Data Must Speak about Positive Deviance Approaches to Learning - Research

Concept Note Summary

Problem Statement

- The learning crisis is striking. 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10. In poor countries, the learning poverty rate is as high as 80 percent. Such high levels of illiteracy are an early warning sign that all global educational goals and other related sustainable development goals are in jeopardy (World Bank, 2019).
- That being said, even in the most difficult contexts, there are some diamonds, the “positive deviant” schools that outperform - in terms of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and other performance indicators - other schools in similar contexts and with equivalent resources.
- The improved outcomes they achieve must therefore be linked to practices, behaviours, gender, and social norms in school (management and pedagogical approaches) or in relation to school (parental and community involvement).
- Unfortunately, most of the time, positive deviant schools are not even identified and very little is known about their positive deviant practices and behaviours.
- And even less is known about the implementation gap in service delivery: how to incentivize and scale up these positive deviant practices and behaviours in the less performing schools.
- Data Must Speak (DMS), an initiative implemented by UNICEF since 2014, provides country-specific technical support and capacity strengthening to ministries of education, for more effective and transparent data use at community/school/system level and social accountability, with the ultimate goal to improve foundational learning outcomes.
- DMS also includes a research component whose new phase has been designed to address the evidence gaps described above.

Research Questions (in each country context)

- What are the positive deviant resources/contextual/gender/social norms factors (i.e. those the most associated with good school performance)?
- Which schools are the positive deviant schools (i.e. the schools outperforming their peers in the same context and with same level of operating resources)?
- What are the positive deviant practices and behaviors of stakeholders at classroom, school, local community/village and district levels that are making a difference in positive deviant schools, in comparison to the practices and behaviors in the other schools? In other words: What are the behaviors/practices that typify high-performing schools in contexts where other schools struggle to perform?
- What policy, system and community levers can incentivize the scaling of the positive deviant practices and behaviors in low performing schools, addressing the ‘know-do’ gap?
To address the research questions above, the team will use a rigorous mixed-methods approach to collect and analyze empirical data for country-level research.

- **Stage 0 (Global Methodological Review)** will map existing methodologies in behavioral science, positive deviance, implementation research, and scaling science, including with a gender lens, for potential application to the following stages (to be implemented at country-level).

- **Stage 1 (Quantitative Research)** will identify the resources and contextual factors that are driving school performance. It will employ statistics, using existing datasets (learning assessments, school census and household survey data).

- **Stage 2 (School Typology)** will categorize schools according to the difficulty of their context, their resources and their performance and will identify positive deviant schools, those performing the best in each contextual and resource environment.

- **Stage 3 (Behavioral Science)** will design a purposive sample of at least 40 schools (based on the school typology) and compare behaviors and practices between positive deviant and ‘control’ schools, using classroom and school observations. It will identify positive deviant practices and behaviors in different contexts.

- **Stage 4 (Scaling Science and Participatory Implementation Research)** will use the state-of-the-art methodologies in participatory action research and investigate the possible concrete levers and incentives at system, policy, school and community levels for the scale-up of positive deviant practices and behaviors in low performing schools.

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1 Including MICS surveys, which now assess learning outcomes and child disability and capture parental engagement.

2 “Implementation research is the scientific inquiry into questions concerning implementation—the act of carrying an intention into effect, which can be policies, programmes or individual practices. Implementation research seeks to understand and work within real world conditions, rather than trying to control for these conditions or to remove their influence as causal effects.” (Peters et al., 2013)
Project Team: Multi- and Inter-disciplinary team including researchers and practitioners, with an appropriate balance of quantitative and qualitative research skills (behavioural and scaling science; implementation research; statistics; gender; social and behavioural change). The project team works closely with Regional and Country Offices.

Modus operandi: In line with a key DMS principle, the research will be co-designed with beneficiaries and implemented using a learning-by-doing approach to strengthen country-level research capacities and maximize buy-in to act on findings for system-level change. The research will be contextualized in each country both in terms of specific research questions.


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