

Automatic Promotion of Children to Higher Levels who Cannot Read and Write: What is the Future of Education in Botswana?

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Abstract:

Botswana provides free primary and secondary education and subsidized tertiary education as part of its commitment to Education for All (EFA) and human capital development. However, despite these efforts, the automatic promotion of learners who lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills remains a critical challenge. Many children advance from one grade to the next without achieving basic competencies, particularly reading and writing, resulting in long-term academic underperformance, high dropout rates, and diminished workforce readiness. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate early childhood preparation, limited teacher support, and insufficient intervention structures exacerbate the problem. Although initiatives such as the Breakthrough to Setswana literacy programme were introduced to support early reading development, inconsistent implementation, resource limitations, and linguistic diversity have undermined their effectiveness.

This study investigates the impact of automatic promotion on educational quality in Botswana, focusing on remote public schools in Mopipi and Nxakato. Guided by Frith's (1985) literacy acquisition model and constructivist developmental theory, the research adopts a mixed-methods design involving interviews and questionnaires with Ministry officials, teachers, parents, and learners. The objectives are to examine promotion policies, identify assessment criteria, analyze the relationship between automatic promotion and academic performance, and recommend inclusive and context-responsive strategies. The findings are expected to inform policy reform toward differentiated instruction, strengthened early literacy support, and improved alignment between learner needs and educational pathways. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to national efforts to enhance educational outcomes, reduce dropout levels, and advance Botswana's human capital development in line with Vision 2036 and global SDG 4 targets.