

Primary care

Professor Angela Little, from the University of London, examines the issue of primary education in developing countries...

Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG 2) is defined as the achievement of universal primary education. Its target is to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, are able to complete a full course of primary schooling. The indicators used by the United Nations (UN) to assess progress towards this target are threefold: the net enrolment ratio (NER) in primary education, the proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary education, and the literacy rate of 15-24-year-olds, women and men. In its Millennium Development Goals Report 2008, the UN presents progress on NERs and, in less detail, on primary school completion.

The NER is defined as the number of pupils of the theoretical school-age group for primary education, enrolled either in primary or secondary education, expressed as a proportion of the total population in that age group. The positive news is that in developing countries as a whole the NER increased from 80% in 1991 to 83% in 2000 and to 88% in 2006. In sub-Saharan Africa, the NER increased from 53% in 1991 to 71% in 2005, and in South Asia from 72% to 90% over the same period. The ratio of girls' enrolment in primary school relative to boys in all developing countries increased from 87% in 1990 to 94% in 2006.

This positive news needs to be interpreted with caution, for at least three reasons. First, current variations in the NERs by country remain very wide. In the sub-Saharan Africa region in 2005, Niger, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burkina Faso and Eritrea report NERs of less than 50%, while Madagascar, Malawi and Mauritius report NERs of more than 90%. In the Arab States, the Yemen, Djibouti, Oman, Mauritania and the United Arab Emirates report NERs of 75% or less, while in the South and West Asia region, Pakistan reports an NER of 68% and Sri Lanka 97% (UNESCO, 2008).

Second, the reported NERs are calculated across the primary stage of education, not on individual grades. Countries can achieve high NERs with very different patterns of enrolment across grade. One country may combine extremely large numbers of overage children in grade 1 with high drop-out rates in grades 2; another may combine age-appropriate enrolment in grade 1 with high progression to grade 6. Both combinations can lead to high NERs across the primary stage, and to the misleading conclusion that the former is close to achieving universal

enrolment when in fact most who enter grade 1 do not complete grade 6. The second indicator of progress towards MDG 2 – the proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary – addresses this concern to some extent. The UN 2008 report records that 'the proportion of children in developing countries who have completed primary education rose from 79% in 1990 to 85% in 2006' (United Nations 2008, p.14). UNESCO (2008) reports median survival rates in 2004 of 63% in sub-Saharan Africa and 79% in South and West Asia. In Uganda and Malawi, where the introduction of free primary education has led to spectacular increases in enrolment in grade 1, survival rates through the subsequent grades of primary have worsened.

Third, NERs by country can disguise wide variations by income group and gender. In general, children from richer families are more likely to enrol and reach the end of primary education than children from poorer families; boys are more likely to enrol and reach the end of primary education than girls. However, wealth and gender patterns vary widely. In Mozambique, rich boys are more than twice as likely as poor girls to enrol in grade 1, where in Kenya the probability of enrolling in grade 1 is very high for children in all wealth and gender groups (Lewin, 2007).

In some contexts, enrolment in education can mean little more than having one's name recorded in an enrolment register. Enrolment in school is not the same as attending school on a regular and frequent basis. Attending school is not the same as participating in learning opportunities, either because the learning and teaching environment is impoverished or because the child is hungry or sick or otherwise unable to take advantage of the opportunity. And participation in learning is not the same as the achievement of learning outcomes that are useful, relevant or enduring. The Education for All Goals advanced at the World Education Conferences in Jomtien in 1990 and Dakar in 2000 offered a more expanded vision.

"Whether or not expanded educational opportunities will translate into meaningful development – for an individual or for society – depends ultimately on whether people actually learn as a result of these opportunities, ie. whether they incorporate useful knowledge, reasoning ability, skills and values" (Article 4 of the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All, WCEFA 1990).



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Whether working to achieve the more limited or the more expanded vision of universal primary education, two challenges stand out. First, the supply and training of teachers has not kept pace with enrolment growth. Pupil teacher ratios can average over 100:1 in some countries. Large numbers of teachers are untrained. Increasing numbers are contract teachers. And as many as 18 million new primary teachers will be needed by 2015. At least 30% of teachers in primary schools in developing countries are multi-grade teachers, teaching more than one curriculum grade at the same time. In general, their work is unsupported by national curriculum and teacher education systems (Little, 2006, Hinchliffe, 2008).

Second, the considerable policy attention given to primary education in recent years has been, in some cases, at the expense of secondary, vocational, technical and tertiary education. This is especially so in countries whose education finance is heavily dependent on external resources. The shortages of teachers noted above underlines the point. Without a planned expansion of secondary education, the teachers needed to expand the primary system cannot be recruited and trained. And without a planned expansion of secondary, vocational, technical and tertiary education, the skilled workers needed to implement the activities that must be put in place to achieve all the other MDGs, whether in agriculture, health, the environment or in the management of development partnerships, will forever be in short supply.

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