Are Our Children Learning?

Annual Learning Assessment Report Tanzania 2010[1]

Introduction

Across Tanzania, huge progress has been made in basic education in the last decade. Enrolments are up in both primary and secondary education, and millions of children are able to go to school. Tanzania is ahead of schedule in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to education access and gender parity. Tens of thousands of classrooms have been built and tens of thousands of teachers been added to the rolls. The budget for education has tripled over this period; the Government now spends over a billion dollars annually or about 1 in every 5 shillings of its budget on education.

These achievements are no easy feats; they have required significant political commitment and large allocations of public resources. Parents too have scrambled to cover their share, for even free education is never quite free, with costs of uniforms, books and pens, extra tuition, transport and whatnot. **The key question is – what have these massive efforts and investments yielded? To what extent have these achievements translate into concrete improvements in children's competencies?** The point of schooling is to enable every child to develop the knowledge and wherewithal to thrive in the world – starting with basic skills in literacy and numeracy that form the foundation of the ability to be curious, think, listen, ask questions, analyze, synthesize, and communicate with confidence. Are our schools succeeding in this responsibility? Are our children learning?

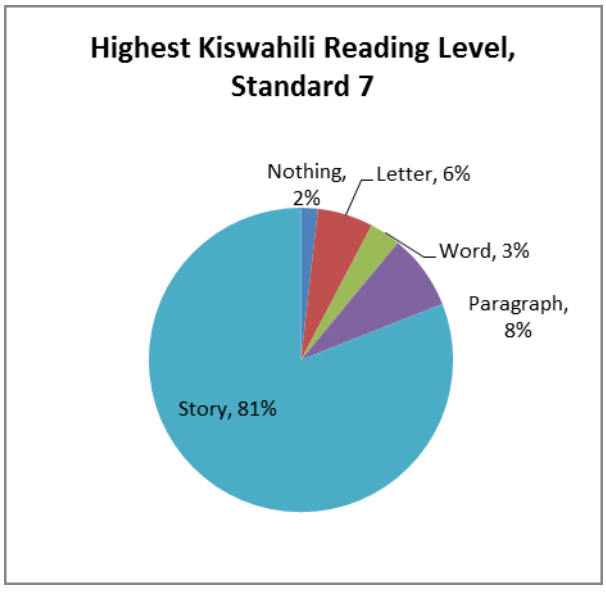
[1] This note has been developed by Uwezo Tanzania (www.uwezo.net). Uwezo is hosted by TEN/MET (www.tenmet.org) and is part of an East African wide effort that is coordinated by Twaweza (www.twaweza.org)

Uwezo seeks to answer this key question, and this report presents the findings of its first assessment. Uwezo, meaning *capability* in Swahili, is a four year initiative to monitor the quality of learning in schools by assessing the basic literacy and numeracy skills of children aged 5-16. The initiative is housed within TEN/MET (Tanzania Education Network, www.tenmet.org) in Tanzania, and it is part of an East Africa wide effort also involving Kenya and Uganda coordinated by Twaweza (www.twaweza.org). The assessment is based on a proven methodology developed by the ASER Center in India, and it uses scientific methods to obtain a random sampling of households around the country. Trained Uwezo volunteers visit the households to assess the mathematics and reading (Kiswahili and English) skills of each child using a short, Standard 2 level assessment. The Standard 2 level is chosen because according to both Tanzanian and international standards, by the end of the second year of primary education children should have acquired basic skills in literacy and numeracy.

The first Uwezo Tanzania assessment was conducted in May 2010, after extensive preparation and pre-testing. It involved 38 out of 133 districts. In each district 30 villages were randomly selected, and in each village all children aged 5-16 in 20 households were assessed. In total, 42,033 children in 22,800 households were assessed. The six key findings are presented below. The main report can be downloaded from www.uwezo.net.

Key Findings

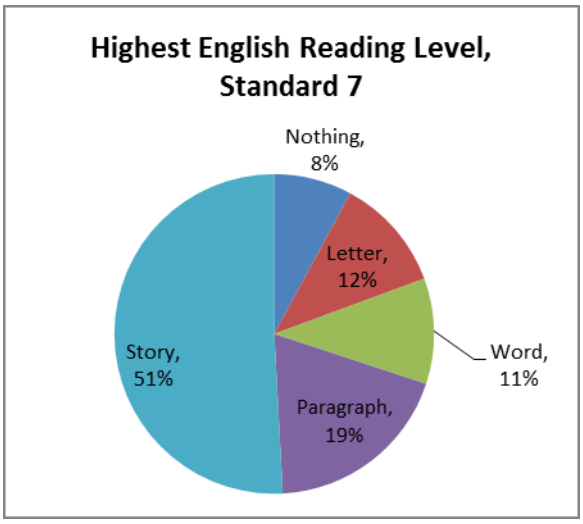
1. One in five primary school leavers cannot read Standard 2 level Kiswahili



Even though Kiswahili is the national language widely spoken across the country, a large number of children are not able to read it fluently. In our sample, less than half (42.2%) of the children surveyed were able to read at the story level. Whereas all children in Standard 3 should be able to read at the Standard 2 story level, less than 1 in 3 (32.7%) can. Most children do not learn to read a simple story until Standard 5 or 6. By the time they complete primary school, however, 1 out of every 5 children still cannot read the Standard 2 level story. These children will likely never learn to read, and despite spending seven years in primary schooling, are likely to remain illiterate for life.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHO CAN READ STANDARD 2 LEVEL KISWAHILI						
Class	**Nothing**	**Letter**	**Word**	**Para**	**Story**	**Total**
PreSchool	53.5	27.7	2.7	2.5	13.6	100
Std 1	41.8	37.8	10.6	4.2	5.6	100
Std 2	24.1	32.3	17.0	9.8	16.8	100
Std 3	14.8	20.0	16.4	16.1	32.7	100
Std 4	9.6	14.7	12.0	16.6	47.1	100
Std 5	6.0	10.1	7.4	13.8	62.8	100
Std 6	4.0	6.1	4.9	11.1	73.9	100
Std 7	1.8	5.9	3.3	8.0	81.0	100
Total	18.6	19.2	9.6	10.5	**42.2**	100

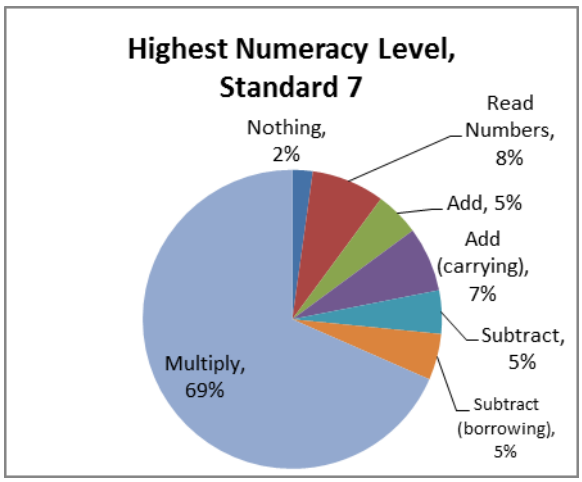
2. Half the children who complete primary school cannot read in English



English is by far the hardest subject for students. Even though all children in Standard 3 should be able to read the Standard 2 story level, less than 1 in 10 (7.7%) can. Progress in English is slow; by Standard 5, only 1 in every 4 children can read a story. Nearly half cannot even read short English words. Many children reach Standard 7 without any English skills at all. By the time they complete primary school, half of all children (49.1%) still cannot read a Standard 2 level English story, and far fewer are likely to be able to read at the Standard 7 level. This means that the vast majority of children who enter secondary schooling are unable to read in the English language, the medium of instruction in secondary education.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHO CAN READ STANDARD 2 LEVEL ENGLISH						
Age	**Nothing**	**Letter**	**Word**	**Para**	**Story**	**Total**
PreSchool	68.3	16.9	2.3	3.4	9.1	100
Std 1	68.0	24.8	3.8	1.3	2.1	100
Std 2	55.5	29.4	7.5	3.8	3.9	100
Std 3	42.0	26.7	14.2	9.4	7.7	100
Std 4	29.0	24.0	16.0	15.5	15.4	100
Std 5	21.4	19.6	13.7	20.9	24.5	100
Std 6	15.1	13.6	13.6	21.9	35.8	100
Std 7	7.9	11.5	10.7	19.1	50.9	100
Total	37.8	21.0	10.4	12.1	**18.7**	100

3. Only 7 in 10 primary school leavers can do Standard 2 level Mathematics

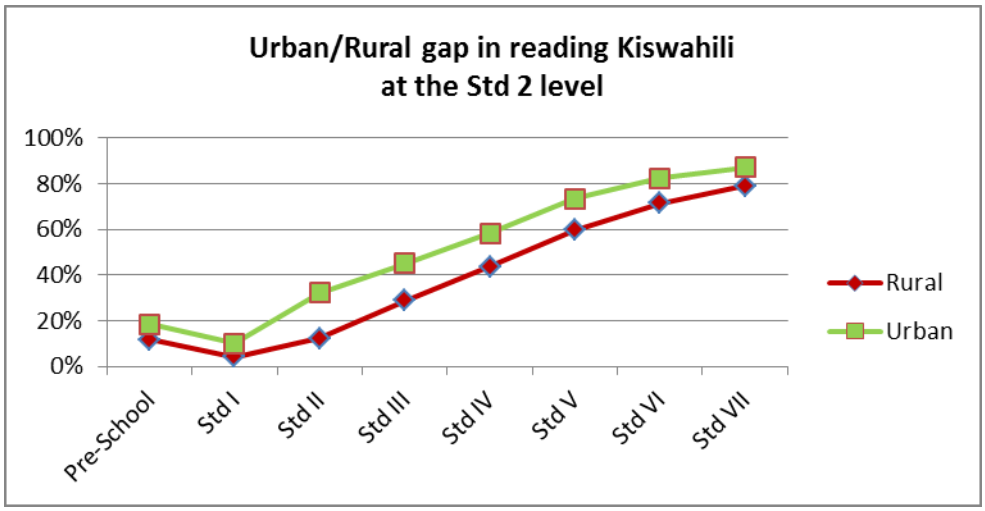


Although multiplication is in the Standard 2 curriculum, hardly any Standard 2 children can multiply. In fact, more than half of them cannot even add. By the time they reach Standard 5, most children can add and subtract, but the majority still cannot multiply. Most children master basic mathematics skills by the end of primary school. However, 3 out of 10 (31.5%) children in Standard 7 still cannot do Standard 2 level multiplication. One in 10 children complete primary school with no mathematics skills at all; they cannot even do basic addition. This likely means that the majority of children entering secondary school do not have an adequate foundation in mathematics that is essential for learning and analysis, particularly in science and commerce.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHO CAN DO STANDARD 2 LEVEL MATHEMATICS								
Age	**Nothing**	**Num**	**Add1**	**Add2**	**Sub1**	**Sub2**	**Mul**	**Total**
PreSchool	40.0	41.9	2.7	1.6	1.7	1	11.0	100
Std 1	26.5	56.9	9.2	1.9	2.3	1	2.4	100
Std 2	15.7	45.8	16.9	4.9	5.5	4	7.6	100
Std 3	9.9	30.3	20.0	8.5	7.3	6	18.5	100
Std 4	7.2	22.0	14.1	10.0	7.0	7	32.8	100
Std 5	5.1	13.9	11.0	10.3	6.7	7	45.8	100
Std 6	3.3	9.2	7.7	10.2	5.9	6	57.8	100
Std 7	2.2	7.9	4.8	7.0	4.7	5	68.5	100
Total	13.1	28.3	11.1	7.0	5.2	5	**30.8**	100

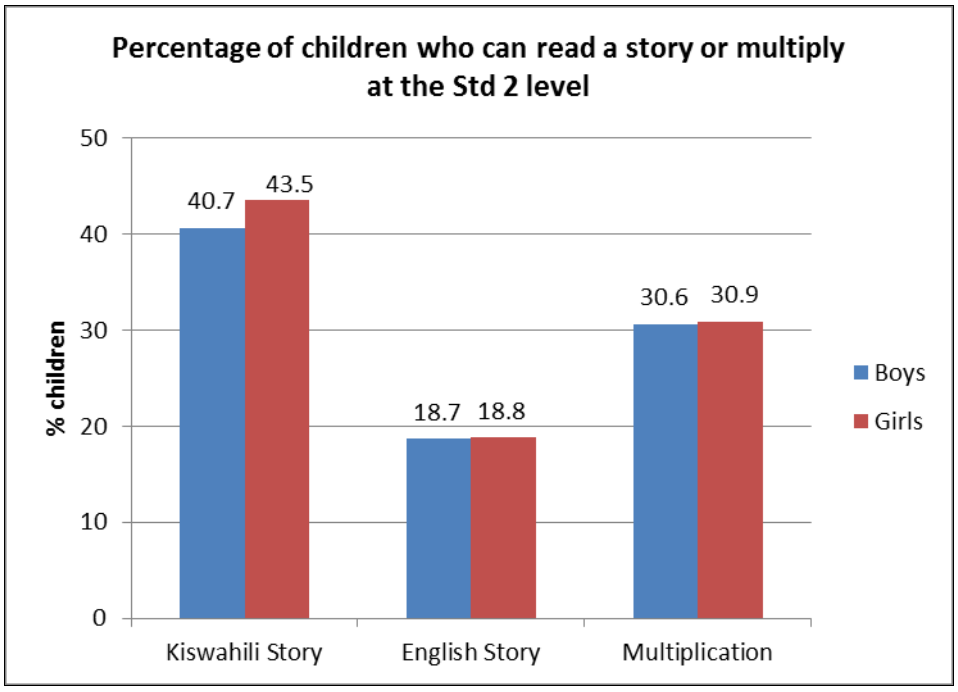
4. Urban-based children perform better than rural-based children

Children in urban areas score about 7-10 percentage points higher than children in rural areas in all subjects. The difference is largest in Standards 2-4, when urban-based children begin to master basic skills while their rural counterparts fall behind. Rural students seem to catch up the Standard 2 level eventually by the time they are in Standards 6 and 7, but in fact may be falling further behind at being able to read at their *own* level.



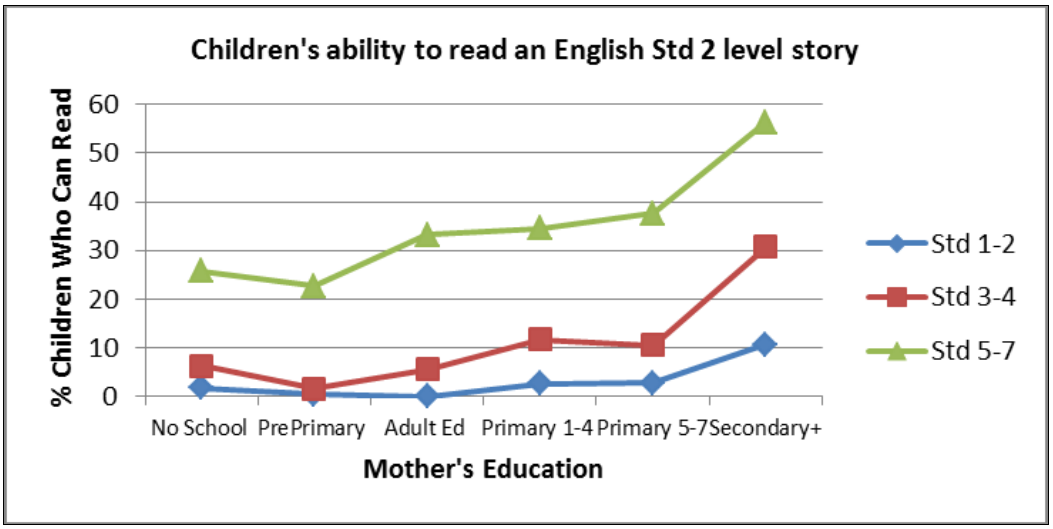
5. Girls do slightly better than boys

Girls performed better than boys in all subjects tested, although the differences are very small. Of all children tested, 43.5% of girls were able to read at the story level in Kiswahili as compared to 40.7% of all boys. For English and Mathematics the differences were negligible, as can be seen in the table below. Nonetheless these findings counter the widely held notion that girls do less well than boys, and raise questions about why there is marked gap in favour of boys in the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). Overall, however, the slight differences between abilities of girls and boys should not mask the larger reality, namely that too many of both lack basic competencies in both languages and mathematics.



6. Children with educated mothers perform better

Children whose mothers attended secondary school perform dramatically better than other children. For instance, in Standard 3 and 4 these children are five *times more likely* to be able to read a story in English and *more than twice as likely* to be able to multiply and read a story in Kiswahili. Even children whose mothers have attended only primary school seem to have a small but significant advantage above children whose mothers have not been to school. The gap in performance begins in Standard 1 and continues through Standard 7, which suggests that mother's education remains important for children at all levels of schooling.



Conclusion

The findings of Uwezo's large scale assessment involving over 20,000 households and over 40,000 children reveal that there is a crisis in education in Tanzania. By the time they enter Standard 3, 100% of children should have basic competencies in literacy and numeracy. **The reality is that by Standard 3, 7 out of every 10 children cannot read basic Swahili, 9 out of every 10 children cannot read basic English, and 8 out of every 10 children cannot do basic mathematics.** Even by the time they complete primary education, large numbers of children cannot do what they should have mastered five years earlier in Standard 2. Breakdowns by districts reveal large disparities, with some districts performing far below the national average.

The stark reality is that, despite the enormous advances in education made possible by investing trillions of shillings each year, the vast majority of children in Tanzania are not learning.

What can be done about the situation?

First, we need to pause and make the effort to fully absorb these results and analyze what they mean. Rushing to explain them away or come up with quick solutions may not help, and it may lead to improper diagnosis and ineffective responses. It may also require, politically unsound as it may seem, to temper the enthusiasm with current achievements. Celebrating new buildings and higher enrolments is dangerous folly if its effect is to mask the reality that too many children in Tanzania complete primary schooling without the ability to read and count.

Second, while major challenges are inevitable whenever an education system is expanded rapidly, one can still ask the question: are the strategic policy and political objectives focused on the right things? At present, in Tanzania and elsewhere, much of the focus is on the provision of educational *inputs*, such as classrooms, laboratories, books and teachers, rather than *learning outcomes*, such as literacy, numeracy, writing, critical thinking and creativity. Since the evidence shows that the inputs are not being translated into learning outcomes, there is a need to realign focus system-wide on achieving learning outcomes within ministries responsible for education, training institutions, curriculum development, examinations, teacher and school assessment, measures of progress, and political commitments.

Third, there is a need to focus on what happens at the school, rather than in national aggregates alone. Studies across the region suggest that the teaching and learning process may be severely compromised. Two of the most common problems appear to be that insufficient funds are reaching schools (ie increasing education budgets are being used up for other things than school level improvements) and teachers are both poorly motivated and not teaching (ie 'time on task' is very low). It may make sense to pay greater attention to these two issues and how to improve them, as well as to rigorously

study the relationship between resources at the school level and teacher time on task on one hand and learning outcomes on the other.

Fourth, greater transparency may spur reflection and action among both policy makers and citizens alike. Uwezo is committed to sharing its findings widely to contribute to this purpose. But the Government could take things much further by enabling data from every school to be available online and through mass media, so that every local government official, teacher, parent and student can compare how she or he is doing in relation to others. Technological innovations and the spread of mobile phone in particular make possible information sharing that was unimaginable a few years ago.

Fifth, instead of doing more of what has been done harder or faster it may be time to do something different. Our analysis and studies worldwide suggest that a core part of the puzzle may be to *realign incentives* – so that key actors system-wide are recognized for promoting learning. One idea worth trying and already endorsed by President Kikwete is called *Cash on Delivery* (www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/codaid). Its basic premise is that additional funding in education should be predicated on and paid on the achievement of an (independently audited) agreed learning outcome, such as literacy and numeracy (eg for every child who completes primary education with agreed ability $200 would be provided). This idea could be rolled further down, whereby the $200 could be shared among local officials, teachers and possibly even parents. The point is to nudge key actors to focus on and reward achievement of learning. There is no guarantee that this idea would work. But in the face of the gravity of the crisis in Tanzania, where the usual methods have failed to bring meaningful progress, experimenting with a carefully designed and bold alternative as Cash on Delivery, and rigorously studying its impact, makes sense.

The Uwezo findings are released on the eve of national elections in Tanzania. Whatever its outcome, the next five years present an opportunity to address the education crisis in an honest, bold and strategically effective manner. A skilled, competent and confident people are essential to enable the nation to thrive, particularly in the context of regional integration and increasing globalization. Whoever emerges as the next President of Tanzania, turning education from more of the same inputs to ensuring that every child can read and count and learn may be the greatest test of his leadership.