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A LIFE IN RESEARCH

DR MODUPE ADEFESO-OLATEJU

Meet the education specialist working to close the gaps in children's learning through an innovative literacy and arithmetic scheme in Nigeria

Dr Modupe (Mo) Adefeso-Olateju and her five siblings were brought up in Lagos. Their father was a caterer who ran industrial kitchens for a living, while their mother retired from nursing at 50 and started a school.

"Every dish my dad made had to be perfect. He codified everything," says Mo. "My mother, on the other hand, loved the children in her school. I was keen to work with children like mum, with my dad's approach to perfection."

Mo studied Educational Administration at the University of Lagos. During teaching practice, she worked in a state school close to the university. "I was trying to bring my dad's precision into a room full of Grade 7 children that I could not help because they were so many, and the resources were so few. It broke my heart. I imagined I could help many more if I worked at a higher level."

During her PhD, Mo observed that although rigorous research was being conducted in academic institutions, this was not changing practice at scale in her country. She could not find a job that would help her seal this gap while fulfilling one of her passions of growing a team. Her husband prompted her, asking: "Why are you waiting for someone to give you a platform? Set up your own and get this thing done."

Mo established The Education Parnership (TEP) Centre in 2013 with just two other employees. Initially, they were advising governments and donors, but by 2015 they were bringing together the private and public sectors to design effective interventions and implement them.

TEP Centre adopted a model they named LEARNigeria (also known in East Africa at the time as Uwezo and in India and Pakistan as ASER). An acronym for Let's Engage, Assess &

LEARNigeria, an acronym for Let's Engage, Assess & Report Nigeria, aims to assess foundational literacy and numeracy competencies among children aged 5-15 years in Nigeria through the collection of household citizen data

Mo's father provided perspective, telling her: "Your job needs to be something that makes you wake up full of joy at the prospect of what you will do each day." This motivated her journey of purposeful meandering. Mo worked for a bank then management consulting firm Accenture. Then a stint as a volunteer for an education programme, Junior Achievement Nigeria (JAN), rekindled her joy of teaching. She resigned from Accenture to work full time with JAN. During this time, she observed the importance of the public and private sector working together to solve education challenges and this motivated her to pursue a Master's degree at the University of London Institute of Education.

Encouraged by her supervisor, Mo returned after a year and a half to pursue a PhD, seeking to explore public-private education partnerships. Her research found that the reason private schools outperformed public schools was connected to a strong culture of leadership, accountability and motivation. She also provided a critical lens through which to view public-private partnerships in education.

Report Nigeria, the project aims to assess foundational literacy and numeracy competencies among children aged 5-15 years in Nigeria through the collection of household citizen data.

The very first survey found that across Nigeria, 45% of children aged 14-15 could only read a text set for eight-year-olds. LEARNigeria's Remedial Programme (LRP) aims to close the gaps in children's learning. An effective and low-cost strategy, it helps children aged seven and above 'catch up' with basic reading and arithmetic skills in a short period of time. So far, the results have been promising: after 24 days of implementing the remedial programme in Kano, the share of children at beginner level (children unable to recognise syllables) dropped from 71% to 34%, while the proportion of children competent at story level (an indicator of basic literacy) increased from zero to 7%.

But Mo is not done yet with her purpose-driven work: "I would like to do more research that would help policy makers understand the evidence. I want policy makers to demand research that solves their problems in the education sector."