

Time to Teach

Teacher attendance and time on task
in Eastern and Southern Africa

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March 2020

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Students attend class at a Girls’ Primary School in Wau, South Sudan, 2019.

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Foreword

We face a global learning crisis. Fifty-three per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries are 'learning poor': they cannot read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school age. In sub-Saharan Africa, this problem is even more acute, with the learning poverty rate reaching 87 per cent overall and ranging from 40 to 99 per cent across countries.

Teachers play the most vital role in any education system, imparting knowledge to students. But they are more than just conduits of information; teachers equip children with the tools to analyse, problem solve, think creatively and use information effectively – skills necessary to lead healthy and productive lives.

Notably, countries in Eastern and Southern Africa have invested heavily in teacher development. Yet education systems in the region are still failing to fully support and motivate their teachers, as illustrated by high teacher absenteeism rates which range from 15 to 45 per cent. Teachers attending lessons and spending time on task is a prerequisite for learning in school.

Teacher absenteeism and reduced time on task wastes valuable financial resources, short-changes students and is one of the most cumbersome obstacles on the path towards the Sustainable Development Goal on inclusive and quality education and to the related vision of the new UNICEF education strategy: Every Child Learns. Low teacher attendance can also cause much broader economic losses, since any hindrance to human capital development has a deteriorating impact on sustainable development across sectors. Therefore, enhancing teachers' presence in the classroom and ensuring that class time is spent teaching, can contribute significantly to the productivity and inclusive prosperity of a country.

The Time to Teach study collates and strengthens the evidence base on primary school teacher absenteeism in Eastern and Southern Africa. The study uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide critical insights into the factors that underpin the multiple forms of teacher absenteeism and time on task. It also examines how factors vary across countries, school types, gender of teacher and other teacher characteristics. Despite high levels of teacher absenteeism, the study shows that teachers are generally committed and that what is needed is education system strengthening. It is hoped that findings will inform workable solutions and policies that will ensure a motivated teaching force, increase the opportunities for children to learn at school and, ultimately, improve their life and work opportunities.



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Executive summary

There is a learning crisis. Fifty-three per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries are in 'learning poverty', i.e. they cannot read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school age.¹ In sub-Saharan Africa, the learning poverty rate is 87 per cent overall, and ranges from 40 per cent to as high as 99 per cent in the 21 countries with available data.²

Teachers attending lessons and spending quality time on task is a critical prerequisite to learning. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, teacher absenteeism ranges from 15 to 45 per cent.³ Teacher absenteeism and reduced time on task wastes valuable financial resources, short-changes students and is one of the most cumbersome obstacles on the path toward the education Sustainable Development Goal and to the related vision of the new UNICEF education strategy: Every Child Learns.

Whilst the stark numbers are available to study, and despite teacher absenteeism being a foremost challenge for education systems in Africa, the evidence base on how policies and practices can influence teacher attendance remains scant.

Time to Teach (TTT) is a research initiative that looks at primary school teacher attendance in eight countries and territories in the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region: the Comoros; Kenya; Rwanda, Puntland, State of Somalia; South Sudan; the United Republic of Tanzania, mainland; the United Republic of Tanzania, Zanzibar; and Uganda.⁴ Its primary objective is to identify factors affecting the various forms of teacher attendance, which include being at school, being punctual, being in the classroom, and teaching when in the classroom, and use this evidence to inform the design and implementation of teacher policies. The study draws from national, system-wide, qualitative data collections and school observations, and a quantitative survey of teachers working in 160 purposively selected primary schools (20 schools per country/territory).

How frequently are teachers absent?

In all countries, teachers are absent in multiple ways. Absence from the school and the classroom are the types of absenteeism least frequently reported by surveyed teachers (15.5 and 15.7 per cent respectively), while lateness to duty and reduced time on task (while in the classroom) are more frequently reported (16.7 and 17.8 per cent respectively). However, large and significant variations exist between countries.

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