POLICY BRIEF
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SACMEQ

Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

Quality of Primary School Inputs in Lesotho

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Introduction

This paper highlights the quality of four primary school inputs in Lesotho in relation to the nation's defined benchmarks. The four inputs are: basic learning materials, mathematics textbooks, pupil-teacher ratios, and class size. These four indicators are described in the section titled Selected Indicators, where it is also shown how they are related to the quality of education. The data used in this paper were collected in 2007 from 4,240 Standard 6 pupils in 182 primary schools in all ten districts in Lesotho. This was part of a major international study known as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) III Project. The SACMEQ III Project sought to examine the quality of education provided in registered primary schools in Lesotho and 14 other African school systems.

The results in this paper cover Lesotho as a whole, and are then further disaggregated by districts, school location (rural versus urban), and type of school (government versus private). The results from the SACMEQ II Project (2000) are also provided, to enable monitoring the general trend in the provision of the selected inputs in primary schools in Lesotho between 2000 and 2007.

Background

In 2000, the Government of Lesotho (GOL) introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) in an effort to realize Universal Primary Education (UPE) and to attain the Education for All (EFA) goals. The FPE was first introduced at the level of Standard 1, but was gradually extended (year after year) to cover all the primary school levels.

Before the introduction of FPE, primary schools were responsible for collecting funds from parents for learning materials (under what was called 'book fee') or it was expected that the parents purchased the materials for their children. Pupils who did not have these materials were suspended from schools. In addition, primary schools charged fees for other operational expenses. The government was mainly responsible for the salaries of teaching staff. However, schools were allowed to recruit extra teachers (paid by parents) to cater for shortages.

Under the FPE policy, as described in the 2001-2006 FPE Strategic Plan, the government agreed to provide schools (inclusive of private schools that opted for FPE) with money for operational and other expenses as follows.

- Book rental fee (M15 per pupil per year) (exchange rate: 1M=0.13USD, October 2011).
- Stationery for pupils (M11.51 per class per year).
- Teaching materials (M37 per teacher per year).
- Feeding (M2 per pupil for each school day).
- World Food Programme (M5 per pupil per year).
- Maintenance (M5 per pupil per year) (MOET, 2000).

Moreover, the central government provides schools with free teaching and learning materials. Schools are strictly prohibited from charging school fees or any other levies. However, there are indications of some challenges in managing the FPE stationery. For example, parents have accused school principals of not distributing these materials to pupils as per the

official policy. On their part, the principals have blamed pupil negligence and thieves for shortages of these materials in schools. In other cases, principals have complained that some parents take these materials and give them to their older children in post- primary or tertiary institutions.

The shortage of this free stationery in primary schools is partly caused by the fact that the School Supply Unit (SSU) relies entirely on the Education-Management- Information-System (EMIS) data. EMIS data are usually not very reliable, because they are based on enrolment information from the previous year. Because of fluctuations in pupil enrolments, the EMIS data cannot be relied on 100 percent for the allocation of stationery, especially in the absence of robust enrolment projections and simulation models.

According to an evaluation report on FPE, it was claimed that the introduction of FPE resulted in increased enrolments in primary schools, particularly in the rural areas (Institute of Education, 2008). Consequently, there are concerns that the quality of education in primary schools in Lesotho declined under FPE, because of congestion in classes, high pupil-teacher ratios, and insufficient learning materials. Indeed, there have been calls by teachers and parents (especially in church schools) for government assistance to improve the quality of primary school inputs.

The SACMEQ data are ideal for examining these concerns about the quality of school inputs based on research evidence, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the data were collected using modern scientific sampling techniques that are known to be reliable. Secondly, at the Standard 6 level, the data were already available before the introduction of FPE (SACMEQ II data, 2000) and then after the introduction of FPE (SACMEQ III, 2007). This made it possible to monitor the quality of school inputs in Lesotho before and after the introduction of the FPE. (In 2000, education was free only in Standard 1.)

Selected Indicators

The four selected indicators of the quality of school inputs are: (a) basic learning materials, (b) mathematics textbooks, (c) pupil-teacher ratios, and (d) class size. The descriptions of these four indicators have been provided in Table 1 below together with the set benchmarks for Lesotho.

Basic learning materials (that is, possession of at least one exercise book, something to write with, and a ruler) are considered crucial to ensure that the pupils participate reasonably in learning in the classrooms. Therefore, it is desirable for all pupils to have these materials. A ruler is especially important for mathematics and science lessons, particularly for the upper primary school classes (Standards four to seven). Likewise, it is desirable for each pupil to have sole use of a textbook (especially for the core subjects, such as English, mathematics, and science), because research evidence has shown that sole use of textbooks is essential for effective teaching and learning in the classroom. Sole use of textbooks is also preferable, because it enables pupils to undertake academic activities at home, such as doing homework and revising school work.

Concerning pupil-teacher ratios and class size, research evidence shows that lower values are desirable for better quality education. It is thought that, to a certain limit, lower values on these two indicators are associated with more interaction between teachers and pupils, resulting in better quality education. Pupil-teacher ratios and class size are also key indicators for checking if expansion in participation rates is accompanied by adequate provision of teachers and classrooms.

The recommended pupil-teacher ratios and class size for primary schools in Lesotho are 40 pupils per teacher and 55 pupils per class, respectively (MOET, 2005; p.54).

Key Findings

The data on the four inputs were analyzed and the results are depicted in Figures 1 to 4.

Basic Learning Materials

In 2007, 86 percent of the Standard 6 pupils had at least one exercise book, a pencil or a pen, and a ruler.

Table 1: National Benchmarks for the Selected Indicators of the Quality of Education

Selected Indicator	Description of the Indicator	National Benchmark
Basic learning materials	Pupil has at least one exercise book, a pencil or a pen, and a ruler	100%
Mathematics textbooks	Pupil has sole use of a mathematics textbook during mathematics lessons	100%
Pupil-teacher ratios	Total number of pupils in a school divided by number of teachers in the school	40:1
Standard 6 class size	Average number of Standard 6 pupils per class	55

SOURCE: MOET, 2005.

In other words, 14 percent of the pupils did not have all the three basic learning items that were considered necessary for effective participation in classroom activities. There were some slight variations among districts with Butha-Buthe (93%) recording the highest percentage and Qacha's Nek (77%) recording the lowest. There was a difference of five points between government (82%) and private (87%) schools. There was no difference between pupils in rural and urban schools.

On average, 79 percent of pupils in all the SACMEQ countries had basic learning materials. This implied that the situation in Lesotho was better than the overall situation in the SACMEQ countries. Moreover, between 2000 and 2007, the percentage for Lesotho increased by three points, which meant that the situation had improved slightly.

Mathematics Textbooks

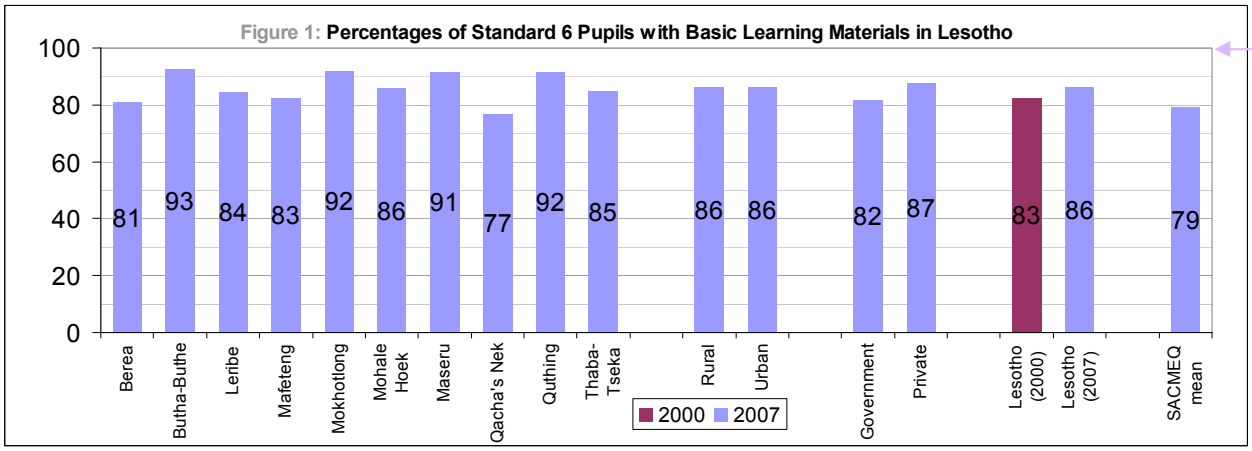
According to the 2005-2015 Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), the government was to provide each primary school pupil with a textbook for each core subject by 2007, and a textbook for all subjects by 2015. It is, therefore, worrying that only about one-half (56%) of the Standard 6 pupils in 2007 in Lesotho had sole use of mathematics textbooks. However, it is encouraging that the quantity of these textbooks had increased since 2000, when the percentage of Standard 6 pupils with sole use of mathematics textbooks was 46 percent. By 2007, therefore, the textbook situation in Lesotho was better than the SACMEQ countries' mean (41%).

Regarding mathematics textbooks, there were large variations among the districts. Mokhotlong (71%) and Maseru (46%) recorded the highest and the lowest percentages, respectively. The textbook situation in rural schools (58%) was slightly better than that of urban schools (52%). Moreover, the textbook situation in government schools (60%) was slightly better than that of private schools (55%).

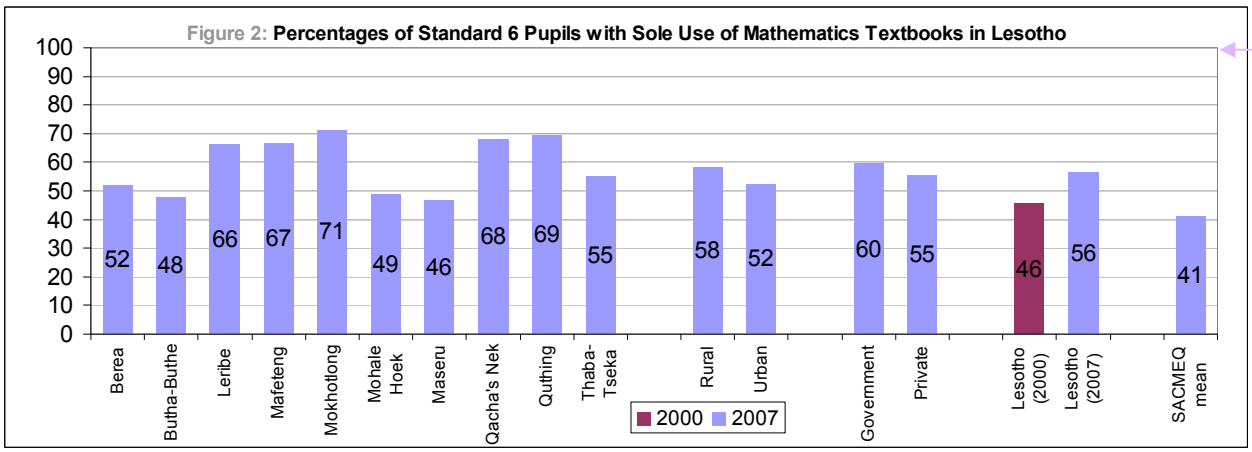
Pupil-Teacher Ratios

In 2000, the average pupil-teacher ratio among primary schools in Lesotho was 54. This average was way above the country's set benchmark, which is 40. However, in 2007 the pupil-teacher ratio had dropped to 42 pupils per teacher, and thus the average was almost within the set target. This therefore implied that the increase in pupil enrolment, as a result of the introduction of FPE, was accompanied by an increase in the supply of teachers.

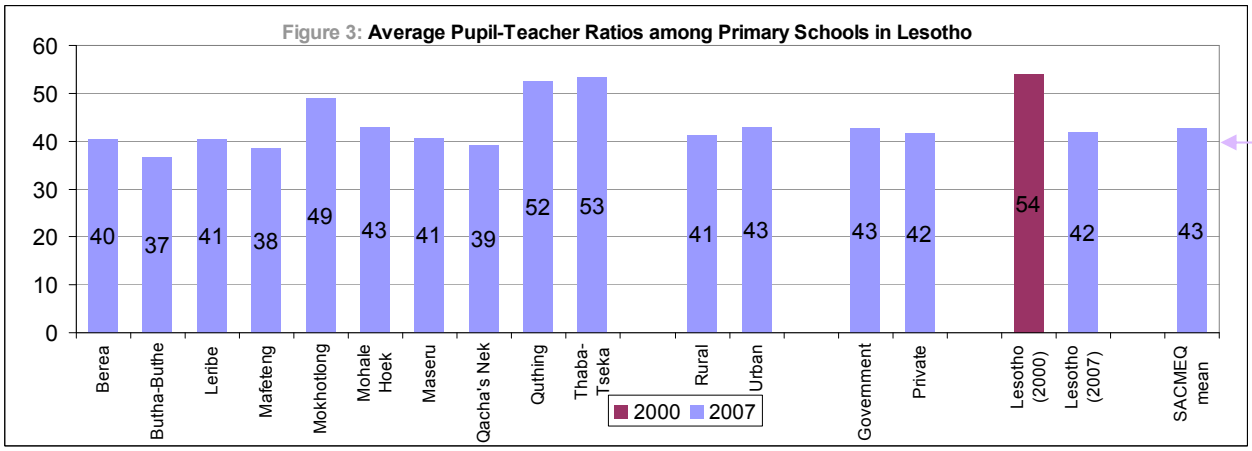
In 2007, the average values of pupil-teacher ratios for schools located in towns and those for schools located in rural areas were almost the same. However, between the districts, there were some variations in these ratios. Four districts (Berea, Butha-Buthe, Mafeteng, and Qacha's Nek) recorded values within the national benchmark of 40, while the other six districts recorded values outside the national benchmark. The worst ratios were recorded in Quthing (52) and Thaba-Tseka (53). The overall ratio for Lesotho (42) in 2007 was almost the same as that of the SACMEQ countries (43).



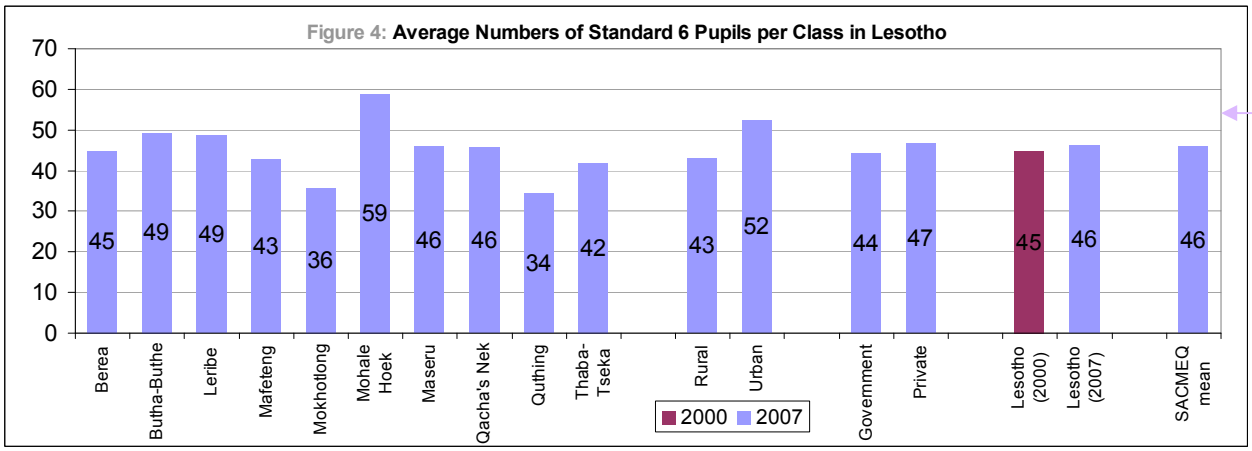
National Benchmark: All primary school pupils in Lesotho are expected to have basic learning materials (100%)



National Benchmark: All primary school pupils in Lesotho are expected to have a mathematics textbook (100%)



National Benchmark: 40 pupils per teacher in primary schools



National Benchmark: 55 pupils per class in primary schools

SOURCES of Figures 1 to 4: SACMEQ Data Archive.

Class Size

Although the average number of Standard 6 pupils per class had risen from 45 in 2000 to 46 in 2007, the number was still well within the set national benchmark of 55 and comparable to the SACMEQ mean of 46 pupils per class in 2007. However, the numbers for government schools (44) were marginally lower (thus, better) than those for private schools (47).

In one district (Mohale Hoek) the numbers of Standard 6 pupils per class exceeded the national benchmark by four pupils, but in all the other districts, these numbers were within expectations. However, as demonstrated in Figure 5, this did not mean that in these other districts there were no classes exceeding the national benchmark of 55 pupils. The district with the lowest number (hence, better) was Quthing (34) followed by Mokhotlong (36). The number for rural schools (43) was far better than that for urban schools (52).

From Figure 5, it is clear that Quthing and Mokhotlong were the districts which had the largest percentages of Standard 6 pupils in classes within the set national benchmark of 55 (91% and 82%, respectively).

Summary of Findings

- This study showed that in 2007 14 percent of the Standard 6 pupils did not have all the three basic learning materials needed for effective participation in classroom activities. Furthermore, about one-half of the pupils did not have sole use of mathematics textbooks. However, there was an increase in the percentage of Standard 6 pupils with basic learning materials and with sole use of mathematics textbooks between 2000 and 2007.
- This study also revealed that in 2007, Lesotho's mean pupil-teacher ratio (42) slightly exceeded Lesotho's benchmark of 40 pupils per teacher. In one district (Mohale's Hoek), the average number of Standard 6 pupils per class exceeded the national benchmark of 55 by four pupils.

Suggestions

Regarding the problems with the provision of basic learning materials and textbooks in Lesotho's primary schools, the following policy options could be considered.

1. The Chief Education Officer Primary may wish to develop some guidelines for the school principals on how to manage the FPE stationery, as it seems it does not last for the whole year. Furthermore, there is a need to revise the strategy used in allocating these materials to schools, since some teachers claim that they are sometimes given inadequate amounts of material.
2. The School Supply Unit Manager may wish to: consider ensuring the equitable distribution of basic learning materials, and prioritize marginalized districts, especially Qacha's Nek in this case. It should be verified, that when giving schools capitation grants – which are very small and destined for minor maintenance work – these are not used for purchasing teaching and learning materials.
3. The Director Planning Unit may wish to develop a robust projection and simulation model, to be used in allocating stationery to schools. It would seem that the current practice, which draws on EMIS data from the previous year, is not very reliable, because some schools claim to receive an insufficient supply of materials from the SSU.
4. Concerning the need to improve pupil-teacher ratios and the average class size in Lesotho's primary schools, the Chief Education Officer Teaching Service might consider: the redistribution or redeployment of teachers, and the introduction of a teacher development and recruitment project (naturally, all recruited teachers should be qualified) to achieve uniform (40:1) pupil-teacher ratios in all districts
5. The Chief Education Officer Primary may wish to review the priority list for schools needing infrastructure development, so as to provide

more classrooms to Mohale Hoek to reduce congestion in the classrooms there.

Conclusions

This policy brief highlighted the quality of primary school inputs in Lesotho using four indicators, namely: (a) basic learning materials, (b) mathematics textbooks, (c) pupil-teacher ratios, and (d) class size. Against the country's own set benchmarks, Lesotho scored satisfactorily in the provision of basic learning materials and the provision of teachers. However, the country scored rather poorly in the provision of textbooks. Nevertheless, on average, the country faired well on class size, although in the Mohale Hoek district the average class size exceeded the national benchmark by four pupils.

Importantly, apart from class size, the results showed that Lesotho improved on all the other three indicators between 2000 and 2007. It is likely that this overall improvement in the quality of school inputs can be linked with increased funding of education by the government, following the introduction of FPE in Lesotho in 2000.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms	
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESSP	Education Sector Strategic Plan
FPE	Free Primary Education
GOL	Government of Lesotho
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
SSU	School Supply Unit
UPE	Universal Primary Education

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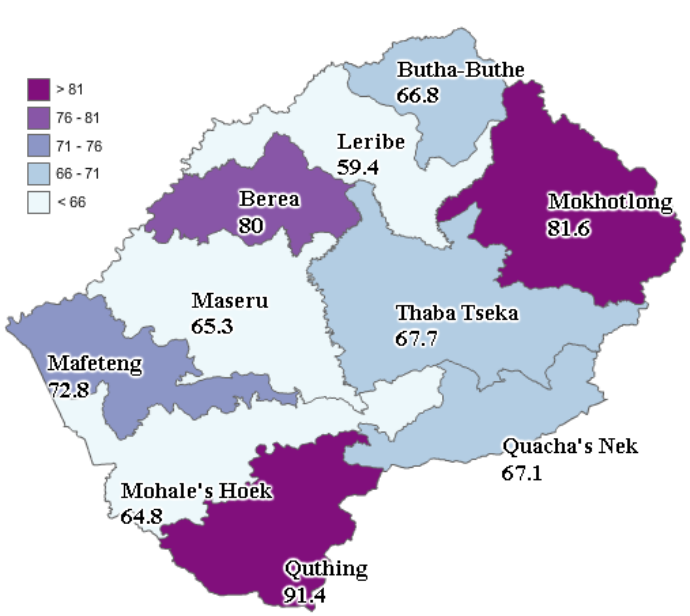
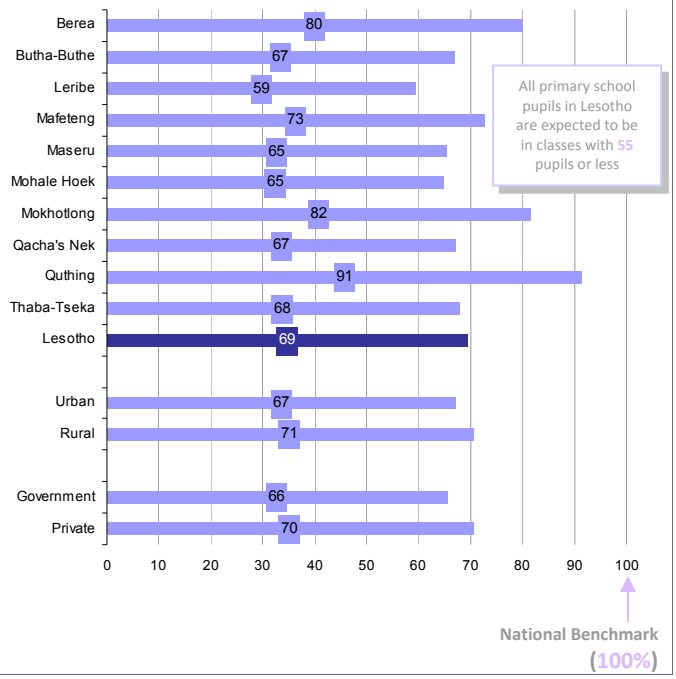
Figure 5: Percentages of Standard 6 Pupils in Classes with at most 55 Pupils in Lesotho





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