

Surging numbers of first-generation learners being left behind in global education

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'First-generation learners'—a substantial number of pupils around the

world who represent the first generation in their families to receive an education—are also significantly more likely to leave school without basic literacy or numeracy skills, a study suggests.

Research by academics at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Addis Ababa University and the Ethiopian Policy Studies Institute, examined the progress of thousands of students in Ethiopia, including a large number of 'first-generation [learners](#)': [children](#) whose parents never went to [school](#).

The numbers of such pupils have soared in many low and middle-income countries in recent decades, as access to [education](#) has widened. Primary school enrolment in Ethiopia, for example, has more than doubled since 2000, thanks to a wave of government education investment and reforms.

But the new study found that first-generation learners are much more likely to underperform in Maths and English, and that many struggle to progress through the school system.

The findings, published in the *Oxford Review of Education*, suggest that systems like Ethiopia's—which a generation ago catered mainly to the children of an elite minority—urgently need to adapt to prioritise the needs of first-generation learners, who often face greater disadvantages than their contemporaries.

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre in the Faculty of Education, and one of the paper's authors, said: "The experience of first-generation learners has largely gone under the radar. We know that high levels of parental education often benefit children, but we have considered far less how its absence is a disadvantage."

"Children from these backgrounds may, for example, have grown up without reading materials at home. Our research indicates that being a first-generation learner puts you at a disadvantage over and above being poor. New strategies are needed to prioritise these students if we really want to promote quality education for all."

The study used data from Young Lives, an international project studying childhood poverty, to assess whether there was a measurable relationship between being a first-generation learner and children's learning outcomes.

In particular, they drew on two data sets: One, from 2012/13, covered the progress of more than 13,700 Grade 4 and 5 students in various Ethiopian regions; the other, from 2016/17, covered roughly the same number and mix at Grades 7 and 8. They also drew on a sub-set of those who participated in both surveys, comprising around 3,000 students in total.

Around 12% of the entire dataset that includes those in school were first-generation learners. The researchers found that first-generation learners often come from more disadvantaged backgrounds than other pupils: for example, they are more likely to live further from school, come from poorer families, or lack access to a home computer. Regardless of their wider circumstances, however, first-generation learners were also consistently more likely to underperform at school.

For example: the research compiled the start-of-year test scores of students in Grades 7 and 8. These were standardised (or 'scaled') so that 500 represented a mean test score. Using this measure, the average test score of first-generation learners in Maths was 470, compared with 504 for non-first-generation pupils. In English, first-generation learners averaged 451, compared with 507 for their non-first-generation peers.

The attainment gap between first-generation learners and their peers was also shown to widen over time: first-generation learners from the Grade 4/5 cohort in the study, for example, were further behind their peers by the end of Grade 4 than when they began.

The authors argue that a widespread failure to consider the disadvantages faced by first-generation learners may, in part, explain why many low and middle-income countries are experiencing a so-called 'learning crisis' in which attainment in literacy and numeracy remains poor, despite widening access to education.

While this is often blamed on issues such as large class sizes or poor-quality teaching, the researchers say that it may have more to do with a surge of disadvantaged children into systems that, until recently, did not have to teach as many pupils from these backgrounds.

They suggest that many teachers may need extra training to help these pupils, who are often less well-prepared for school than those from more educated (and often wealthier) families. Curricula, assessment systems and attainment strategies may also need to be adapted to account for the fact that, in many parts of the world, the mix of students at primary school is now far more diverse than a generation ago.

Professor Tassew Woldehanna, President of Addis Ababa University and one of the paper's authors, said: "It is already widely acknowledged that when children around the world start to go back to school after the COVID-19 lockdowns, many of those from less-advantaged backgrounds will almost certainly have fallen further behind in their education compared with their peers. This data suggests that in low and [middle-income countries](#), first-generation learners should be the target of urgent attention, given the disadvantages they already face."

"It is likely that, at the very least, a similar situation to the one we have

seen in Ethiopia exists in other sub-Saharan African countries, where many of today's parents and caregivers similarly never went to school," Rose added.

"These findings show that schooling in its current form is not helping these children to catch up: if anything, it's making things slightly worse. There are ways to structure education differently, so that all children learn at an appropriate pace. But we start by accepting that as access to education widens, it is inevitable that some children will need more attention than others. That may not be due to a lack of quality in the system, but because their parents never had the same opportunities."

More information: Padmini Iyer et al, A rising tide of access: what consequences for equitable learning in Ethiopia?, *Oxford Review of Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2020.1741343](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1741343)

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