



In Africa, many are in school but not learning



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ACER analysis for UNICEF examines the major impediments to children's learning as a considerable proportion of students in Eastern and Southern African schools do not reach expected basic learning benchmarks in numeracy and literacy.

Ursula Schwantner reports.

The analysis, published in *Improving Quality Education and Children's Learning Outcomes and Effective Practices in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region*, compares existing learning assessments in Eastern and Southern Africa, and explores how education data are used in education policy and practice to improve children's learning outcomes in the region.

Learning assessments

The report contrasts 58 learning assessments targeting students in primary education in 23 countries. With the majority of these assessments aimed at system-level monitoring, it is essential that assessments be undertaken periodically, and that competency levels and benchmarks be defined to measure learning growth.

In addition to performance data, the relationships between background characteristics and performance need to be understood to identify factors and strategies relevant to change and improvement of learning outcomes. Based on this information, measures can be established to address specific learner needs at each level, for example, developing instructional strategies or identifying areas for professional training.

Although more than half of the assessments in this study report results with reference to competency levels or benchmarks, and almost all of the assessments collect contextual data of some kind from students, teachers and school principals, the limited data that were available for analysis posed challenges for characterising children with limited learning outcomes.

Another challenge in quantifying the number of children experiencing limited learning outcomes is that different assessment programs use different metrics to measure achievement and set different benchmarks for 'acceptable' learning outcomes. Hence there is no consistency or clear standard among assessment programs in estimating the proportion of children who are not meeting minimum levels of learning proficiency. This highlights the importance of the development of common learning metrics for literacy and numeracy based on international and regional benchmarks for achievement results.

Affecting learning outcomes

Average test scores for literacy and numeracy are low in Eastern and Southern Africa. For example, in Zambia and Malawi, only 27 per cent of students have achieved basic reading skills by Year 6. In mathematics, the proportion of primary students with basic skills is even lower, with fewer than 50 per cent of students in Year 6 achieving the minimum level in two-thirds of the countries in the region.

The report reveals that both gender and age tend to be strongly related to learning outcomes among Eastern and Southern African students. Girls generally outperformed boys in reading literacy, while boys outperformed girls in mathematics. Students who were relatively younger than the median class age tended to be less likely to be experiencing limited learning outcomes. For example, Year 6 students in Botswana who were aged 12 years or younger were almost three times less likely to be experiencing limited learning outcomes in mathematics than students who were more than 12 years old. However, the relationships between age and performance are complex and may be determined by different socioeconomic and demographic factors.

Consistent with other studies in the region, socioeconomic factors are a strong predictor of achievement.

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to experience limited learning outcomes throughout the region in both literacy and numeracy. Among other factors, household possessions, including the availability of reading materials and books in the home, and levels of parental education, were also found to be associated with lower learning outcomes.

Students who had limited exposure to a learning environment in the home were disadvantaged in performance at school. Positive learning outcomes were far more likely in homes where students:

- were involved in reading and storytelling
- were not required to work outside of the home
- started school early
- were provided with adequate support in school by their teachers to build foundational literacy skills, and
- attended schools that had relevant and engaging reading and learning materials in buildings with clean water and sanitation.

Improving learning outcomes

The report identified a number of strategies that contribute to the success of country-level practices in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Ten programs in seven countries were identified as having had an impact on student learning in early grade literacy and numeracy. These successful programs comprised assessments, teacher training and community support for children's reading.

The successful programs provide a combination of:

- well-targeted instructional interventions
- regular professional development of teachers through school-level training and coaching with regular system-level follow up and support
- sufficient relevant and quality classroom materials, and

- more literacy and numeracy instructional time.

Overall, the study found that key strategies for improving the learning outcomes of disadvantaged children share two common features: a holistic and coherent approach, and consistent and continuous support over time.

Synthesising the main findings from this study, a macro theory of change was developed, anchored in the 'three As' approach (assessment, analysis and action) and aimed at initiating a long-term and sustainable improvement in student performance. This approach reveals the importance of knowing where students are at in their learning and how performance progresses over time so that effective targeted interventions can be developed and integrated into education reform agendas. ■

Further information

Improving Quality Education and Children's Learning Outcomes and Effective Practices in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region by Tim Friedman, Ursula Schwantner, Jeaniene Spink, Naoko Tabata and Charlotte Waters is published by the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office.

LINKS

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Read *Improving Quality Education and Children's Learning Outcomes and Effective Practices in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region* at http://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/25