

Girls' chance of success at school in Sub-Saharan Africa shaped by language they are taught in

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Millions of school children across large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa are sat silently in classrooms, struggling to follow lessons, and not

progressing in their learning due to an insistence that all lessons should be taught in English, say the authors of a new report.

The findings, published today as a [policy brief](#) from the University of Bath's Institute for Policy Research (IPR) and the UK government's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), highlight that a reliance on English as the principal 'language of instruction' within many schools is impacting [girls](#) most acutely.

Drawing on studies conducted in Rwanda, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Egypt, the authors conclude that many children lack basic skills in English which has significant ramifications for their learning. English is often not practised or reinforced out of school, and teachers are also limited by language.

The research team says an unfamiliar language of instruction is compounding existing challenges and barriers to education for girls. For example, girls can struggle more than boys because in families the burden of housework often falls to them, which in turn denies them an opportunity to work on their English out-of-school hours.

The researchers argue that increasing access to education for girls is hugely important, but more attention now needs to be paid to the quality of that education too. Continuing to deliver all lessons in English, including maths and science, to children who struggle to understand, will hold back individual progress and have long-term, negative effects.

To address this, their report suggests that in the short-term more must be done to increase teachers' own competence in English language to have a trickle-down effect on students. Longer term, they suggest that countries should re-evaluate historic decisions to teach in English and assess what impacts this is really having.

And although English is often the predominant language of instruction, similar critiques can also be made about French and other dominant languages, which are typically defined by former colonial ties.

Lead researcher from the University of Bath's Department of Education, Dr. Lizzi Milligan explained: "Many people will be unaware that across large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, school lessons are delivered exclusively in English to children whose first and sometimes second language are different. As a result, and across the board, our research reveals that children are struggling to access education.

"Despite girls' education generally being high on the agenda for policymakers, this specific issue has received very little attention, but that really matters. Imagine someone trying to teach you maths or science in a language you were unfamiliar in? If we really want to make progress in increasing educational attainment, we need to urgently look at this issue."

Alicia Mills, Senior Portfolio Advisor at the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), added: "Language is a widespread challenge and large numbers of girls across GEC projects are being educated through one (or more) language(s) that may not be their mother tongue.

"Language of instruction is regularly identified by GEC projects as a barrier for girls so programming reflects this to mitigate the impact this can have on girls' opportunities for accessing, continuing and thriving in education."

In Rwanda, the team looked at transitions for girls between primary and secondary school. This found performances dropped for both girls and boys: by the end of lower secondary school (Year 9) half of children fail their English exams. However, among those, girls were more likely to fail than boys.

Within groups of girls, they also found distinct differences in performance too. Whilst some had a good level of English and could make progress, many more were struggling. This included those dubbed 'at risk', from financially and physically insecure home environments, who they found were almost entirely silent and disengaged at school.

Aline Dorimana, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Rwanda and researcher on the project said: "Many girls from different parts of Rwanda grow up in societies that already encourage silence whenever brothers are present. This impacts how girls learn in English and practise that language in the classroom which is also generally not practised out-of-school given girls' home burdens too. These issues need to be considered if we are to provide access to quality education for all learners."

The team at Bath with the Girls' Education Challenge now hope to explore how language of instruction impacts other gender equality priorities, such as female empowerment and ending violence against women and girls.

More information: Girls Education and Language of Instruction: An Extended Policy Brief, [DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6523434](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6523434)

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