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Addressing Inequality in Education in Tajikistan

Inclusive, supportive classroom environments can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Introduction

USAID has been supporting the Government of Tajikistan (GOT) to improve learning outcomes in primary education for over a decade. USAID's programs have contributed to some improvement in oral reading proficiency in the early grades. As can be seen in the chart on the right, from 2014 to 2022 average oral reading fluency increased for grade 2 and grade 4 students. These average improvements are equivalent to roughly a half year of schooling for grade 2 and a full year for grade 4.

However, the education system's ability to improve learning is not evenly distributed among the diversity of settings and learners across schools and communities in Tajikistan. Schooling in Tajikistan produces inequities in the development of early literacy based on geography, gender, the language learners use in the home, as well as their parents' levels of education. Differences in classroom environments play a role in how well students learn to read, and importantly, how schools are run and how teachers teach can help overcome some of the disparities associated with non-school factors.

Average Oral Reading Fluency (cwpm)
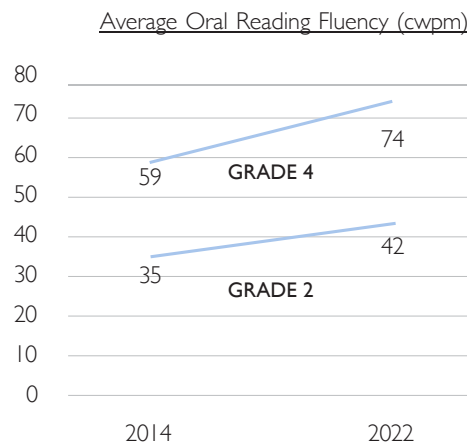

Quantifying Inequality

The chart on the next page contrasts the oral reading proficiency of grade 2 students from different demographic groups and for those experiencing different classroom environments. The data are based on an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) conducted in 2022 by USAID. EGRA measures how accurately and fluently children can read aloud a short, grade appropriate text. Oral reading fluency measures the number of words a learner can correctly read per minute (cwpm). All the results presented here are for Tajik language of instruction schools, which represent about 90% of all government-funded schools in Tajikistan. The 2022 EGRA survey drew on a sample of schools designed to be both nationally and regionally representative.

The overall grade 2 average oral reading fluency of 40 cwpm is also the benchmark for Grade 2 reading proficiency and is provided as a reference point to compare with the selected learner sub-groups.

Region: There is a gap equivalent to about a year of learning (16 cwpm) between grade 2 students in the highest-performing region, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), and in the lowest one, Khatlon. This may be as a result of GBAO region teaching Tajik language as the only subject one year prior to official schooling. The Khatlon region is the most populated and also the poorest region in Tajikistan.

Gender: Following an international trend, Tajik boys slightly underperform girls. Many factors might contribute to this disparity, such as existing gender norms that expect girls to behave in ways better suited to formal schooling in contrast to those that tolerate less disciplined behavior from boys. Also, reading books available in school may treat subjects that are typically of less interest to boys.

Home Language: Not surprisingly, students who speak Tajik at home (the vast majority of students) perform at around the national average. Students speaking Uzbek at home are disadvantaged in the classroom, as is often the case for students who come to school not speaking or understanding the language of instruction.

Grade 2 Oral Reading Fluency
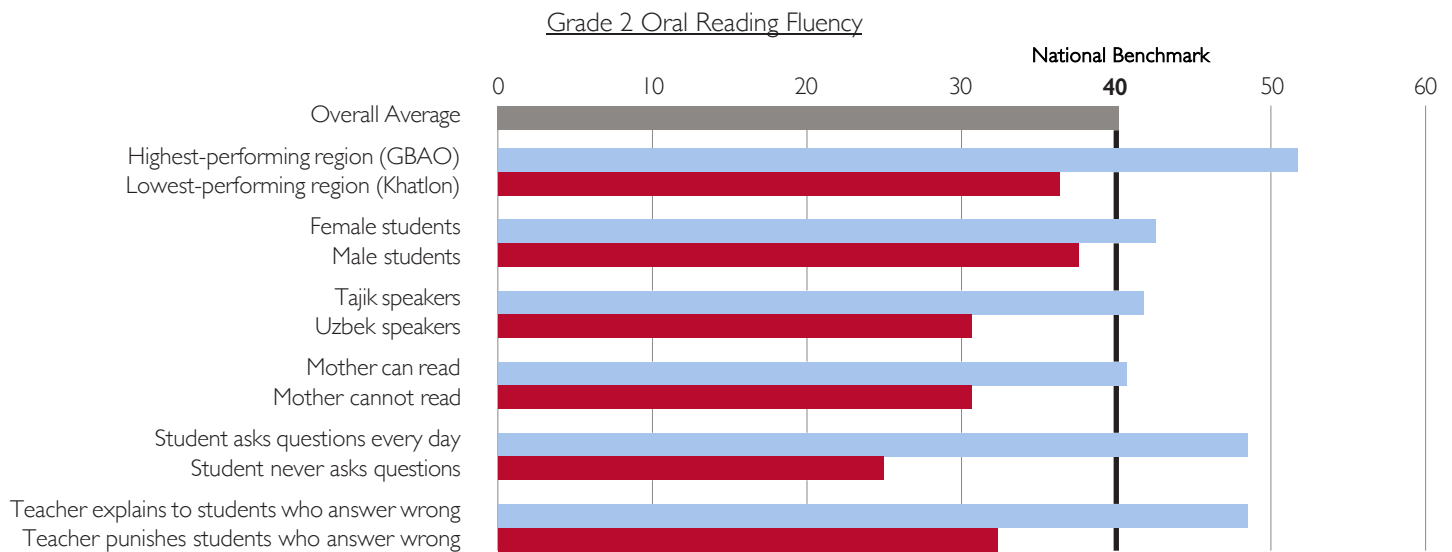
Parental Literacy: International evidence shows strong relationships between parents' levels of education and the learning outcomes of their children. This relationship is particularly strong for mother's literacy. In Tajikistan, whilst learners whose mothers cannot read represent only a small percentage of the population (4%), they have reading fluency 10 cwpm lower than their peers whose mothers can read.

Classroom Environment: Learners in grade 2 classrooms where they are able to ask questions achieve reading fluency that is almost double (47 v. 25 cwpm) that of those in classrooms where asking questions is discouraged (i.e., never occurs). And learners in classrooms where the teacher encourages them to try again when they give an incorrect response perform better on the EGRA than those whose teacher scolds, punishes, or strikes a student who answers incorrectly.

For learners in the categories shown above to be disadvantaged, the nature of their classroom environment can lead to higher levels of literacy. For example, male students who are Uzbek speakers have an average oral reading fluency of 29.5 cwpm. Those in a classroom where the teacher encourages students to ask questions every day have average reading fluency of 37.6 cwpm. This shows how improved instruction can lead to more equitable outcomes.

Implications

Students living in different circumstances need extra help. Those who come to school not speaking Tajik will need extra time to learn Tajik before they can begin to learn to read in the new language. The example of GBAO is particularly informative – devoting a full year for students to learn Tajik clearly contributes to the high performance seen in that region. Boys are behind girls in learning to read in the early grades of primary school. Teachers may therefore try approaches and use materials that relate to subjects that boys are drawn to (e.g., sports) as a way to spur their interest in reading. And clearly, learners perform better when their teachers establish nurturing and supportive rather than disciplinary learning environments. The GOT needs to develop capacity to identify communities where schools are not meeting the needs of the student populations that they serve. The GOT can then target additional resources and support to help teachers and school leaders better respond to the needs of their students and communities.