

The Use of Learning Assessment Data Ghana



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Overview

Although the number of countries conducting large-scale assessments has increased significantly over the past two decades, this has not necessarily led to the effective use of learning assessment data in policy-making and planning. To better understand the reasons for this, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) conducted a qualitative study in six sub-Saharan African countries that explored both how they use learning data in the education planning cycle and what influences their use. The study examines the use of data generated by national, regional, and international large-scale assessments as well as citizen-led assessments. When relevant, it also explores how it articulates with the use of other data, such as examination results.

IIEP's research team together with MKA Education Services conducted an in-depth case study in Ghana, collecting data in 2019. Interviews, observations, and focus group discussions were held with actors involved in production and use of learning data at central and decentralized administrative levels (i.e. regions and districts), complemented by documentary analysis. Drawing from the research data, this policy brief explores the main lessons for national policy-makers and planners as well as international actors.

Background

Ghana currently carries out a National Education Assessment (NEA) in grades 4 and 6. In 2013 and 2015, it conducted a national Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and an Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) in Grade 2. Its Grade 8 students participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2003, 2007, and 2011.

Ghana's first experience with large-scale assessments dates back to the beginning of the 1990s, when the US Agency for International Development (USAID) supported criterion-



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referenced tests and the World Bank financed performance-monitoring tests. In 2004, the NEA (sample based) was created to provide a single national large-scale assessment. Nevertheless, a new National Standardized Assessment Test (NSAT) (census-based) is

planned for the evaluation of all students. Funded by the Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP), it will start by assessing Grade 4 students, while public funds will be used to extend the assessment to grades 2, 6, and 8 in the future.

Use of learning assessment data in the planning cycle

Education sector analysis (2018)	Education Strategic Plan (ESP) (2018–2030)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NEA, EGRA/EGMA, TIMSS results demonstrate changes in students’ results over time, and, together with examination data, illustrate the inequities that exist in the education system (i.e. based on gender, urban or rural setting, region, language, school status). – Student results are not correlated with variables that influence learning, but information on elements linked to education quality is analysed separately (e.g. information on teachers, textbooks). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – EGRA/EGMA and TIMSS results illustrate low learning outcomes and existing disparities among regions, girls and boys, as well as urban or rural locations. – ESP identifies challenges linked to assessments (e.g. lack of a census-based assessment and a national annual assessment at primary level; inadequate regulatory framework on assessments) and related policy objectives to improve the assessment system. – ESP highlights the importance of assessments to inform teaching and learning and increase school accountability.
Implementation of ESP	Monitoring and evaluation of ESP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – District officers often rely on external project data (e.g. Learning Programme, District Quality Monitoring System for Education tool [DQMS-E]) and examination results for their level of planning. For example, results from EGRA conducted in the framework of the USAID-supported Learning Programme were used to identify teacher weaknesses and solutions in terms of professional development or replacement. These results also informed overall levels of performance in districts. – Examination results track student performance when it comes to school monitoring and supervision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The ESP monitoring framework includes numerous indicators on student learning outcomes as measured by NEA and EGRA/EGMA. – National Education Week is the main event when national actors discuss advancements in the education sector. Learning assessment results are discussed in very general terms there, referring to overall scores.



Summary

- Although Ghana does not have an overarching policy on assessments, ESP (2018–2030) foresees its development together with an assessment framework which aims to ensure coherence among assessments as well as their alignment with the new curriculum.
- NEA reports provide relevant information on overall system performance and existing inequities, but certain areas for improvement have been identified regarding assessment design.
- Although NEA results are readily available for central-level officials, some regions and districts do not receive them despite multiple dissemination efforts; raw data are difficult to access at decentralized level and for civil-society organizations.
- Examination data inform planning activities in regions and districts; they are the only information available on education quality at secondary level.
- The National Education Assessment Unit (NEAU) is understaffed and relies on external expertise for certain tasks, although their capacities have improved over recent years.
- NEA is financed by external funds but national resources will cover most of the NSAT costs.
- NEAU cooperation with other central bodies and decentralized-level officials remains somewhat limited.
- Although international partners, especially USAID, played an important role in the development of the assessment system, concerns were raised regarding the sustainability and national ownership of external initiatives.

Key findings and policy recommendations

1. Institutional framework

Ghana has no overarching policy on assessments, as one respondent noted, perhaps because assessments have so far been largely funded by external sources. Nevertheless, the current ESP (2018–2030) foresees development of such a policy, together with an assessment framework. GALOP programming documents highlight the importance of this regulatory framework and plan for its development (Mikesell, 2019).

The 2019 curriculum reform created a window of opportunity for setting up a new assessment policy and framework to guide a national assessment system, ensuring its alignment with the curriculum and consistency among existing assessments. In many documents and interviews, officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE) have expressed a clear

“ Like the British Constitution, we know what we want, but it’s not written.

Official from the Ghana Ministry of Education

preference for a census-based assessment to make sure every child is evaluated. Under the new curriculum it is therefore crucial to have a national, standardized, census-based assessment to replace existing sample-based assessments.

Currently, officials at the central level have varying degrees of knowledge regarding the existing set of assessment documents, depending on their closeness to the assessment system: some are aware of the development

of the assessment policy and could provide some details on it, whereas others only mentioned external programming documents. However, officials at the decentralized level (i.e. regional and district education officers) were not aware of the regulatory documents on learning assessments; they are currently more familiar with examinations and assessments taking place under the framework of the USAID Learning Programme rather than the NEA, national EGRA/EGMA, or TIMSS assessments.

2. Data analysis and dissemination

2.1. Assessment design and analysis of results

NEA reports provide relevant information for policy-making and planning regarding the performance of the education system and its existing inequities:

- Performance across sub-populations is analysed in depth (boys/girls, urban/rural location, deprived/non-deprived districts, regions, public/private schools).
- Global student performance is compared over time.
- Information is provided on pupil performance in relation to subject areas.
- The analysis of how different variables (e.g. teacher and school characteristics) affect student performance is not systematic, but it appears in certain reports considering data from the education management and information system (EMIS). The depth of this analysis varies from one assessment implementation to another (e.g. the NEA 2013 technical report conducted an in-depth analysis, whereas the NEA 2016 report did not).

Recommendations

- Finalize the assessment policy as well as the assessment framework and ensure they are consistent with the new curriculum framework to institutionalize the assessment system and set overall student evaluation goals.
- Involve actors at both central (e.g. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as well as the NEAU in particular, Curriculum Research and Development Division, West African Examinations Council) and decentralized levels (i.e. regional and district education officers, circuit supervisors, school heads) in consultations to ensure that the development of the assessment policy and the assessment framework is inclusive.
- Disseminate the assessment policy and the assessment framework to all education staff in an interactive way (e.g. seminars, workshops) to ensure their understanding and ownership for successful implementation.



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However, report recommendations seem to be derived from international ‘good practices’ rather than an in-depth analysis of assessment results, as they are often very general. In addition, interviewees have underlined a number of shortcomings regarding the NEA design that could be further considered when designing the NSAT:

- The NEA administration does not include the gathering of background information on students, teachers, and schools, which would enrich the analysis of results.
- Assessment is limited to evaluating skills in reading and mathematics.
- Students are not given a single, consistent identification number (ID), which makes it impossible to track their results over years.
- NEA is not inclusive of all groups of children (e.g. children with disabilities are not included in the assessment, and its sample is not representative for private schools).
- NEA is not representative at district level either. Decentralized-level officials highlighted the need for disaggregated data, as national results cannot be used for planning at their level. Consequently, they turn to partner-led assessments (e.g. USAID Learning Programme, DQMS-E).

2.2. Dissemination of assessment results

Many dissemination activities have been organized to share NEA, TIMSS, and EGRA/EGMA results (e.g. presentations for key stakeholders, seminars, training workshops, and district cluster forums), and learning data are easily accessible at central level. If needed, actors can use their networks to access the raw data. Nevertheless, learning data from different assessments are dispersed in databases of different agencies and divisions of the MoE. Furthermore, EMIS contains neither NEA nor EGMA/EGRA, although GALOP aims to integrate different data systems.

Recommendations

- Administer background questionnaires to teachers, students, and principals, together with NEA (later NSAT) student tests to enrich the analysis of results, providing more information on factors influencing learning. Alternatively, ensure consistency of this analysis using EMIS data across different rounds of assessment implementation.
- Ensure private schools and children with disabilities are better represented, making the national assessment more inclusive, as this would provide insights on learning in these groups.
- Consider using consistent student IDs to track performance over the years.
- Ensure that data coming from the new census-based assessment are adequately analysed and disseminated to provide information on student learning to regions, districts, and schools.
- Target national assessment recommendations to specific central-level units and regions to improve their relevance for these actors.
- Include NEA (later NSAT) data in EMIS to ensure data are accessible from one source for policy-making and planning. Make sure raw data are easily available online to improve their uptake by actors external to the MoE (e.g. civil-society organizations, researchers).

In spite of several dissemination efforts and the availability of most assessment reports online, some officials in regions and districts were not aware of the latest assessment results. In addition, many actors were not aware of the latest NEA data collection (2018). Moreover, raw data are even more difficult to access than assessment reports, especially for regions and districts, civil society organizations, and the wider public.

Consequently, at decentralized level, officials very often rely on examination data for planning activities. Many of them would naturally think of examinations as the main source of information on student learning. Regional

offices largely use examination results to identify districts that are falling short so that measures are put in place to address their difficulties. Exam results are also widely used to monitor and compare district performance. Schools, like districts, can be ranked by these results. Poor exam results indicate which schools have issues, and then some districts conduct a more in-depth analysis to try to understand existing problems. Examination results are currently the only information available to evaluate education quality at secondary level.

3. Capacities and resources

3.1. National capacities

NEAU is the main body in charge of assessments in Ghana and has been developing its capacities over recent years, mostly with support from RTI International (formerly the Research Triangle Institute). International experts continue to assist the unit with certain tasks, such as data analysis, and it is therefore hard to estimate to what extent the team is currently fully autonomous in the management of the entire assessment cycle.

IIEP study results show that NEAU is inadequately staffed for the tasks it is expected to conduct. The team consists of fewer than 10 staff members, and more human resources are needed to conduct the assessment. This problem will become even more urgent with the implementation of the new census-based assessment (i.e. NSAT).

Many interviewees at the decentralized level suggested that they felt well prepared in terms of knowledge and skills to use learning assessment data in planning. Some participated in the USAID-organized Learning Programme training sessions, which were particularly useful. However, they would benefit from additional training in the collection, analysis, interpretation, and use of learning data.

3.2. Financial resources

Ghana has relied on external partners since the introduction of the first large-scale assessments in the early 1990s, but is now planning to increase national funding of assessments. Over the years, USAID has supported NEA and funded national EGRA/EGMA assessments; World Bank loans also funded Ghana's participation in TIMSS. However, the MoE is planning to take over the financing of NSAT. Initially, only Grade 4 will be supported by GALOP funding; the MoE is planning to finance grades 2, 6, and 8 in the future.

At the decentralized level, many officers noted financial barriers to assessment implementation, such as the lack of internet connection, means of transportation, computers, and other tools for data collection. They feel 'well prepared [for assessments] but not well resourced'.

Many remarked that the implementation of policy recommendations generated by the analysis of results is hindered by a lack of financial resources: 'it's like we always say, you may know about a problem, but the resources to fight or solve it are out of reach'.

Recommendations

- Expand the NEAU team and provide them with tailor-made training to ensure they have all the skills to manage the entire assessment cycle. Provide additional training for regions and districts in identified areas.
- Ensure stable national financing for the implementation of NSAT to guarantee its sustainability, given the high implementation costs of aiming to evaluate all students.

4. Cooperation among actors

4.1. Cooperation among national actors

Cooperation between NEAU and other central bodies appears somewhat limited, to the extent that some central-level officials seemed unsure of the role of NEAU. Furthermore, its collaboration with the EMIS unit also remains weak in spite of GALOP efforts to integrate different databases and approach these bodies.

Decentralized-level officials have limited opportunities to communicate with NEAU. Regions and districts receive NEA materials to be administered, participate in related training, and send the collected NEA data back to NEAU, but not much cooperation beyond that could be observed. Decentralized-level officials do not take part in the design of assessments, and their involvement in data analysis also appears limited. Some regions and districts have reference officers for learning data who can hold different positions, such as planning, statistical, or exam officers. These people often facilitate communication and exchange of information regarding learning data.

Recommendations

- Improve involvement of decentralized-level officials in data collection, treatment, and analysis to increase their familiarity with assessments, which could in turn improve their use of data (provided they are disaggregated and representative at their level). Ensure actors understand the potential uses of learning data, for example through additional training.
- Improve NEAU cooperation with other key directorates (e.g. EMIS, National Training Council, National Inspectorate Board, Curriculum Research and Development Division) to make sure learning data can better inform their activities.
- Ensure NSAT is supported by national funding for its successful implementation.
- Ensure the sustainability and ownership of externally funded programmes through inclusive design and implementation activities.



When learning assessments were introduced, MoE often had a strong defensive reaction to poor results and did not always publish them for political reasons, especially before important political events, such as elections. Political dissatisfaction regarding TIMSS results was mentioned as a reason for Ghana no longer being involved in this assessment. Nevertheless, MoE has gradually become more open in this respect. Interviewees agree that currently there is more focus on evidence-based decision-making. Decentralized-level officials also mention a positive change, saying that ‘we are now growing to appreciate data’.

4.2. Cooperation with international partners

International partners, and USAID more particularly, played an important role in the development and running of the national assessment system (i.e. NEA, national EGRA/EGMA). Evaluation and assessments have always been an important component of external projects, including the GALOP initiative. Its sub-component directly targets support towards the development of the assessment strategy and its implementation.

Although partners also played an important role in choosing evaluation modalities, the development of NSAT seems to give more autonomy to MoE on decisions regarding assessment modalities than before. This in turn might increase its ownership of the national large-scale assessment. Nevertheless, this will largely depend on whether all interested parties are involved in the development process of this new assessment.

In addition, partners have conducted many learning assessments on a sample basis (e.g. in the framework of DQMS-E and Learning Programme) but concerns have been raised, particularly at the decentralized level, regarding the sustainability of these initiatives. Some district officials felt that the system could not take up initiatives once external projects had ended.

See the IIEP Information Sheet on Ghana and more information about the study and its methodology on the IIEP-UNESCO website:
www.iiep.unesco.org/en/our-expertise/use-learning-assessment-data-planning

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