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INVESTIGATING HOW FORMER SPEED SCHOOL STUDENTS EXCEL IN CONVENTIONAL CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

From early in Geneva Global's experience with Speed School in Ethiopia (since 2011) and Uganda (since 2016), teachers, school leaders, and local education officials and agents have routinely commented that former Speed School students tend to surpass both academically and socioemotionally their classmates who have only learned in conventional classes. Data gathered by Geneva Global's teams yearly in the two countries as well as two independent longitudinal studies in Ethiopia and one in Uganda share evidence to show such reports to be true. Yet, it has never been completely clear why these students continue to excel year in and year out even as they progress far into their formal studies. The program's operators and associated researchers have harbored ideas that may explain why this happens, but none have ever studied the question rigorously, until now.

In 2024, each country team joined with local education partners – civil society grantees in Ethiopia and district inspectors and teacher trainers in Uganda – to explore empirically why former Speed School students regularly outperform their classmates. What is it, we asked, that enables these students to achieve exceptional performance both academically and socioemotionally even after they have transitioned to the more difficult environment of conventional school classrooms, characterized by much larger class sizes, teacher-centered instruction, and scarce learning materials?

The Study's Design

The study surveyed 242 teachers of Grade 5 or 6 classes across 97 schools divided nearly evenly across the two countries. This allowed us to compare students who had completed Speed School at least two years before with the classmates whom they joined in conventional classes. Given that teachers of upper primary grades teach just one or two subjects, they provided insights drawn from their experience with more than one class, reflecting on an average of 152 students each (or nearly 37,000 total students). In Ethiopia, all 120 teachers based their appraisals on at least two years of teaching former Speed School students. In Uganda, over 75% of the 122 teachers had taught former Speed School students for at least that long.

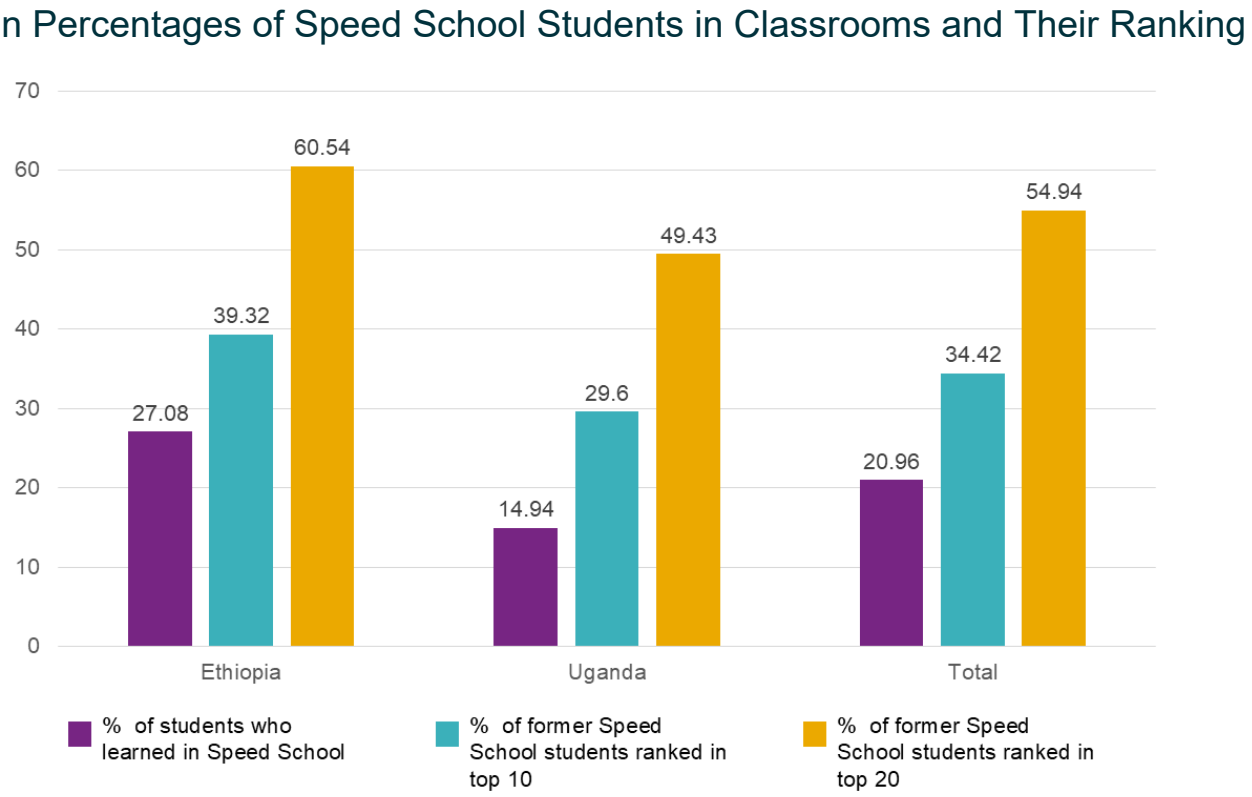
Comparing the Two Groups' Class Rankings

The study compared the two groups of students from a pair of angles. The first sought to confirm empirically that former Speed School students were in fact achieving academically better than their fully conventionally educated counterparts. The teachers' reports verified this soundly, as shown in Exhibit A. While former Speed School students constituted less than a quarter of the average 152 students on which the teachers reported (27% in Ethiopia and 15% in Uganda), they comprised over one-third of the top ten academic performers (39 % in Ethiopia and 30% in Uganda) and well over half the top 20 academic performers (60% in Ethiopia and 55% in Uganda).

The second angle aimed to explain these results. In Speed School, students learn in small groups, engaging in highly active learning with abundant low- and no-cost learning materials. Class sizes have been capped at 36. Teachers feature continuous formative assessment as an essential aspect of their instruction, and they enliven nearly every lesson by bringing in content and practical applications from the local context while creating learning tasks that purposefully require learners to hone their personal competencies such as collaboration, communication, creativity, planning, and perseverance. The

question that we strived to answer was: What do Speed School students learn *in addition to content* in these instructional settings that permit them to continue to learn and thrive better even in the routinely stultifying educational setting of most conventional classrooms?

Exhibit A: Mean Percentages and Class Rankings of Former Speed School Students



Comparing Learning Strategies and Behaviors

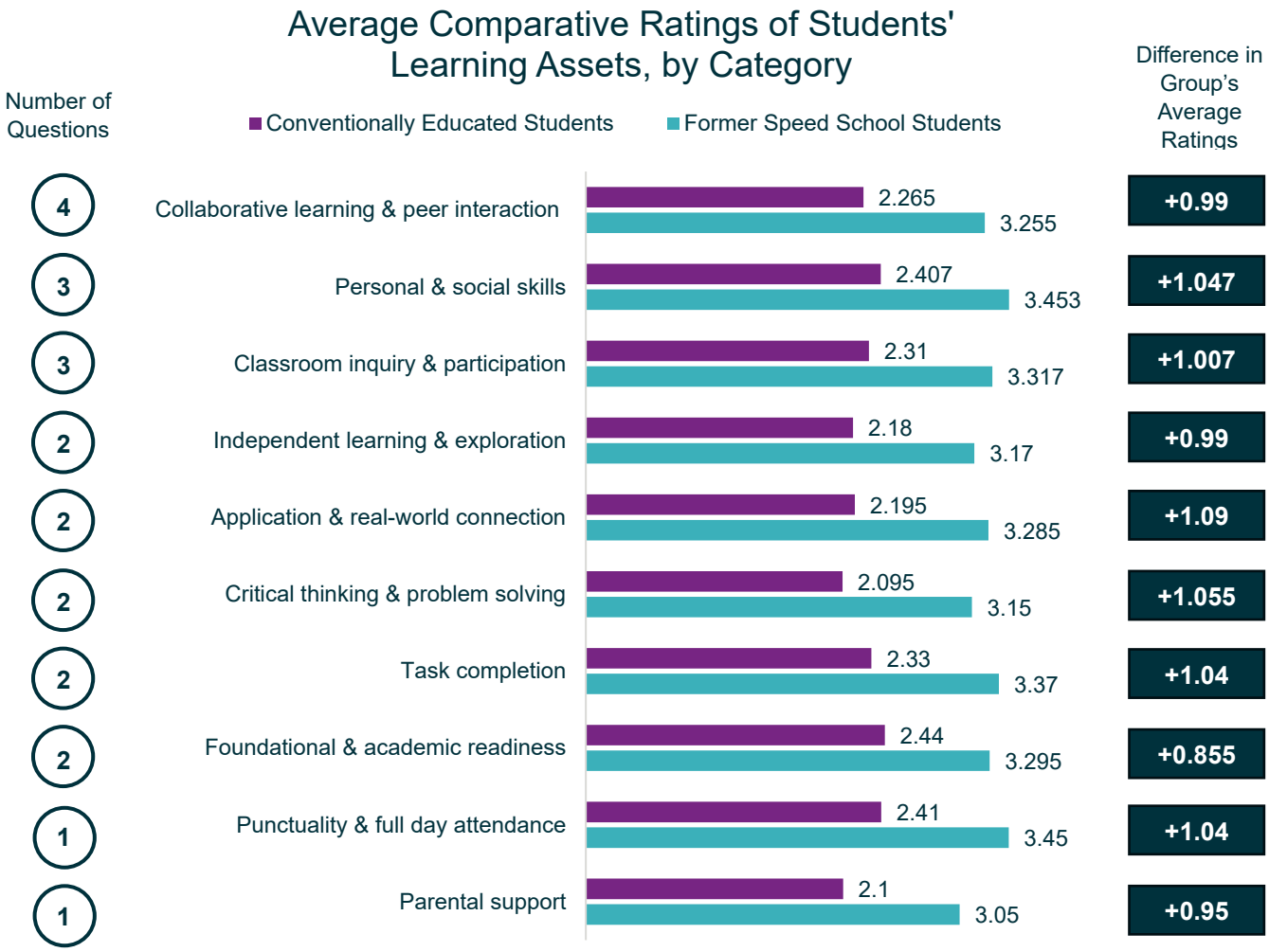
The study asked teachers to compare the two groups of students across 23 different learning strategies and behaviors. The aim was to determine if there are concrete learning assets that students acquire in Speed School that help them to excel after they join conventional classes. For each item, the teachers indicated for the two groups the degree to which students tend to use or exhibit the different strategies or behaviors, ranking them from "0" – "Used rarely or not at all" – to "4" – "Used regularly by all or most students."

For the analysis, we organized the 23 items into ten categories (see Annex). For every category and, in fact, for all items and in both countries, the teachers consistently rated the former Speed School students approximately a full point higher than their counterparts (see Exhibit B). The survey began with two questions about students' knowledge assets at the start of the year, one about their literacy levels and the other about their numeracy. Their purpose was to provide rough insight into the relative importance of foundational knowledge on the former Speed School students' superior class rankings. While statistically highly significant, the size of the difference was smaller than for all the other assets, suggesting that how students learn may be more impactful for future academic success than what they know at the start, though core knowledge is undoubtedly essential.

In only one instance was the difference not statistically significant. This was "parental support." The statistical non-significance of this category might actually serve as an even greater endorsement of the importance of the students' acquired learning assets. Their advantage traces directly to them, not to

their home setting. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that the size of the Speed School effect might even be larger across the categories if not for the influence of the former Speed School students on their classmates and even the teacher. Many attest that the former Speed School students' habits often "rub off" onto the rest, without which impact the ratings the teachers gave to this group might otherwise be even lower.

Exhibit B: Average Comparative Ratings of Students' Learning Assets, By Category



Explaining the Differences to the Speed School Model

The model's main implementers and partners in both countries attribute this difference directly to the pedagogy and classroom management that characterize the Speed School classroom. Mentioned briefly above, the model's main defining features comprise the following:

- Students sit and work in small groups of six, supporting each other's learning constantly through collaboration, peer learning, and peer assessment;
- Instruction is predominantly learner-centered and activity-based, covering curricular content in a wide variety of ways and engaging students in, as one former Speed School student put it, in "learning beyond learning;" and towards this end

- All lessons are “C-P-C” – **C**ontextualized, **P**ractical, and engage personal **C**ompetencies –, strengthening students’ learning and motivation by making lessons relevant and hands-on while assigning learning tasks that deliberately and repeatedly require students to foster their skills of collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, planning, organization, and many more.

In sum, Speed School facilitators learn to prioritize learning over teaching in their instruction.

Final Thoughts

Neither Speed School students nor facilitators come to the model with the skill or inclination to learn in the ways outlined above. While Speed School instruction closely mimics the curiosity-driven, highly social approach that children naturally exhibit when learning “out in the wild” – i.e., at home and in the community –, it relies on strategies and behaviors that teachers in conventional classes, sadly, regularly reject and often even punish. For example, collaboration may be treated as cheating, curiosity as disobedience, and initiative and creativity as disruption. This is doubly troubling. For one, it impedes the strong holistic, or competency-based learning of that a growing number of national education systems are seeking. Rather, learning remains limited to the shallow type that Bloom (1956) places at the bottom of his pyramid: Remember.

Two, and arguably more disturbing, is what this means for school graduates as they transition to life and livelihood. As this study and other research on the Speed School program show, the learning assets that former Speed School students bring with them into conventional classes clearly contribute to stronger and more durable academic outcomes. Yet, they also constitute vital skills and behaviors that will equip former students for success and lifelong learning as adults, readying them equally for their future economic, family, and social roles and responsibilities. At that time, knowledge remembered solely for passing tests will offer little value to the students themselves or to society. Instead, they will need to analyze and use not just what they have already learned but also, critically, an endless body of new knowledge and skills that they will acquire on their own and with family, friends, and colleagues to find success and fulfillment.

The original motivation behind the Speed School program was to provide out-of-school children who are too old to enter school at Grade 1 a “second chance” to join formal education. Viewed as a “nonformal” education option, the program’s implementers had the freedom to color outside the lines of the prevailing pedagogic orthodoxy both by using a condensed version of the official curriculum and by favoring truly learner-centered, activity-based methods. As the program’s “graduates” continue to transition to conventional classrooms and demonstrate their relative excellence, it remains obvious to educators across the system that the model is not only valuable to expand school access. It also represents a means to attain greater quality teaching and learning across all of formal education. This is the path that Geneva Global is now pursuing deliberately with education leaders and other partners in both countries, focusing similarly beyond WHAT teachers must know to imbue students with the learning strategies and behaviors for future academic (and life) success to equip and motivate them with HOW to do this (see Muskin, 2024). This is the story that we will continue to research and about which we look forward to sharing more in the future.

Annex: All 23 Survey Questions, Grouped by Category

Foundational Academic Readiness	• Pupils began the school year with the expected knowledge & skills in literacy. • Pupils began the school year with the expected knowledge & skills in numeracy.
Classroom Inquiry and Participation	• Pupils ask questions during lessons when they do not understand something: clarification questions. • Pupils ask questions during lessons to learn more about an aspect of the lesson: probing questions. • Pupils volunteer to provide answers to questions from the teacher.
Independent Learning and Exploration	• Pupils seek to strengthen their learning on their own, outside of school. • Pupils conduct independent activities to learn about their lessons or even other topics. • Pupils demonstrate curiosity, eager to learn more about a topic or topics.
Application and Real-World Connection	• Pupils link lessons to practical aspects or applications from real life during class: contextualization. • Pupils seek to link lessons to practical aspects of real life on their own, outside of school.
Collaborative Learning and Peer Interaction	• Pupils consult with one or more classmates in class for help in understanding aspects of a lesson. • Pupils consult with classmates outside of class to help understand aspects of a lesson better. • Pupils consult pupils from other classes or others outside school for help in understanding a lesson. • Pupils show eagerness and skill to collaborate.
Punctuality and Attendance	• Pupils attend class regularly, arriving on time and remaining through to the end of the school day.
Task Completion and Responsibility	• Pupils perform their in-class assignments completely, neatly, and within the allotted time. • Pupils perform their homework assignments completely, neatly, and within the allotted time.
Parental Support	• Pupils' parents show interest in their children's learning & promote their participation.
Personal & Social Skills	• Pupils are purposeful and organized. • Pupils are sociable and kind. • Pupils communicate clearly and with confidence.
Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving	• Pupils use critical thinking to understand reasons behind topics or challenging what they learn. • Pupils are problem solvers, facing problems with an eagerness and strategies to find solutions.