

## Assessing student learning: Yes, but what next?

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### 1. Background

Since the 2000s, significant progress has been made worldwide in terms of access to education. However, this progress has not been accompanied by an improvement in student performance, particularly in developing countries. The latest international assessments point to an alarming skills deficit. Although it primarily occurs in sub-Saharan African countries, the skills deficit is not limited to them.

In 2022, the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, the UK's Commonwealth Foreign and Development Office, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation published *The State of Global Learning Poverty* report. According to this report, nearly two-thirds of ten-year-olds worldwide struggle to read or understand a simple story.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with this learning crisis, governments are continuing to develop various policies and strategies to improve the quality of education, some of which are already in place, but the desired results have not materialized.

Evaluation plays a prominent role in national policies to improve education quality. It is emphasized by those involved, and significant logistical and financial resources are allocated to evaluation. However, the education system fails to use these resources effectively to regulate policies and initiatives at all levels.

<sup>1</sup> The State of Global Learning Poverty : 2022 Update, Conference edition, June 2022.  
<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>

This observation is one of the findings that have been made by the IIEP-UNESCO Dakar Education Quality Management Support Programme during its diagnostic phase of quality management practices in several countries. These diagnostics reveal significant capacity for collecting data that are valuable for education policy, whether in the field of school statistics, multi-sector surveys or learning assessments.

In terms of assessments, countries have various assessment systems in place, including termly compositions, end-of-cycle exams, entrance examinations for higher education, national assessments, and international assessments (such as PASEC or PISA-D). However, not all of these data can be used effectively to improve student learning.

Nevertheless, evaluations concerning all schools, such as termly compositions and examinations, can greatly help in identifying needs as accurately as possible and developing effective remedial solutions. Therefore, to enhance learning outcomes, it is necessary to use data from each school while taking alternative sources such as pedagogical reports into account.

The observation made by the programme regarding data use applies to all supported countries. Data are underutilized, or if used at all - it is poorly utilized in guiding the system towards improving quality, and numerous reasons are contributing to this issue.

## 2. Reasons for not using the data

The programme teams conducting the research have identified several factors that combine to explain this low level of data utilization, namely a lack of strategic vision, a lack of confidence in the data, and a lack of time. These main obstacles are explained in more detail.

### A lack of strategic vision

Data collection only adds value when it aims to shed light on specific phenomena, support implemented or monitored actions, or address specific issues. However, based on the observed practices and discourses, it appears that data are sometimes collected purely for the sake of collection. At times, the process of data collection is poorly planned and, most importantly, it is not explained adequately to stakeholders at various levels for them to understand its precise intended purpose.

At the central level, stakeholders simply request and receive data, compile it for availability, and then move on to the next collection without clear communication. At the field level, stakeholders receive requests and provide data without a clear understanding of why or how data will be utilized. Furthermore, the objective of data collection can change along the way, depending on how stakeholders perceive its purpose.

This absence or misuse of data partly explains the failure to utilize data effectively for improving student learning at all levels. Testimonies gathered supporting this point indicate a lack of incentives, often coupled with a lack of skills.

Stakeholders tend to focus on consolidating data related to assessment and test results in order to pass them on to their superiors without an established institutional framework encouraging them to analyse and reflect on the potential data use.

**Senegal: The analysis and utilization of evaluation data are not a major part of the work routines of supervisory staff**

The diagnostics conducted at the various levels have provided evidence of a twofold inadequacy in the analysis and utilization of evaluation data and tests by education managers and authorities at both the decentralized and centralized levels. When questioned, the stakeholders in charge of education at the central level did not mention any specific use of the standardized and certificate-based evaluation results for the purpose of guided learning, except for evaluations aimed at feeding information systems or to the local level. Similar observations were consistently made at the decentralized level in response to requests from funding bodies.

In several instances, data are also used for purposes other than intended. One notable example is the use of assessment data solely for the purpose of classifying students and schools or for preparing for competitive examinations.

In such cases, the issue also stems from a lack of understanding regarding the different purposes of assessment, including evaluations, formative assessments and certification.

**Burundi: Assessment practices for grading purposes or to prepare for competitive examinations, and little for remediation**

While assessing learning should encompass more than just measuring the achievement of learning objectives, it is evident that the various stakeholders prioritize the selection of students to attend schools of excellence. The strategies employed to supervise students are mainly driven by legislation and the cultural emphasis on excellence. *'It's pedagogical to have so many tests per term, I have to work with this culture of excellence'.*

However, the disadvantage of promoting excellence in this way is that it lacks a specific strategy for addressing where students are facing the most challenges. Consequently, there is a need to develop targeted interventions to support students.

The national competition organized at the end of the school year holds significant importance in social perceptions and serves as a means to prepare students for several tests. To this end, the Direction générale des curricula et des innovations pédagogiques (DGCIP; Directorate-General for Curricula and Assessment) plays a crucial role in preparing students to succeed. In one province, for example, a bank of questions known as 'school network tests' is prepared for subjects that are particularly challenging. This is done to train students in all schools to succeed in the national competitive examination.

The administration of these national competitions is considered a priority for decentralized education services.

### A lack of confidence in the data

Another significant factor that has been emphasized is the lack of confidence in the data. Paradoxically, those responsible for collecting data sometimes admit to falsifying it, solely to meet the requirements set by their superiors. Consequently, the perception of evaluation becomes a crucial aspect in explaining the limited use of data.

Most stakeholders tend to associate assessments with the possibility of sanctions, regardless the level. As a result, there is a tendency to report 'positive' information to the hierarchy, even if it contradicts reality. The reliability of the information, therefore, cannot be guaranteed. Moreover, the way the system is structured, often rewarding top-performing schools and potentially penalizing those facing challenges, further exacerbates the issue of complacent grading for self-preservation. Consequently, assessments are accorded low credibility by those involved, and their utilization for improving student outcomes is almost non-existent.

This example highlights that the problem is not purely technical; rather it revolves around power dynamics and the roles played by the different stakeholders, which hinder efforts to improve quality. There is a tendency to conceal the obstacles encountered by claiming that the desired results have been achieved.

### Lack of time to process too much data

The data collection systems in these countries operate on a quantitative basis, where both quantitative data and a large quantity thereof are collected simultaneously. As a result, one evaluation follows another without stakeholders having sufficient time to use the collected data effectively. In some instances, stakeholders report having difficulties in compiling the data and writing evaluation reports before having to move on to the next evaluation.

Consequently, the utilization of data at the central level is often limited to the presentation of evaluation reports. In most cases, these reports highlight a significant decline in student achievement. However, little consideration is given to formulating effective responses to these challenges, or if discussions do occur, they fail to involve local levels. Furthermore, these responses, lacking the foundation of local data, are not suited to address the specific characteristics of each region.

### The remedial programme in Niger: A scheme that misses its target

The Programme de mise à niveau (PMN), a remedial programme introduced by the Ministry of Education, aims to improve the level of students' basic reading and mathematical skills, particularly in response to the dismal performance in assessments such as the PASEC assessment.

The programme was initially implemented as an experiment in a pilot region between 2017 and 2018, which showed some success. The pilot was extended to the seven other regions without allowing each region to adapt the proposed scheme to their needs. Consequently, the programme was not customized to the diverse needs of the different regions. All students, regardless of their pedagogical needs and level of difficulty, were offered the same PMN.

The implementation of the programme revealed several shortcomings. The content of the PMN did not adequately address the specific difficulties faced by students and focused mainly on basic skills.

An analysis of the implementation of the remedial tools of the Priority Education Programme (PEP) also revealed that the tools lacked contextualization, as it often followed a standardized programme without considering the actual level of the classes.

Furthermore, the monitoring and support provided by supervisors mainly focused on checking compliance with content and implementation, rather than offering guidance and assistance.

While the Ministry demonstrates responsiveness in revising policies based on field information, the process of policy adjustment faces challenges. The main difficulty is the decontextualized and highly injunctive nature of the efforts to adjust and review policies, which reflects a purely top-down management approach.

## 3. The immense potential of data

The utilization of data is crucial for managing and improving the quality of the education system. Firstly, it facilitates the establishment of clear objectives and targets that are customized to the specific context, providing a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the challenges to be addressed.

Based on this detailed understanding of the context, it becomes easier to foster dialogue between stakeholders regarding resource allocation. Data enable the justification of choices and the identification of specific needs, allowing actions to be customized to the realities on the ground and appropriate resources to be allocated.

Relying on reliable data is not only crucial for monitoring and supporting the implementation of actions but also assessing their effects. By collecting and interpreting the data that provide information on the effects of the implemented actions, it becomes possible to prioritize actions and make necessary adjustments for enhanced effectiveness. In a context of limited resources, prioritization and adjustment are essential for taking effective action without attempting to solve all problems simultaneously.

These observations highlight two major challenges in education quality management.

The first challenge concerns repositioning the assessment as a tool for improving learning.

The primary purpose of school-based assessments is to measure the achievement of learning outcomes, identify encountered difficulties, analyse their potential sources, and propose remedial strategies to improve students' competency levels. However, it must be acknowledged that stakeholders have ventured away from this objective, resulting in practices that fail to fulfil the objective.

The second closely related issue concerns the need of restoring the confidence among those involved in assessment practices. Understanding the objective, demystifying assessment practices by focusing on the students' progress rather than personal successes or failures of individuals at all levels of the system, are among the elements that should facilitate a transformation in terms of the collection and utilization of assessment data.

## 4. Meeting the necessary conditions

The research conducted by the national teams reveals that using data to improve the quality of education (and students' learning) involves several preliminary stages that must be completed before the data can be used.

These conditions vary in nature, ranging from technical aspects to relational, hierarchical and logistical aspects. Regarding the technical aspects, the initial challenge identified concerns data centralization. This includes both quantitative and qualitative data that need to be captured and processed to make it usable. However, questions arise regarding the location of centralization, the responsible parties, and the available resources. These questions have to be asked as centralizing data at school level is not a standard practice yet.

Another aspect to consider is the task of sorting data and extracting useful information. This requires identifying the key issues to address and determining how to select relevant information from a wealth of diverse resources.

While these initial stages are the responsibility of a small number of people at local level, finding solutions to the identified problems requires a concerted and collaborative effort. This entails sharing information with other stakeholders involved, such as the education community, local authorities, and parent associations.

Facilitating collaborative work is a significant challenge as it enables the development of realistic and practical solutions customized to the specific context. Without this strong connection to the local context, the effectiveness of the proposed solutions may be limited.

Finally, the last necessary condition is the monitoring of the implementation of actions, regular remediation where necessary, and the accumulation of knowledge to inform an active decision-making process. This ensures that actions are continually monitored and adjusted as needed, contributing to an ongoing cycle of improvement.

Clearly, this transformation necessitates a shift in the mandate of the stakeholders, each of whom has a specific role to play. In a system where roles and hierarchical positions significantly influence dynamics, initiating this change requires an approach that is participatory and inclusive.

It is crucial that this change is not imposed solely from the central level but is instead developed collaboratively, ensuring the active involvement and ownership of all stakeholders.

## 5. Towards solutions: the example of the Shawara Karatu initiative in Niger

Creating opportunities for dialogue between stakeholders and exploring ways of using assessment data to monitor learning at local level would appear to be an initial response to these challenges. In line with this approach, the programme is supporting the Shawara karatu initiative in Niger, which is a translation of "dialogue and consultation on education" in the local language. One component of this initiative is establishing the Journées communales de suivi des acquis scolaires (JCSAS).

Conceptually, the Shawara karatu initiative is presented in three phases.


- **The preparation phase**, which consists of conducting a comprehensive assessment of all available data, including inspection reports in the local authority, collating the data, and analysing it to identify the priority issues to be discussed by a group of education stakeholders.
- **The implementation phase**, which is the community day itself. Education stakeholders from within the community come together to discuss the issues identified from the data and reports. The primary objective is to generate concrete actions that are relevant to the context and that can be carried out within a short time frame (2 to 3 months).

- **The follow-up phase**, which takes place after the community day. The focus shifts to supporting stakeholders in implementing the actions agreed upon during the event. It is anticipated that the Shawara karatu process may lead stakeholders to explore new paths. Therefore, ongoing support is essential to help them overcome obstacles and ensuring that the actions are implemented before the next Shawara karatu.

This Shawara karatu experiment will take place over the 2022/2023 school year, with the intention of organizing a Shawara karatu at the end of each of the three terms of the year. During this period, local stakeholders are expected to use their quantitative and qualitative data to analyse their difficulties thoroughly and to develop solutions.

The aim is for stakeholders to take proactive steps rather than necessarily waiting for instructions from the central level. However, stakeholders do have to adhere to and respect the policy defined by the central level.

The aim of this support initiative is to change the working habits between stakeholders in the education system and to encourage meaningful dialogue based on locally available factual data. By implementing this experiment in the two local authorities, the aim is also to identify the conditions for the success of Shawara karatu, including technical, logistical, material and organizational aspects. This will enable Shawara karatu to be rolled out across the board as part of the education policy.



In February 2018, the IIEP-UNESCO Office in Dakar, with the support of Agence Française de Développement, launched a programme to support the monitoring of education quality in sub-Saharan Africa. The programme's primary objective is to assist education authorities in diagnosing and regulating their practices across all levels, contributing to the goal of providing inclusive, quality education that is accessible to all. The programme adopts a comprehensive approach to quality management, emphasizing continuous improvement of educational practices at school, devolved administration and central administration levels. Rather than starting from preconceived notions about the obstacles to quality education, it focuses on the overlooked angle of stakeholder involvement. Solutions are developed with stakeholders, taking the promising practices that already exist within the system into account. The aim of the programme is to support stakeholders in achieving sustainable transformation of their professional practices, ultimately leading to improved quality education.



The programme to support the management of the quality of education is a programme of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

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