Introduction

Studies have shown that the amount of time students spend engaged in learning tasks is related to learning outcomes. However, schools often offer to the students only a fraction of the time that governments pay for, and schools in lower-income areas often offer less time than governments plan for students. An assessment of the amount of time used in the schools of Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana and the Brazilian state of Pernambuco showed that the percentage of time that students were engaged in learning vis-à-vis government expectations ranged from 77.9% in Tunisia to 38.7% in Ghana. To ensure service delivery to the poor, local governance must improve. Community organizations and other local governing bodies must be empowered to ensure that schools offer students the amount of time governments mandate, verify teacher attendance, and monitor students’ acquisition of basic skills through simple means, such as oral reading tests.

Time loss in schools

In 2006, a non-governmental organization decided to find out how well children could read in the early grades of various provinces of Cameroon. Oral reading tests in various languages were given to samples of students. From the 848 students in grades 1–3 of one province, 749 could not read a single word. Even the top 10 readers read 12–27 words per minute in
English or in the local language. This speed is far below the 45–60 words per minute needed to make sense of text (Abadzi, 2006, p. 28). Only in grade 4 did students become able to decipher text to some extent and that text was at the level that kindergarten children in the US are expected to perform. The study also found an attrition rate of 40% between grade 1 and 6, as well as many sixth graders who could not read. One important cause was the use of instructional time. Classroom observations suggested a link between the amount of time students spent in reading practice and learning outcomes. Teachers were often late or absent, and the poorer students got less instruction than the ones who were better off and attended private schools. The data of the study were shown to the provincial and central authorities, but the response was “professional disinterest”. Senior staff was aware of the problem, but felt that there was little or nothing that could be done about it.

This anecdote is only one of many instances seen in lower-income countries where students’ welfare is short-changed by helplessness or a lack of concern by officials in local and state governments. The teachers and education officials are allowed to deliver poor service to their constituents, who may not know how efficiently schools are supposed to operate. Under these circumstances, only the very bright ones succeed without private tutoring. Education is given nominally “for all”, but in fact those who benefit from minimal teaching are very few.

The Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) of the World Bank has observed classes in hundreds of primary and secondary schools. In low-income areas worldwide, from Brazil to Niger, only a fraction of the intended instructional time is used for learning tasks. Sometimes schools are found closed, particularly before or after holidays; they may start late in the day or end early, due to teacher delays and other engagements, and thus may teach only for 2–3 hours a day per shift. When teachers are present, they may be engaged in activities other than teaching and spend much class time in handing out textbooks, doing small chores, and copying on the blackboard. A striking symptom of this failure to teach in some countries is an inability to read fluently (if at all) until the later primary grades (IEG, 2006). Lacking parental support, poorer students tend to fall behind early and repeat grades or drop out illiterate. School councils and village education committees often do not know how much time their children ought to be spending in learning activities and have no basis for demanding what is due to them.

Instructional time should be an important accountability tool for those who finance education. Government revenues and private investments pay for teachers’ salaries, buildings, teacher training and textbooks, and it is expected that 100% of this investment be used for student learning. In fact, an hour of class in a particular school corresponds to a fraction of the amount of time schools officially operate (about 200 days, 4–5 hours per day at the primary level). Governments’ intentions to provide a certain number of instructional hours are defeated at the local level. However, data have rarely been collected to demonstrate the links between instructional time loss, local-level governance, and potentially effective remedies. The subsequent sections of this paper show what is known about instructional time, means to assess it, and the implications for improvement through better governance.

When and how is instructional time lost? Some of the culprits include long matriculation periods, in-service teacher training, climatic conditions and poorly maintained