Skills development: Helping youth navigate O/L hurdle

By Ashani Abayasekara and Nisha Arunatilake

The G.C.E Ordinary Level examination is a watershed in education for youth in Sri Lanka. Success at the O-Levels opens avenues for further education and better skills, but for many, this is a full stop in education due to poor performance. Education and skills are essential to empower youth, a key goal on World Youth Skills Day that was commemorated yesterday - 15 July.

This March, as usual, when O-Level results were released, articles spotlighting top performers and their schools abounded in the Media. What factors contribute to good performance at examinations? Is it the ability of individual students or is it the influence of schools and teachers? However, low scorers at the O-Levels received hardly any attention. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), in 2015, nearly half the number of students (45%) either failed or partially passed the O-Levels due to failing in Mathematics. Who are they and which schools are they from? Why are they unable to keep up with their more successful peers? What are the most effective ways to improve pass rates? These are important questions to ponder, especially when trying to maximize the efficiency of government educational budget allocations.

To shed light on some of these issues, this article examines whether and to what extent, school-level resources have an impact on O-Level performance. It focuses on several socio-economic, school, teacher and principal characteristics. These included the share of grade six students who gained admission to a school via the grade five scholarship examination – as an indicator of student ability – criteria measuring a school's ranking, funds generated at school-level and several variables capturing teachers' and principals' qualifications and experience (Box 1). O-Level performance was measured as the share of students who sit for the O-Levels who qualify to continue to Advanced Level (A-Level) classes. Three econometric models were estimated, using data from the 2016 School Census of government schools conducted by MOE.

Significant school level impact

Many school-level factors have a significant impact on O-Level performance, although these effects are not of a large magnitude. Schools that have higher shares of grade six scholarship holders, community funds and qualified and experienced teachers for Mathematics and the first language – the two subjects for which at least a simple pass is compulsory at the O-Levels – report better average results. Teachers going on leave, considerably lowers O-Level results. A school's ranking based on type, size, and...
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Policy suggestions
Pay special attention to improve performance standards in smaller, 1C (schools that offer only Commerce and Arts streams for A-Levels), and Type 2 schools (secondary schools that end at O-Levels). The finding that O-Level performance is lower for both smaller schools and 1C and Type 2 schools, even after controlling for the share of scholarship holders, indicating that lower performance is not only due to differences in ability. These schools thus require special attention if overall O-Level performance is to be increased nationally. Develop policies to ensure that schools attract and cultivate in-field and experienced teachers (Box 1).

As Figure 2 shows, schools that report the best O-Level results (good performers) have more than adequate numbers of Mathematics teachers (a share of over one), a majority (44%) of whom are both in-field and experienced. In contrast, very poor performing schools have a shortage of Mathematics teachers and a large share of unqualified teachers. The share of in-field but inexperienced Mathematics teachers – representative of recent qualified graduates with low experience – is also relatively high, even among better performing schools. Measures are therefore needed to reduce the numbers of unqualified and in-field inexperienced teachers, while at the same time increasing the shares of in-field and experienced teachers. Given that a teacher gains sufficient experience within a three to five-year period under Sri Lanka’s teacher recruitment structure, the target should be to expand the share of qualified and experienced teachers to at least 80%, from the current 40%. Meeting this target will depend on systematic training and recruitment of teachers into the Teacher Service.

Put in place incentive schemes for teachers to reduce leave of absence and take measures to provide substitute teachers in the absence of regular teachers. The findings show that student achievement is low in schools when the number of leave days taken by teachers is high. The average share of teacher leave days of total working school days stands at 15%, which is a significant figure.

Enhance the quality of principals’ training programmes and ensure that recruitment to the Principal’s Service is systematic and merit-based. Results suggest that schools managed by better qualified and experienced principals perform better at the O-Levels. It is disturbing to note that on average, 27% of schools in the sample were managed by principals belonging to low ranking Grades – a figure which experienced principals perform better at the O-Levels. It is disturbing to note that on average, 27% of schools in the sample were managed by principals belonging to low ranking Grades – a figure which

Developing schools and improving O-Level performance based on the above recommendations should be a priority to give Sri Lanka’s youth better access to train for better skills.

(Ann Nisha Arunatilake is a Research Fellow and Ashani Abayasekara is a Research Officer at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). This blog draws on an ongoing study on ‘School-Level Bottenlecks in Improving O-Level Performance Rates in Sri Lanka’ carried out by the writers. To view this article online and to share your comments, visit the IPS Blog ‘Talking Economics’ - http://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/)

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