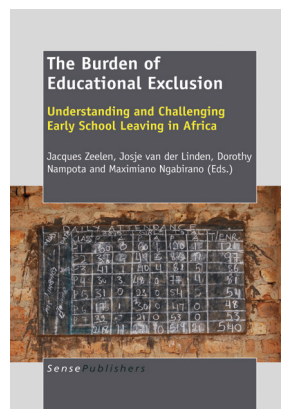# BOOKS

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Though access to and enrolments in education
have improved over the past decennium,
completing primary or secondary school and
leaving with a certificate is a different issue
altogether. This book addresses the complex
and prevailing problem of early school leavers
in Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania,
South-Sudan, Uganda and in the Netherlands.
The book, in fact a collection of papers, is
one of the results of intensive collaboration
between researchers and other stakeholders
from several African countries and researchers
from the Netherlands in the Early School
Leaving in Africa (ESLA) project.
The various papers present background
information on the issue of early school
leaving and describe (new) interventions
undertaken to either keep students in school
or get them back to school.
While reading the book, the dimensions of the
problem of early school leavers become clear
and it is interesting to learn which similarities
and differences between the researched
countries exist and which interventions have
been used to address the problem. I will refer
to some of the authors and their papers to
illustrate certain issues.

In the introduction Zeelen *et al*. present the
background of the ESLA project and state
that, though the important role of education
in development has been recognized and

educational policies to improve access to and enrolment in education have been initiated, research shows there is a huge gap between policies and reality. Better access and higher enrolment rates do not automatically mean that all students attend school on a daily basis, finalize the total number of years at primary or secondary school, pass the exams and leave school with a certificate. Openjuru illustrates reality with numbers in his paper on *Government Education Policies in Uganda*. As a result of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) enrolment rose from 3.1 million in 1996 to 6.6 million in 1999. However, attendance statistics show a consistent decline for each successive level of primary school education (from Primary 1 to 7) in 2003, with a distribution of 25 percent in Primary 1 steadily declining to six percent in Primary 7. According to Tukundane and Blaak in their paper *Towards New Intervention Programmes* the completion rate in Uganda in 2003 of primary school was 56 percent and dropped to 48 percent in 2006.
However, Zeelen *et al*. emphasize that even completion of secondary or higher education doesn't mean that finding a job or generating income is ensured, as the African education system does not prepare people for the formal or informal labour market.

In the various papers authors discuss the causes behind the occurrence of early school leavers. Tukundane and Blaak (p. 211) highlight the main causes based on a number of studies in Uganda: monetary cost, family responsibilities, academic reasons, teenage pregnancies and early marriages, the child's perception that they have had enough education, cultural attitudes, parental decisions, harassment at school, being too old for the class, negative peer pressure, pupil's involvement in petty trading, lack of role models, and illness. They also point out that early school leaving is a complex issue and reasons vary from person to person and place to place. Other authors search for the causes in the education system, curricula and for example in Uganda, the overly academic system and irrelevance of the system and content to life after school. Kanyandago in his paper on *Community-Based Learning* indicates that the violence of systemic, or structural, undermining of the culture of the people in the education system is one of the reasons why students leave and he blames the "combined work of colonizers, 'civilizers', educators and evangelizers" (p. 103).

Types of interventions and suggestions to address the problem of early school leavers as presented in the book consist among others of the introduction or improvement of counseling of students, specific vocational training programs to get students back to school and give them a second chance, use of local languages as a medium of instruction and involvement of the community in the school programme. This last intervention, the involvement of the community as described by Nampota in *Non-formal Education for Early School Leavers* immediately raises the question

whose responsibility education is. Parents', communities', governments'? The Community Based Education Programme in Malawi tried to create ownership at community level, by the use of Learning Centre Management Committees (LCMC), which includes local community members. The latter are expected to monitor the centres on a daily basis, checking facilitators, assisting the learners with children and pay home visits to parents or guardians of irregular attendees. Though the CBE programme is considered to be a success, the LCMC complains about a lack of incentive while they have to leave their daily activities, often involving their own income generation:

> There is no benefit to us…our clothes get dirty when we help the learners with children but in the end there is nothing to help us buy soap. There are no seminars. Allowances, training…they just ask us to do the job (Focus Group Discussion, LCMC, p. 236).

The question is if the burden of education can be placed on the shoulders of the parents or the community. Corrales (2006) also wonders if parental participation in schools does empower or strain civil society. Kanyandago in *Revaluing the African Endogenous Education System for Community-Based Learning* sees this from a different perspective. Based on a number of arguments he pleads for Community Based Education which is produced and managed by the community and is completely endogenized; an education

system for Africans as he calls it. Personally I find this paper the most interesting one, as it really challenges the educational systems and practices instead of trying to find adaptations and treat the after effects. Feasibility remains an issue but his idea, also in view of globalization, raises the question if education has to be local, even using local languages at primary school level, or (inter)national. As Dyer and Rose (2005) argue, decentralization shifts the locus of management and responsibility and raises questions about learning outcomes, quality and widening of disparities.

Although the title might suggest different the book also contains a chapter about early school leaving in the Netherlands. As Kuiper and Van der Linden describe in *Early School Leaving in the Netherlands:* "*Go Round the Back. That's What We Do*", early school leaving is prevalent in the Netherlands as well. The authors point out how national and regional policies hamper rather than promote effective action of professionals working with early school leavers. They also indicate that the surprising fact is that interventions to combat problems are expected to happen at the school level, as many of the problems causing early school leaving are of a bigger nature. This brings me to the problem I have with the book. Though Zeelen *et al*. (p. 259) acknowledge in *Afterthoughts* that early school leaving is a multi-dimensional problem caused by a combination of societal, political, school, family, individual and health issues as well as other factors related to

traditional culture, it is surprising to realize that all papers focus on the school level and to a certain extent on educational policies and the responsibility of the communities. I would like to see the problem of early school leaving related to the total context of national development and how interventions at other levels could influence the occurrence of early school leaving.

The feasibility of the Millennium Development Goal, education for all by 2015, is not challenged. Is this due to the difference between planners and searchers as described by Easterly (2006), who also challenges the value and feasibility of keeping pouring resources into a fixed objective, despite many previous failures at reaching that objective? Or are the problems with implementation of the goal and related policy due to the weak link between policy objectives on the one hand and the economic planning and management on the other as Penrose (1993) argues? I also miss the attention for cost-effectiveness of the various interventions, which is, as Creemers and Van der Werf (2000) point out, not only important for decision making in educational policy and practice, but also to establish the costs of educational processes in relationship to their effects.

The strength of the book is that it draws the attention to the complex problem of early school leaving through contributions of researchers and other stakeholders from Africa and the Netherlands. The book also fulfills its aim to raise questions and enhance academic and policy debate (though I would like to add public debate) and challenges further research.

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