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Education as a fundamental human right and prerequisite for development has been the basis of many current international policies, such as Education for All (UNESCO, 2008) and the Millennium Development Goals (2008). Governments and NGOs all over the world are making access to education their priority. As a consequence, the number of children enrolled in primary and secondary education is increasing noticeably. Good news? Yes, but according to Zeelen, Van der Linden, Nampota & Ngabirano (2010), there is also a flip-side. Efforts in education have concentrated more on access and enrolment, and less on the retention of learners and the quality of education. The drop-out rate is high, therefore, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This issue is the focal point of the Early School Leaving
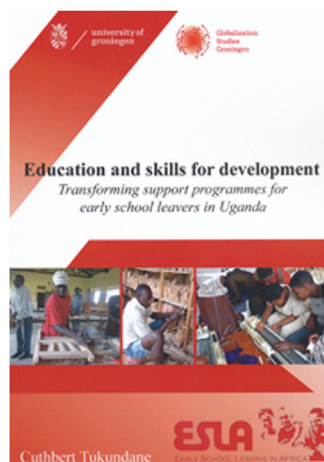
research programme at the Institute of Globalisation Studies Groningen in collaboration with Uganda Martyrs University and Mzumbe University in Tanzania, and other universities in Uganda and Malawi. Tukundane's PhD dissertation is well situated in this research programme, focusing on transforming support programmes for early school leavers (ESLs) in Uganda. His dissertation gives us a captivating insight into the challenges of early school leaving (ESLg) and the intervention programmes designed to support the (young) people who live with its consequences. By means of a participatory action research project, Tukundane's study explores how outcomes might be improved.

In this well-written and comprehensible dissertation, Tukundane describes how interventions are limited when it comes to encouraging early school leavers to re-enter mainstream education in Uganda. ESLs are either permanently excluded from education or enrol in support intervention programmes to acquire the necessary skills and competences for their integration into the labour market and to take advantage of other livelihood opportunities (such as self-employment, access to financial services, land, social networks, etc.). In the Ugandan context, most of these programmes are vocational education and training (VET) programmes.

Tukundane emphasizes the realities of life for early school leavers and argues that the perspective and social worlds of the ESLs are generally understudied when these kinds of support programmes or educational policies are designed. After a general introduction (chapter 1), therefore, his dissertation opens with 16 in-depth interviews with ESLs between the ages of 16–24 (chapter 2). In his analysis, he concludes that early school leaving is linked to several interrelated factors originating in the family, school, and community environments. Most ESLs described early school leaving as negative and as a traumatizing experience, which undermined their sense of self-worth. They told of their experiences of exclusion and marginalization where they are reduced to low-paid jobs, menial jobs, working in difficult conditions with limited life opportunities and choices, and experience a lack of belonging (p. 44).

> "When I failed to continue, I felt hurt, and even now I'm hurting. I see the students that I finished primary 7 with… those that went to technical school are now working; those that continued with secondary are now at university… and for me, you find that I am here still envying them…. I didn't study to get a job…. the money I make as a house maid is very little." Jackie – female respondent (p. 22).

Through his research into the lived realities of early school leavers, Tukundane draws some conclusions regarding intervention support programmes. These should "seek to rebuild the

self-image of ESLs and equip them with the relevant practical skills to help them overcome vulnerability, marginalization, and social exclusion" (p. 45), or so-called soft skills. His advice for support programmes is "to build on the talents and competences of ESLs rather than concentrate only on their deficiencies" (p. 45). This may also relieve some of the stigmatization surrounding early school leaving and the intervention support programmes. While I agree with his conclusion, I would also raise some further questions: how can intervention support programmes achieve this paradigm switch? When programmes focus on talent and competences as well as "soft skills", they may neither refer to themselves as "intervention programmes", nor target ESLs specifically as their intended learners. How do these programmes ensure that they can still incorporate the issues that arise when confronted with the challenges for ESLs? In his further study, Tukundane does not focus on these issues specifically, but concentrates on the enabling factors of existing ESLg intervention programmes through a literature review and an in-depth and extensive action research process.

Based on his literature review (chapter 3), he distinguishes a number of enabling factors: the flexibility of learning approaches and opportunities, intensive support through guidance, counselling and follow-up, the delivery of learner-centred curricula, a holistic approach to learning, a conducive programme environment, a whole-community approach, providing a link to the labour market and possible further education, the certification and recognition of qualifications, and monitoring and evaluation, and finally actively involving stakeholders (p. 59–65). Interesting as these conclusions are, the literature review has its limitations as it included only a limited number of papers from SSA and included no longitudinal or quantitative studies. These are limitations that Tukundane cites himself. He therefore claims that tailoring to local needs, and as such small-scale intervention programmes, are currently the best answer for SSA. "Enabling factors must be tailored to such needs of the local economy, the labour market, youth employment, cultural values and food security" (p. 69). Here, holistic and flexible approaches are the most successful. In his own SWOT analysis (chapter 4) of a number of existing Ugandan VET programmes, he concludes that some participants in current VET programmes have been moderately successful, i.e. they have found employment or started their own business. However, the VET programmes are also lacking, in terms of realizing the participant's full potential, relieving stigmatization, creating links with the realities of the local market, acquiring practical skills, learner-centred teaching approaches, guidance and counselling practices, flexibility, and addressing the diverse needs of ESLs.

The literature review and SWOT analysis form the lead-up to a participatory action research process in Mbara district, south-western Uganda (chapter 5), which I consider the strongest feature in Tukundane's study. Through a practice-based evidence approach, the project "enabled

various stakeholders, including VET practitioners, VET graduates, ESLs, parents, educationists, and policy makers, representatives from NGOs and local community leaders to collaborate in a knowledge-generating process and actions that led to new understandings of VET and plans for its improvement" (p.128). The research process showed that involving these stakeholders in the design and implementation of support interventions is likely to improve outcomes, in terms of changing the image of VET and creating links between the programmes and work opportunities. Tukundane's description of the PAR process is fascinating to read, but I also feel that the reader is missing out on more insight than is now being provided. The role of the researcher, the research process, and the methodological challenges that were faced would benefit from a deeper analysis, and as such also improve the exemplary value of this project for other action researchers.

In the general discussion (chapter 6), Tukundane addresses the broader policy implications of his research by recommending increasing effort and resources for both the prevention of early school leaving and the support of intervention programmes. In addition, he stresses the need for policy interventions to ensure macro-economic stability and the improvement of household income and to create job opportunities, as well as the need to rethink the education system in Uganda so that it is able to disseminate relevant education and skills.

Tukundane's dissertation demonstrates a deep and thorough understanding of the experiences of ESLs and the challenges that they are facing, the enabling factors of support intervention programmes, and how support intervention programmes can be improved through the active involvement of various stakeholders. While Tukundane places his research findings within the larger context of ESLg, Ugandan policies and the education system, the focus remains on his findings regarding the support of intervention programmes, and the findings may lack the practical applicability or specific recommendations that Ugandan scholars and policy-makers are petitioning for. This minor reservation aside, Tukundane has made a substantial and valuable contribution to research into early school leaving in SSA.

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