



Teachers matter: Understanding their contribution to learning in Uganda



African Population and Health Research Center



"... teachers are one of the most influential agents in the learning process. If they are asked to teach what they best understand, that enhances their instructional strategies, if they are asked to teach what they can hardly understand, our children miss precious learning opportunities. Only one in every three P6 teachers scored above 50% in a teaching knowledge assessment, majority of the students are taught by those who scored below 50%".

INTRODUCTION

I ncreasing the number of children attending primary schools has topped the global development agenda since the turn of the century, with the commitments established by the Millennium Development Goals enhanced by the momentum of the Education For All initiative. Many countries across sub-Saharan Africa have made laudable progress in boosting enrolment; in Uganda alone, the number of children in primary school increased from 6,559,013 to 8,374,648, an increment of 28% between 2000 and 2010¹. This success, however, appears to have come at a cost; global consensus acknowledges that the quality of education has declined substantially during that period. These declines have been widely attributed to the quality of teaching in these now highly subscribed schools. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how well teachers are going about the business of teaching – and what effect this will ultimately have not only on the quality of education but on the learning outcomes of the growing numbers of students.

Teacher development programs

Uganda offers two training options to primary school teachers, covering both content and practice: a two-year pre-service training or a four-year in-service training, across all subjects taught in primary school. Pre-service programs include three internship sessions of eight weeks each, while in-service programs offer two supervised internships. These internships have been widely criticized as ineffective and unable to address the practical challenges faced by teachers and learners in the classroom². Equally, the strategy of providing training to teachers across

¹ Ministry of Education and Sports (2015). Uganda: Education for All 2015 National Review. MoESTS, Kampala.

² Akycamong, K., Pryor, J., Westbrook, J., and Lussier, K. (2011). Teacher Preparation and Continuing Professional Development in Africa Learning to teach early reading and mathematics. Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.

all of the subject matter has come under debate, as it is impossible to achieve competency in all five subjects.

Teachers are also supposed to receive continuous professional development (CPD) from ministry-employed coordinating center tutors. However, this program, too, has fallen short of expectations, failing to meet the needs of teachers and head teachers especially as they relate to school management and classroom practices. These shortcomings were comprehensively documented in a 2014 survey³ carried out by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) on the quality of education in two districts in Uganda. The study found that trained teachers are unable to demonstrate effective pedagogical teaching skills as would be expected.

In the year prior to data collection for a classroom observation study, only 32% of teachers indicated that they had attended an in-service or CPD activity, which for the most part are largely theoretical. Inadequate professional support inside the classroom context makes it difficult for teachers to relate theory to practice and the challenges they face every day while teaching. APHRC findings show that about half of math lessons in all schools utilize non-basic teacher made learning materials. Use of non-basic teaching materials such as manila made charts to draw illustrative diagrams is critical in facilitating learning through simplifying concepts and reinforcements. The good news is that between 53% and 66% of the classroom lesson time is spent on teaching activities that enhance learning; with teaching the 'whole class', albeit a less effective teaching style, being the common activity in many lessons. The bad news is that about 40% of the lesson time is on transition activities that do not directly influence learning, for example external interruptions, looking for writing materials and textbooks among others. This may be an indication of inadequate pre-lesson preparation.

Effects on students

Effects of poor teaching inhibit school progress for students, the APHRC research shows. Despite a national policy that no child should repeat a grade, repetition rates are above 50%. At grade six, fewer than four in 10 students were able to even achieve a 50% passing score on a grade-appropriate literacy test. Only one in 10 students was able to achieve a

50% passing score on a grade-appropriate numeracy test. Many students are pushed through to the next grade level without even basic competencies in reading and math, leaving them further and further behind. Our findings in Uganda also show that students who had never repeated classes were estimated to have achieved better scores in English and mathematics, compared to students who had repeated classes once or more times. This clearly shows that repetition does not improve learning outcomes.

Limited teaching styles

A teacher with mastery of content and pedagogical knowledge is better equipped to deploy a variety of classroom-based tools to respond to changing classroom dynamics. Yet a considerable proportion of Uganda's teachers are not well equipped to respond nimbly or flexibly to their classes and their students. Teaching practices are limited to command and task-focused styles that often lead to reproducing the knowledge as given by the teacher, rather than incorporating a learner-focused teaching style that encourages creativity and self-directed acquisition of knowledge by students both collectively and individually. This results in missed learning opportunities for students.

Efforts by the stakeholders

The poor state of teaching in Uganda is not unknown to education stakeholders; the Department of Teacher Development and the Education Service Commission have developed a curriculum for continuous professional development to try and improve the quality of teaching, and schools are provided with teaching and learning materials as part of the Universal Primary Education program. These enhancements, however, are proving inadequate and have yet to deliver the anticipated benefits. Better monitoring of teacher performance inside the classroom and establishing benchmarks for teachers to meet could be one way to help ensure students are learning – and that teachers are meeting performance expectations.

Move towards a practical approach to teacher training

The need for a more practical approach to teacher-training is immediate and critical in order to help

³Ngware, M. W., Hungi, N., Abuya, B., Mahuro, G., Mutisya, M., Nyariro, M. & Guwatudde, D. (2016). The quality of education in Uganda: A case of Iganga and Mayuge districts. APHRC, Nairobi.

Uganda's primary school students overcome the deficiencies in their education and not fall further behind their regional peers. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports (MoESTS), in collaboration with the Education Service Commission, should shift from theory-based CPD, to practical and classroom-based teacher support programs by 2018. Despite the acute need for a shift, however, it is not without its own risks. There is inadequate evidence about what, exactly, is happening on a daily basis in classrooms, or about what teachers know and how they know how to teach it; equally, there is not enough evidence available about what the impacts of a teacher's knowledge, or lack thereof, are on a student's learning. While the current strategy to improve quality of education through enhancing teachers' pedagogical skills and knowledge is laudable, it can be enhanced through classroom-based teacher support to improve learning outcomes.

Focus on improving pedagogical skills

The APHRC study noted that teachers with less math knowledge avoid verbal interaction with learners and default to individual desk work; those with higher math knowledge appear to prefer 'passing on' or 'telling' pupils what they know, which is a more teacher-centered teaching style. This speaks to a need to improve pedagogical skills for all teachers. While it is important to allow pupils to practice math tasks on their own, it is equally important to ensure that they conceptualize and develop mathematical procedures that show relationships for them to acquire mathematical proficiency. Effective teaching styles such as group work, cooperative learning and discovery approaches are important to cement learning, and demonstrate a need for improved training for teachers in pedagogy and practice in order to provide teachers with alternatives for dealing with classroom situations. Teachers need to develop fluency in pedagogical skills so that they have

alternative options of dealing with classroom situations without having to think about 'how to interpret and act'. The current teacher training approach is too theoretical to enhance the fluency in teaching skills.

Focus on strengths

The current protocol that provides teacher-training across all of the primary school subject areas requires reconsideration. Instead, teachers should be encouraged – and supported – to concentrate on what they are most comfortable and most proficient in so that they can pass that proficiency to their students. A national cut-off point for proficiency should be established so that any teacher who fails to achieve that minimum standard in any one subject is prevented from teaching that subject. Alternatively, remedial training could be offered to teachers who are close to the minimum standard, in order to broaden the complement of teachers available to teach a multiplicity of subjects in poorly resourced or remote school districts.

Focus on continued learning

APHRC's study also showed that a lot of teaching experience does not necessarily guarantee quality teaching; long-serving teachers are often the least likely to engage in continuous learning or to acquire new or improved pedagogical knowledge. The study found that there was a negative association between student math scores and years of teaching experience. Continuous learning should be mandated as part of teacher assessment for teachers at all levels. It should also be noted that longer-serving teachers were the least likely to have been visited by a quality assurance personnel inside their classroom, which allows bad teaching habits to perpetuate – to the detriment of the students in those classrooms. Creating a system that provides classroom-based teacher support can go a long way towards enhancing teaching skills among long-serving teachers.



...across all the school types, more than half of the math lessons in grade three and six utilized teacher directed activities as the dominant classroom interaction style. Teachers who utilized this highly teacher centered style scored slightly higher (46%) than the others in a teacher test...



Recommendations

Professional development for teachers

Teachers should be mandated to participate in continuous professional and academic development, with regular assessments at the theoretical and practical levels. Online courses providing a global perspective on content and pedagogy should also be made available to enhance the national teacher training curricula. This will require investment in information and communications technology (ICT) at all levels.

Continuous development will require continuous evaluation and feedback, which itself will require additional investment at the school and ministry levels.

Teacher knowledge

Routine teacher competency assessments must play a prominent role in education reforms currently under discussion. Competency assessments should be developed in collaboration with the range of education stakeholders in Uganda, including but not limited to: the Ministry, Education Service Commission, Uganda National Teachers Union, Uganda National Examination Board (UNEB), National Curriculum Development Center, researchers, head teachers associations, and teacher training institutions. All teachers leaving training colleges should be certified by UNEB on areas of subject

competency by end-2018 and should only be assigned teaching areas on the basis of those competencies.

Teacher work assignments

To capitalize on teachers' strengths and mitigate the impact that their weaknesses have on students' learning outcomes, it is important that teachers teach only the subjects where they have achieved minimum acceptable grades in the secondary school end of cycle exams. Better teachers should be assigned to lower grades as these foundation years are critical for pupils to acquire reading and numeracy skills needed to allow for annual progress through the school system. Quality teaching goals should also be incorporated in performance plans and be routinely assessed throughout the school year, with classroom-based support available as needed to address poor performance.

The study showed that some teachers who have been assigned to teach math in primary schools scored very low (below 10%) on a teacher knowledge test. Addressing this concern requires that teachers' employers should demand a minimum acceptable grade (preferably a C5 or higher) in a relevant subject in the Uganda Certificate of Education exam for one to be allowed to teach that subject. Such a move has implications on teacher recruitment and deployment and it should therefore be gradually implemented.



The math scores for teachers ranged from 6% to 78% with an overall mean of 40%. In pedagogical knowledge assessment alone, the mean score was 29%...



Author: Moses Ngware.

For more information go to: www.aphrc.org



African Population and Health Research Center

APHRC Campus, Kitisuru Nairobi, Kenya

Email: info@aphrc.org

@aphrc

