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Improving Learning: Perspectives for Primary Education in Rural Africa.

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Measures to accelerate the development of education often carry potential risks for the quality of education, especially in rural areas. It is therefore important to combine these strategies with policies aimed to improve the quality of education. This is the framework of the Zambia seminar which objectives were (a) to promote a better understanding of the factors and processes determining the improvement of learning outcomes in rural primary schools, (b) to share promising strategies to improve students' learning, (c) to formulate new ideas to be used as the basis for future action. Four major themes have been identified to structure the case studies developed during the preparatory phase as well as the discussions taking place during the seminar.

Theme I : Policies Concerning Teaching Staff

Teachers and their performance in the classroom is one of the most critical factors in improving students' learning. In rural African schools, there are generally three main challenges: poverty, instability and the lack of qualified teaching staff. Discussions have shown that: (i) policies relating to the hiring and remuneration of new teachers can be adapted with the aim of providing enough teachers for rural areas to promote the goal of equal education for all; (ii) these policies should be combined with recruitment and deployment strategies which guarantee a balanced distribution and support of teachers in rural areas, in particular by decentralizing the management of schools; (iii) the close supervision and participation of local communities in the schools' management help in promoting regular attendance among teaching staff. Key questions pertaining to teachers' training and motivation have been emphasized in order to underline the crucial importance of developing strategies which take into consideration their relative isolation in rural schools. These strategies include: (i) meetings and pedagogical exchanges between neighboring schools, encouraging the development of reflexive practices and mutual training (between peers); (ii) support to self-education, particularly through rural information centers, tool-kits, and distance learning; (iii) community support in order to resolve the problems faced by teachers.

Theme II : Curricular Improvement

The area in which change is most difficult, but also most decisive, is in the daily interactions between teachers and students. This is why the kind of reform most likely to succeed will begin in the classroom. The content and the methods recommended by the curricula must make good use of all cultural experiences which encourage learning. Curricular content, while it should be based on national policies and on international perspective, must be structured in such a way that local needs are taken into account. In all cases, the main concepts should be adapted to the universe of the child: his or her culture, his or her language, his or her potential for development, etc. Curricular content is necessarily limited, but it must not be limiting. The main objective should be to teach children how to learn, and not merely to teach as much content as possible. Child-centered learning strategies as well as involvement of parents and the community in the education process and management of the school, have been shown to be the most effective. Steps must also be taken to ensure compliance with international standards for the number of hours of effective teaching, without sacrificing the necessary flexibility of local school calendars.

Successful Experiments in Rural Schools Display Some or All of the Following Characteristics:

A 'child-centered' pedagogy rather than a 'teacher-focused' approach : active teaching methods geared more towards learning than teaching;

Intensive cooperation between highly qualified teachers, less qualified teachers, community members and parents;

A continual learning process grouping several levels and resources in the educational environment; older or quicker students helping the younger and weaker ones;

Teaching and educational material designed to encourage students to teach themselves or to work in small groups;

Ongoing regular training of teachers and mechanisms for mutual training and monitoring (among peers);

Use of technological resources for teaching : the use of distance learning, radio, and sometimes television courses;

Integrated follow-up and evaluation of student and teacher performance so as to help the schools learn from their own experiences;

Sustained relations between children and adults, through the interactive relationship between schools and local communities;

Participation of the community, parents and students in, among other things, the general orientation and management of the school and the development of materials;

Use of daily/weekly timetables and calendars of the school year adapted to local realities;

The community attends to the health and nutrition of the child before the child reaches school age.

Some powerful ideas :

A new concept of quality : the notion of quality must break free from pre-established norms, whereby students are classified according to their capacity to conform. This new concept of quality should incorporate the notion that each child has the right to keep on learning and receiving guidance as far as his or her potential allows.

Foundations for school: the cultural background the child brings with him or her on the first day of school is the point of departure for all schooling, particularly the 'basic data' from his or her culture and language.

Training through practice: the initial training of teachers has little impact on their performance since the most important and sustainable skills are acquired during the first five years of service.

Moving beyond the illusion of control: the center level cannot effectively monitor everything that happens in the education sector, but they can facilitate and effectively promote initiatives through a transfer of responsibilities to the local level.

The strategic question of research : who is targeted by the research? How does it contribute to the improvement of education? Without valid answers to these questions, the exercise may become a significant waste of time and effort.

Theme III: Decentralization and Participation of Local Communities

Decentralization is not a panacea. There is no proof of its strategic effectiveness in improving the quality of education, since the term can be interpreted in many different ways. Nevertheless, the analysis of relevant case studies demonstrates the positive effects of decentralization in various areas: resources collection at the local level, classrooms construction and equipment, student recruitment (particularly of girls), monitoring of student attendance and results, provision of text-books and didactic materials, community involvement in teachers' hiring, salary and lodging. Thus, decentralization reinforces schools appropriation by local communities, and promotes a greater basis for dialogue on education, at the same time that it increases the relevance of school learning by taking into consideration specific local needs.

Moreover, one of the critical conditions of success of any alternative primary school programme is the active and massive participation of communities, parents and children in the school management. This process concentrates energies around the school, and integrates the school into a global project of collective promotion.

Theme IV : Promotion of Evaluation and Research

The child must remain the center of research and evaluation in order to improve the quality of education. The objective should be to measure the learning curve of each student. Also, it is critical to establish the extent to which the structures and components of the system contribute to the improvement of education. University researchers must contribute to research efforts on school issues including reading difficulties, teaching methods, class and school management, tests and school exams and teacher training. It is helpful to conduct this type of research in partnership with the main educational actors, in particular the teachers who would, through their involvement in the research, undergo a process of training and innovation development (the problem solving process). The final objective is to instill a research and evaluation culture into the normal school and classroom operations. This would be instrumental in setting standards and improving the quality of education.

Analysis of Case Studies:

On Teachers

In Senegal the "volontaire de l'éducation" (**education volunteers**) are teachers recruited to work in primary schools. This project, launched in 1995, has helped to provide teachers for rural schools where they had previously been lacking.

In Uganda the "Système de Gestion et Développement des Enseignants" (**Teacher Development and Management System**) has had many successes including promotion of the improvement of teacher training schools, primary school infrastructures, didactic materials and curricular relevance.

On Curricula

In Zambia **teaching in multigrade classes**, initiated in 1985, has had considerable success in terms of underprivileged children's access to primary education, as well as in terms of the standard of education itself.

In Senegal the **reform of the of basic education curriculum** operates within the framework of a participatory process lead-

ing to (i) a redefinition of the concept of basic education which is now based on the needs of specific communities, (ii) the conceptual equation of quality with relevance; (iii) a participatory and systematic elaboration of the curriculum.

In Mali the **Pédagogie Convergente** of the teaching of national languages and of French is an innovation which enables the aptitude and skills acquired in the first language to be transferred to the second, resulting in an improvement in the quality of education.

On Decentralization

In Uganda the **decentralization of primary education** consisting of the transfer of political, administrative, financial and planning responsibilities to the district and school level has accelerated the decision making process, encouraged an increase in local initiatives and resulted in transparency and accountability.

In Guinea the **NAFA centers**, regarded as 'second chance' schools, have made basic level education accessible to disadvantaged young people age 10 to 16, especially girls living in rural areas. These centers propose an education/apprenticeship combination of basic education and initial training in jobs relating to local socio-economic activities.

In Zambia **community schools** are the result of the population's desire to send their children to nearby schools which are less expensive and less rigid than traditional schools. These schools are open to under-privileged children and place emphasis on the acquisition of the basic principals of reading, writing, arithmetic, and relevant life-skills.

On Research/Evaluation

In Mali the "Projet d'Amélioration de la Qualité de l'éducation" (**Quality of Education Improvement Project**) aims to identify and list both intra- and extra-school factors which can have a positive effect on the education of students in rural areas. This project also aims to conceive, test, implement and evaluate new didactic methodologies, and help teachers in adapting their teaching to the realities of the rural environment. The objective is to improve quality and increase the number of full-time students.

In Guinea the "Programme de Petites Subventions des Ecoles" (**Small Grants Program**) aims to encourage school teachers to develop the capacity to analyze their problems and to identify those which could be solved with small grants. Teachers are encouraged to come up with suggestions for projects, to implement them and to account for the allotted funds. This programme has, among other things, improved the motivation of teachers in rural areas, as well as their capacity to elaborate projects and to work in teams.

For more information about UNSIA and this newsletter, please contact:

Mamadou Ndoye at Mndoye@worldbank.org

Mactar Diagne at mdiagne1@worldbank.org

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*Synthesis of documents by Kangbai Konaté (Consultant)