MONITORING TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL GROWTH: CLASS 6 GIRLS AND BOYS IN AFGHANISTAN 2013

ACER

IN 2013, the Learning Assessment Unit of the Afghanistan Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the Centre for Global Education Monitoring at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER-GEM), launched the Monitoring Trends in Educational Growth (MTEG) study in Afghanistan. Class 6 students in 13 provinces in Afghanistan were assessed in the domains of mathematical, reading and writing literacy. In total, 5,979 students, 42% girls and 58% boys, took the test and completed a student background questionnaire in either Dari or Pashto. The principal from each assessed school also completed a school background questionnaire.

The initial results on gender differences, presented here in brief, show some promising outcomes as well as highlighting areas that require attention.

The results of MTEG 2013 Class 6 indicate that

- girls and boys demonstrated similar levels of achievement in mathematical literacy, while girls outperformed boys in both reading and writing literacy.
- boys from non-urban areas and girls from non-urban areas have similar levels of achievement. Girls schooled in an urban area outperformed girls schooled in non-urban areas.
- boys reported receiving more support than girls to attend school, from family members, friends and the community.

By providing data on students' achievement and information on background characteristics, MTEG can assist in the development of education policy and practice. One of the policy areas MTEG aims to inform is gender equality. In Afghanistan fewer girls attend school than boys and the illiteracy rate is higher in the general female population.[1] However for girls who do go to school, things are looking more positive. The MTEG results showed that Class 6 girls had higher levels of proficiency than boys in reading and writing. Ensuring that girls have access to quality education will be important in improving literacy rates and, therefore, in contributing to gender equality, a priority for Afghanistan.[2]

Despite data having been collected on school attendance and literacy levels in the general population, little is known on the quality of education outcomes. MTEG contributes to the discussion on gender disparity by reporting on the proficiency levels of girls and boys and providing information on background characteristics that may interact with school attendance and achievement, both of which are important indicators of gender parity.

Class 6 proficiency: Girls and boys

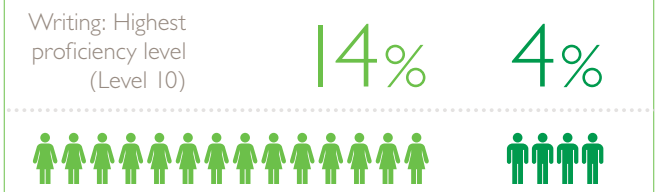
Mathematical literacy

Girls and boys demonstrated similar levels of achievement in mathematical literacy. The majority of students demonstrated basic proficiencies, although a substantial minority of students did not demonstrate these basic proficiencies. The finding that in Class 6 there were no gender differences in mathematical literacy achievement is consistent with the results from many countries in international studies, e.g. the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS).

Reading and writing literacy

In the areas of reading and writing literacy, girls outperformed boys. For reading literacy, these gender differences in Afghanistan are consistent with international assessment results, e.g. in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). There are currently no large-scale international assessments of writing literacy. It is important to note however, that for writing, even though girls outperformed boys in the Class 6 assessment, the percentages of both boys (36%) and girls (24%) at and below the lowest proficiency level were high.

A greater proportion of girls than boys performed in the highest writing proficiency levels. The highest level, Level 10, comprises more than three times as many girls as boys: 14% of girls but only 4% of boys.



Attitudes towards school and teachers

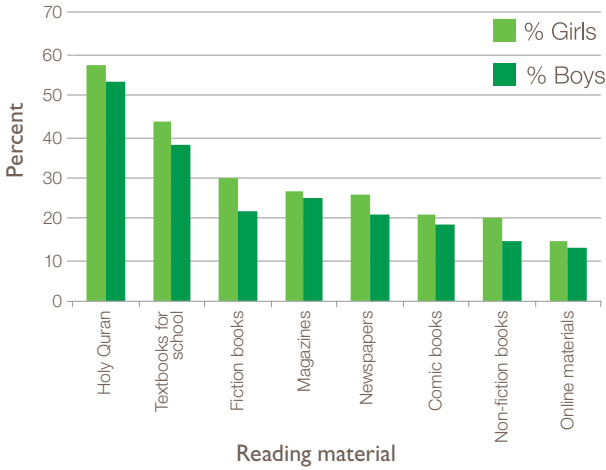
It appears that attending school is not a very positive experience for most students in Afghanistan, with both boys and girls expressing quite negative attitudes towards the school environment as a whole. Generally, both boys and girls responded negatively when asked about their teacher's classroom organisation skills. However, girls were less negative about their teachers than boys.

Reading habits and attitudes

Students who indicated more negative attitudes towards reading demonstrated lower achievement in all three domains. There was no gender difference in reading attitudes.

The most-read material is the Holy Quran, which is read by more than 50% of girls and boys, followed by textbooks, which are read by slightly less than half of girls and boys. Girls read significantly more fiction books than boys. Online materials are read by slightly more than 10% of Class 6 girls and boys.

Per cent of girls and boys reading each text type (Class 6)



Research suggests that diversified reading of a variety of texts – especially books of any kind – characterises the most proficient readers, whether boys or girls. The findings in MTEG agreed with this, showing that the greater the variety of materials students indicated they read, the more likely they are to do better in each of the three domains. Engaging students more in reading and making reading materials more accessible through establishing school libraries would be an advantage.

Learning support

Overall, boys report receiving slightly more help in attending school than girls. Although girls and boys indicated receiving similar levels of support from their parents, boys indicated receiving more support in attending school from other family members, friends and the community than girls did. Students who indicated that they have more support in attending school demonstrated lower achievement in mathematical, reading and writing literacy. A possible explanation could be that weaker students receive more support precisely because they are demonstrating lower achievement and require more encouragement, attention or help.

Demographics

Age

The range of ages in Class 6 in Afghanistan is quite wide, from at least 11 to 15 years old and older. On average, it was the 12-year-olds in Class 6 who performed best in mathematical, reading and writing literacy. Interestingly, there was a lower proportion of boys in the 12-year-old age group.

Location

Class 6 students who go to schools situated in an urban area outperform their peers at schools in a non-urban area in reading and writing. There was no difference in mathematical literacy performance.

In comparing boys and girls at schools in urban areas, girls outperform boys in reading and writing literacy. However, girls and boys in non-urban areas perform at a similar level in mathematical, reading and writing literacy.

In comparing girls in urban areas to girls in non-urban areas, girls in urban areas significantly outperform girls in non-urban areas in writing. In mathematical and reading literacy, their levels are similar. Boys in urban areas and boys in non-urban areas perform at around the same level in all three literacy domains.

The results showed that girls were under-represented at schools in non-urban areas. This may be connected to findings on support attending school: the data show that boys perceive more support in attending school from family members, friends, and the community than girls do. A possible policy implication is that more support may be required for girls in non-urban areas to attend school.

Boys indicated receiving higher levels of support in attending school than girls

Socio-economic characteristics

Students from homes with higher socio-economic characteristics perform better than students from homes with lower socio-economic characteristics. At Class 6, a larger proportion of girls than boys report having more possessions at home and they live in homes made of higher quality materials, which might mean that girls from the poorest families are less likely to attend Class 6 than boys from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

The initial results from MTEG provide a baseline for monitoring the learning outcomes of girls and boys in Afghanistan in the years ahead. Testing of the Class 3 and Class 9 cohorts will add to the picture of Afghan students' educational outcomes. The 2013 Class 6 assessment results have shown that many of the differences in performance between girls and boys are similar to findings from wider international assessments. The overall performance results are encouraging, showing that many girls and boys in Afghanistan are demonstrating basic skills in mathematical, reading and writing literacy. It is clear, however, that for many girls and boys in Afghanistan, there is still a lot to be learned.

Having taken the important step of implementing an assessment of mathematical, reading and writing proficiency, Afghanistan has recognised that high-quality education is fundamental to addressing the needs of its population, now and in future generations. MTEG data collected now and in subsequent assessments can inform education policy and practice and form an integral part of the Ministry's work towards providing Afghanistan's students with the skills, knowledge and understanding to succeed on the global stage.

For more information on the results of the 2013 MTEG assessment of Class 6 students in Afghanistan, please refer to Class 6 Proficiency in Afghanistan 2013 and Class 6 Girls and Boys in Afghanistan 2013, both available at **www.acer.edu.au/gem/activities/mteg/products**

More information about the MTEG program is available at **www.acer.edu.au/gem/activities/mteg**

More information about ACER-GEM is available at **www.acer.edu.au/gem**

More information on the Learning Assessment Unit of the Afghanistan Ministry of Education is available at **http://moe.gov.af/en/page/lau**

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[1] Central Statistics Organization. (2014). National risk and vulnerability assessment 2011-12. Afghanistan living condition survey. Kabul: CSO.

[2] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. (2008). Afghanistan National Development Strategy 1387-1391/2008-2013 (ANDS). Retrieved March 20, 2015, from http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/sites/default/files/publications/Afghanistan_National_Development_Strategy_eng.pdf