



Association for the Development of Education in Africa

**Biennale on Education in Africa
(Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006)**

Plenary Session 3

**Conditions and Factors of
Effective Schools in Africa**

Effective Schools for Sub Saharan Africa

by Adriaan Verspoor

**Working Document
DRAFT**

PLEASE DO NOT DISSEMINATE

PL-3.1

This document was prepared by ADEA for its Biennial Meeting (Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006). The views and opinions expressed in this volume are those of the authors and should not be attributed to ADEA, to its members or affiliated organizations or to any individual acting on behalf of ADEA.

The document is a working document still in the stages of production. It has been prepared to serve as a basis for discussions at the ADEA Biennial Meeting and should not be disseminated for other purposes at this stage.

© Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) – 2006

Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

International Institute for Educational Planning

7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix

75116 Paris, France

Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57

Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65

adea@iiep.unesco.org

web site: www.ADEAnet.org

The “Quest for Quality” in basic education initiated at ADEA’s 2003 biennial meeting, challenged participants to focus on (ADEA 2004, chapter 5):

Implementation at the school level

Providing equitable access to poor children, especially those living in rural areas

Eliminating education disadvantage due to gender.

Box 1: What determines education quality?

- **Classroom factors** (time, grouping procedures, instructional strategies) are key
- **School factors** (leadership, emphasis on academic achievement and staff development) enable and reinforce
- **System factors** (vision, standards, resources, relevant curriculum, incentives) provide direction
- **Community factors** (home environment, support for education) ensure local relevance and ownership

Source: Verspoor, 2006

There was also a broad consensus that while many factors influence student learning (Box 1), improvements in education quality and better learning achievements of students in SSA will ultimately be determined in classrooms by motivated teachers who have the skills and resources to respond effectively to students learning needs. Effective schools are schools that create a supportive environment for such teachers and for classrooms where all students have the opportunity learn and acquire the knowledge the skills and the attitudes specified in the curriculum. Moving towards an in-depth understanding of what makes schools in Africa effective and how schools can be helped on the path towards effectiveness is thus a central element of the continuing “Quest for Quality”. The theme of effective schools is closely linked with the other themes of the 2006 biennale. Early childhood programs can prepare children for formal schooling; evidence on the positive impact of ECD programs on later school performance is overwhelming. Equally robust is the evidence that literate parents will actively support the education of their children. In sum, effective schools depend in important ways on effective ECD and literacy programs.

Thirty years of research has produced a robust body of research on effective schools, (summarized in Verspoor, 2006, chapter 2) that has brought a broad consensus on the characteristics of effective schools (Box 2). This research has had a significant impact on the thinking on education change and quality improvement by emphasizing:

- Learners’ educability – it is possible for all children to learn
- Outcomes – examining indicators of learning
- Taking responsibility for students – don’t blame the victim (the student) for the shortcomings of the school; schools should take a fair share of the responsibility for students’ learning performance
- Consistency throughout the school community – treat the school as an organic whole, – more than the sum of it’s parts – and don’t focus on only the parts (Hopkins, 2001)

“The Challenge of Learning” presented as a discussion paper at the 2003 biennial meeting, argues that effective schools can only develop and survive in a broader system wide “**Culture of Quality**”, and proposed the following key features:

- Values that place learning central:
- A belief that failure is not an inevitable part of the education process; and that all children can learn given time and appropriate instruction;
- A commitment to equitable outcomes and a readiness to vary inputs and processes to achieve these.
- An improvement process that focuses, first and foremost, on the means- on the processes and the skills required to bring about quality results.
- A dedication to universal quality learning based on diversity and flexibility in delivery mechanisms and instructional practice

Box 2 : Characteristics of Effective schools	
Factors	Components
Educational Leadership	School leader as information provider Initiator and facilitator of staff development
Curriculum quality/ opportunity to learn	Setting curricular priorities Opportunity to learn
School climate	The importance given to an orderly climate Good behavior of pupils Perceptions of effectiveness-enhancing culture Pupils' engagement Appraisal of roles and tasks
Monitoring student learning	Monitoring pupils' progress School process evaluation Use of evaluation results Keeping records on pupils' performance
Effective learning time	Monitoring absenteeism Time at classroom level
Source: Based on Scheerens, 2000	

Identifying the features of effective schools is not enough, however. To provide operational guidance to what perhaps are the central policy questions of education development today, at least two questions need to be addressed:

- How to transform poorly performing schools into effective ones
- What are the central elements of the process of school improvement?

Research on school improvement has focused on these implementation questions. It has found that quality improvement is essentially a local –school level- process but one that will only be successful with close internal and external monitoring and support. Where the school is recognized as the unit of change, head teachers take a leadership role in transforming the school and communities mobilize to support these efforts improvements can and do happen. Since teachers are at the core of the improvement efforts powerful teaching and high levels of learning call for continuous staff development efforts. Successful strategies provide (Hopkins, 2001):

- Concrete, practice focused extended training
- Classroom assistance
- Teacher observation in other classrooms
- Regular meetings that focused on practical issues related to teaching and learning
- Teacher involvement in school improvement planning
- Head participation in training

Box 3: How Schools Improve in Developing Countries

- Education reform is a local process
- The reform process is a learning process
- Teachers need to be seen as learners
- Central support is vital
- Effective system linkages are vital
- Focus on classroom practice is key
- Both local and central initiation can work
- Parent and community participation is a key element of success

Source: Dalin. 1994

Much of this research has taken place in the industrialized world, some in developing countries (Dalin, 1994) but very little in Sub Sahara Africa. The purpose of the research and analysis sponsored by ADEA in preparation for the 2006 biennial meeting is to enhance the understanding of the way African school can move towards increased effectiveness, how they can better provide quality learning opportunities at the school level to all children, poor and rich, boys and girls, urban and rural. Several of these studies report on field research in schools in Africa. All are summarized in the ADEA newsletter article on the effective schools theme. The findings are important for further discussion and reflection and are highlighted below.

The characteristics of **effective schools in Sub-Saharan Africa** (Session B-1) are discussed in a paper (Heneveld) synthesizing 4 country studies where in each country teams of local educators visited a sample of 30 schools. They found that:

Overall learning levels remain low; but several schools demonstrate that even when the existing level of school inputs is less than desired, improvements are possible.

Good learning outcomes are associated with teachers who plan for teaching, put into practice what they have learned (particularly in in-service courses), and correct and remediate students' work regularly; head teachers who emphasize teaching and learning in their management; and communities that actively support their school.

Low learning outcomes are associated with overcrowded classrooms, perfunctory school level and external pedagogical oversight and continued use of ineffective teaching practices in spite of training in alternative approaches.

The synthesis paper emphasizes that improvement is essentially a local process and calls for a greater focus on teaching-learning processes: how to improve them should drive decisions on what to invest in to improve student results. These findings are very much in line with the findings of the effective schools and school improvement research in other parts of the world. At the same time they force all stakeholders to consider the question: why is it that significant investments in teacher training (pre service and in-service) have not resulted in changes in instructional practice? In some cases – overcrowded classrooms in Mozambique are an example the conditions under which schooling takes place have deteriorated to the point that effective instruction is virtually impossible. But in others available resources are not used to best advantage.

Michaelova (session B-1) reviews recent evidence on the cost-effectiveness of different inputs. The review confirms earlier findings, but also questions some conventional wisdom:

Textbooks, teachers guides and instruction time are the most cost-effective inputs;

Class size up to 60 does not affect student performance.

Grade repetition is not an efficient way to enhance student learning.

Long pre-service programs show little evidence of improved learning, but do imply higher salary cost.

Non-civil-servant contract-teacher programs may be successfully introduced without compromising on education quality.

Grade repetition has high cost and few benefits.

Perhaps most importantly she emphasizes the importance of institutions: incentive systems that affect teacher and administrator motivation and management system that shift resources and accountability to the local level. Could it be that institutional weaknesses explain an important part of the difficulties involved in improving teaching practice and the continued underperformance of many schools?

Clearly principals and teachers are at the center of change. A roundtable discussion will be the opportunity to explore the lessons of experience in several countries. The **AFIDES** ('Association Francophone Internationale des Directeurs d'Établissements Scolaires) studied the management of a sample of well performing schools in four African countries. The role of head teachers in creating effective schools is well established in the literature and-perhaps unsurprisingly, management systems in high performing African schools are not unlike what has been found elsewhere:

- Well structured, visible and transparent school management involving all staff
- Regular monitoring of student performance and teaching practices combined with support for professional development and training of staff.
- Student learning as the central concern of school management.
- Effective management of the involvement of external partners.

Several members of the **International Confederation of Principals** (ICP) responded to a questionnaire that asked them to reflect on the findings of the AFIDES report. They identified many similarities emphasizing the need for effective internal and external communications, support for under achieving students, especially girls, community support and continuous professional development opportunities for teachers.

A second input in this round table discussion by **Mulkeen** shows the challenges of school improvement in rural areas. Many rural schools serve disadvantaged populations, have great difficulty attracting and retaining qualified teachers and have management systems poorly adapted to their small size. Teacher support systems often are barely functional. Yet the evidence shows that these constraints are not insurmountable and can be overcome with appropriate policies and adapted and flexible school management. Contributions by the **Working Group on the Teaching Profession** which has been working with teachers and teacher trainers for many years are expected to further enrich this round table, while the AVU will share its experience using new technologies in support of teacher development.

These discussions should allow participants to explore what can be done to spread and good practice to an ever increasing number of schools? In many cases, head teachers do not provide the pedagogical or transformational leadership necessary to put the school on a path of continuous improvement, teachers lack the motivation and the skill to improve instructional practice and classroom management, support systems are weak and resources severely constrained. Centralized management systems are often not capable dealing with local issues. Incentive systems are often poorly targeted and not explicitly designed to support improvements in learning achievement. Participants will have the opportunity to share experiences that may guide others who are struggling with these issues.

The effective schools literature often does not pay much attention to what is being taught, how content is organized to serve all students and how it can be best be integrated around the competencies that students are expected to acquire. Yet this is a central element in many quality improvement strategies in Sub Saharan Africa. Several countries are moving towards mother tongue instruction, competency based curricula and gender sensitive pedagogy as ways to provide a meaningful education experience to all children and enhance the effectiveness of schooling. Several papers prepared for the biennale (session B-3) discuss these issues.

Language of instruction issues are central to improving student learning in the African classroom. The 2003 biennial concluded that evidence of the instructional effectiveness of the “bilingual” or “early transition models” compared with the traditional international language of instruction models, was compelling. A provocative stock taking (ADEA and UIE) grounded in insights from cognitive science and country experiences, evaluates different models of mother tongue instruction and bilingual education and pushes this analysis further. It documents constraints and limitations faced by many “bilingual early exit” programs caused by insufficient teacher preparation, shortages of African language instructional materials, poor limited cultural relevance of curricula, and absence of well defined national language policies. It reviews the challenges of African language publishing, assesses the cost of mother tongue and bilingual education and proposes an integrated social marketing model for implementation and in conclusion:

- questions the bilingual model and proposes an “additive model” with African languages as the language of instruction for 6-8 years combined with high quality instruction in a second international/official language;
- calls for a radical reform of existing language-in-education policies to build high performance education systems; and
- contends that such reforms will increase education budgets by 1-5% and are feasible building on existing experience and mobilizing local institutions with specialist knowledge.

The **adaptation of curricula** necessary to respond to the demands of mother tongue instruction, gender sensitivity and improved student learning was discussed in a seminar in Cotonou (December 12-15, 2005). The seminar report (ADEA) summarizes these discussions and argues that a competency based approach is the key to addressing these challenges while recognizing the value of differences between countries and the need to have country specific definitions of competencies. It will be important to link the discussion on curriculum adaptation with issues raised in a paper by FAWA on issues of gender sensitive pedagogy (session B-5)

Issues of language of instruction and curriculum always generate considerable controversy and discussion. They are central to what children are to become and the kind of future society people want for them. Country situations differ dramatically and it is unlikely that there is a single solution or strategy that applies everywhere. That should, however, not exclude a discussion and reflection on the lessons of experience, providing the opportunity to every country to consider options that may help improve students’ learning achievement.

The emphasis of the effective school literature on school level processes has as a consequence that **decentralization and parental and civil society participation** are

increasingly seen as key factors contributing to school improvement. Two papers (Niane and Naidoo) explore the reality on the ground in this regard with evidence from nine countries finding:

Considerable parental participation at the school level, but little parental or civic involvement at higher levels.

National organizations rarely involved in national level policy making but with a strong focus on external representation.

Different civic groups with different views on governance and management issues, in particular on the scope of decentralization and local autonomy

Many civil society actors unable to participate effectively in decision and policy-making processes.

A central element in this context is opening up of the school towards the community, aiming at the involvement of local stakeholders in the life of the school and adapting curricula to respond to local needs and incorporate local knowledge. A paper summarizing the experience of “Aide et Action” summarizes the experience with local capacity building for this purpose.

Direct financial support to schools has accompanied the move towards local autonomy in several countries. Two reviews based on seven country case studies emphasizes (Ayako; Solaux and Suchaut) the central importance of local capacity building in local planning for education development and financial management.

There is now a considerable body of experience with different ways of promoting increased school level autonomy for managing resources and instruction. Much of it is promising, but at the same time significant challenges remain to ensure that decentralization, parental and civil society participation accelerate progress towards school effectiveness and increased student learning. The round table discussions on this topic will provide participants with a unique opportunity to learn from each other and identify possible actions to move forward.

Equity was identified in the 2003 biennial as perhaps the single most important challenge of the EFA agenda. Only when effective schools reach poor girls and boys, including those in rural areas, will the EFA promise of **equal opportunity to learn** (session B-5) become a reality. Several papers review the multifaceted action that is currently taking place to redress inequities

Providing rural people with equitable access to quality learning with often require non-traditional approaches and additional resources (Addis Abbeba Seminar)

Complementary education programs currently provide access to more than 3 million children, many of these provide cost-effective and equivalent opportunities to children who do not have access to formal schools (USAID);

Effective teaching recognizes and responds to gender differences in learning style, takes place in a gender sensitive school environment, adopts girl friendly classroom management practices and recognizes the impact of culture and tradition on girls' performance (FAWE).

There are many promising experiences designed to provide disadvantaged populations with access to quality opportunities to learn. But most programs have limited

coverage and as a result many of children who are difficult to reach with traditional schooling strategies remain out of school or have access to low quality schooling. What would it take to move forward and launch strategies that really will reach all?

Cross-cutting Issues for Reflection

While many features of effective schools and school improvement strategies in the literature are clearly relevant in Sub Saharan African settings, it is equally clear that the path towards effective schooling for is one that in many ways is unique to the African context, the national culture and past policy choices and the wide variations in local conditions.

School improvement is fundamentally a local process, albeit one that cannot be successful without system-wide technical and financial support. For this local process to work the papers suggests several issues that will need to be addressed:

Weak local capacity for planning and management constrains the transfer of authority, resources and accountability.

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs and supervision have little impact on instructional strategies and classroom practice.

Strengthening school management is a key to school improvement that still requires much attention and action.

Few attempts to recognize gender and other differences in instructional strategies and classroom management.

Limited transfer of experience between formal and complementary programs.

Foreign language of instruction has a clear negative impact on student learning; yet teachers are ill prepared to deal with this reality.

Box 4: The Conventional Wisdom about Reform

- Good curriculum is largely self explanatory and self-implementing
- Success of reforms depends mainly on the quality of the reform ideas
- Schools and teachers are generally resistant to reforms
- Key variable is teacher motivation not curriculum instructional methods
- Tight inspection and control are essential
- Materials need to be designed so well that that it can be implemented faithfully with minimal training
- High-stakes tests and public accountability will drive instruction and improve achievement

Reflection on these –and other - cross cutting issues by the participants in the 2006 ADEA biennial meeting (session B-6) would help countries and their external partners reflect on strategies that could address these challenges and at the same time identify contributions ADEA can make to the process.

Perhaps most importantly, participants may want to reconsider some of the traditional assumptions (Box 3) about quality improvement and change in the light of the findings in the papers prepared for the ADEA 2006 biennial meeting. In many cases the problem of reform has not been one of conceptual quality, but rather of implementation and application at the classroom (see session B-1). The challenges of use in real classroom are often underestimated by reform designers and central level decision makers , the skills of teachers are rarely taken into account and implementation is often seen as an event (at best a series of events) rather than as a process of learning and gradual adoption.

References:

ADEA (2004). *The Quest for Quality: Learning from African Experience*. Proceedings of the ADEA Biennial Meeting. Grand Baie Mauritius December 3-6, 2003. Paris: ADEA.

Dalin, Per et al. (1994). *How Schools Improve*. London: An International Report. Cassell

Hopkins, David (2001). *School improvement for real*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Scheerens, Jaap (2000) *Improving School Effectiveness*. Fundamentals of Education Planning No. 68. Paris: UNESCO/ International Institute for Educational Planning,.

Verspoor, Adriaan (ed) (in press). *The Challenge of Learning: Improving the Quality of Basic education in sub-Saharan Africa*. Paris: ADEA.