

What are children in private schools learning?

Findings from four areas of Lagos

Learning outcomes in private schools

As a baseline to evaluate the Developing Effective Private Education in Nigeria (DEEPEN) Programme, we visited 358 private schools across four Local Government Areas in Lagos and assessed the learning outcomes of 2,444 pupils in the early stages of Primary 3 (P3).

We found that just over half of P3 pupils in private schools in the four areas of Lagos have mastered the literacy curriculum and are achieving within the range expected of P3 pupils.

We found that about six percent of P3 pupils in private schools in the four areas of Lagos have mastered the numeracy curriculum and are achieving within the range expected of P3 pupils. A further 74% are achieving within the Primary 2 (P2) proficiency range – up to a year behind.

Two notes on how to interpret the findings

The numbers presented in this brief are representative of private schools in four LGAs (Alimsho, Ojo, Shomulu and Ajeromi-Ifelodun), but not the whole of Lagos.

The term 'within a proficiency range' means that pupils in a particular band are *more likely than not* to be able to demonstrate the skills linked to a particular Primary level within the Nigerian curriculum. Those achieving at the top end of the proficiency band are close to mastering the skills demanded by the Primary level and those at the bottom end of the proficiency band are only just starting to demonstrate skills that can be linked with the Primary level. For example, pupils tested at the beginning of P3 are expected to have mastered the P2 curriculum and should, therefore, be performing within the P3 proficiency range.

We can't directly compare our results with results of children in government schools, because the tests were taken at different times of year and because we don't know whether the backgrounds of the students are the same. But we do offer some context by noting what the achievements of children in government schools were at the end of P2.

Literacy

About half of pupils in the early stages of P3 in private schools in Lagos are achieving at the expected curriculum level in English literacy. A further 45 percent of pupils are achieving at the P2 curriculum level in English literacy skills. The figure below indicates that most of these pupils have skills that are just below the level expected by the curriculum at the end of P2. Three percent of children demonstrated English literacy skills below the range expected by the P2 curriculum. This small minority of pupils are now at least a full academic year behind the majority of their peers. Since these pupils have not mastered foundational literacy, they risk being left behind.

How good are these results? When compared to the curriculum, not very good. For example, the figure below shows that pupils are not reading as they should be at P2, which will slow their learning as they fall behind. However, if we compare their performance to pupils in government schools, these results are better than might have been expected, as far as we can tell. We discuss this further in the section on comparing public and private school learning outcomes.

Figure 1: DEEPEN English literacy results

51.7 percent of children demonstrate **English literacy** skills within the proficiency range expected of P3 pupils. Pupils in this range have mastered the P2 curriculum and are ready for, or have begun achieving the P3 curriculum.

44.8 percent of children demonstrate **grade 2 English literacy** skills within the proficiency range expected of P2 pupils. Pupils within this range are at varying stages of proficiency within what would be expected of P2 pupils throughout the academic year.

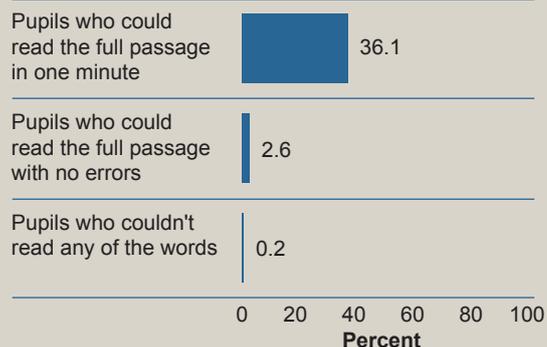
3.4 percent of children demonstrate **English literacy** skills at a level **below the proficiency range expected of P2 pupils.**



Example: Reading

One of the key components of literacy is reading. According to experts, pupils are only considered established readers after two years of schooling if they are able to read a passage of fifty words correctly in a minute. While almost all pupils we interviewed could read some words when asked to read a P2 level text aloud, just over a third of the pupils could read the full passage in under one minute. Only 2.6 percent of pupils could read the full passage with no errors. Only 2.6 percent of pupils could read the full passage with no errors.

Examples of results from the pupil test



Numeracy

Around 6 percent of pupils in the early stages of P3 in private schools in four areas within Lagos are achieving within the proficiency range expected by the curriculum at P3. Approximately three-quarters of pupils in the early stages of P3 are achieving within the P2 proficiency range in numeracy. As the figure below shows, most of these pupils are in the lower end of the P2 proficiency range, and so up to a year behind the curriculum. Approximately one-fifth of children demonstrate numeracy skills within a proficiency range considered below P2 curriculum expectations. These results suggest that without remedial action, about 20 percent of P3 pupils in these private schools will struggle to progress in numeracy, as they have not learnt the foundational numeracy skills required for everyday living and for progress in mathematics.

Again, these results are not impressive compared to the curriculum, but are perhaps better than some expected for private schools. We explore this in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: DEEPEN Numeracy results

6.1 percent of children demonstrate **Numeracy** skills within the proficiency range expected of P3 pupils.

73.9 percent of children demonstrate **grade 2 Numeracy** skills within the proficiency range expected of P2 pupils. Pupils within this range are at varying stages of proficiency within what would be expected of P2 pupils throughout the academic year.

20 percent of children demonstrate **Numeracy** skills at a level **below the proficiency range expected of P2 pupils**. Pupils within this range are a year or more behind what is expected by the curriculum.

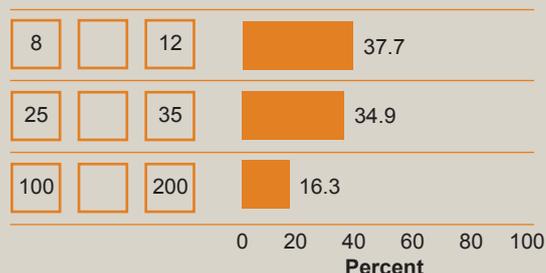


Example: Number patterns

The ability to recognise, identify, describe, translate and create patterns is a crucial skill. It supports mathematical learning, encourages children to think in terms of algebraic problem solving and contributes to broader social development (Copley, 2000). Pattern recognition allows children to make predictions about what should come next both in mathematics and in life. Within the numeracy assessment, P3 pupils struggled particularly with recognising patterns. 37% could recognise jumps of two, 34% jumps of five, but only 16% jumps of fifty.

Children found number patterns more difficult than other numeracy questions

Can you see the two numbers? A number is missing in the middle. Can you fill it in?



Can we compare the learning outcomes of pupils in public and private schools?

Students in public schools in Lagos were tested using the same instrument in June 2014,¹ so it is tempting to compare results. However, **it would be very dangerous to compare the results directly and draw conclusions about which school system works better.** This is for two reasons.

First, **many factors influence what a pupil will learn.** Schools, classrooms and teachers play a major role, of course. But so do the wider society and economy, which influence what a pupil can do with their learning (and so how much effort to put in), and pupils' households and communities, which influence how learning is seen and what support it gets. Unfortunately, we can't measure all of these other factors, so we can't tell whether differences in learning outcomes are caused by schools or something else. For example, we don't know whether in Lagos public school students are poorer, or in households that give less support to education, than their private school counterparts, but we do know that internationally and within private schools in Lagos, poverty and support to education are major drivers of learning outcomes. Because of this, we compared private school students from low fee schools and low fee households with public school students.

Second, **pupils were tested at different times.** Pupils in public schools took the test at or near the end of P2. Pupils in private schools were tested at or near the beginning of P3, and so they had around 2-4 months' additional schooling (and 2 months' additional holiday). We see from the results that pupils that took tests slightly later did better, and we know that children's brains and abilities develop fast at this age.

At this point, we can say that in low fee private schools in four LGAs in Lagos students from poor households in early P3 answer correctly to approximately 13% more questions in numeracy tests, and 17.5% more in literacy tests, than students at the end of P2 from public schools across Lagos.

How do students' backgrounds affect what they know?

We found no significant difference between the performance of girls and boys in P3. This is encouraging, but we don't know whether there are differences in learning outcomes between male and female students at other levels of the schooling system.

More worryingly, **we found a clear wealth-related pattern in learning achievement.** For both literacy and numeracy, pupils who are below the poverty line perform worse than others, and pupils who are more than a year behind the majority of their peers are more likely to be from poor households. Detailed analysis suggests that households' wealth influences learning outcomes mainly through the type of private school that children attend.

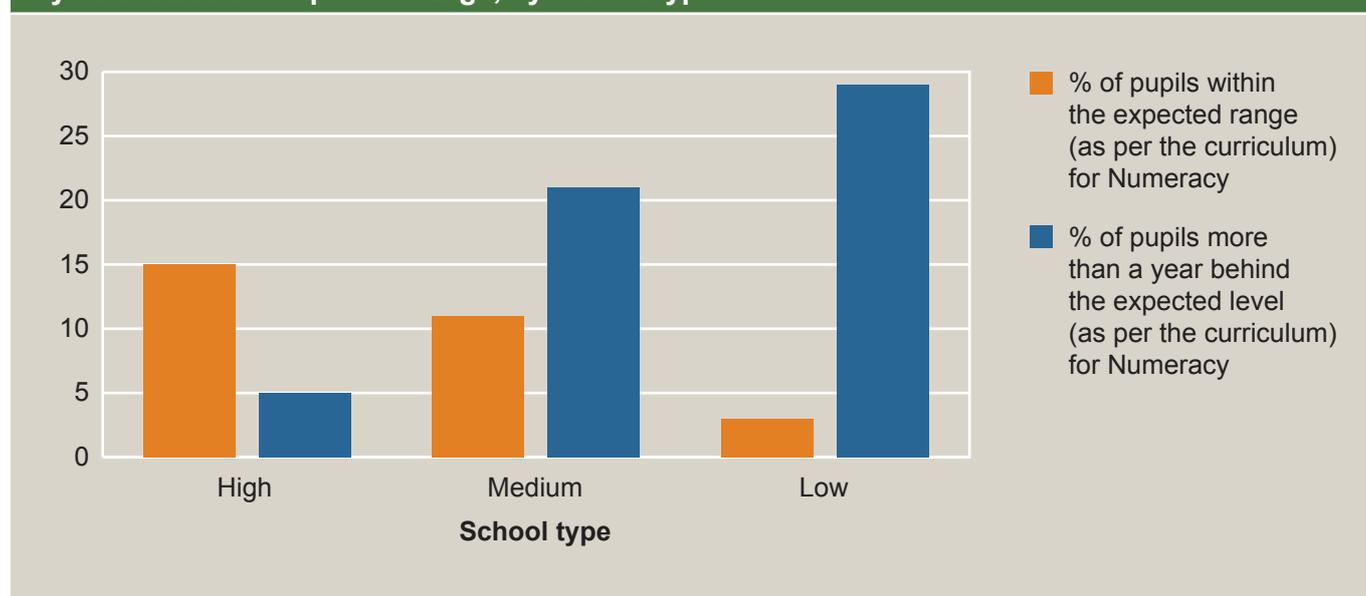
¹ By the Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN) Composite Surveys.

How much do schools influence what students know?

To find out more about how private schools influence learning, we broke down the sample into low-fee, medium-fee and high-fee private schools. Low-fee schools were defined as those charging parents 25,000 Naira or less (including fees and other expenses, but not transport) while medium-fee schools were defined as charging between 25,000 and 50,000 Naira. High fee schools charged above 50,000 Naira.

Both literacy and numeracy scores varied strongly by school fee. We found that in high-fee schools, a large majority of children were achieving within the expected P3 level. In low-fee paying schools a much smaller proportion is achieving within the expected range. The highest levels of both literacy and numeracy were observed in high-fee schools. The proportion of low-fee school students more than a year behind the expected level (below P2) was high and much higher than the corresponding proportion for literacy.

Figure 3: Proportion of pupils achieving within the expected range as compared to more than a year behind the expected range, by school type



How can teachers help?

Children achieving below the expected level in literacy demonstrated difficulties with consistently finding the correct answer. For example, children achieving at this level were able to copy full sentences, but did not consistently apply spaces between letters or capitalise letters. Similarly, children achieving at this level were able to identify some initial sounds and letters of everyday objects and animals, but not consistently. Teachers could help as follows:

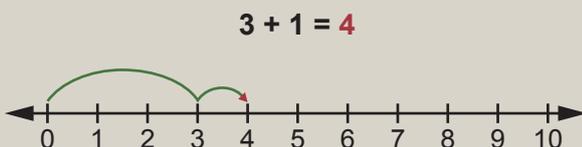
- Give pupils opportunities to be read to, and to read out loud. Exposure to new stories – whether home-made or published – can ensure pupils are not remembering and reciting stories rather than reading.
- Give pupils immediate, consistent and frequent feedback, and explain the feedback. Review pupil writing, diagnose what pupils are struggling with – preferably at an individual pupil level – and create opportunities for pupils to build the skills that they lack.

Children achieving below the level expected in numeracy did so because they are not able to undertake double and triple digit addition tasks or single digit subtraction tasks with consistency. Pupils achieving below the expected level demonstrated some skills in addition but were not able to apply them to reach the correct answer consistently. For addition tasks, this indicates that pupils could be making simple counting errors, by seeking to undertake triple digit addition tasks by counting out numbers in full, rather than using long addition techniques. Teachers could:

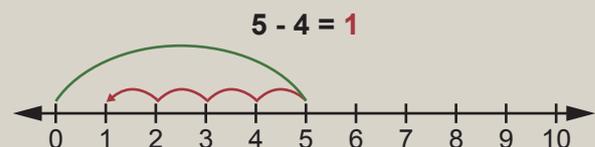
- Show pupils how to use long addition techniques, including examples where carrying over from the unit to tens column and from the tens to hundred column. The inability of pupils to consistently reach the correct answer by undertaking single digit subtraction tasks indicates pupils require further learning regarding the concept of subtraction.
- Help pupils understand that the order in which one number is subtracted from another is important (unlike in addition), pupils need to understand the interaction between addition and subtraction (if you add a number and then subtract the same number, you find yourself where you started).
- Offer pupils a vocabulary that supports the concepts of subtraction (more, less, difference, value, change).

Figure 4: Example of number lines

Pupils will benefit from the use of number lines to demonstrate the relationship between numbers, and to help pupils identify skips based on these relationships. In this example the pupils count to three along the number line. Then in order to add 1 the pupils count one more step on the number line. The pupils then find themselves at 4.



Using number lines for subtraction can help pupils understand the order in which one number is subtracted from the other. First, the pupils counts to five (the first number in the subtraction equation) and then counts 4 steps back down the number line in order to subtract 4. The pupils then find themselves at 1.



What can the Government of Lagos do to help?

We've learnt a lot from this survey. We can now say confidently that:

- Just over half of P3 pupils in private schools in Alimsho, Ojo, Shomulu and Ajeromi-Ifelodun are achieving within the range expected of P3 pupils.
- About six percent of P3 pupils in private schools in the four areas of Lagos have mastered the numeracy curriculum and are achieving within the range expected of P3 pupils. A further 74% are achieving within the P2 proficiency range – up to a year behind.

We already knew that most primary aged children in Lagos attend private schools, because parents think that private schools seem more accessible, better quality or more accountable. We didn't know much about what these children were learning. Now, we do. While we can't compare directly, our survey indicates that these children's results are not vastly different to those of children in government schools in Lagos, as measured by a survey by ESSPIN. In our sample, children in low fee schools and from poorer households achieve worse, but even these children's results do not appear substantially worse than those in government schools.

It's too early to jump to strong conclusions on the basis of this survey; this is the start of a five-year programme of research. But that doesn't mean that confronted with our new knowledge, the best course of action is inaction. The Government of Lagos can sensibly act now by:

- Constructively regulating and proactively supporting private schools so that they can improve the quality of education they provide.
- Providing information to parents on the quality and availability of different schools, including through sharing the results of the Graded Assessment of Private Schools (GAPS) with parents.
- Exploring options to finance students from low income households to attend better schools.

About the author and contributors

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About EDOREN and DEEPEN

The Education Data, Research and Evaluation in Nigeria initiative (EDOREN) is a four year initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). It is designed to generate new evidence and understanding of how best to support equitable access and improved learning outcomes for all Nigerian children through innovation and the sustainable development of basic education systems. Developing Effective Private Education Nigeria (DEEPEN) is a five-year (2013-2018) UK Department for International Development (DFID) funded education programme, and is the first programme to employ a market systems approach to improve children's education in Lagos.

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