



RESEARCH BRIEF

Equitable Access and Inclusive Education for Marginalized Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Enhancing the Impact of Accelerated Education Programs

Impact and Effectiveness of Accelerated Education in Northern Ghana

(March 2023)

Background

This policy brief aims to synthesize key findings and provide evidence-based recommendations to enhance quality education for vulnerable children and youth in West Africa, particularly within the context of accelerated education programs (AEP) and girls' empowerment models (GEM). The study focuses on assessing the effectiveness, adaptability and scalability of these programs and models in addressing barriers to education and empowering vulnerable children and youth in rural, extreme poverty and fragile environments.

Methodology

The study utilizes an exploratory mixed-method approach, with qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, checklists, and observations, while the quantitative data was gathered through administering 800 structured questionnaires to households. Visiting thirty-two communities in eight districts across Northern, Northeast and Upper East regions, Associates For Change (AfC) data was gathered from the following beneficiaries: AEP¹ beneficiaries who had transitioned to formal education; AEP beneficiaries who had dropped out after transitioning; AEP beneficiaries who had entered the workforce directly after the AEP; non-AEP students; and also teachers, parents and education innovators. The data collected covered various themes, including demographic characteristics, social-emotional learning, empowerment, inclusion, access, participation, retention, completion, transition, learning outcomes, and some 'most significant change' stories.

Key Findings

Overall Effectiveness of Accelerated Education Programs

- The process of enrolling beneficiaries in the AEP and girls' model was inclusive, including the involvement of family members, community facilitators and teachers in the AEP registration process. This was transparent and equitable with no financial barriers to the girls' enrolment reported.

- The educational programs provided by the education innovators led to the successful transition of learners: 12,463 GILLBT, 15,929 Afrikids, and 51,819 School for Life (Associates for Change, 2022).
- The involvement of parents and community members has positively influenced parental perspectives, leading to the increased enrolment of girls in formal schools.

Condition of learning within AEP programs across Northern Ghana

- The AEP adopts a more gender equitable, inclusive and flexible approach, combining students of different ages or learning levels in one class, while formal schools follow a structured system with separate classes for different grade levels.
- AEP classes are conducted in the late afternoon, while formal schools follow a morning schedule. This scheduling difference has various advantages, including accommodating working students or providing flexibility for learners with other responsibilities.

Impact 1: AEP on learning outcomes

AEP have a significant positive impact on learning outcomes for learners who transitioned into the formal education system. AEP learners exhibited improved literacy gains in both local language and English, as well as higher competencies in literacy and numeracy as compared to non-AEP learners. The results underscore the effectiveness of the AEP in preparing learners for successful integration into the formal education system (starting from Primary 3 class level) and highlight the importance of continued support and investment in similar accelerated education initiatives.

Learning outcomes regarding proficiency in local language

- Table 1 shows a total of 32 AEP beneficiaries analysed, with 14 (43.8%) being female and 18 (56.2%) being male.
- A little over half (59.4%) of the beneficiaries are at the Initial level, which suggests that a significant portion of AEP graduates in the world of work have basic language skills in ASER-Ghanaian language.
- Males show higher representation at the Initial level (66.7%) compared to females (50.0%), but they (males) show lower success in Letter recognition (16.7%) compared to females, 35.7%.
- Similarly, females have higher representation in the Word recognition category (11.1%) compared to males (7.1%).

Table1: Language proficiency of AEP beneficiaries in the world of work: ASER-Ghanaian language competency levels by gender

Competency level	Female		Male		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Initial level	7	50.0	12	66.7	19	59.4
Letter recognition	5	35.7	3	16.7	8	25.0
Word recognition	1	7.1	2	11.1	3	9.4
Paragraph recognition	1	7.1	0	0.0	1	3.1
Story recognition	0	0.0	1	5.6	1	3.1
Total	14	100.0	18	100.0	32	100.0

English reading proficiency by gender:

- The analysis shows that there are no significant disparities between females and males in overall reading proficiency. However, subtle variations do exist at certain proficiency levels.
- At the Word recognition level, a higher percentage of females (32%) demonstrate the ability to read individual words compared to males (just above 30%).
- 16% of females and 14% of males display proficiency in comprehending longer passages of text.
- At the Story level, 31% of females and 21% of males exhibit the capacity to read and understand complete stories.

Based on this analysis, it can be inferred that females tend to be more proficient in the English language than their male counterparts.

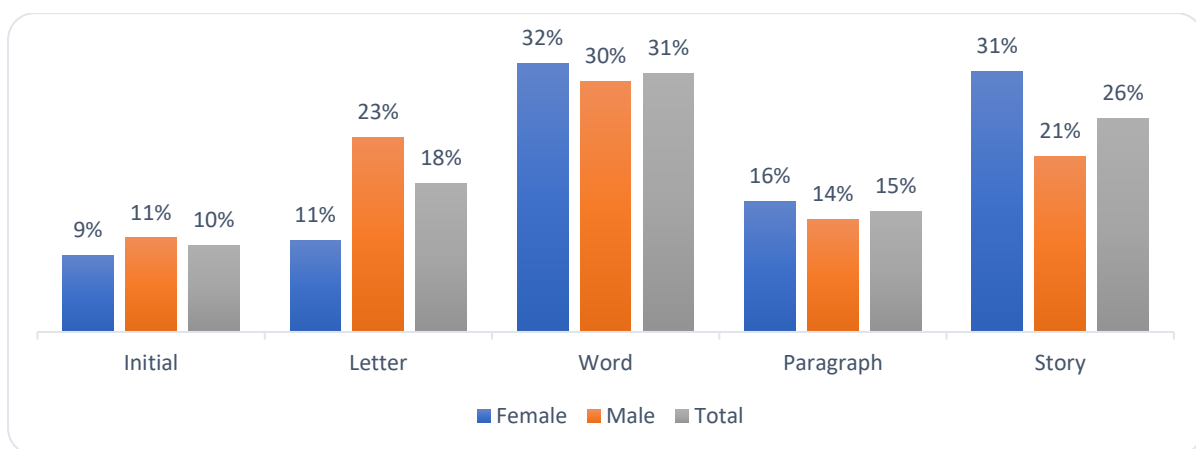


Fig. 1: English reading proficiency by gender

Impact of the AEP on students at upper primary compared to non-AEP students

- 21% of students in the AEP group exhibit the ability to read individual letters compared to 16% in the non-AEP group.
- 32% of students in the AEP group demonstrate the ability to read individual words compared to 29% in the non-AEP group.
- For reading paragraphs, 17% of students in the AEP group display proficiency in comprehending longer passages of text, significantly surpassing the non-AEP groups' (4%).
- Conversely, at the story level, 21% of students in the AEP group show the capacity to read and understand complete stories, whereas the non-AEP group performs notably higher at 36%.

These findings underscore the impact of intervention type on students' reading abilities. The AEP group outperforms the non-AEP group in letter, word and paragraph reading, while the non-AEP group exhibits stronger proficiency in story reading.

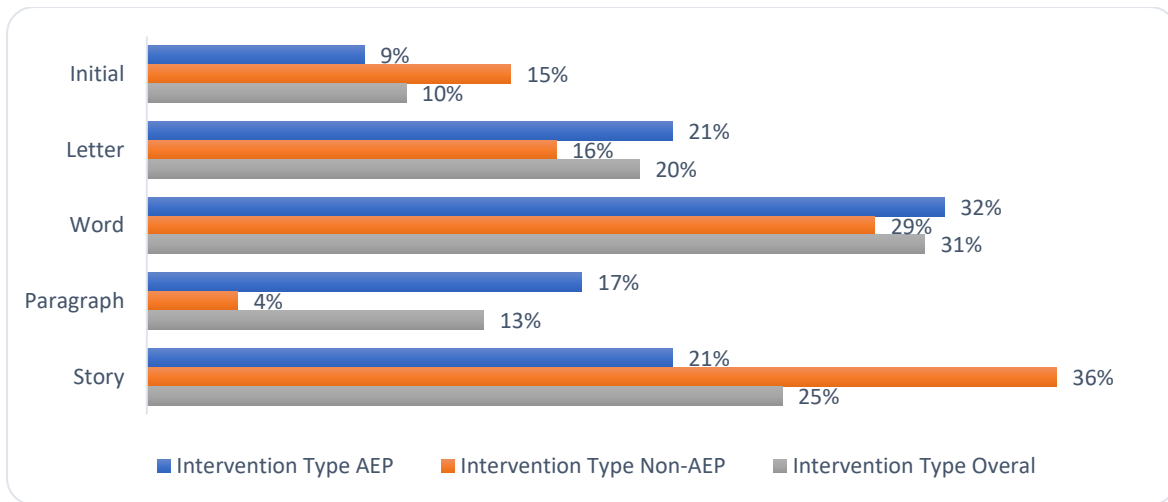


Fig. 2: English reading proficiency by intervention

Level of proficiency in numeracy by gender

- Many children demonstrate proficiency in three key areas: number recognition of numbers from 20 to 100, addition and subtraction with two digits, and multiplication and division with one to nine digits.
- Notably, females tend to excel more than males in these areas, suggesting a possible advantage in certain numeracy skills.
- For addition and subtraction with two digits, 25% of females and 22% of males demonstrate proficiency.
- In multiplication and division with one to nine digits, 34% of females and 29% of males show proficiency, with an overall average of 31%.

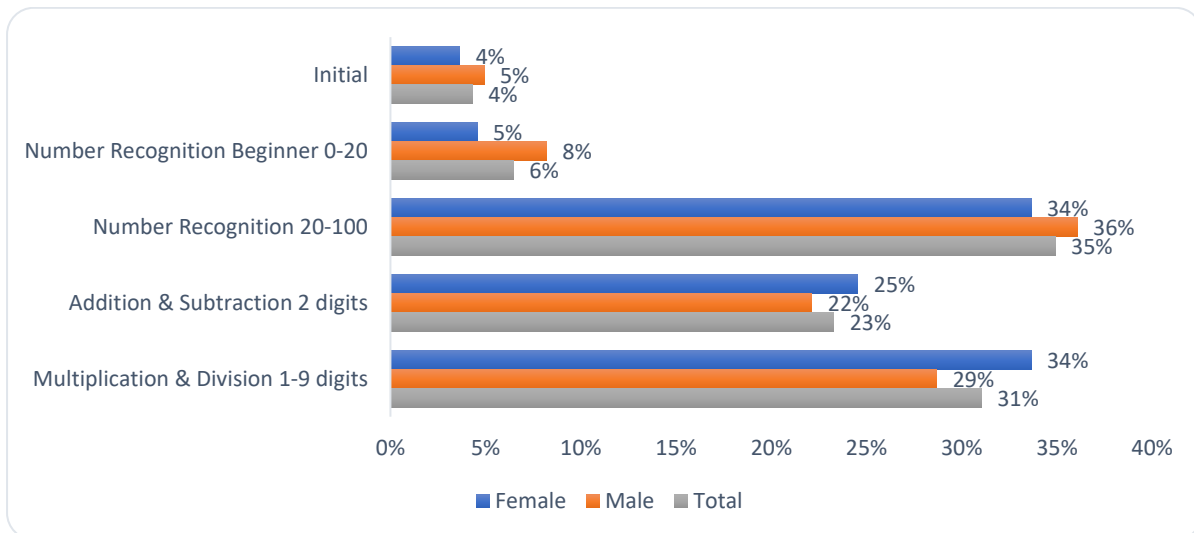


Fig. 3: English reading proficiency by gender

Level of proficiency in numeracy by intervention

While most members of the non-AEP group tend to achieve higher proficiency levels in multiplication and division with one to nine digits, most members of the AEP group perform better in number recognition (both 0-20 and 20-100), and in addition and subtraction with two digits.

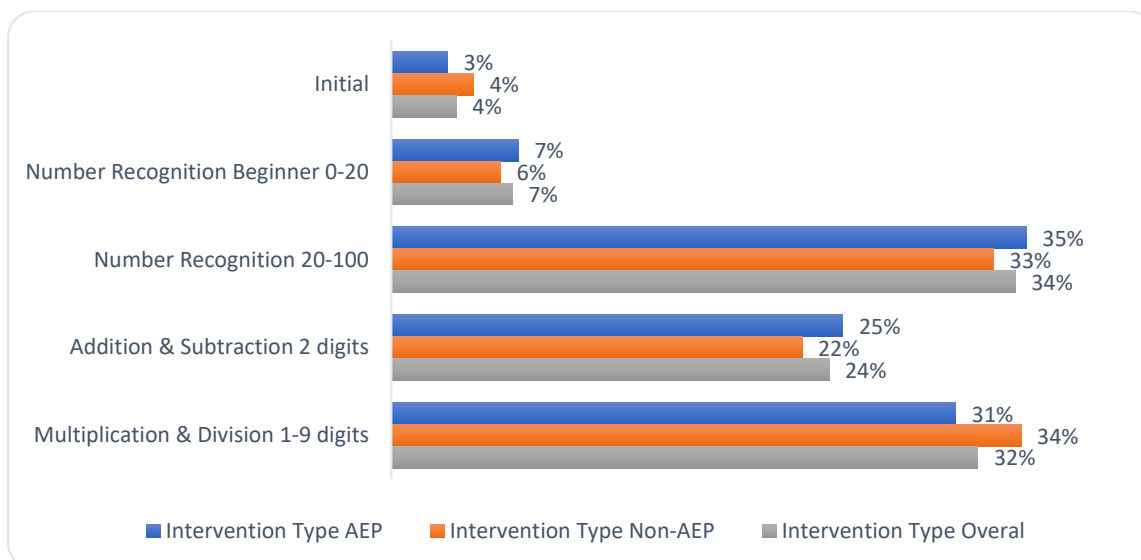


Fig. 4: Numeracy proficiency by intervention

Head teachers and teachers' perceptions of AEP graduates learning performance in school

- Head teachers general perception is that the AEP graduates have shown greater improvement in their reading skills compared to their non-AEP peers. This improvement is particularly evident in local language, thanks to the use of mother tongue-based instruction during the CBE program.
- While female AEP graduates excel in reading (especially in the local language), male AEP graduates tend to dominate in mathematics.

Impact 2: AEP on gender transformative impacts

The AEPs, including CBE, play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and empowering marginalized groups, especially girls and women.

Increased access to education: The education innovators provided flexible and accelerated learning pathways, which enabled more girls to access education and acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. **Voice:** *“With the AEP, I had a chance to go to formal school in a neighboring community because there is none in my community. Though, I am a grown-up, I feel it is never too late to go to school to learn. Now, I have acquired reading and writing skills, and I feel that education has opened many doors I never thought was possible.”* (Male AEP beneficiary in a peri-urban community).

Reduction of gender disparities: By offering tailored support and inclusive learning environments, girls are encouraged to participate and complete their education, narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment. **Voice:** *“In our community, girls were often seen as destined for household chores only. But with the AEP, many girls are taking advantage to attend formal school and thus proving that we can excel in anything we set our minds to do.”* (Female AEP beneficiary in a rural community).

Empowerment and agency: Through the AEPs, girls and women gain knowledge, skills and self-confidence, enabling them to make informed decisions, advocate for their rights, and actively participate in social, economic and political spheres. **Voice:** *“Education made me realize my worth and potential. I now have the courage to speak up for myself and others when*

we are in a group. I feel empowered to make choices that shape my own future.” (Female AEP beneficiary).

Improved livelihoods and economic opportunities: By equipping girls and boys with basic literacy, numeracy and vocation skills, AEPs enhance their employability and income-earning potential, leading to financial independence and ultimately greater decision-making power and autonomy within the household and communities. **Voice:** *“After completing the AEP, I transitioned to the world of work. I practiced and learned sewing and electrical skills. Currently, I have my own tailoring business with 6 apprentices. I also provide electrical services like wiring and addressing faulty electrical problems in my community. These skills support me to take care of my parents, wife and children... AEP has changed my life beyond imagination.”* (Male AEP beneficiary in the world of work in a rural community).

Positive community perception: As the benefits of educating girls become more apparent, rural communities are becoming more supportive of girls’ education, thereby contributing to sustained efforts to promote gender transformation. **Voice:** *“Before, many of the community members didn’t believe in educating girls. Now, we see the difference education makes. Our daughters are confident and capable of doing so many things by themselves. We support them with prayers to pursue their dreams.”* (Community elder and farmer).

Reduction in negative socio-cultural practices: Across all the 32 communities visited there was evidence of a reduction in child marriage /early marriage for girls between (10 to 15 years of age). In addition, more girl children were fostered to biological and non-biological relations due to awareness creation efforts and flexible educational provision (i.e., with the afternoon program, children are able to work in the morning at the farm or market).

Impact 3: AEP on transition and completion at primary level

The AEP make a substantial contribution to supporting transition and completion at the primary level. Through innovative approaches, tailored support, and inclusive environments, AEPs empower out-of-school children to enroll in primary education, experience academic success, and transition smoothly into mainstream schools.

Smooth transition to formal education: AEPs are designed to prepare learners for mainstream education seamlessly. After completing the AEP, learners are often integrated into regular primary schools at an appropriate class level, typically Primary 3. This smooth transition helps AEP beneficiaries continue their education journey without further disruption.

Improved learning outcomes: AEPs employ innovative teaching methods tailored to the specific needs of learners who have missed out on foundational education. AEP focus on bridging learning gaps and enhancing core competencies in literacy and numeracy (as shown in the Graphs above), resulting in improved learning outcomes for AEP participants.

Socio-emotional development: AEPs foster socio-emotional development by creating a nurturing environment where learners feel valued, supported, and encouraged. This holistic approach enhances learners’ self-esteem, confidence, and motivation, positively influencing their academic performance and overall well-being.

Community engagement and involvement: AEPs foster community engagement and involvement by collaborating with parents, caregivers, and local stakeholders. This

collaborative approach strengthens community support for education, leading to sustained efforts to promote primary education for all children.

By investing in AEP, we can create a more inclusive and equitable education system, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to complete their primary education and unlock a brighter future.

Impact 4: AEP on transition to the world of work

The implementation of AEP has significantly impacted the lives of AEP beneficiaries in the world of work, equipping them with valuable knowledge and skills that have proven beneficial in their transition to the world of work.

Practical skills for daily life: AEP beneficiaries have learned practical skills for personal hygiene and maintaining a clean environment. These skills not only contribute to their overall well-being but also inspire them to strive for higher educational levels and better opportunities in life.

Functional literacy and communication skills: AEPs have enabled learners to acquire functional literacy skills, allowing them to read, send and receive text messages. This new found ability is invaluable in the world of work, where effective communication is vital for various job roles.

Enhanced problem-solving abilities: AEP beneficiaries have developed problem-solving abilities, particularly in rural areas where they often encounter unique challenges. These problem-solving skills are essential for adaptability and resourcefulness in various work settings.

AEP have contributed significantly to AEP beneficiaries experiences in the world of work. By imparting essential knowledge, fostering practical skills, and promoting community values, the program has prepared learners to succeed better in the workforce and their daily lives. The newfound confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities acquired through the AEP empower beneficiaries to overcome challenges, pursue further education, and contribute positively to their communities and society at large.

Recommendations

- To address potential gender-based disparities in **reading proficiency**, it is recommended that educational institutions and policy makers implement targeted interventions. These interventions should focus on improving reading skills at the word and paragraph levels for both females and males. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, we can empower all students to achieve their full potential in language proficiency and academic success.
- Investing in teacher training and professional development programs is also crucial to ensure educators are equipped with the latest evidence-based practices in teaching reading effectively.
- Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of evidence-based instructional approaches that cater to diverse learning needs within each intervention type. This can be achieved through ongoing professional development for educators, empowering them with innovative strategies and techniques to engage students effectively.

- Foster collaboration between AEP implementers and formal schools to facilitate smooth transition and support systems for AEP graduates.

By implementing these recommendations, policy makers, educators and stakeholders in the education sector can work together to enhance access to quality education, reduce dropout rates, improve learning outcomes and support students on their academic journey.

Conclusion

Overall, the study underscores the importance of collaboration between AEPs and *formal* schools to facilitate smooth transitions and support systems for AEP graduates. By implementing the recommended strategies, stakeholders in the education sector can work together to enhance access to quality education, reduce dropout rates, and improve learning together for vulnerable children and youth in rural, extreme poverty, and fragile environments in Ghana. By doing so, we can take significant strides towards empowering the next generation and building a more equitable and prosperous future for the country.

Next steps

Assess the contextual environment and cost effectiveness for the sustainability and scalability of an Accelerated Education Program in Ghana.

For more information about the effectiveness study, please contact:

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