

Are education policies reaching the marginalized in Africa?

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Are African education policies reaching the marginalised? This column reports results from a cross-country analysis, finding that the sharing of textbooks has a positive effect only for the most privileged students. For the average student, textbook access has no impact on academic outcomes. Indeed, less privileged students perform poorly due to a combination of low parent and teacher expectation, poor health, and routine classroom disruptions. It is these factors that reduce the effectiveness of policies like the improvement of access to textbooks. For education to be truly for all, educational reforms must target the least privileged students.

Do policies to improve educational quality perpetuate the marginalisation of children with low socioeconomic status in African schools? New research provides an answer: it reveals that these policies have no impact on academic achievement, the exception being for students with the highest socioeconomic standing.

Read up

Textbook provision might be considered a simple solution for building the quality of education, particularly in areas like sub-Saharan Africa facing severe resource constraints. Yet in the African context whether or not textbooks actually improve student achievement overall remains understudied. Though textbooks can offer a clearer curriculum structure, curriculum itself may be too advanced for the average student. For example, while textbook sharing improves testing in Kenyan schools, it does so only for those students who are already high-achievers (Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin 2009).

In a recent paper, we try to expand upon this textbook sharing result by focusing on eleven sub-Saharan countries (Kuecken and Valfort 2013a). Matched pair test score data for students in mathematics and reading allow us to conduct a ‘within-student’ analysis across subjects. Doing so eliminates bias from unobserved student characteristics that may be correlated with both textbook access and achievement as long as these unobservables are constant across subjects. Our analysis first looks at what happens when a student has access to a textbook either through ownership or sharing. It then distinguishes between the impacts of textbook sharing and textbook ownership – evidently, sharing might be conducive to knowledge spillovers that simple ownership cannot produce (Frolich and Michaelowa 2011).

The results of this cross-country analysis coincide with those already found in Kenyan schools – textbook sharing matters, but it matters only for the most privileged students. For the average student, however, textbook access unfortunately has no impact on academic outcomes.

Follow the rules

In developing country schools, teachers are notorious for absenteeism. Teachers were found to be missing one out of five days on average across six different developing countries (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan, and Rogers 2006). But behavioural issues are not limited to absenteeism alone, extending to name-calling and even sexual harassment. In another recent paper, we investigate the causal impact of three types of teacher misbehaviour (absenteeism, violence against students, substance abuse) on student testing in reading and mathematics across eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Kuecken and Valfort 2013b).

Misbehaviour itself is inherently linked to trust levels since trust influences the likelihood of cooperation among individuals. As the historic intensity of exposure to the slave trade has been shown to generate lower modern-day trust levels (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011), we draw a causal chain from slave trade exposure to modern-day teacher misbehaviour using an instrumental variables approach. Doing so helps to eliminate bias from reverse causality or omitted variables, capturing the causal impact of teacher misbehaviour on student learning outcomes.

Can encouraging better behaviour make a difference on student achievement? Again, the answer is similar to that which occurs with textbook provision: for the average student, there is no impact from any misbehaviour type. However teacher misbehaviour, specifically absenteeism, affects only the achievement of richer students. The rest are unaffected, presumably because their achievement is already hindered by multiple obstacles to success.

Making the grade

Less privileged students perform poorly due to a host of constraints both inside and outside the classroom. Low parent and teacher expectations mean that it may be more challenging for poorer students to gain respect from authority figures. Students' cognitive development can be damaged early in life from poor health, translating into lower attainment and weaker achievement down the road. Delays and disruptions in enrollment spurred by negative income shocks weaken continuity in education and undermine progress. Even within curriculums, residual biases from colonial periods tend to target class material and teaching practices for a high-ability elite, leaving others behind.

These factors mean that, even if improvements to textbook access and teacher behaviour are made within the classroom environment, such interventions taken alone cannot guarantee a helping hand to those who are already behind. For education to be truly for all, educational reforms must target the least privileged students.

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