle to secondary and further education. As important as being able pay dues is, I suspected there was more to the situation than that.

The teachers were able to convey the seriousness and complexity of the situation that the youth are facing in their struggle for education and mobility. One of the obstacles that every teacher mentioned is poverty. Even if a child is able to perform well, if his or her parents are unable or unwilling to pay school fees they will not be able to attend primary, much less secondary or university. As I walked to school one morning, I noticed that several large groups of

students were headed away from school. I stopped one group and asked them why they were leaving and they responded that school fees were being collected and those that could not pay had been told to return home. There were also several boys I encountered who were on leave from secondary because their families had been unable to produce enough money to pay for the fees. It is possible, one teacher noted, that if a student does exceptionally well on exams the government will contact that child and offer scholarships for them to attend an upper level secondary school. In other cases, a student who has qualified for secondary school may be able to attract a sponsor. Saikeri is a village where a few international volunteer organizations send volunteers to work on projects such as cultural exchange, teacher assistance, and medical clinics, and some of these volunteers decide to sponsor a child's education. These cases, however, are exceptions to the norm.

Another hindrance to quality education is a general lack of resources and infrastructure. From textbooks and calculators to desks and teachers, Saikeri Primary School is sorely lacking. I watched as teachers spent hours doing tasks such as averaging a hundred students' grades by hand- a task that a computer could have done almost instantly. Several teachers mentioned that while the government does give learning materials, it is not nearly enough to provide for all of the students. Roughly half of the students are not being supplied with the appropriate learning materials, and this results in students being unable to do homework or study outside of school. They also stated that there is a need for the government to provide more teachers to rural schools because currently, the classes are much too large and there is a shortage of teachers. There was a general sense of mild government neglect towards rural Maasai education among the teachers, although they were hopefully for changes in the near future (to be discussed in further detail).

Infrastructure in Saikeri is also a serious issue and is linked to questions of safety and health. There is only one road that leads to and from Saikeri, and it is in horrendous shape. A single dirt road with large groves and rocks thickly littering its length is the only way in and out of Saikeri for vehicles. After a heavy rain, there will often be unstable areas that can collapse out

from under tires and cause serious accidents. One weekend, I had taken a trip to the nearest town which was roughly an hour and a half car ride away (that particular trip I undertook in the back of a pick-up truck with a goat in my lap) and on the way back two of the tires burst and stranded us for hours. On another trip, the vehicle's brakes gave out while going downhill. Understandably, the majority of the students in Saikeri have never ventured beyond the village or seen a paved road. These students commonly have to walk over an hour to and from the school on unsafe roads or through the bush where there are often snakes. The lack of proper roads makes it difficult for the school to try to organize excursions and is also part of the reason teachers do not want to travel to rural areas for employment.

When I was there in 2011, the teachers had told me the government was planning to bring electricity to the town, but for some reasons the project was in hiatus. This summer I was surprised to see that the posts for electricity lines had reached the village and to hear that electricity was expected to be available to certain parts of the village for a fee by the end of the year. The lack of electricity is a serious problem for the students. As I mentioned previously, these students often have to walk a long distance to reach home after school and by the time they have returned the sun is low. When finally they have finished chores and perhaps had dinner, it is too dark for them to study. I witnessed Chepto attempt to study by an oil lamp, but many students returned to school and said they were unable to complete assignments because they simply could not see. The lack of a clean water supply is also a concern and is linked with health issues that can get in the way of education. Several students admitted that some of them missed school because they were ill. The dams and pumps that are currently being used to supply water to the village hold unclean water and many students have suffered from dysentery and typhoid. There is a small health clinic in the village, but it is staffed by one woman and only offers simple treatments, especially because there is no electricity and thus no way to refrigerate supplies or medicines. It should be noted that majority of the students and villagers practice poor hygiene, in

part because they have not been taught proper habits of hygiene and because supplies like toothpaste and soap are not easily accessible.

Another obstacle mentioned by all of the teachers is actually the community. Being a traditionally pastoral and nomadic people, the Maasai people are still learning to appreciate the value of education. Some teachers felt that the community still values tangibly beneficial goods like cattle and livestock, which have an obvious pay off versus an intangible education for which they must continually pay. Teachers reported that the community and parents need to be sensitized to the importance of schooling for their children. One teacher expressed that he felt many parents only sent their children to school because they saw other parents doing so. Without a solid understanding of what education can do for their children's futures, the parents may continue to hold their children home for chores, not send them on trips planned by the school, or decided not to send them to secondary school. The adults that I interviewed indicated a strong desire to educate the children of the village and to see them enter professional arenas, but this may be because the adults I spoke to were educated or related to someone involved in the school.

There is also the concern that there are not enough role models for the children in the community. The previously mentioned clinic is run by a former student of Saikeri Primary School who went on to a nursing college and a few of the teachers are from the area, but most of the students who manage to be successful settle in other towns or cities. In the student interviews many students indicated wanting to leave Saikeri for what they considered better prospects, but the teachers felt that if this happened Saikeri would never develop and future generations would not have individuals to aspire to be like.

It is extremely important to note that there is a gendered aspect to the challenges to education in Saikeri. In my conversations with the teachers, it became obvious to me that they were concerned about security for their female students. Pregnancy and early marriages (at ages as young as twelve or thirteen) are still common in Maasai communities like Saikeri. A few teachers were candid enough to admit that some young girls face sexual abuse. They expressed

concerns that traditional Maasai culture places girls in a place of less value than boys and so they are not being afforded the same treatment or opportunities as boys. For these girls to have a chance at being properly educated in Saikeri and continuing on to further education, the community must believe they deserve to be. Girls like Chepto are expected to help clean, cook, gather firewood, bring water, do the laundry, and take care of their siblings and by the time that is accomplished, they hardly have the time or energy to focus on their studies. Boys also face challenges when they are expected to tend the livestock. One teacher described what once may have been acceptable as cultural norms is now looked upon as child labor by many. This teacher felt that while preserving Maasai culture is important, there are certain aspects of that culture that are being roadblocks to the development of future generations and should no longer be practiced.

Solutions

With all of these problems plaguing Saikeri Primary School's goal of educating the youth and helping them pursue their futures, what can be done? The teachers agreed that first the community has to be educated. Workshops and seminars hosted by the teachers, political officials, NGOs, members of other villages and even international volunteers could be effective means of reaching out to the community. These seminars should inform the community of the significance of education, promote gender equality, and introduce different avenues of further education for their children. It is also extremely important that successful graduates return to the village in some way to show the community what education has done for their lives. One teacher, Julius Saitaga, felt strongly that the teachers also had to work to make school a pleasant experience for the children. It is not uncommon to use physical punishments in Maasai schools, but Julius felt that teachers should be patient, kind, and motivational. He expressed that education should not be monotonous and the reason why some students do poorly in secondary school is that once they leave the village, they are unable to adapt to the different environment. School trips to safaris, the capital, airports, zoos, or theatres should be arranged to expose the children to a

variety of places. Some of the children who said they want to become pilots do not even know what an airplane looks like. Being able to put an experience or image to their aspirations could provide motivation for their studies.

Two of the biggest developments in Saikeri this summer that bode extremely well for the future of the students are the construction of the girls' dormitory and the new constitution. The teachers were excited to inform me that the government had passed a constitution that would take control of funds away from the central government that had previously neglected to meet the needs of minority groups. That control would be transferred to local governments where elected representatives of the Maasai community would discuss and distribute the budget. There would be a youth representative, a women's representative, village elders and others who would represent Saikeri's needs. This means that in the future, the community will have more control over where the money will go, and hopefully this means that Saikeri's school will be better funded. Such funds could be used to support students going to college, organize school trips, or host seminars or athletic tournaments.

The other change that had come to Saikeri Primary School was the construction and completion of a facility that would function as a solar powered girl's dormitory for about 35 girls from classes six to eight. Two volunteers who had come to Saikeri had returned to their home countries and fundraised enough money to fund the construction of the dormitory and it was scheduled to open on June 25, the day after I left. All of the girls interviewed declared that they want to enter the dormitory because they believed it would help them to do better in school. The teachers felt that the opening of the dormitory would be an enormous benefit to the girls. Having the girls live in this facility would do a number of things. Firstly, it would eliminate the need for them to walk long distances to and from their homes. Secondly, it would free them of duties such as cleaning and cooking and afford them more time to focus on their studies. Because of the building's solar power capacities, the girls would be the first in the village to be able to use electricity and lights to read and study past dark. When I left, the headmaster of the school was in

the process of hiring a head matron and cook to tend to the girls. He hoped that these women could teach the girls about ways to better care for themselves through nutrition and habits of hygiene, and provide a sense of security. The dormitory is expected to notably reduce the number of pregnancies and subsequent drop-outs, improve grades, and raise the number of girls going to good secondary schools. The two volunteers are said to be currently fundraising to build a similar facility for boys. Of course, now that this dormitory is available and another one is in the works, parents must be convinced that it is worth their money to house their children in them. Regardless, there has been progress in the village since my visit towards improving the education system in Saikeri and giving students a greater chance at improving their lives chances for economic, social, and vocational mobility.

Conclusion

This project turned out differently from what I had envisioned when I was writing my proposal. I went to Kenya believing I would be conducting research on how the youth was using their primary education to pursue further education and careers, but once there I was more interested in the various challenges students in Saikeri faced while pursuing an education. My interviews and interactions shed light on the complexity of their situation, and because this was my second summer with these people for whom I had come to care deeply I was both moved and troubled. It became clear that in order to make Saikeri an environment in which the youth could receive a quality education, one without the daunting roadblocks currently commonplace, there would have to be a multifaceted approach. Cultural norms and perceptions of gender, a lack of resources, poverty, roads, and many more obstacles will have to be addressed, and it will certainly take time. But for the Maasai youth of Saikeri it is a crucial endeavor, one that will have a resounding effect on the future of the youth and of the village.