

Regional focus

Africa





Significant work on evaluation and assessment aimed at addressing equity and educational quality in Africa is being undertaken by researchers at ACER.

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African countries comprise 34 of the world's 49 least developed countries, as classified by the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and the Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS). The *Education for All* Global Monitoring Report of 2012 from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicated that the number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 1.6 million between 2008, the number of illiterate adults rose by 27 per cent since 1990 and pre-primary gross enrolment ratios are the lowest of any region in the world. The report suggested that the deterioration in the quality of education in some African countries is not only due to the recent increase in enrolments, but to a '*chronic quality problem*' in many sub-Saharan African states.

Prior to the Human Development Report of 1990, development was conceptualised as an economic process, measured through a nation's gross domestic product. However, it has now undergone a paradigm shift, with development now being conceptualised as *human development*. The UN Human Development Report of 1990 asserted that 'people are the real wealth of a nation.' Education is at the heart of human development.

Major challenges surround the provision of quality education for primary school children in Zimbabwe.

According to a report in the *Economist* in 2011, between 2000 and 2010, six of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies were in sub-Saharan Africa, but the extent to which this economic development will expedite progress towards the development of human capabilities in Africa is the *real* development question. UNESCO estimates that if revenue from natural resources in resource-rich countries, including Ghana, the Niger and Uganda, were dedicated to financing education, access to schooling could be achieved for 86 per cent of out-of-school children and 42 per cent of out-of-school adolescents. So while the educational challenges in Africa may appear daunting, data indicates that they are not insurmountable.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is closely involved in improving the quality of education in Africa, and has engaged ACER to provide expertise on a number of projects that are improving learning in the African region.

The South Africa Workbook Evaluation

South Africa has achieved a number of the indicators attached to the Millennium Development Goals regarding universal education and gender equality in education, and is now addressing the issue of quality.

As part of quality improvement measures, in 2011 the South African Department of Basic Education launched a workbook development



project to provide 'lesson-a-day' learning materials in South Africa's 11 official languages for approximately six million children from Grade R to Grade 9. The first delivery of workbooks to schools took place in 2011. The second delivery took place 2012.

The workbook project aims to assist teachers and learners directly in the classroom. Specific objectives include the provision of worksheets, activities to reinforce language and literacy skills, helping teachers monitor student performance, the provision of easy-to-use lesson plans and assisting teachers to focus on the skills that learners should be acquiring at each grade level as outlined in the curriculum. The additional provision of textbooks in Grades 10 to 12 aims

to provide students with adequate resources that reinforce language and literacy skills.

In 2012, the Department of Basic Education commissioned ACER, with support from UNICEF, to undertake an independent formative evaluation to inform further development of the workbooks and textbooks project. The evaluation focused on the effectiveness and utilisation of the workbooks in relation to curriculum objectives, outcomes and coverage.

In order to gain a sense of how the intervention is working in South Africa's 24 000 primary and secondary schools, the ACER evaluation addressed a representative sample of schools to investigate the ways in which workbooks were being used

in the classroom and at home, and assessed the extent to which the workbooks have the characteristics of quality workbooks.

In order to gain a more detailed and richer understanding of workbook and textbook utilisation, ACER collaborated with the South African research group, Ask Afrika, to conduct three case studies. The case studies used teacher interviews, parent focus groups and student focus groups to identify and compare expectations, strengths, benefits, challenges and perceived impact of the workbooks.

ACER's final report included recommendations for adjustments to the workbook intervention for future editions. The logic of the workbook intervention is that through the ongoing





development of adequate, engaging workbooks and textbooks, the South African government will accelerate progress towards *Education for All* in terms of both access and quality of education.

Evaluation of the Zimbabwe Education Transition Fund Program

Major challenges surround the provision of quality education for primary school children in Zimbabwe. According to UNICEF, demographic and health survey statistics indicate that the nation's rural and poor citizens are substantially overrepresented in drop-out rates and repetition rates.

ACER is working with UNICEF to evaluate the impact of the Education Transition Fund (ETF) program in Zimbabwe. The ETF program is a multi-donor sector-wide education intervention.

The theory behind the ETF program intervention is that the provision of essential material resources

and support for the systems and structures that provide education will result in increased access to quality education for all Zimbabwean children. The measure of quality used in ACER's evaluation of the ETF is the extent of improvement in students' learning outcomes in the early years of schooling.

ACER is working with the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council to establish and implement the UNICEF-funded Zimbabwe Early Learning Assessment (ZELA). The project seeks to improve Zimbabwe's system of student learning assessment by introducing early-grade learning assessments in numeracy and establishing a national data collection related to student background characteristics, teaching resources, and funding and facilities. It also aims to support and enhance national capacity to review, strengthen and reorientate the current system of student assessment in Zimbabwe.

The program commenced in 2012 with the assessment of a representative sample of approximately 15 000 Grade 3 students in almost 500 schools in order to establish a baseline against which to measure for improvement.

Two further assessment cycles, in 2013 and 2014, will provide feedback about changes in the system in order to inform ETF program interventions. The final evaluation study will take place in 2015 and will determine whether the ETF program has had the desired effects on children, their caregivers, schools and the education sector in general.

Review of social norms and equity in education

The Social Norms and Equity in Education review is primarily concerned with the complex interplay between societal expectations and equity in education. Education is often held up as a mechanism able to challenge and redress prejudicial



social norms – social norms being the values, beliefs and attitudes that govern behaviours. As Deborah Tranter notes in *Reconceptualising Equity in Higher Education*, however, education structures can also reproduce social norms that are disabling to groups within society and collude to exclude certain students. For example, social norms concerning gender can result in inequitable educational outcomes for certain groups of men and women as gender intersects and interacts with class and race.

Social norms are deployed through the functions of the educational institution, as much as they are affected by them. Therefore, while education institutions are able to reinforce norms that result in unequal educational outcomes for certain groups, they are also able to function as a transformative force to challenge prevailing norms in the interests of equity.

In 2012, UNICEF engaged ACER to examine the interplay between

social norms and student equity, and to undertake case studies in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. The review and case studies looked at how social norms can reinforce exclusion and disparities and, conversely, how they can have a positive impact on inclusion and equity.

The study aims to challenge prejudicial social norms, by identifying effective UNICEF programs that have been proven to successfully address cultural practices affecting education outcomes, and by recommending strategies that enhance social norms that promote inclusion in education. ACER is designing a program strategy that will highlight good practice and areas for improvement, and provide suggestions on how lessons and strategies can be applied and adapted in a variety of settings.

The review and case studies include an examination of socioeconomic and sociopolitical aspects of social norms and shed light on the predominant set of values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures and relations that operate systematically and consistently within the education context – and within society more broadly – to the benefit of certain persons and groups, and at the expense of others.

ACER presented the preliminary findings of the study at UNICEF's headquarters in New York in late 2012. The recommended strategies will inform UNICEF's policies and frameworks, and will help eliminate disparity in education and enhance support for education for marginalised groups who endure multiple social and educational inequalities.

Future priorities

In the interests of building the capacities of all, the focus on access, quality and equity in education is likely to remain at the centre of the development agenda in Africa. As African nations continue to work towards educational quality and equity, the need for data to inform

educational decision making increases. ACER will continue to work in the region, in line with its organisational mission to improve learning across the life span.

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