



Disappointing Primary School Attendance in Eastern Uganda: Is Cultural Dynamics to Blame? Revelations from Naweyo Sub-County, Butaleja District

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ABSTRACT

Following reports of alarming poor school attendance in several districts of Eastern Uganda, this study set out to scrutinize the dynamics of selected cultural practices in explaining the problem. The study was carried out in Naweyo Sub-County using a cross-sectional survey design that triangulated qualitative with quantitative methods. It was discovered that although cultural dynamics contribute to poor school attendance, their explanatory strength had been exaggerated by earlier research. The study therefore concluded that cultural dynamics are only partially to blame for disappointing school attendance in Eastern Uganda. Closer collaboration strategies between education officials, cultural leaders and parents were proposed for better school attendance management.

Keywords: School attendance, absenteeism, cultural practices, educational administration and management.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting contradictions in Uganda's education history is that although colossal sums of money have been devoted to the sector in the last two decades, regular school attendance is still far from being realised (MoES, 2015). For example, some reports posit that in Uganda at least 50% of primary school pupils do not attend school on a daily basis (UBOS, 2013). UNESCO (2015) also reveals that in the whole country, the worst level of poor school attendance is in Eastern Uganda – in Butaleja District – with a shocking rate of 70% of pupil absenteeism. These statistics are corroborated by those of Butaleja Education Department, which show that poor school attendance has risen in the district from 45% in 2013 to 70% in 2017 (Daily Monitor, 24/1/2017). Yet available research (Namukwaya, 2014; MoES, 2014; Longman & Bradley, 2015; Berhane, 2006; Wandera, 2015) has mainly focused on the influence of other factors (such as hunger and long distance to school) on poor school attendance, leaving cultural dynamics unexamined. Those studies that have looked at cultural factors, such as (Mwesigwa, 2015) and UNFPA (2012), have only considered the generic influence of certain cultural practices, without making a comprehensive treatment of the dynamics of each. Hence the current study, which assesses the dynamics of selected cultural practices in explaining poor school attendance in Eastern Uganda, by carrying out a survey of Naweyo-Subcounty (Butaleja District). This survey is assumed to be of utmost importance, since every school day counts in a child's life, and thus a missed school day is a lost opportunity for pupils' learning, growth and development (UNESCO, 2015). The study had three specific objectives; namely, to find out the contribution of circumcision, early marriage and child labour to poor school attendance in Eastern Uganda, the case of Naweyo Sub-County.



CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study focuses on cultural dynamics of primary school attendance in Naweyo Sub-county (Eastern Uganda). By “culture” is meant a set of shared beliefs, customs and thus values that distinguish one group of people from another (Dawson, 2010). Culture is “dynamic” (not fixed or static), as is evident in the rituals, artefacts and institutions that reflect a given people’s values (Longman & Bradley, 2015). This study used the term “cultural dynamics” in reference to certain underlying (“cultural”) forces or practices such as circumcision, early marriage and child labour, which are said to have a critical bearing on school attendance (United Nations, 2001). School attendance was conceptualized in terms of pupil participation in school educational programs, implying both pupil frequency and regularity (UNESCO, 2015).

For theoretical grounding, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) was found to be most suitable in explaining the study variables, although also Ludwig Von Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory (1968) remained remotely useful. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) explains how a child’s micro and macro environments affect a child’s growth and development (Berk, 2000). The micro environment consists of institutions and groups that most immediately impact on the child’s development. These are the family, school, religious institutions, health services and peers. The macro system is seen in the overall cultural set up (Berk, 2000). Cultural contexts therefore include cultural practices (such as circumcision), ethnicity, and parents’ socio-economic status. School, pupils, their parents and even parents’ places of work are all perceived to be part of large cultural contexts in the macro system. For example, Maani (1990) contends that pupils’ school attendance is closely related to their home background; if parents have a strong attachment to certain cultural practices, pupils’ school attendance is affected in one way or another.

HISTORICAL-CONTEXTUAL DERIVATIVES

The problem of school attendance in Uganda makes even more sense when we view it from a historical perspective. Formal education was introduced in Uganda by Anglican and Catholic Missionaries in 1877 and 1879 respectively (Ssekamwa, 2000). The two groups largely remained in-charge of education up to 1970, when government centralized education service delivery. However, it was not until 1997 that government embarked on universal primary education (UPE). The aim was to elevate literacy levels and to meet millennium development goals of attaining UPE (MDG, 2000). Introduction of UPE resulted in a significant expansion of pupils’ attendance, from 2.5 million in 1997 to 8.3 million pupils in 2009 (Namukwaya, 2014). However, regular attendance has remained a daunting challenge (MOES, 2015).

Naweyo Sub-County (Butaleja District, in Eastern Uganda), where this survey was carried out, is the district with the highest level of poor school attendance in Uganda, standing at a shocking rate of 70% absenteeism irrespective of gender (UNESCO, 2015). Reports also show that on a typical school day, it is possible to find in the area a school with less than 25 children (District Abstract, 2015). Although in 2016, district leaders launched a campaign dubbed “back to school” to ensure that all school going age children returned to school, there seems to be no improvement in attendance. Perhaps an examination of the cultural dynamics involved might help to improve on the situation. The district is inhabited by various tribes such as Banyole, Bagwere, Bagisu, Basoga and Japadhola. These tribes are



mainly subsistent farmers, who often require their school going children to provide labour. Girl child marriages are also common among them; and a big proportion of their population, especially Bagisu and Banyole, practice male circumcision every leap year. These cultural practices are believed to have influence on school attendance, although both the magnitude and exact dynamics of this influence are yet to be established.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research has been carried out on the problem of poor school attendance in Uganda (Namukwaya, 2014; MoES, 2014; Longman & Bradley, 2015; Berhane, 2006; Wandera, 2015), much of this research has largely approached the issue from the perspective of such factors as biting poverty, hunger and long distance to school. Studies that have looked at cultural factors, such as Mwesigwa (2015) and Onzima (2010) have only considered the generic influence of the factors, without making a comprehensive treatment of the dynamics of each. Others like Mbugua (2012) and Chang'ach (2013) have been carried out in geographical contexts different from that of Eastern Uganda. More so, whereas some of those studies relied on descriptive statistics to make their conclusions (Kawala, 2006), others just used open narratives. There was therefore dearth of research using inferential parameters, on the one hand, and enriching the resultant concise coefficients with precise narratives to uncover implicit cultural dynamics for better school attendance management.

More specifically, for the cultural practice of circumcision, available research had indicated that in Africa many societies practice male circumcision for cultural reasons (Bruce 2010), particularly as an adolescent's initiation rite of passage into manhood. This traditional male circumcision varies from 20% in Uganda and Southern African countries to more than 80% in Kenya (Bruce 2010). For Eastern Uganda, circumcision forms part of society's core values of nurturing a culturally 'fit' individual to take on other cultural roles such as marriage and family leadership (Mwesigwa, 2015). Studies done in Mbale District – also in Eastern Uganda – had already established that circumcision negatively impacts on pupil performance (Kawala, 2006). However, these studies did not indicate if circumcision had the same effect on attendance itself. Two other Eastern Uganda studies, one a baseline survey by UWEZO (2010) in Sironko District, and another a study in Sironko District by Namukwaya (2014) had also established that circumcision rituals had a negative effect on formal education. However, none of these studies presented respondents' voices of how exactly this comes about. For example, which specific roles do youngsters play during circumcision, and how exactly do the different roles impact school attendance?

For early marriage, a number of studies report its negative effects on formal education (Field & Attila, 2008; Klepinger, Lundberg & Plotnick, 1999; Mwesigwa, 2015). However, whereas some of these studies only relate early marriage with other educational aspects such as school performance (Klepinger et al., 1999); those that relate it to school attendance have either been carried out in socio-cultural contexts different from that of Butaleja District (Field et al., 2008), or they stop at making declarative statements without exposing the dynamics (Onzima, 2010). More so, no study used inferential parameters to further argue its case.

The current study's last objective related school attendance with child labour, which refers to any form of work that does not only potentially result in mental, physical, social and/or moral harm to the underage, but also deprives them of their childhood, dignity and overall



potential (ILO, 2009). The study measured child labour in terms of child involvement in work during school time.

Globally, an estimated 150 million children between 5-18 years were reported to be involved in both paid and unpaid forms of work (ILO, 2016; Levy, 2005). Many of these are in African countries like Uganda, with between 59 and 65 million child labourers (ILO, 2016; UNICEF, 2014). Child labour clearly steals a child's school time, and so foils attendance. However, some studies have discovered that child labour also helps to raise school fees for pupils' tuition, uniforms and other scholastic materials, hence enhancing school attendance (Rosenzweig & Evenson, 2007; Cockburn & Kabubo-Mariara, 2010). For instance Emerson and Souza (2002)'s study in Brazil discovered a positive relationship between one child's labour and the education opportunities of his/her younger siblings, hence the conclusion that child labour adds schooling opportunity through income reallocations within the household. How realistic is this, considering cultural dynamics in Eastern Uganda?

In brief, unlike previous studies on pupils' school attendance in Eastern Uganda – notably Namukwaya (2014), International Refugee Trust (2016) and Kawala (2015) – the current study centered its focus singly on cultural practices so as to provide a more detailed perspective – by unravelling the dynamics involved. Secondly, the study used both inferential statistics and qualitative narratives so as to realize both precision and depth in the same work.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design that included both qualitative and quantitative plays. It was conducted in all the ten primary schools in Naweyo Sub-county (Eastern Uganda), eight of which are Government aided, while two are privately owned. The study population comprised of 306 (primary four to seven) pupils, 66 classroom teachers, ten Head teachers, four local leaders and four cultural leaders; as in Table 1.

Table 1: Study Population

Category	Population	Targeted Sample	Actual Sample
Pupils	5855	357	306
Teachers	97	76	66
Head teachers	10	10	10
Local leaders	4	4	4
Cultural leaders	4	4	4
Total	5952	451	390

In the study context, "Local Leaders" (LLs) are democratically elected civil servants representing the lowest government unit in a given village. Then "Cultural Leaders" (CLs) are individuals who are in-charge of a given tribal grouping's traditional rites and ceremonies such as circumcision. LLs and CLs wield a lot of influence among their people; their opinions and decisions are hardly questioned.

The total population was 390 respondents, selected using Krejcie and Morgan (1970)'s table. Sampling techniques used were stratified random and purposive sampling. Interview



guide and two sets of questionnaires were the instruments. Whereas one set was for pupils (closed-ended), the other was for teachers (semi-structured, with both open and closed-ended items). Each of the two questionnaires had questions on each of the three study sub-variables (circumcision, early marriages and child labour). Bio-data apart, the pupil questionnaire had 20 items; and it is this questionnaire that was used for inferential statistics (Correlation and Regression analyses). The teacher questionnaire had 16 items, some of which were open-ended, and others closed-ended. Both questionnaires were developed by the researchers themselves, basing on queries discovered in literature reviewed.

Validity and reliability were respectively realized using Content Validity Index and Cronbach Co-efficient Alpha, which were found to be appropriate at 0.93 and 0.891, respectively. Quantitative data (from questionnaires) was analysed using inferential statistics (Pearson's correlation analysis and regression analysis). After data had been established to be of normal distribution, Pearson analysis was applied, followed by regression analysis. Data for both Pearson and regression analyses was primarily captured from the 20 items in the pupil questionnaire; but was validated using school attendance registers. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data (interviews) (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Ethical issues were also catered for, including pupils'/minors' rights. The study was carried out between 2017 and 2019.

This study is considered limited by its localization to only Naweyo Sub-county (Butalejja District), hence affecting its external validity in as far as Eastern Uganda is concerned. However, the thoroughness of its protocols give the study credence for exemplification of scholarly work in view of combatting the disappointing school attendance problem in Eastern Uganda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Circumcision and Pupils' School Attendance

Nearly all teachers (93.9%) and pupils (94%) in Naweyo Sub-county reported that school going children are involved in circumcision ceremonies. More than half of the pupils (65.4%) further indicated that they had attended the circumcision ceremony at least three days a week during the year 2016. These findings mean that it is normal for children to attend circumcision ceremonies during school days. Absence from both class and out of class exercises for three days in a week is also a lot. It implies that circumcision truly steals a big share of pupils' school time, hence impeding regular school attendance. These findings corroborate Cook (2010)'s study, which showed that certain cultural factors are responsible for poor school attendance.

The study went into the dynamics of circumcision ceremonies by attempting to establish the nature of pupils' involvement. It was discovered that pupils participate in different ways. Whereas some participate as circumcision candidates; others get involved in singing, dancing, and/or cooking and related activities. The comparative representation of each of these participation schemes was also established, as in Table 2.



Table 2: Nature of Pupils' Participation in Circumcision Ceremonies

	Response	f	%
1	Singing circumcision songs	12	18.2
2	Dancing to the drum	24	36.4
3	Cooking for circumcision attendants	15	22.7
4	Participating as circumcision candidates	05	7.6
5	Other (e.g. preparing the circumcision site)	10	15.1
	Total	66	100.0

Table 2 reveals that whereas according to 36.4% of teachers the children participate by dancing to the drum; 18.2% participate by singing; only 7.6% of children participate as circumcision candidates. This means that even those pupils that are not circumcision candidates indeed participate personally, and thus miss school. This agrees with Chang'ach (2013) that not only candidates participate, but also other children who go to watch or cook, among other roles.

Further explaining how other children (non-candidates) participate in circumcision rites, one local leader reported that;

Some boys circumcise and others accompany candidates [for circumcision]. Also...girls participate because girls help in cooking and dancing, which takes a lot of time thus causing a lot of absenteeism [from school] (Local leader interview, Kachonga village).

A teacher also observed that;

During times of circumcision, school attendance reduces so much. When I take off time to observe what is going on during the circumcision ceremony, I find that many of my learners are active participants in different ways for example dancing and singing (Teacher, interview)

This implies that teachers have witnessed their very learners taking part in the circumcision ceremonies and can even identify them. Why do these teachers not stop such children? Respondents revealed that, on the one hand, this is partly explained by the little value attached to schooling by a big section of the community, and, on the other, by the high value attached to circumcision. For example, one respondent explained that;

Because these parents don't value education so much, they have failed to help us reduce poor school attendance levels during circumcision period. In my school I have tried to put strict rules against absenteeism like telling a child who didn't attend to come with a parent. Some parents feel uncomfortable to come to school with such a child. Some tell their children to stay at home the whole term (Head teacher interview).

This implies that as much as some school administrators are strict on pupil absenteeism, some parents are uncooperative. It is therefore true that parents contribute to pupil absenteeism during days for circumcision, which occurs every even year. On this, one cultural leader noted that;

The year of circumcision is always characterized by irregular school attendance because the drums attract learners to join the dancing group. A pupil is free to join the dancing group. This [participation] is like a training for those who have not yet circumcised (Cultural leader interview).



These findings agree with those of Amssalu (2003) in Tanzania, which showed that boys' absenteeism and drop out cases increased after the circumcision season. Since also girls participate in the ceremonies, the findings also corroborate Hari (2009)'s conclusion that circumcision practices are a breeding practice for reduced girl child attendance at school.

However, not everyone involved in circumcision ceremonies fails to return to school afterwards. Most of the pupils (89.9%) said that they go back to school after the circumcision season; only 10.1% of respondents said that pupils do not go back. This implies that, although they may be few, some pupils never return to school after circumcision, hence concurring with Onzima (2010) that circumcision has a negative bearing on school attendance. However, since most of the pupils (89.9%) reported returning to school after the circumcision season, the current study disagrees with Mbugua et al. (2012)'s and Chang'ach (2013)'s studies in Kenya, which argued that most circumcision initiates desist from school for good, since they begin to see themselves as candidates for marriage, not children for school. The current study argues that this depends also on the role played in the circumcision rites;

At times children come back to school but this really depends on the role played during circumcision. For example, those who are circumcised have to stay at home until the wound heals, which at times takes long (Head teacher interview).

This means that the influence of circumcision on school attendance also depends on the particular role played during circumcision. Therefore, the lighter the role played, the earlier pupils are likely to return to school. To crown up findings on objective one, the study used Pearson Correlation analysis to put inferential parameters on the relationship between the cultural practice of circumcision and poor school attendance, as in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation between circumcision and poor school attendance

Correlations		Circumcision practice	Pupil's attendance
Circumcision practice	Pearson Correlation	1	.382**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	306	306
Poor School attendance	Pearson Correlation	0.382**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	306	306

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 reveals that there is a significant positive relationship between circumcision and pupils' poor school attendance ($r = 0.382$, $p = 0.00 < 0.005$). However, the correlation coefficient of .382(**) is relatively weak; it relates poor school attendance to circumcision by only 38.2%. This implies that other factors are more important in explaining school attendance. These were found to be such factors as digging, grazing animals, doing domestic chores, and harvesting crops. This conclusion disagrees with earlier studies (Chang'ach, 2013; Amssalu, 2003; Hari, 2009) that may now be declared to have exaggerated the influence of circumcision ceremonies on pupils' school attendance. The employment of inferential analyses by the current study yielded results that are less alarming than either those of its own descriptive statistics and qualitative results or those of earlier research, though largely pointing to the same direction.



Early Marriage and Pupils' School Attendance

The study's second objective was to establish the influence of early marriage as a cultural practice on pupils' school attendance. Sixty seven percent (67%) of teachers reported that they had received complaints on their pupils' early marriages. This implies that most schools have registered early marriage cases, further revealing that early marriage is widely spread in Eastern Uganda, going by realities in Naweyo Sub-county. This agrees with Onzima (2010) that some girls get married at as low as 14 years of age. On this, one of the respondents observed that;

Child marriages are common among the 14 year-old girls and above, as some parents force their children to get married yet others get married because they have already conceived (Head Teacher, Head teacher interviews).

This further means that in Naweyo Sub-county early marriage is supported by many parents themselves. This agrees with Onzima (2010) that many child marriages take place with the consent of parents.

The study further discovered that 38.9% of pupils involved in the study had ever been advised, or even ordered, to get married in the previous one year (2016) alone. Many of these were told by their very parents or guardians (44.5%); 39.2% by peers, and 16.3% by other community members. Yet these are primary school going children who deserve all protection from every community member to ensure that they continue with school attendance for a brighter future. Telling children to get married further makes them have fear and loss of confidence in their parents, especially if children still want to stay in school. This implies that friends, peers, guardians and adult relatives majorly influence children into marriage without considering their education and the legal age for marriage which is eighteen years in Uganda. Since there are many categories of people telling children to get married, moreover with parents/guardians also involved, it shows how irresistible it may often be for these children! But why the urge for marriage at such a tender age? Reasons vary;

Children get married due to many reasons like some get married after circumcision because they are free to marry, others are forced by their parents because they want dowry yet others are convinced by peers to get boy friends and girl friends which results into pregnancy leading to child marriage (Local leader interview)

The discovery on some parents' urge for dowry concurs with Mwesigwa (2015) that early marriage is a result of poverty where parents want to secure their financial security by marrying off their daughters with an intention of getting bride price. Another Cultural Leader, himself in support of the practice, explained that;

Those children who delay in school get spoilt by producing few children and moving away from their ancestral homes. I married my first wife, a mother to twelve children, at the age of fourteen. Children must marry when parents are still alive in order to enjoy dowry. My wife was given to me by her parents because my father had dowry. She has never divorced me compared to educated girls (Cultural leaders' interview).

This indicates that most parents highly support early marriages, which negatively impacts on pupils' school attendance. Once they get married, these pupil mothers/fathers do not return to school. However, there are some Local Leaders who do not only disagree with the practice, but have also taken steps to change it. One such leader reported that;

I try to sensitise community members on the issue of early marriages. They give lame excuses that the girl(s) was too weak and big to study in a primary school... [But] Since I



[myself] *have not been successful in educating mine [my daughters] who also get married early but on their own, I have always been insulted* (Cultural leaders' interview).

Among the steps taken to salvage the situation is reporting to police or courts of law, as reported by 36.4% and 33.3% of respondents, respectively. However, 22.7% reported that they do not mind about children's early marriages. One said that;

Once the biological parents consent to the marriage, there is no need of legal interventions. It is their thing and they have agreed. So why interfere? (Local leader interview).

Also for this objective the study sought to establish the relationship between the cultural practice and school attendance; Table 4.

Table 4: Early marriage and poor school attendance

Correlations		Early marriage	Poor School attendance
Early marriage	Pearson Correlation	1	.548**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	306	306
Poor School attendance	Pearson Correlation	.548**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	306	306

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 reveals that there is a significant relationship between early marriage and pupils' missing of school attendance ($r = 0.548$, $p = 0.00 < 0.005$). However, the obtained correlation co-efficiency of .548(**) is only medium. This implies that there are other more crucial factors contributing to pupils' missing attending school, like lack of midday meals and lack of interest in schooling. These findings disagree with earlier research (e.g. Onzima, 2010; Mwesigwa, 2015) that seem to have exaggerated the contribution of early marriages (as a single factor) to poor school attendance.

Child Labour and Pupils' School Attendance

The third objective of the study was to find out the contribution of child labour on pupils' school attendance. It was discovered that due to both domestic and extra domestic work, 81% of pupils had missed attending school for some days in the previous one year (2016), with 18% of them missing for at least two weeks, and 4% missing for a full term. These discoveries agree with UBOS (2013) that there is widespread child labour in Uganda. They also agree with MoES (2011) and Boozer and Tavneet (2001) that child labour adversely affect pupils' school attendance, since children spend many days off school.

To link such child labour to school attendance, the study asked Head teachers which days of the week pupils get involved in domestic work. It was discovered that this takes place on any day of the week, including school days (Monday to Friday). One of them said that; *They do work any day whether school days or weekends as long as they are told to work. Some pupils can attend half day and escape from school to go to the swamp to work because they need the money. Others just stay away working for days and weeks* (Head teacher interview).



When asked in which way child work really hinders pupils' school attendance, another Head teacher revealed that;

Some pupils miss for a number of days digging in the swamp or scaring away birds from rice gardens. This takes a month or more meaning he or she will miss attending school for a number of days (Head teacher interview)

This means that child labour truly reduces pupils' school attendance, for pupils work even on school days. However, this depends also on the kind of labour involved in; as in Table 5.

Table 5: Type of Work Involved in by Pupils

Type of work	Frequency	%
Agriculture	245	80.1
Petty business	32	10.5
Skilled employment	15	4.9
House chores	5	1.6
Digging/farming	9	2.9
Total	306	100

Table 5 reveals that the type of work involved in by most of the pupils (80.1%) is agricultural activities such as digging, slashing, chasing birds from rice gardens, and grazing animals. It was reported that;

These children do all the work like grazing animals and digging. At the beginning of the season like sowing and weeding of millet and other crops need many people (much labour) and these children need to join parents like for at least a week depending on how big the garden is. The same applies to harvesting of most crops. For us who cannot afford to employ [other] people we use our children (local leader interview).

Another respondent said that;

Children spend much time working during the week days. Some children are forced by parents, yet others work to get money to buy scholastic materials and other home needs. If you go to Doho rice scheme now, you will think that today is a weekend or public holiday (Head teacher interview).

Whereas some pupils do this involuntarily to supplement family income, others do so voluntarily in order to meet their own scholastic materials or those of their siblings. This means that child labour is partly due to high domestic poverty levels in Naweyo sub-county. However, it also means that child labour can also enhance pupils' education by availing them with scholastic requirements. This is close to Ravallion and Wodon (2000)'s contention that child labour makes some positive contributions to children's development, although the duo saw this in terms of marketable skills gained by pupils, and not in terms of contributing to siblings' education.

On contributing to children's own education, a respondent noted that;

Sometimes children have to be absent from school in order to work for paid labour that is used to pay school fees and buy other scholastic materials that may be needed at schools. Farmers prefer using children to adults because they are cheap and faithful to their employers (Local leader interview).



These findings agree with Onzima (2010) that children absent themselves from school to do casual work to supplement family income. Unfortunately many pupils get used to making quick money and end up absenting themselves from school for long, or quitting school all together. Yet many residents of Naweyo Sub-county are not bothered by such eventualities like dropping out of school, because they attach little value to schooling. One observed that; *Once a child learns how to get money, it is enough because I see many graduates and government employees like teachers very poor. I feel digging is more paying (local leader interviews)*

This implies that parents look at the benefits of education largely in terms of only earning more money. If one can already earn big by doing casual work, why continue with schooling!

When pupils' responses were subjected to Pearson Correlation analysis, the results were (Table 6):

Table 6: Child labor and poor school attendance

Correlations		Child labour	Poor school attendance
Child labour	Pearson Correlation	1	.566**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	306	306
Poor School attendance	Pearson Correlation	0.566**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	306	306

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 reveals a significant and positive but medium relationship between child labour and pupils' missing of school attendance in Naweyo Sub-county ($r=.566$, $p=.000<0.005$). The obtained correlation co-efficient of .566(**), with a significance value of .000, illustrates a significant positive relationship that exists between the two variables. However, since the coefficient is only of medium strength (.566), it means that other issues like parent socio-economic status and educational level have a stronger influence on pupils' school attendance. This conclusion corrects such studies like UBOS (2013) and Boozer et al. (2001) who gave child labour more credence in explaining poor school attendance. Even then, the current study posits that child labour is a more significant cultural practice in explaining poor school attendance than either circumcision [at .382(**)] or early marriages [at .548(**)].

To wrap it up all, a regression analysis involving all the three cultural variables (Circumcision, Child labour and Early marriage) was carried out, also in order to gauge the relative importance of each of the three in explaining school attendance; as in Table 7.



Table 7: Regression analysis of Cultural Variables and School Attendance

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.673 ^a	.453	.432		.30923	
a. Predictors: (Constant), early marriages, child labour, circumcision						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.260	.351		3.592	.001
	Circumcision	.377	.098	.419	3.845	.000
	Child labour	.312	.068	.429	4.592	.000
	Early Marriages	.045	.099	.051	.458	.649
a. Dependent Variable: School attendance						

Table 7 reveals that together the three variables can explain 43.2% of the variance in pupils' school attendance (adjusted R Square = .432). This means that an improvement in the way circumcision activities, child labour and early marriages are managed in Naweyo Sub-county (Eastern Uganda) is capable of issuing in a 43.2% improvement in school attendance in the long run, *ceteris paribus*.

The findings in Table 7 also agree with all Correlation results above that of the three variables, the most influential predictor of pupils' school attendance is child labour (Beta = .429, $p=.000$). However, Table 7 results do not bring early marriage but circumcision (with Beta=.419, $p=.000$) as the next strongest factor in explaining poor school attendance. This slight difference in results calls for further research. How comes, for example, that Regression analysis even indicates that the relationship between early marriage and school attendance is insignificant relationship. In any case, the current study is proud to reveal that in Naweyo Sub-county (Eastern Uganda) children are more likely not to attend school while doing child labour, than while attending circumcision ceremonies or because of early marriage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study concludes that, going by the realities in Naweyo Sub-county, cultural dynamics are only partially to blame for disappointing school attendance in Eastern Uganda. Although truly the three cultural variables (circumcision, early marriage and child labour) both individually and collectively have a negative bearing on school attendance, the strength of their explanatory ability is either only medium or even low. That is the first contribution of this study, as a correction to earlier research that is now declared to have exaggerated the contribution of cultural factors to poor school attendance in Eastern Uganda. This is not to posit that cultural dynamics do not typify a statistically significant factor in explaining school attendance. They are significant, but their significance is not unlimited. This practically means that to improve on school attendance in Eastern Uganda, cultural dynamics only pose a critical starting point; otherwise there are several other factors (such as school environment and distance to school) that also have to be factored in.



The second contribution of this study lies in its disclosure of a number of implicit underlying forces that surround each of the three cultural variables in Eastern Uganda. It was important to uncover these dynamics in view of handling them better for improved school attendance. For example, simply banning pupils from circumcision ceremonies does not help; while at school, the sound of “the drum” will keep distracting them and inviting them to attend. In such a case, it makes more sense closing all schools for a week to allow pupils attend; or, even better, to convince cultural leaders to organise these ceremonies only during holidays (in December).

As way forward, the study recommends closer collaboration between education officials (District education officers, heads of schools, teachers) on the one hand, and cultural leaders and parents, on the other, to combat poor school attendance. This might for example mean holding circumcision ceremonies only during holidays, or sacrificing a few school days (or hours) in the District to let pupils provide some labour to their parents. Only such strategies or “joint compromises” will work, in line with the African proverb that “It takes a whole village to raise a child”.

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