

The World Bank's Approach to Reducing Learning Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa:

Arab Journal of Applied
Linguistics
e-ISSN 2490-4198
Vol. 08, No. 01, 2023, 1-17
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Abstract

A learning crisis across Arabic-speaking countries is leading to human capital deficits, undermining efforts to reduce poverty and putting achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals at risk. The World Bank has introduced the concept of learning poverty to highlight this crisis — measured as the percentage of 10-year-old children who are unable to read and understand a simple text. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this affects around 6 in 10 children, and likely more, because of the COVID-19-related school disruptions. The World Bank has proposed a path to reduce learning poverty through advancing Arabic language teaching and learning. The proposed path comprises a set of purposeful actions that governments and stakeholders can take to reorient education systems so that they can best achieve essential core Arabic language skills and learning for all. This includes, for example, setting literacy goals, aligning instructional resources to follow a systematic phonetic approach with a focus on reading comprehension in a literature-rich environment, ensuring high-quality instruction, and identifying and intervening early with struggling readers. As the largest external financier of education in the developing world, the World Bank has a significant role to play in helping countries to recognize these key challenges and to mobilize resources to address them effectively and efficiently. This paper outlines the World Bank's approach and explores how it is taking shape in the World Bank's support to countries' education programs across the MENA region.

Keywords: Arabic, learning poverty, literacy, MENA region

Introduction

Education is a pathway to development, as well as a basic human right. Through education, countries can reduce poverty, improve public health, attain gender equality, and realize peace and stability (World Bank, 2022a). For individuals, every additional year of school is associated with higher earnings — 9 percent globally —with greater returns for those in low- and middle-income countries, and for women (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). However, it is the learning in school that matters more than the number of years of schooling (World Bank, 2018a). When countries make smart investments to improve skills, health, knowledge, and resilience, the potential of education for the individual and for societies materializes (World Bank, 2018b).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, investments in education are yet to reach their expected outcomes. A large potential remains untapped for education to contribute to human capital, wellbeing, and wealth in the region (World Bank, 2019). The Human Capital Index (HCI) indicates that a child born in MENA in 2020 was expected to be only 57 percent as productive as she could be when she reaches the age of 18. The HCI increased in most MENA countries between 2010 and 2020, due in large part to gains in preprimary and upper secondary school enrollment, and adult survival rates (World Bank, 2022b). However, poor learning outcomes continue to drive MENA's weak

human capital, and prolonged school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have further set back progress.²

Literature and Discussion

Foundational learning: basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills

Every child should gain from school, at a minimum, the foundational building blocks of basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills (such as socioemotional skills) that are essential for all further learning. These foundational building blocks form the basis of the call for a Commitment to Action at the 77th United Nations General Assembly in September 2022 (World Bank, 2022c). The commitment includes reducing the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten, by half by 2030, which requires achieving national Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets in each country.

The learning poverty indicator

To shine a light on a learning crisis threatening countries' efforts to build human capital and achieve the SDGs, the World Bank introduced the concept of learning poverty, which is the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank, 2021a). The

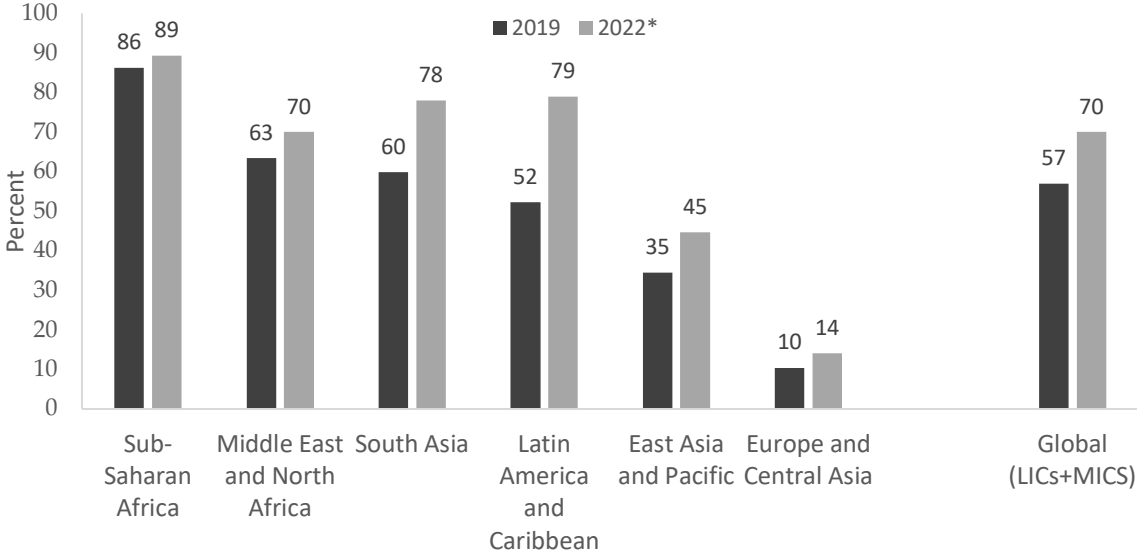
² Schools in MENA were closed on average for 170 days due to the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2022b). Global evidence suggests that mitigation measures such as remote learning were a poor alternative to in-person schooling (Schady et al., 2023).

learning poverty indicator uses data on the share of children who have not reached minimum proficiency, adjusted by the proportion of children who are out of school (and are assumed not able to read proficiently). In most MENA countries, the learning poverty rate is based on data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2019), the learning poverty rate in the MENA region was 59 percent, rising to 63 percent when limited to MENA’s low- and middle-income countries, the second highest rate behind Sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1). With disruptions to schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, simulations suggest that the learning poverty rate in MENA may have risen to around 70 percent in 2022.

Figure 1

*Learning poverty rate by region, 2019 and 2022**



Note: LICs = low-income countries; MICs = middle-income countries. Regional and global figures are all population-weighted averages. The chart is based on data from the World Bank Development Data Hub.

* 2022 rates are based on simulations (see Azevedo et al., 2022).

With such high rates of children being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10, concerted efforts are needed to ensure that all students achieve core foundational skills at a minimum, most notably literacy skills in the language of instruction, which is predominantly Arabic in the MENA region. Without these skills, the region's children are prevented from fully engaging in their education, which in turn will hold back countries' progress in human capital formation.

Arabic language teaching and learning

A recent analysis of the factors leading to high rates of learning poverty in MENA highlighted issues related to the teaching and learning of Arabic (Gregory et al., 2021). In addition to challenges of diglossia, whereby children learn to read and write in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) with limited exposure before reaching school age, and where parents are less likely than those in other regions to read to their young children or play word games in MSA with them. Early childhood education provision, where language skills can develop, remains low compared to other regions. Instructional practices in Arabic language classes are outdated, not utilizing the latest evidence on how children learn to read, and lacking in quality instructional materials. Teachers of Arabic have little,

if any, education on Arabic instructional methods, and are themselves the product of poor literacy education.

These issues, and the high learning poverty rates, should alert governments, development partners, civil society, the private sector, and all stakeholders to urgently take comprehensive action to improve the teaching and learning of Arabic in MENA's schools.

The World Bank's role in helping countries to reduce learning poverty

The World Bank is the largest external financier of education, working in more than 90 countries, including 11 in the MENA region, to improve education outcomes. Therefore, the World Bank has a central role to play in helping countries to reduce learning poverty, including by increasing access to quality education for all (World Bank, 2022a). Through its suite of financial products, technical advice and analytics, and capacity to convene stakeholders and coordinate actions, the World Bank is helping countries across a range of income levels, including the provision of grants and loans for lower-income countries and reimbursable advisory services for higher-income countries.

With a vision to achieve a quality education for all, the World Bank has set a target to reduce learning poverty by half by 2030. This means reducing by at least 50 percent the number of children around the world who cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10, providing a building block for children and youth to succeed in later life.

To share knowledge gained through this work, the World Bank produces global public goods ranging from freely available reports to guides and tools. This includes a policy package to support the target of reducing learning poverty, made up of evidence-based interventions to promote literacy for all children (Table 1). This package frames the World Bank’s support to countries across the world, particularly in the Accelerator Program, which supports governments that demonstrate strong political and financial commitment to reducing learning poverty; that are willing to measure and monitor learning outcomes; and that are ready to implement large-scale, evidence-based reform programs to improve foundational literacy skills. The initial Accelerator Program cohort includes 10 countries, of which one — Morocco — is in the MENA region. As part of the program, the World Bank supports the countries to set and monitor targets, develop a clear plan to reach the targets, and strengthens the government’s capacity to implement the reform program. UNICEF complements these efforts with advocacy campaigns and increasing development partner alignment and accountability (World Bank, 2021b).

Table 1

A policy package to promote literacy for all children

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1. Assure political and technical commitment to making all children literate.
 2. Ensure adequate amounts of effective instruction by supported teachers.
 3. Provide quality, age-appropriate books, and texts to children.
 4. Teach children first in the language they speak and understand best.
 5. Foster children’s language abilities and love of books and reading.
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Note: For more details, see World Bank (2021c).

A path to reducing learning poverty in MENA

Based on its global work, and the recent analysis of Arabic teaching and learning in the MENA region (Gregory et al. 2021), along with its work in countries across the MENA region, the World Bank proposed a path to reducing learning poverty in MENA (Table 2). The proposed path is designed to guide countries in their efforts to advance Arabic language teaching and learning and thereby reduce the high rates of learning poverty.

Table 2

A Path for Reducing Learning Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa

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1. Set literacy goals
 2. Build a bridge from colloquial to modern standard Arabic (MSA)
 3. Expand early MSA exposure
 4. Align instructional resources to follow a systematic phonetic approach with a focus on reading comprehension in a literature-rich environment
 5. Revisit Arabic language teacher education programs
 6. Reduce achievement gaps
 7. Intervene early with struggling readers
 8. Promote family and community awareness
 9. Balance purposeful use of technology
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Note: The proposed path is based on the original report (Gregory et al., 2021) and has been updated, with a link to the update in Arabic and English available on the publication website: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/advancing-arabic-language-teaching-and-learning-path-to-reducing-learning-poverty-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

First, countries are encouraged to set quantifiable national goals and standards for Arabic language learning outcomes, and to garner the highest-level of government commitment to those goals. Linking the goals to the countries' social and economic policy goals will help to illustrate their importance. A national literacy strategy is one way to

promote the goals widely while ensuring that all actors — including government departments responsible for education, child development, finance, and planning; university faculties of education; research centers; teacher training colleges; teacher professional organizations and unions; educators; developers of curriculum and materials; children’s authors and the entertainment industry; and the media — are aligned and understand the vision.

Next, it is important to embed instructional practices that help children to build a bridge between colloquial Arabic spoken at home and MSA used in schools. This means harnessing the overlap by explicitly teaching the common features between MSA and the local variations of Arabic in teaching literacy, including starting with simple words that are used in both, highlighting common patterns, and teaching phonemes that exist in MSA.

Early exposure to MSA can help children to be ready for school, and this can be done in engaging ways that help them to become familiar with vocabulary and syntax. Parents can be encouraged to read to their children in MSA from a young age. Children’s entertainment such as television programs can be used to promote MSA learning.

Classroom instruction, including the teacher-facing materials (such as teachers’ guides) and student-facing materials (such as reading books, posters, workbooks, and flashcards), should be well aligned and follow evidence-based approaches for reading development. This includes a strong systematic phonetic approach, along with explicit

efforts to build vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension through a literature-rich environment. In MENA countries, this means significantly ramping up the availability and use of books and training teachers on how to introduce phonetic approaches and use books within Arabic classroom instruction.

Gaps in achievement need to be carefully identified and monitored, with resources targeted to support those schools and students most in need. For example, the learning poverty rate for boys is substantially higher than it is for girls in many MENA countries. The MENA region has the largest gender gap in the learning poverty rate among all regions, at 66 percent for boys compared to 56 percent for girls (Gregory et al. 2021). Other disparities exist, such as between urban and rural schools and by socioeconomic status.

Where individual children are struggling to learn to read, early intervention is paramount. The use of national screening checks for early literacy skills such as phonics (decoding) in the first one or two grades of school is one way to ensure that no child is overlooked. Importantly, the range of steps that schools should take to intervene once struggling readers are identified should be clear, such as providing additional supports, involving the family, diagnostic testing for learning difficulties, and continuous monitoring.

Outside of the school, families, community groups, and the private sector should be encouraged to prioritize Arabic literacy development through their engagements with

children and youth. Role models, within the family and beyond, can shape views on the importance of learning to read in Arabic.

Finally, the MENA region has seen significant investments in education technologies in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Harnessing these technologies to best encourage more MSA listening, speaking, reading, and writing requires careful consideration to ensure that there is a good balance with proven paper-pencil methods.

Examples of efforts across MENA to advance Arabic language teaching and learning

There are many examples across MENA of efforts to advance Arabic language teaching and learning. The following are just a few of these examples. In Jordan, a literacy strategy has been developed and recently launched. In addition, the Queen Rania Foundation, in collaboration with the World Bank, developed a network of engaged stakeholders through a series of webinars on key issues for Arabic including fostering language development in the early years, the science of reading, teacher development, teaching and learning resources, assessments, and supporting struggling readers and raising boys' literacy.³

³ Key points on these topics and video recordings of these webinars are available in Arabic and English on the Queen Rania Foundation website: <https://www.qrf.org/en/advancing-arabic-language-teaching-and-learning-0>.

In Morocco, the government has tackled learning losses due to COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures with support from the World Bank by piloting a targeted instruction program designed by Pratham and known as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) over the summer of 2022, with plans to roll it out further.⁴ The pilot included 12,000 grades 3–5 students who were lagging their peers in learning achievement. The approach included assessments of Arabic, French, and mathematics, followed by grouping of students by learning level (not age or grade), instruction aimed specifically at those levels, with continuous assessment and regrouping. While an experimental design was not implemented (students were selected, not randomly assigned, into the treatment group), the learning gains for the students participating in the TaRL program appear promising, and the government is intending to scale up the program.

In several GCC countries, literacy strategies have been (or are being) developed, along with screening check assessments for early identification of struggling readers, including through the World Bank’s Reimbursable Advisory Services. In Egypt, the World Bank has supported the first national assessment of grade 4 Arabic literacy, which took place in 2022, allowing an in-depth understanding of levels of literacy and factors related to those.

⁴For further details on Pratham’s TaRL methodology, see their website: <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/>.

In Palestine, the World Bank is supporting the expansion of quality preschool provision, with early literacy skills development being a crucial element. A large, multiyear project is also underway to build strong foundational skills for learning and wellbeing. This includes several steps under the proposed path, including developing an Arabic literacy strategy and early grade literacy screening check, along with enhancing Arabic curriculum standards and associated teaching and learning materials from grades 1 to 4.

The World Bank is also invested in producing global public goods including guidance related to using books to supplement early Arabic reading learning for young children; and leveling, inventory, and costing of books.

Conclusion

In partnership with other development organizations and stakeholders, the World Bank is committed to continue supporting collective efforts to improve Arabic language teaching and learning across the MENA region. By working closely with governments, schools, teachers, families, and students, these efforts will work toward reducing the high levels of learning poverty across the region and ensuring that the children and youth of the region have the foundational skills they need to thrive, and that countries build the human capital they need for greater equity and economic growth.

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