



# Uganda Early Years Study

## Policy Brief: Causes and Implications of Hidden Repetition in Early Primary

The British Department for International Development (DFID) has partnered with the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to conduct empirical research on inefficiencies in the Ugandan education system. This research will help the Ministry better understand the severity, causes, and consequences of an enrolment bulge in early primary classes in Uganda.

Specifically, this study is investigating the magnitude of repetition in primary 1. It encompasses a nationally representative sample of pupils, and uses information from interviews with pupils, parents/guardians, and teachers.

In 2017, the research team collected data from 120 randomly selected schools across 24 districts in Uganda. Interviewers engaged with 1,439 teachers and 1,318 parents/guardians about the sample of pupils from those schools. In addition, they sought enrolment and repetition data from classroom registers, head teacher registers, and education management information system (EMIS) forms, and then compared that information to the interview results. This combined data set yielded a new window into enrolment and repetition rates of pupils in primary 1 in Uganda.

The study team also was able to examine the financial impact of repetition and over-enrolment on primary education sector financing. Researchers calculated how much over-enrolment and repetition is costing the Ugandan government, and how much it could save by investing better in the pre-primary and primary education sectors.

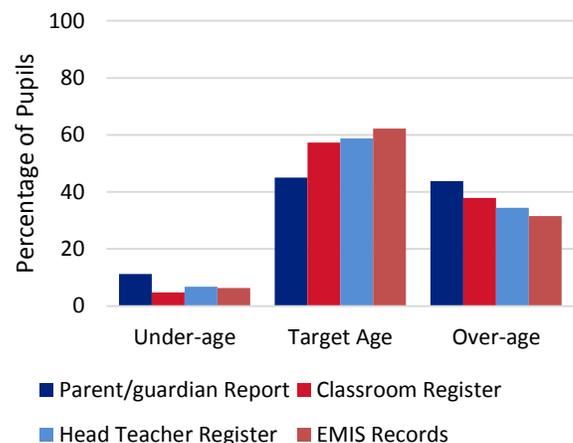
The researchers used several methods to find the cost implications of inefficiency in the early primary cycle. The first method was a macro-level analysis to estimate implicit and explicit costs. The second method used a cost projection model to outline the impact of investments in quality pre-primary and early primary grades.

Below we highlight key findings from both aspects of the study, as of early 2018.

### What are the ages of pupils in primary 1?

*Parents/guardians indicated higher percentages of under-age and over-age pupils in primary 1 than did school records.* In their interviews, parents/guardians reported about 11% of pupils being enrolled at ages younger than the target age range of 6–7 years, and about 43% being enrolled at older ages, as shown in **Figure 1**. Classroom registers, head teacher registers, and EMIS records all reported higher proportions of target-age pupils in primary 1 (i.e. between 57% and 62%) than did the parents/guardians.

**Figure 1. Percentage of primary 1 pupils reported to be enrolled at various ages, by source**



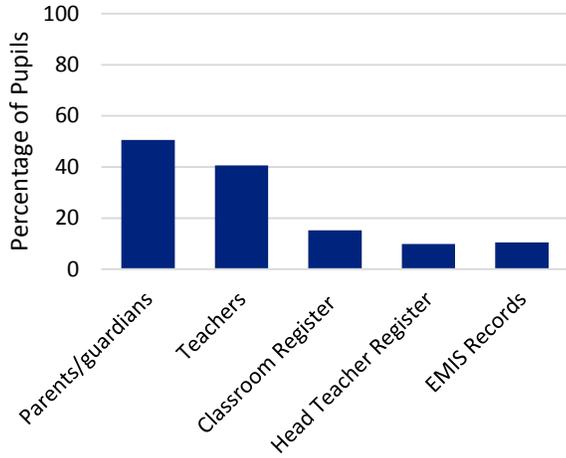
### What is the estimated national repetition rate of primary 1 pupils?

*Parents/guardians and teachers indicated 51% and 41% repetition, respectively, much higher than reported in EMIS and school records.* Records provided by head teachers, classroom registers, and EMIS data showed relatively low rates of repetition. However, teachers reported a repetition rate of 41% on average, and caregiver interviews revealed an average repetition rate of 51%, as shown in **Figure 2**. Data from school records showed much lower repetition rates: between 10% and 15%. Some school officials might have underreported repetition because they knew that

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the Education Act of 2008 introduced an automatic promotion policy, yet clearly some pupils in their schools were still repeating.

**Figure 2. Percentage of primary 1 pupils reported to be repeaters, by source**



### How does attending pre-primary impact repetition rates?

*Attending pre-primary was associated with a lower chance of repeating, and entering primary 1 early was associated with a higher chance of repeating.* Children who did not attend pre-primary school were 3.8 times as likely to repeat as pupils who did attend pre-primary school. This finding held true even controlling for other variables such as socio-economic status (SES), gender, age at enrolment, and disability. The government could take advantage of this ‘protective effect’ of pre-primary schooling to address over-enrolment, dropout rates, and overall system efficiency. Finally, pupils entering primary 1 before the official age of enrolment (i.e. before they were developmentally ready) were 1.7 times more likely to repeat.

### How do vulnerable populations fare in terms of repetition and pre-primary attendance?

*Pupils reported as having a disability were more than twice as likely to repeat primary 1 than pupils who were not reported as having a disability.* In low-resource educational settings such as Uganda, pupils with disabilities are likely not to be receiving differentiated instruction or materials. These resources are required for them to progress and learn at the rate of their peers.

*Pupils from low-SES environments were less likely to attend pre-primary school.* Pre-primary education in Uganda is offered almost exclusively by the private sector, and can be costly. Thus, despite the

modest expansion of private pre-primary schools, without a free public option, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to benefit from the positive impacts of pre-primary.

### What are parent/guardian perceptions of early education?

*Parents/guardians knew about their children’s learning, proactively sought education for them, and perceived early enrolment as preparation for completing primary 1.* In the absence of a public pre-primary option, some parents/guardians prioritized education even when their young children were not developmentally ready to successfully complete primary 1 without repeating. They sent the children to school early even though they also expected them to repeat.

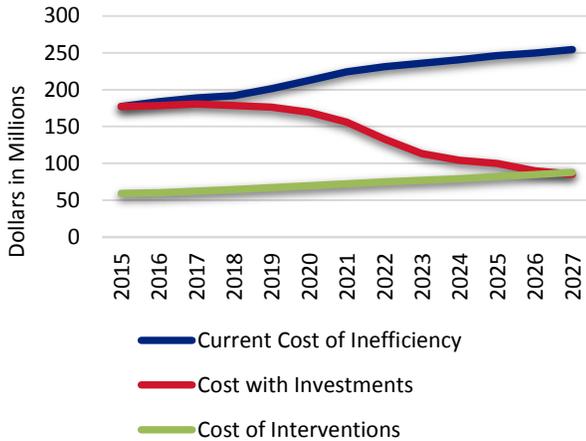
### How does Uganda compare to other countries in the region on measures of efficiency and cost?

*The study team conducted a macro-level analysis of factors related to the efficiency of education, comparing Uganda’s situation to that of nearby comparable countries. They found similar education efficiency characteristics: repetition rates much higher than the official reports, and rates of pre-primary enrolment and primary school completion that were very low.* Together, these factors drive down internal efficiency in Uganda’s education system, meaning that the cost of per pupil completion is very high. By contrast, other neighbouring countries, such as Kenya and Tanzania, had lower over-enrolment in early primary, much higher access to pre-primary enrolment, and higher completion rates than Uganda, resulting in higher internal efficiency.

### How will investments in high quality pre-primary and primary education benefit the education sector?

*Currently, a significant amount of public money is being lost to inefficiency.* The researchers prepared a cost-projection model as part of the financial analysis of this study (see **Figure 3**). They learned that if the government were to invest in better access and in quality improvements for pre-primary and early primary education, it could recoup those investments in 12 years’ time. The reason is that these expenditures would reduce the inefficiency caused by high repetition and low completion rates. Pupils would repeat grades less often and complete primary school in fewer years.

**Figure 3. The current cost of inefficiency in education, the cost of education with investments, and the cost of the interventions**



### What are the policy recommendations?

- 1. Prioritize support for vulnerable children.** This study found that pupils living in extreme poverty were less likely to attend pre-primary, and those with disabilities were more likely to repeat primary 1. Other studies have found that disability impedes access to pre-primary and other forms of early childhood care (Cambridge Education, 2017).<sup>1</sup> These populations are most likely to benefit from high-quality early education and should be prioritized.
- 2. Revisit the automatic promotion policy.** The data revealed that in schools throughout Uganda, current practice does not adhere to the policy of automatic promotion. As a result, the schools are sending inaccurate enrolment and repetition data to the MoES, which then uses it to make important decisions about education policy. If automatic promotion is to be effective, learning outcomes must improve. That can be accomplished by increasing access to pre-primary education and by improving the quality of instruction in early primary grades.
- 3. Invest to expand high-quality pre-primary, as well as improve the quality of primary education.** Substantial global evidence has shown that the quality of pre-primary education is a vital factor in inducing lasting effects on learning outcomes. Higher quality pre-primary may also be associated with even lower repetition rates. However, investing in pre-primary education may not make a difference if

attention is not paid to the quality of education that children receive in early primary as well. Investments might encompass subsidies to private pre-primary providers, more and better books for primary schools, in-service teacher education, teacher support or coaching, improved school management and governance, and systems improvements. These enhancements ultimately would reduce repetition rates and raise completion rates, thereby improving education sector efficiency.

- 4. Set minimum standards of quality and strengthen quality assurance.** If the government and civil society were to define a clear vision and strong mandate for pre-primary education, it would create an incentive for quality and intensify the appetite for reform in the education landscape. Cambridge Education (2017) underscored the importance of creating an environment which supports various approaches to high-quality pre-primary education, provided by various partners. The government could define minimum standards of quality, enhance regulation, and thereby lead all stakeholders of early childhood education in the country.
- 5. Improve school management and leadership of the early grades.** Guide head teachers to prioritize support to teachers of early primary grades. School leadership should be concerned with classrooms with high pupil to teacher ratios and the use of appropriate school assignment processes for teachers. Head teachers and school staff should recognize the importance of the foundational years in children's later academic achievement.

This project is led by RTI International.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Education. (2017). *Review of the 2007 education sector early childhood development policy and operational standards*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Education