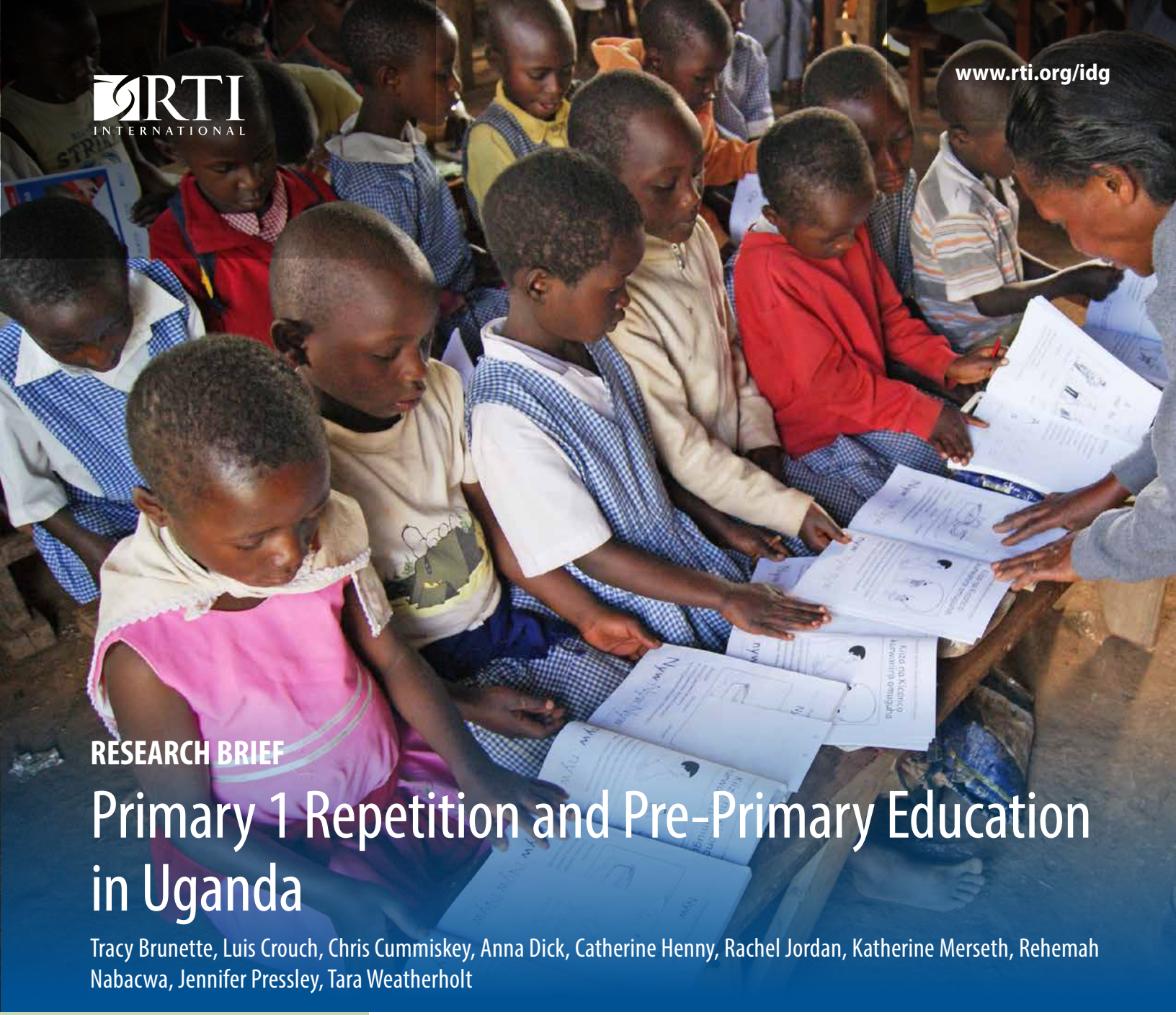

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Primary 1 Repetition and Pre-Primary Education in Uganda

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As a result of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and reform efforts, primary school enrollment in Uganda doubled from 2.9 million in 1995 to 5.8 million by 1998. By 2016, enrollment had reached 8.3 million. Although enrollment gains have been dramatic, the completion rate has stalled for at least a decade, with only about 60% of learners completing primary school. RTI International conducted research that suggests this is due to problems that begin in the first few grades of primary school (and earlier). Primary 1 (P1) repetition is partially attributed to lack of access to early childhood educational opportunities. This brief summarizes these and other key findings of the research, "Repetition of Primary 1 and Pre-Primary Education in Uganda," published in 2017.

Did you know?

High repetition rates have implications for efficient use of scarce education resources and learners' ability to successfully complete repetition primary school.

Expanding access to pre-primary education can

reduce PI repetition rates by 50%

leading to significant savings to the Ugandan Government.

70%

more children are enrolled in P1 than there are in the appropriate age cohort in the population.

According to EMIS enrollment data and population data

In Uganda, and other countries in the region, more children are enrolled in P1 than there are children in the population of the appropriate age, suggesting that some enrolled children are under- or over-age for the grade. Drastic enrollment declines from P1 to P2 are commonly attributed to learners dropping out, but may in fact be a sign of under-reported P1 repetition.

Crouch and Merseth (2017) suggest that the inflated enrollment in early primary grades may be related to limited access to pre-primary education and that the cost of pre-primary is essentially already being paid for by governments because they are paying for learners to attend P1 more than once (and inflating class sizes, which lowers the quality of learning, further increasing the chances of repeating).

The findings described in this study confirm this situation in Uganda, using data collected from two distinct districts: Mbale (a "low-risk" district with relatively low early primary repetition and high pre-primary school enrollment) and Kumi (a "high-risk" district with relatively high early primary repetition and low pre-primary school enrollment).

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the enrollment and age distribution of students enrolled in P1?
- What is the real repetition rate in P1 according to the Education Management Information system (EMIS), school records, teachers, and parents?
- What is the relationship between repetition and age of enrollment in P1?
- What is the relationship between enrollment in pre-primary education and P1 repetition?
- What are parents' attitudes and expectations about pre-primary education and repetition in P1?

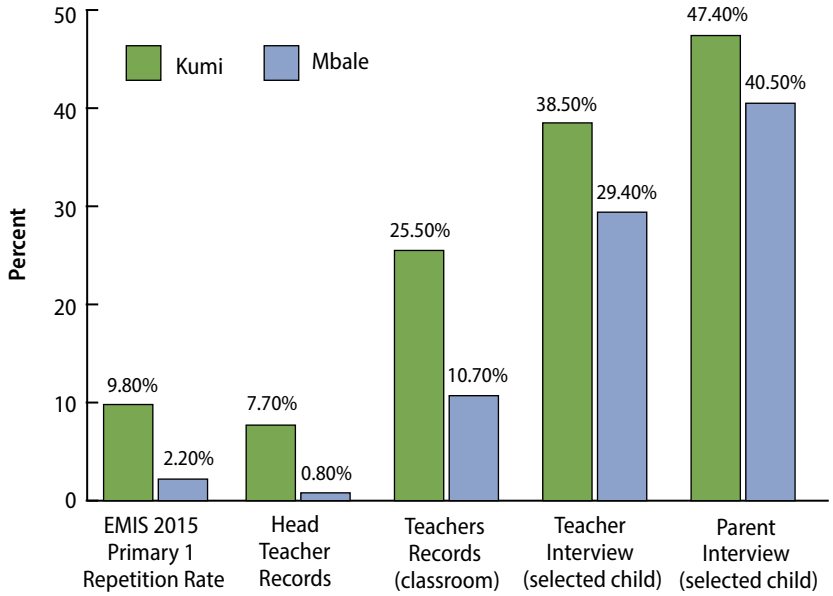
Enrollment and age distribution in Primary 1

Children were found to be both above and below the appropriate age while attending P1. Of the P1 learners, 62% were found to be of the "right age" (6 or 7). Most children who were not of the appropriate age were reported to be over-age (31%), and a much smaller percentage were underage (7%) according to parent interview data. Teacher and head teacher records show even lower underage enrollment (less than 2%). Although official policy calls for school entry at age 6, there are incentives for schools to admit learners of all ages because school funds are tied to enrollment. The fact that 18% of parents believe children should start P1 at age 5 or younger, but only 6% of children in our sample were reported to be age 5 or younger, suggests a discrepancy between what parents believe and what they report regarding their child's age and hints at the possibility of misreporting. The high percentage of over-age learners suggests hidden repetition or late enrollment in P1.

Real repetition in Primary 1

P1 repetition rates were found to be much higher based on teacher and parent interviews than what schools report to the Ministry. Reported rates varied from 4.8% according to head teacher records to 43.8% according to parent interviews about their own children. The P1 repetition rate from EMIS was 5.6%, teacher

Figure 1. Comparison of repetition rates by source and district



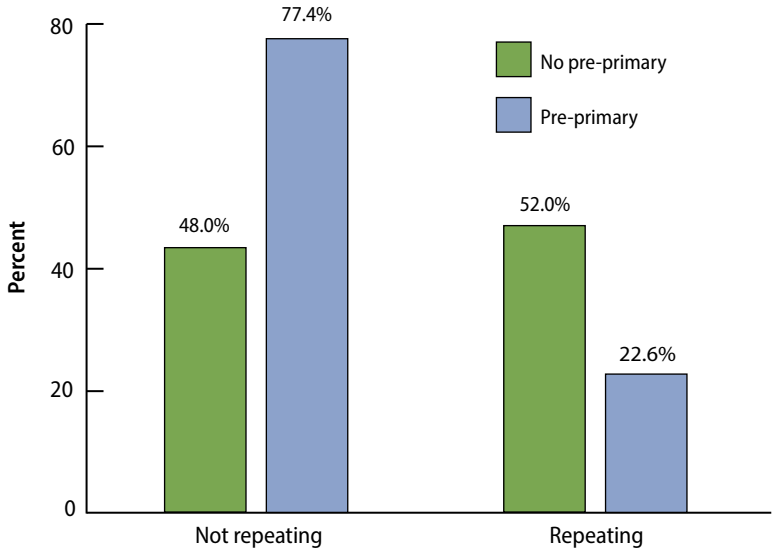
Source: Calculated from survey data.

records 18.0%, and teacher interviews 33.8%. There were no significant gender differences in repetition rates.

Relationship between pre-primary enrollment and Primary 1 repetition

The research found that P1 repetition is associated with a lack of pre-primary education. The study confirmed that children who attend pre-primary are less likely to repeat P1 – children who did not go to pre-primary have a 52% chance of repeating P1, and that chance decreases to 23% if they attended pre-primary. The data also show that attending pre-primary for two years has a stronger effect on reducing P1 repetition than attending for just one year. The protective effect of pre-primary attendance on repetition is the same for boys as for girls.

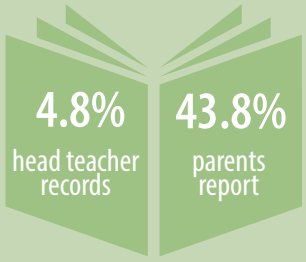
Figure 2. Protective effect of pre-primary on P1 repetition



Did you know?

There is significant variation in reported repetition rates in P1 in Uganda.

According to **head teacher records,** the repetition rate in P1 is **4.8%,** but . . .



Repetiton Rates in P1

parents report a repetition rate nearly **ten times higher – 43.8%.**

Children who **do not attend pre-primary** are **more than twice as likely to repeat P1** than children who do attend pre-primary.

Did you know?

The protective effect of pre-primary attendance on repetition is the same for boys as for girls.

28% of parents send their children to P1 early instead of to pre-primary, expecting that they will repeat the grade. The main reason parents cited for **not sending their children to pre-primary was inability to pay** for it.

Relationship between repetition and age of Primary 1 enrollment

The research found that children who start P1 younger than age 6 are more likely to repeat the grade. This aligns with developmental expectations about children's ability to adapt to and succeed in school (e.g., less mature children will have more difficulty than more mature children). At the same time, there is evidence that some parents knowingly send their children to school early with the expectation that they may learn less and repeat. Of the parents interviewed, 28% said that they sent their children "early" to P1 instead of to pre-primary. In fact, experience working in primary schools in Uganda has shown that some young learners may be admitted into the "P1B" class (formally or informally) with the expectation that they will join "P1A" the following year – an admission that they are expected to repeat.

Parents' attitudes and expectations about pre-primary education and repetition in Primary 1

Interviews with parents found that they have fairly accurate knowledge of the correct age (according to policy) for a child to enroll in pre-primary education and P1. This suggests that a lack of information among parents is not the main cause of the repetition problem in P1 or low pre-primary enrollment. However, the research found that parents' expectations for learning in pre-primary (such as learning how to read) may not be developmentally appropriate. If developmental rather than academic aspects of early learning were emphasized with parents, they might realize that P1 is not a suitable substitute for pre-primary.

Virtually all parents who did not send their children to pre-primary school cited the inability to pay for it as the reason for their decision – 93% in Kumi, the high-risk district, and 73% in Mbale, the low-risk district. Additionally, about a quarter of parents in Mbale noted that not having a pre-primary school nearby was the reason they did not send their child.

This study gives us a snapshot into the problem of high repetition in P1 and identifies two critical levers for intervention: pre-primary school fees and (a distant second) proximity of access to pre-primary school.