

# School segregation by wealth creating unequal learning outcomes in the Global South

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Students in class in Burkina Faso. Credit: Global Partnership for Education

Millions of the world's poorest children are leaving school without mastering even basic levels of reading or maths because of an

overlooked pattern of widespread, wealth-based inequalities in their countries' education systems, new research suggests.

The University of Cambridge-led study shows that [children](#) from the very poorest families, in what are already some of the lowest-income countries in the world, consistently perform worse in basic literacy and numeracy tests than those from more affluent backgrounds.

The overwhelming reason, the study found, is that poorer children are disproportionately clustered in the lowest-quality schools, which often lack even basic resources—such as textbooks, electricity, or toilets.

The researchers say that there is an urgent need to 'raise the floor' in global [education](#), by focusing both national-level efforts and international aid on students from the most disadvantaged communities.

Institutions like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Bank have long referred to a 'learning crisis' in the Global South. While growing numbers of children in low-income countries now attend school compared with previous generations, many still lack basic literacy or numeracy skills.

Until now, most analyses have looked at the factors that explain low learning outcomes in general, rather than differentiating between groups of children. But the new study suggests that there is a huge gulf between the quality of education that children from the poorest families receive compared with wealthier children, and that this is directly linked to their ability to read, write, add, or subtract, by Grade 6.

Dr. Rob Gruijters, from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, who led the research, said: "There is a high level of social segregation in many of these countries' [education systems](#). The pattern is similar to the UK, where rich children tend to go to better-resourced

schools. But the differences in school quality are much more pronounced, and they are strongly linked to family background"

"Global reporting on the learning crisis often pays little attention to these inequalities, focusing instead on average differences between countries. But if we really want to fix things, there needs to be a commitment not only to investing in education, but to raising the floor: to ensuring that every school has a minimum level of support, in staffing, training, and resources."

The study analysed data from the Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC), a survey managed by the association of education ministries in francophone Africa. The survey assessed more than 30,000 Grade 6 students in more than 1,800 schools in 10 countries: Benin, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Ivory Coast, Niger, Senegal and Togo. All 10 have 'received scant attention' in previous analyses of the learning crisis, the study says.

The data provides the pupils' scores in basic maths and reading tests. The researchers cross-referred this with additional information about their socio-economic backgrounds, their health, and the quality of their schools; dividing each country's sample group into fifths based on their families' relative wealth.

Overall, pupils from the poorest 20% of families consistently performed worst in the tests, while those children who—although often poor by international standards—fell into the wealthiest 20%, consistently had the highest test scores.

Poorer students also tended to fail to reach PASEC's Grade 6 'proficiency threshold', meaning that by the time they leave primary school, many still struggle with basic sums and reading.

The researchers then explored possible reasons why this link between household wealth and performance exists. They found that differences in the quality of schooling explained almost the entire learning gap between poor and wealthier children.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds were consistently found to be clustered in educational settings that scored low for school quality in the dataset—meaning that teachers' own education levels were often poor, classrooms overcrowded, and critical resources and facilities, from textbooks to running water, often unavailable. Wealthier children, on the other hand, were much more likely to attend better-resourced private schools.

Importantly, in cases where children from the wealthiest 20% and poorest 20% of families attended the same school, there was almost no difference in their test results.

"The problem is that most of them are not attending the same schools, and that's why we are seeing these learning gaps" said Dr. Julia Behrman of Northwestern University, who co-authored the study. "Wealthier children learn more largely because they are going to better schools, with better resources."

The researchers say that their assessment of the impact of socioeconomic status on learning outcomes is almost certainly conservative, as the PASEC data only covers children who reach Grade 6. In countries like Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, where fewer than half of all children finish primary school and many never attend, the poorest children face a 'double hurdle': first, getting to school; and second, finding a [school](#) that is sufficiently equipped to give them a basic education.

The study therefore argues that policy initiatives and aid efforts aimed at

solving the global learning crisis should focus on equalising access to learning opportunities for all children.

"One silver lining is that our research emphasises there is nothing inherent in being poor that stops children from learning," Gruijters added. "Give them a better place to learn, with better resources, and they can do just as well as children from the wealthiest end of the scale."

**More information:** Rob J. Gruijters et al, Learning Inequality in Francophone Africa: School Quality and the Educational Achievement of Rich and Poor Children, *Sociology of Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0038040720919379](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040720919379)

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