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Why Impoverished Children do well in Ugandan Schools

STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN

Socio-economic status measures have been used to represent a mixture of material and psychological privileges which vary between families. There is less than unanimous agreement about exactly what 'it' is within the family environment; nevertheless many of the indices (such as father's occupation, educational attainment, income, possessions, number of rooms per family-member, number of books in the home, etc.) indicate 'something' because children who have better than average amounts seem to demonstrate better than average performances in school. The fact that this is not true in Uganda (Heyneman, 1976a, b), by necessity, forces us to retrench, and to rethink why these symbols are such powerful and consistent influences in one society, and not in another.

MEASURES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS IN UGANDA

As do others, I use the term 'socio-economic status' to refer to a continuum of societal privileges. To contain differences in privilege, societies need not be fully industrialised; they need only be marked by variance in sufficient quantity to be measured. If an investigator is sensitive, few (if any) societies would have to be excluded from an analysis because of insufficient variance.

However, the concept of privilege can be defined in more than one way, as primarily: (1) normative (i.e. symbolic), (2) coercive, or (3) utilitarian (i.e. material) [1]. Normative privilege would imply that the status contained roles of honour or positions of voluntary leadership. In American communities normative status might pertain to individuals honoured in organisations such as the local Parent-Teachers Associations, military organisations, or churches, and to signify recognition accorded to individuals such as senators, governors or presidents who had retired. But in Uganda normative privileges are ethnic-specific. They are not transferable across differing family and kinship values or political and legal traditions. The status of a 'traditional' leader, for example, would have divergent and perhaps opposite implications within Buganda (where colonial authorities ruled through existing structures) as compared to Sebei or Bugisu (where 'traditional' leaders and 'traditional' structures were imposed by the colonial authorities and imported from Buganda). Any attempt to measure normative social

This paper and its conclusions are based upon information valid for the period predating 1972. Portions of the paper have been read at the Annual Meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society and at the American Sociological Association; and helpful suggestions were received from the members of those two organisations. I am also indebted to individuals at Makerere University, the University of Chicago, The George Washington University and the World Bank for their technical support and substantive criticism. Earlier versions were read by Philip Foster, James Coleman, Donald Holsinger and Melvin Kohn; their comments, too, are much appreciated.

status across Uganda's 30 or more ethnic groups would have to be approached with extreme caution and will not be attempted here [2].

Similarly, I will not focus upon social privileges which derive primarily from the possession of coercive resources. In industrial societies these imply the use or the potential use of political, legal or military force. But in Uganda there is no coercive institution outside of the military. Parliament, town councils and political organisations, once profuse, had all been dissolved by the time of the 1972 survey; laws and legal rulings emanated solely from the office of the 'supreme' commander, and few sample children had parents from that context [3].

My use of the term socio-economic status in the context of Uganda does not imply the possession of either differential normative or coercive privileges. Children who have parents with educational attainment above the average, who have fathers with better means of earning money, or homes containing more modern possessions relative to the rest of the sample—these children will be thought of as possessing privileged socio-economic status with respect to its third and most valid meaning for multi-ethnic samples in Uganda, that of utilitarian (material) resources.

Finally, since the concept of measuring material privileges originated in industrial societies, let me raise the issue of whether their value is transferable. Two reasons lead to the conclusion that it is. First, scales of occupational prestige have already proved to have considerable inter-societal validity (Hodge, 1966; Treiman, 1977). But also, unlike many oriental cultures (Gertz, 1956), African societies generally place considerable emphasis upon wealth and income in determining social status; and this is particularly true in Uganda (Fallers, 1957, 1964, 1966).

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

From a random selection of schools in five districts and three urban areas, each of the 2293 children in the survey was asked to react to five attitudinal statements [4]. Each statement was designed to tap feelings of generalised success or failure; whether satisfied in general about his own behaviour or performance, or whether in some unspecified way there were feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. As with other instruments (McClosky & Schaar, 1958), each attitudinal statement was placed randomly in the questionnaire and phrased in the negative. To demonstrate a higher conception of himself a child would have to circle 'NO'. The wording of each statement and the frequency of responses (Table I) were then summed into a general scale ranging from 0 to 5. A discussion of the validity can be found in the Appendix. These are the results.

Self-Confidence and Achievement

How children respond to these five statements has moderate but consistently positive associations with all measures of academic achievement. Between self-concept and performance on the English Language section, the coefficient was 0.183; with General Knowledge (Geography, History and Science) 0.140; with Mathematics 0.208; and with the summary measure of achievement 0.169. Furthermore the relationships seem to hold true right across sexes, ethnic groups and communities with differing rates of school attendance. Considering males alone or differing ethnic groups or differing districts did not alter the direction of the associations or elicit a statistically insignificant coefficient.

Self-Confidence and Socio-Economic Status

It is not uncommon to find a definitive relationship between a child's self-confidence and the socio-economic status of his parents (Battle & Rotter, 1963; McPartland & Cummin, 1958;

TABLE I
Responses from five statements to elicit a measure of a Ugandan child's feelings about himself^a (N = 2293)

	No ^b (%)
(1) No matter what I do, I always seem to fail	72.1
(2) I rarely succeed in the things I try to do	53.7
(3) My enemies are trying to get me	82.9
(4) If I found a goat's head outside my door, I would run away and hide	74.3
(5) Bad luck often comes to me	67.0

^a Summary mean = 2.516; sd = 1.118; range = 1-5.

^b 'No' is an indication of a 'positive' feeling about oneself.

Gordon, 1971). It was one of the principal lessons drawn from the 'Coleman Report' (Coleman *et al.*, 1966) [5]. Neither is it a finding limited to the United States because the same relationship emerges also in Western Europe and the United Kingdom (Runciman, 1969; Barber, 1956).

But not in Uganda. Contrary to findings from these societies long industrialised, no interrelationships emerge between a Ugandan school child's self-confidence and his parental socio-economic status. Each of the four SES measures (mother's education, father's education, possessions in the home and a summary SES scale) had a coefficient with a child's attitudes of 0.04; for father's occupation the coefficient was 0.02. Nor does a relationship appear when sex or ethnic group are controlled.

TABLE II
Correlations between a child's feeling about himself and five measures of socio-economic status (N = 2293)

	Coefficient with self-concept	Mean	Range	sd
Mother's education	-0.04	2.038	1-7	1.313
Father's education	-0.04	2.660	1-7	1.545
Father's occupation	-0.02	4.240	1-5	1.202
Possessions in the home ^a	-0.04	3.598	1-8	1.731
Summary SES scale	-0.04	9.987	1-27	4.559

^a Bed, newspaper, bicycle, radio, clock, motor car (or lorry), camera, television.

A question might well be raised as to whether these findings are dependent upon the fact that, unlike the situation in industrial societies where almost all children attend school, fewer children attend Ugandan schools and therefore those who do are uniformly privileged. This is a valid query, but three reasons lead me to suspect that it cannot explain these findings.

First, among Ugandan school children, like all school children, there is a considerable range of self-confidence. Some feel very confident, happy and self-assured, others do not. There is nothing uniform about the way in which they feel about themselves. Moreover this absence of

a link between higher family wealth and higher self-confidence holds true irrespective of the local level of school attendance. No relationship appears in Karamoja District where school children have the lowest rate of school attendance in the country (between 5–10%); nor even in Kampala where the rate of attendance (between 85–90%) is the highest in the country. Lastly, there are parallel results from elsewhere. Mwaniki, for example, has measured the self-concepts of Kikuyu children in two rural and two urban schools in Kenya. She discovered that the relationship between attitudes and mother's education was only 0.01; with father's education 0.01; and father's occupation 0.08 (Mwaniki, 1973). Further evidence is definitely needed, but all these findings so far suggest that the pattern of relationships between attitudes and SES in East Africa appears to diverge markedly from those normally found among industrial societies.

Many have discussed the psychological effects of social stratification (Myers & Scaffer, 1954; Sennett & Cobb, 1973). Some have suggested that evidence of psychological effect should be a criterion of whether or not a particular socio-economic level is in fact a genuine social class (Ossowski, 1969; Tumin, 1967), for, as Kohn argues, "the essence of higher class position is the expectation that one's decisions and actions can be consequential . . ." (1969, p. 189).

If the criterion is to be followed which Kohn, Tumin and others have placed upon classifying a social group as a social class, then these findings would indicate that school children in industrial societies may be characterised by genuine social classes, but that school children in Uganda are not. The contrast is illustrated by Fig. 1. The three variables of SES, attitudes and test performance are found to be intercorrelated in industrialised societies, but the only connection appearing in Uganda is between how a child feels about himself and how he performs in school [6]. The next question is what is there about Uganda which would allow this 'attitudinal equality' to develop and to be maintained?

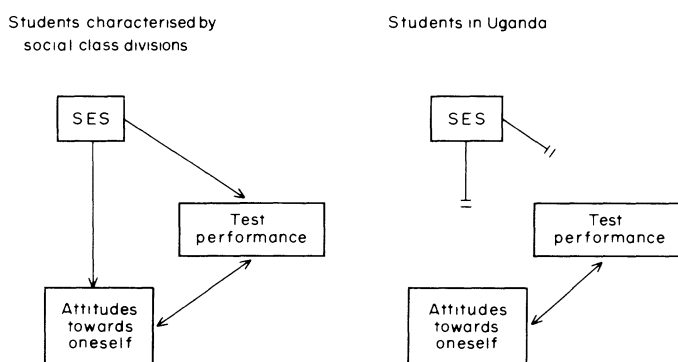


FIG. 1. Relationships between socio-economic status, attitudes and test performance among students characterised by social class divisions and among students in Uganda.

ATTITUDES OF UGANDAN CHILDREN TOWARD THEMSELVES: THREE REASONS FOR THEIR NON-RELATIONSHIPS WITH SES

The Recentness of Modern Socio-Economic Stratification

The spread of modern occupational differentiation in Uganda, with its hierarchical layers of government ministers, teachers, clerks, taxi drivers, export farmers and traders, all are very recent differentiations in comparison to European and American societies. With the possible

exception of the few aristocracies from the southern tribal monarchies, the history of these occupational layers is less than a century old and, at least among the salaried, largely a product of post-World War II economic and governmental expansion.

Such recent economic stratification can profoundly affect the formation of attitudes. Even among the wealthiest of the elite, families commonly include illiterate members. Unlike their occupational counterparts in Britain or America, Ugandan bank chairmen, university professors, authors and presidents have numerous relatives who have never attended school, who are poor, and with whom they interact socially—often living in the same house. The experience of having respected but illiterate elders is not lost on children of the elite.

In sum, even at the highest level, those associated with privileged economic roles tend to be an early generation [7]. This has militated against less privileged children getting the feeling that top economic positions are entrenched in the hands of a group which had achieved prominence through inheritance. There simply has not been enough time for this 'early generation' to have developed the 'genealogical purity' necessary for their children to adopt the rationale of personal 'superiority' which is associated with the children of the wealthy in the west.

The Fit Between School and Income

The fit between schooling and income is tighter in Uganda than it is in those industrial societies for which data are available. Jencks *et al.* (1972) claim that each additional year of schooling boosts the future income of Americans by about 4%. Knight (1967) says that an additional year for Ugandans will boost their future incomes by 18% and ultimately will explain a full 50% of their income variance.

The tightness of the Ugandan fit results from the explicit tying of government salaries to level of educational attainment. Forty-two per cent of all salaries and 82% of all high level salaries are paid by the government. In the private sector, whether in Africa or America, there is less use of educational qualification for entry; yet in Uganda the private sector is so small that scarcely one out of five professionals can locate employment outside of the civil service. Knight says that

A close relationship can be seen between income and education; more precisely, between income and educational qualifications required by the government ... (Knight, 1968, p. 256)

Setting minimum educational requirements for entry into the public sector affects the 'openness' of the social system. Hiring in the (non-military) civil service is open to public scrutiny. Requirements for employment are published and are easily available; each position is linked to an appropriate educational qualification. Regardless of prestige, ethnicity or family position, a candidate's attainment in school is a *sine qua non* for employment in the civil service and therefore for almost all employment. Knight observes that

No matter how favorable a person's position—be he male, able, ambitious, city-born, of dominant tribe, European (in the past) or African (in the present) with powerful or wealthy connections—he would generally not be able to increase his basic salary in the public sector much above the mean for his education or age. Similarly, a person without these qualities if he had somehow managed to receive an education, would still be protected by his paper qualifications. (Knight, 1968, p. 256)

Outside of Uganda, and especially in industrial societies, it is common to think of using educational qualifications for job entry as being unfair to the less privileged, but in Uganda, children take comfort in feeling that opportunity will be delegated only to those who can

'qualify', and recognise that educational qualification is the only universal standard for judgement they have.

Furthermore, even though the cost of schooling is burdensome to the poor who are under-represented in schools, lower-status individuals are surprisingly mobile in Uganda. In 1972 93% of the grade seven pupils had illiterate mothers; in 1969 17% of the male secondary school students had illiterate fathers (Currie, 1974, p. 56). On balance, these portions are not at all inconsiderable, and it would be interesting to see how they would compare to the make-up of the elite school populations in Western Europe or in the United Kingdom at a point in time when a similarly small portion of the age cohort attended school. I tend to concur with Foster who, with respect to Ghana, has argued that "such wide recruitment probably did not prevail at earlier stages of European development . . ." (Foster, 1965, p. 246).

The Role of the Selection Examination in Maintaining the Feeling of Equal Opportunity

As an influence on American occupational attainment, academic achievement pales beside that of socio-economic status (Jencks *et al.*, 1972). But just the opposite is true in Uganda. In Uganda the most powerful predictor of occupational attainment is a child's performance in school (Currie, 1977). Although the power of academic achievement to predict employment and earnings might be a surprise to us, among Ugandan primary school children it is a well-known fact. Contrary to misguided fears that ignorance of employment chances would cause pupils to 'flock' to urban areas (Balogh, 1962; Moumouni, 1968), subsequent investigations have quite clearly demonstrated a marked awareness and a rational acceptance of the realities of economic life (Foster, 1964, 1965; Koff, 1967; McQueen, 1965; Peil, 1968; Weeks & Wallace, 1972; Heyneman, 1972; Brownstein, 1972).

What is startling about Ugandan children is not their low occupational expectations but the seeming irrelevance of socio-economic status to their aspirations. Ambitious children of both cabinet ministers and peasants know three things perfectly clearly: they know that occupational success depends first upon meeting the minimum educational entry requirements; secondly, they know that a grade I 'pass' on the Primary Leaving Examination is the only prerequisite for achieving an opportunity for advancement beyond primary school and, thirdly, that only 10% of the applicants each year can achieve it.

Thus the Ugandan grade seven children know that many elites, if not most, have humble origins; that educational advancement is required for most elite status; and that they will *all* have an opportunity for advancement on the same basis as everyone else, on the basis of their test performance. Although there are other arenas where particularistic ethnic and family influences may affect their mobility, to them, the secretly written, uniformly administered, multiple-choice, computer-graded Primary Leaving Examination represents a trustworthy and fair system of evaluation. The fact that their teachers, families and tribal affiliations will all be unknown and irrelevant to a machine which can only read their ID numbers is a boost in morale to those in the more compromising social milieux. In Western societies, educational selection is based upon a multitude of personality batteries, IQ tests, class grades and personal recommendations, each with its own particularistic cultural nuances. Use of the Primary Leaving Examination as the one necessary prerequisite for selection [8] makes Uganda, in this regard, a rather universalistic society [9].

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly we need more evidence before we can generalise with confidence. Yet although tentative with respect to other non-industrial societies, we have learned something about the children in Uganda, and this can be summarised into three statements.

(1) The reason why socio-economic status has such little influence on their academic performance is that the school children of the wealthy are no more self-confident than are the school children of the impoverished. This is so because of: (a) the comparative recentness of wide economic stratification; (b) the close link between academic achievement, educational attainment and later occupational success; and (c) the universalistic prerequisite placed upon educational advancement in the form of the Primary Leaving Examination.

(2) Economic status is not linked with attitudes of self-concept, and therefore, although characterised by wide differences in wealth, Ugandan school children cannot be said to be marked by divisions of social class.

(3) Contrary to long-cherished beliefs in industrial societies that examinations serve the rich and help to maintain social privilege, it is the presence of a 'blind' examination in a non-industrialised society that protects those less economically fortunate, that ensures them an equal chance for success, and helps to maintain their personal confidence by assuring them that, regardless of how menial their background, they will be judged fairly.

In sum these data indicate that academic advantage is not an inevitable condition of economic privilege. What we might conclude is, in fact, a very old lesson: that if someone is poor and lacks confidence, then performance in school is bound to suffer. But if someone is poor and does not lack confidence, then academic performance, even on the most rigid of examinations, need not be handicapped by poverty.

APPENDIX

Validity of the Five Statements

In an effort to please the investigator, it was expected that some Ugandan children would answer all questions in the affirmative. But the 'acquiescent set' problem (Kenniston, 1960; Kahl, 1966) may not be serious. Other responses to positive/negative responses (such as 'does your father earn a salary') closely correspond to expected frequencies. If children did wish to please the investigator by responding 'YES', only nine (0.4%) did so on all five statements. Perhaps uncertainty led the 34 individuals (1.5%) to leave a statement response blank; but, whatever their reason, these latter were eliminated from the analysis regardless of their response to the other attitudinal statements.

One way of assessing the validity of an attitude measure is to relate it to another measure which had previously demonstrated intercorrelations. How a child feels about himself might be linked theoretically to indices of modernity—with its components of 'efficacy', and 'distributive justice' believed to come to 'hard-working' individuals (Cunningham, 1972; Inkeles, 1966). Three modernity statements were also included within the Ugandan questionnaire, two drawn from the O-M Scale (Short Form) reported by Smith & Inkeles (1966); a third developed by myself. They consisted of the following:

- (1) One should obey one's elders regardless of whether the elders are right or wrong.
- (2) Moscow is the capital of the United States.
- (3) A man is bad if he attends neither church nor a mosque.

Responses to the three were summed and they demonstrated consistent intercorrelations with the measure of a child's feelings about himself. The zero-order coefficient ($r=0.199$) holds constant when controlled for sex, school location, and is uniformly significant at the $p<0.001$ level.

Because the inter-item correlations were all positive, it was possible to create an additive rather than a weighted scale. To assess internal validity, it was submitted to a test of internal consistency designed to gauge the sum amount of interrelationships between the five sub-items. Utilising the Kuder-Richardson formula (Kuder & Richardson, 1937; Ferguson, 1951),

the five items elicited a K-R internal consistency of 0.36. In comparison, this K-R 0.36 coefficient is lower than, say, the internal consistency of 0.43 for Holsinger's Brazilian 0-M201 Scale and his 0-M801 Scale (Holsinger, 1974).

But the Ugandan coefficient is a result of dichotomous precoding ('YES/NO') of responses. Even though dichotomous responses create less variance than would a wider gradation, it is a necessary precaution in an instrument which needed to be translated and interpreted to young children from many different languages and cultures [11]. Nevertheless, a K-R coefficient of 0.36 is sufficiently strong to refer to the measure as a genuine attitudinal variable for use in the Ugandan context, and to discuss relationships with variables around it. The original hypothesis was that a child who felt more confident and more self-assured would perform better on the Primary Leaving Examination, and this was confirmed.

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NOTES

- [1] These distinctions, whose origins lie with Max Weber, have received recent interpretations to which I am indebted (see Lehman & Lehman, 1975).
- [2] Future research could explore the possibility of church or mosque 'elders' as holding comparable normative status across ethnic groups. But even this index would be skewed in those geographical areas which contain neither a dominant church nor mosque.
- [3] It is common for children with military fathers to attend special schools; and although they must sit for the PLE, no military school happened to fall within the random sample.
- [4] The sample was chosen from five districts (North and South Karamoja, West Buganda, Bugisu and Toro), and all three of the country's urban areas (Kampala, Mbale and Jinja). Within each area a list was obtained of all schools with a grade seven class, and a minimum of 10% of these schools was randomly selected for study. The final sample represented an average of 10.7% of the schools, and 13.1% of the grade seven children in each district. I visited each of the 67 schools and personally administered a questionnaire to each of the 2293 grade seven children. For a measure of academic achievement, I used the child's score on the National Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), the test which all children must take if they wish to have any post-primary training. The PLE consists of equally weighted sections of Mathematics, English and General Knowledge (History, Science and Geography). In 1972, it was administered in 2615 locations over a three-day period under conditions which approached uniformity. A Ministry of Education official delivered the sealed examination questions in the early morning to each location, headmasters oversaw the examination of students from schools other than their own, and the completed test papers were resealed and collected nightly for computer grading. All in all the process of test administration was surprisingly professional, efficient and impartial. For further details see Heyneman (1975b).
- [5] The direction of this relationship is not consistent in comparisons between American Black and non-Black children; Black children frequently demonstrate higher self-concepts, particularly along indices of the physical and social dimensions.
- [6] Eventually this link between attitudes and school performance may prove to be a universal phenomenon. Although the size of the relationships varies, the results are surprisingly consistent: how a child feels about himself affects his performance in school right across societies and cultures very much unlike our own (Mwaniki, 1973; Cunningham, 1972; Dubey, 1972; Honess & Klein, 1974; Jones, 1975).
- [7] The 1971 military takeover has had the effect of reshuffling the top leadership. Because the military is one area of government not dependent upon minimum educational qualifications, this allows for advancement to be based upon other criteria. Although access of pre-coup leadership positions was in no way closed socially, recent events have quickly elevated individuals into high positions who come from some of the most geographically isolated and impoverished of social backgrounds. In fact, it could be argued that the military takeover increased low SES representation among the most prestigious positions because of the backgrounds which characterise the post-coup leadership. See a section entitled 'The Lumpen Militariat', in Ali A. Mazrui (1975).
- [8] Teacher evaluations are used only in borderline cases, and for selection into particular schools.
- [9] Educational selection is not identical to educational opportunity; the former depends almost exclusively upon examination performance, the latter includes the ability to travel to and pay for further schooling. However, in the minds of primary school students, even those from the most impoverished backgrounds, educational selection is by far the most serious hurdle—and they are right.
- [10] Statement four is of special significance and deserves comment. First of all I do not regard it as a statement of 'modernity'. Placing an animal's head on someone's doorstep has been a relatively common method of informally enforcing social mores, as burning a cross at the home of someone who had stopped attending church has been in the American South. It is a sudden alteration, a shocking surprise. To be sure, finding a cross burned on one's lawn or finding a goat's head at one's door would give any of us reason to pause, some of

us cause to be concerned and, many cases, fearful. But it is not the point of statement four to discover whether a child expressed fear. The statement asks for a response to a very specific and very extreme reaction: that of 'running away and hiding'. A preliminary wording ('If I found a goat's head on my door, I would be afraid') elicited an 85% 'YES' response. After 'run away and hide' was added to emphasise and to specify their reaction, only 26% continued to respond 'YES'. I submit that these individuals (the remaining 26%) believe that they might have an extreme reaction—a reaction far beyond what we might think of as legitimate fear. It is the extreme reaction that I am interested in tapping here, not fear in the face of an abnormal event.

- [11] To date there have been very few attempts to measure African attitudes among differing ethnic, unschooled populations. Aside from one pioneering effort by Edgerton (1971), who collected a random sampling of dwelling units across four cultures, most surveys have had to stick closely to secondary school or university samples where respondents have a common and high quality use of one or two common languages. In this study questionnaires were distributed to each child in the classroom and then slowly read aloud in their entirety, question-by-question, first in English and then in one or more of 10 local languages. The variety of required translation dependend upon the English comprehension skills found with each group of school children. If there were any quizzical or vacant looks, this would prompt the immediate personal attention of myself (in English), or my research assistants in whatever local language was required.