

Primary education in Morocco: Achievements and limits

Research article



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Abstract

The question of quality education has attracted critical debates not only in Morocco but the world over in the recent years. Several international surveys and meetings have been done and connected to it in order to comprehend possible dynamics with which it is strongly loaded. Despite the progress made in this field, the impact of measures implemented varies greatly from one country to the other. The perceived dysfunctions show that more avenues need to be explored in order to make a sector that is regarded as the first "nursery" for any human capital capable of tackling the challenges of secure and sustainable development more efficient. This article, however, presents some of Morocco's efforts in terms of quantity and quality at the basic education level. It uses data from a variety of sources, including the High Commission for Planning's reports, the Ministry of National Education's reports, and national and international surveys on student achievement. Mixed methods were used in the data collection while both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the data analysis. The main goal was to identify the disparities and fractures in Morocco's education policies, as well as the key dysfunctions that exist at this level.

Keywords: primary education, Morocco, policies, quality, quantitative, qualitative



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1.0 Introduction

It is important to note that in the last twenty years, Morocco has distinguished itself significantly through reshuffles that have affected various sectors of social life. Human rights have grown significantly against a backdrop of reconciliation; the kingdom's political actors have been revitalized, and the democratic process has benefited greatly. However, certain inequalities, particularly those of a socioeconomic nature, persist and thwart any attempt to develop an inclusive growth model (OECD, 2017). Noting that one of the most pronounced deficits in Moroccan primary education is the low level of student achievement and the amplification of inequalities. The Charter emphasizes access to basic education (preschool and primary), believing that "by generalization of education, we must understand the generalization of quality education to all children and young people from Morocco, in preschool, from the age of four to six, and in primary and college, from the age of six to fifteen" (Lever 1 of the Charter). This goal was set to be completed by the end of the decade.

2.0 Limitation of access to pre-school

Considering the role of pre-school education in the success of primary school pupils, Law No. 05-00, promulgated on May 19, 2000, affirms that the generalization of this cycle of education has for objective: "to guarantee equality opportunities for all Moroccan children, to facilitate their physical, cognitive and emotional development and to develop their autonomy and socialization" (Dahir n° 1-00-201 of May 19, 2000 promulgating law n° 05-00 on to the status of preschool education). However, despite the political will to develop preschool education, it is clear that this education cycle is a poor relation in the education system. The absence of direct intervention in the organization and operation as well as the increased disengagement of financial and human responsibility on the part of the supervisory Ministry have led to this cycle being taken over, almost exclusively by the private sector. Being predominant in urban areas, private supply is almost non-existent in rural areas and that of the public is still very limited compared to demand (real and potential), particularly in peri-urban and rural areas. In fact, in 2017, out of 1,342,385 children of preschool age, only 58% benefited, i.e. 778,583 children aged 4 to 5 who were excluded.

Table T1: Evolution of the number of preschools by category and by environment

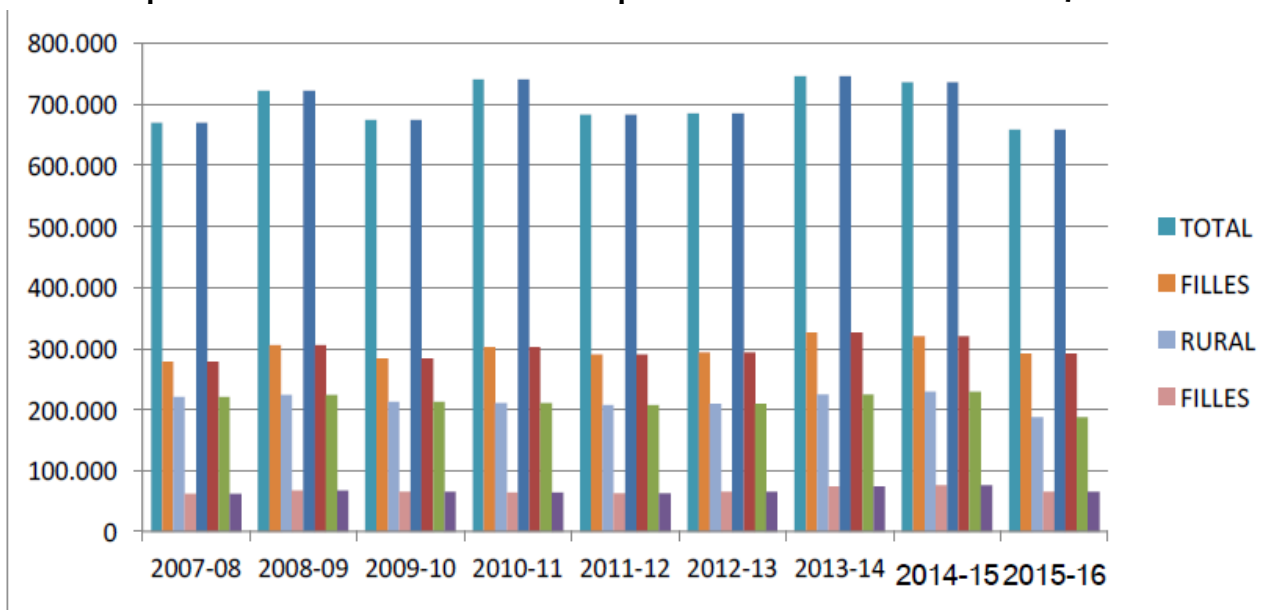
		07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	16-17
Traditional	Urban	8,529	7 454	7,444	7,602	6,864	7134	7 425	7,245
	Rural	13,997	13 823	13 647	13,222	12,042	12 104	12 346	11232
	Total	22,526	21,277	21,091	20 824	18,906	19 238	19,771	18,477
Private	Urban	1,599	1,822	1,933	2,042	2,304	2 238	2,412	2424
	Rural	20	30	47	55	65	69	70	74
	Total	1,619	1,852	1 980	2,097	2369	2 307	2482	2498
Public	Urban	304	396	521	624	668	620		692
	Rural	862	1,013	1,209	1 445	1,583	1320	1,452	1423
	Total	1,166	1,409	1,730	2,069	2 251	1,940	2 105	2115
Total	Urban	10,432	9,672	9,898	10,268	9 836	9,992	10,490	10695

	Rural	14 879	14 866	14,903	14 722	13 690	13,493	13,868	12,395
	Total	25,311	24,538	24,801	24 990	23,526	23,485	24,358	23,090

Source: DSSP / MEN, 2017

As shown in the table above, the overall number of preschool establishments registered a decrease between 2014 and 2017, going from 24,358 to 23,090 establishments, a decrease of 5.2%. Traditional preschool has experienced a significant decline, both in urban and rural areas, falling from 22,526 in 2008 to 18,477 establishments in 2017. In terms of preschool enrollments, the graph below shows that despite the efforts made, access to preschool, even when increasing, remains very limited. The rural environment has declined over the past ten years, dropping from 32.86% in 2007 to 28.42% in 2016 (Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research (2017)). The rate of pre-schooling for girls and even evolving from 41.56% in 2007 to 44.28% in 2016, still remains below the national average. The indicators of the last three years show a clear regression or even an exhaustion of the policies undertaken.

Graph G2: Evolution of the number of preschool students between 2007 and 2016



Source: Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research 2017

Considering the very slow rate of growth of preschool enrollment, it is evident that the expected generalization is still out of reach. We would be tempted to point out that this slowness has enabled the private sector to set up in order to respond favorably to this shortcoming. However, a large part of the children remains excluded because of the inexistence of the private sector in the rural environment and because of the situation of their families, deprived of financial means. To achieve generalized access to all Moroccan children of preschool age (3 to 4 years), the responsibility of the State is engaged in order to implement all the necessary means (infrastructure, qualified personnel, adapted program). The National Charter insists on the importance of preschool and stipulates that “preschool and primary education will be integrated to constitute a coherent educational base, primary education lasting 8 years made up of two

cycles: the basic cycle which will bring together preschool and the first cycle of primary and the intermediate cycle which will consist of the second cycle of primary”.

In addition to this desire to set up quality preschool education accessible to all, the State will also have to face up to the dysfunctions that will probably come in the way. It would be important first of all to develop the quality of traditional preschool in need of means and resources and to overcome the currently dominant inequalities, in particular in comparison with modern preschool which in the majority of cases is addressed to materially well-off families. Secondly, it would be wise to accelerate the pace of generalization so as to respond equitably to the demand that is felt throughout Morocco, because unequal access to preschool will surely have harmful effects on the internal performance of primary education.

3.0 Access to primary education

Primary education, the second level of the school pyramid, is the most developed cycle in terms of reception capacity. Unlike pre-school education, the efforts made have made a palpable contribution to increasing the educational offer and improving access to schooling. According to Article 65 of the Charter, “primary school is made up of two cycles: The first cycle, of two years, has as its main objective the consolidation and extension of preschool learning, to enable all children to acquire Moroccans, arriving at the age of eight, a common base of instruction and socialization; The second cycle, lasting four years, intended for children who have passed the first cycle”. Primary education is provided by public and private establishments. The private sector is made up mainly of national institutions and a few establishments under foreign cultural missions, in particular those from France and the United States. As for the public, it is conceived in two forms: autonomous sectors and school sectors. The autonomous sectors, located in the majority of cases in urban areas, had 3,227 establishments in 2014, of which 2,782 were located in cities. The school sectors, located in rural areas, consist of a mother school, the seat of the administration and several satellite schools scattered in more or less distant douars. In 2014, the school sectors were 4,601 (with 13,226 satellite schools) including 4,264 in rural areas (with 13,034 satellite schools). The insufficiency of mother schools makes it necessary to open satellite schools which generally only have one or 2 levels and one or 2 classrooms. This generates an unfinished and unbalanced school structure, making it necessary to transfer children to other mother schools after one or 2 years of schooling.

Table T2: Number and types of public establishments according to the environment.

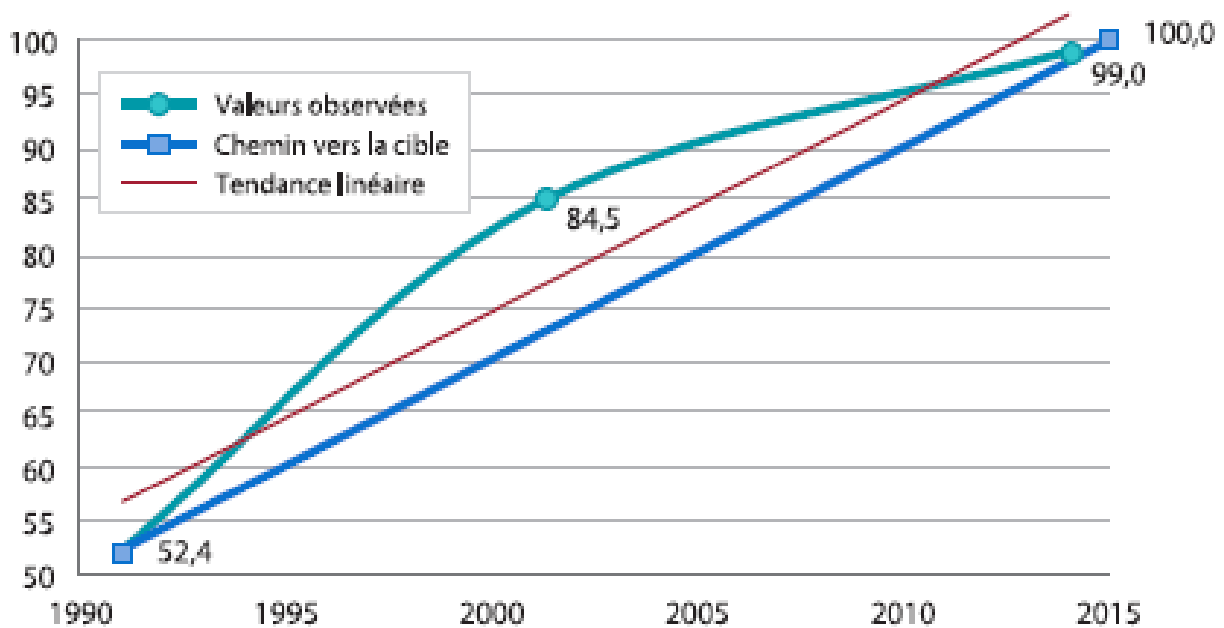
National total	Designations	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14
	Total established public		6970	7003	7054	7141	7208	7369	7458
	<i>School sectors</i>	4057	4,080	4128	4,178	4182	4240	4275	4264
	<i>Autonomous</i>	2,863	2 876	2 885	2 923	2 992	3,090	3 142	3 227
	<i>Autonomous annexes</i>	50	47	41	40	34	39	41	50
	<i>Satellites</i>	13 381	13 451	13,401	13,402	13,304	13,320	13,255	13 226
Rural	Total established public	4287	4,230	4,272	4 351	4,410	4,499	4,565	4,601
	<i>School sectors</i>	3 954	3 932	3 973	4,030	4,054	4 110	4,149	4,142
	<i>Autonomous</i>	320	285	286	308	348	380	407	445
	<i>Autonomous annexes</i>	13	13	13	13	8	9	9	14
	<i>Satellites</i>	13 231	13,224	13,183	13 186	13 109	13 123	13,057	13,034

Source: Statistical collections of the Ministry of National Education (2015)

The school sector in terms of organization, is just a collection of unrelated schools, without administrative and pedagogical cohesion due to the remoteness and isolation of certain satellite schools. On the other hand, considering the material conditions in which this teaching is carried out, these school sectors are characterized by a faculty in the majority of cases newly recruited and therefore having no significant experience. Rarely visited by an inspector or guided by a pedagogical advisor, the teachers are left to their own devices and try in vain to apply their theoretical knowledge acquired in teacher training colleges. The generalization of schooling for all children aged 6 is a first objective dictated by the CNEF (article 28, space 1). Indeed, compulsory schooling is not new, it was first instituted by the dahir n° 1-63-071 of November 13, 1963, which stipulates that "Education is compulsory for Moroccan children of the both sexes from the year in which they reach the age of seven until the age of thirteen years."¹

¹ Dahir n° 1-63-071 of November 13, 1963 relating to the obligation of teaching, Official Bulletin, n° 2665 of 22/11/1963-page: 1769.

Graph G3: Evolution of net enrollment rates in primary education (6-11 years in%)



Source: Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training, Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Management Training

In rural areas, the efforts made to want to preschool girls have been fruitful and the access rate, having reached 99%, is explained here. In 2015, and thanks to social support programs, in particular that of “Tayssir” financial aid, the Royal Initiative “one million school bags” and the creation of boarding schools, the enrollment rate for girls rose from 22, 5% to 100%. The dropout rate is a key indicator for studying the educational path of students during the education cycle. High values of this rate signify the low internal efficiency of the education system. In primary education, after this rate was 4.6% in 2008, it has therefore experienced a sustained decline since the year the national education and training charter came into force to reach 1.00%. 9% in 2016. However, maintaining this downward trend is necessary². In addition, the dropout rate varies according to the level of study. Thus, it increases as one progresses through the years of primary education. As a result, despite the downward trend in dropout, the fifth and sixth year of primary school remains characterized by higher rates than in the first three years. This is a more predominant phenomenon in rural areas than in urban areas, and more particularly among girls.

² Morocco's social indicators 2018, Report of the High Commission for Planning

Table T3: Dropout rate (in%) by sex and level

Indicateurs	Années scolaires							
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Primaire								
Garçons	4,1	2,8	2,4	2,5	1,2	1,8	1,9	1,5
Filles	5,2%	3,9	3,8	4,0	2,7	3,4	4,0	2,4
Total	4,6	3,3	3,1	3,2	1,9	2,5	2,9	1,9
Secondaire collégial								
Garçons	14,0	14,3	11,7	11,2	10,6	11,7	13,6	12,7
Filles	11,9	11,1	9,6	9,3	7,6	9,2	10,4	8,5
Total	13,1	12,9	10,8	10,4	9,3	10,6	12,2	10,8
Secondaire qualifiant								
Garçons	15,6	13,1	11,4	10,7	8,9	11,6	14,3	12,7
Filles	14,4	13,0	11,9	11,4	8,4	12,1	13,6	10,3
Total	15,0	13,0	11,7	11,0	8,7	11,9	13,9	11,5

Source: Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training, Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Management Training

Overall and in view of the evolution of the figures presented, it is obvious that the objectives set out in the various programs have not yet been achieved. In Morocco, schooling problems (access and retention) remain acute and constitute the weak link in the implementation of educational policies.

4.0 Quantitative choices to the detriment of quality

We have seen, in the previous pages, the few characteristics of the evolution of schooling and its limits in the basic cycle (preschool and primary). These limits directly affect the quality of the education provided. From the 90s there is a growing interest in evaluations of the quality of education. Indeed, these evaluations make it possible to determine "how much children are learning and the extent to which their education translates into the overall personal, social and developmental benefits".³ (UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005). Morocco is among the Maghreb countries that have carried out several evaluations either by the Ministry of National Education in collaboration with other international institutions or through participation in several editions of international surveys such as TIMSS and PIRLS. The review of the results of these various assessments unanimously reveals the weakness of the pupils' achievements.

³ UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, Education for All: The Quality Requirement, UNESCO Publishing 2005, p.21.

4.1 Review of the main results of national assessments

As part of the preparation of the Education for All report, the Education System Assessment Department (DESE) conducted a survey in 1999 with the support of UNESCO and UNICEF, the objective is to assess the learning outcomes of students in the fourth year of basic education in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics and everyday life (environment, health, civic life, know-how). The sample that was the subject of the survey was part of a file which lists all the establishments of the first cycle of primary education with at least one class in the fourth year of primary education. The choice of these establishments was made using random sampling techniques and for each establishment selected, only one class of 25 pupils was retained. This resulted in the performance evaluation of 4,249 students (UNESCO & BIE, 2012). The results of this assessment showed that 711 out of 4,249 students reached the proficiency threshold for reading, writing, mathematics and everyday life, ie (16.73%). In addition, interregional and intermilieu disparities were observed. The pupils of the region of Settat recorded the best level of mastery of skills, that is to say a percentage of 37.9%, this rate hardly exceeds 0.7% for the region of Meknès-Tafilalet.

Regarding the analysis by environment, it turned out that around 22.1% of the students who mastered the basic knowledge came from an urban background and that this rate was (13%) for the students from the background. rural. At the same time, the analysis by type of education revealed contrasts between public and private education. In the first, the percentage of students having reached the master's level for all disciplines combined is (15.9%). In the second, this percentage is 27.6%.

Subsequently, a second evaluation was carried out in 2006 by the Ministry of National Education in collaboration with the European Union. The results of the survey show that the performance of pupils in the sixth year of primary school is on the whole very poor. Indeed, (36%) of the students assessed reach the minimum level in Arabic, (18%) in French and (43%) in mathematics. The percentage of those with prior learning deemed acceptable fluctuates around (7%) in Arabic, (1%) in French and (11%) in mathematics.

Following this level considered to be low in the achievements of Moroccan primary school pupils, the first edition of an evaluation program was carried out in 2008 by the National Authority for the Evaluation of School Achievement. The selected sample includes 26,520 primary school pupils. The objective is to assess the achievements of students in the fourth and sixth year in Arabic, French and mathematics. The results of this survey confirm previous results, despite the efforts made by the national education and training charter. Indeed, the average school achievement rates vary, depending on the school level, between (27%) and (36%) in Arabic, (28%) and (35%) in French, (34%) and (44%) in mathematics.

Table T4: Overall acquisition rates according to subject and the primary school level

Materials	4th year	6th year
Arab	27%	36%
French	35%	28%
Mathematics	34%	44%

Source: CSE, PNEA, Report, summary, 2009

The results reveal an insufficient level of achievement in all subjects, except for the sixth year of primary school where this rate is (44%) in mathematics. Thus, the pupils were able to achieve between a third and a half of the objectives assigned in the school programs specific to the primary education cycle. The analysis by gender reveals that the levels of learning achieved by girls in Arabic and French are better than those of boys, and this at all levels of education. Disparities between the various regions of the country and between urban and rural areas have been noted. Indeed, the highest levels of educational achievement in all subjects are recorded in the Grand Casablanca region. At the same time, students from rural areas have levels of academic achievement below those achieved by their peers in urban areas, in all subjects and all levels. The second edition of the PNEA carried out in 2016 confirms the previous results. It reveals a generalized weakness in student achievement for all disciplines and all school levels. Moroccan schoolchildren continue to show deficiencies in basic learning (reading, writing and arithmetic). In short, the assessments carried out within the framework of this program (PNEA 2008 and 2016) are original and considered to be the first benchmark analyzes in terms of the assessment of student achievement in Morocco. In addition, the kingdom is also participating in other evaluations carried out at the international level.

4.2 Reviews of the main results of international assessments

Morocco regularly participates in international assessments of student achievement TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy). The objective of these two surveys is to assess learning outcomes through standardized tests. The TIMSS assessment program developed to test the achievements of pupils in the fourth year of primary school and in the second year of middle school in mathematics and science. The assessment has been done regularly every four years since 1995, making TIMSS 2015 the sixth edition of the International Assessment of Trends in Mathematics and Science. Morocco participated in all editions of the TIMSS survey with the exception of the first one carried out in 1995.

The 1999 edition revealed that the performance of Moroccan students was below the international average. Morocco is ranked second to last on the list for both subjects. In mathematics, on an international average of (487) points, Morocco had obtained 337, a difference of 150 points. For science, it was far from the average set at (488) by 165 points.

The 2003 edition saw the participation of several new Arab countries in addition to Morocco and Tunisia⁴ such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Out of a total of 50 countries that participated in the study, Morocco is ranked 45th. Likewise, although the performance of all eight Arab countries was below the international average, their situation remained better than that of Morocco. In addition, the average scores of students in Morocco in mathematics and science are respectively 148 and 185 points away from the international average.

In 2007, the sample of participating countries was reduced to 36 countries including Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The results of this evaluation show that the Maghreb countries are below the international average and above the average score achieved by Morocco in mathematics and science.

The 2011 edition, the most extensive ever produced to date, concerns 66 countries including 14 Arab countries. In mathematics, Morocco ranked last on the list with an average score of 335 points. The situation is almost the same in science since Morocco ranked second to last for the 4th year of primary school with a score of 376 points.

The results of the last edition carried out in 2015 confirm the weakness of the achievements of Moroccan students. Thus, with an average score of 377 in mathematics and 352 in sciences, Morocco is ranked among the bottom three countries on the list.

In short, the results of the assessment of the achievements of Moroccan students in mathematics and science show that the latter are very weak. The average scores achieved in the different TIMSS editions are summarized in the following table:

**Table T5: Evolution of the average achievement scores of Moroccan students
4th year of primary school since 1999 (TIMSS)**

Average score	In mathematics	In science
1999	337	323
International average	487	488
2003	347	304
International average	495	489
2007	297	341
International average	500	500
2011	335	376
International average	500	500
2015	377	352
International average	500	500

Source: Table produced by the author

⁴ Morocco and Tunisia are the only two Maghreb countries whose survey concerned 4th and 2nd grade students.

The PIRLS survey (Progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS)) assesses reading and reading skills. It has been conducted every five years since 2001 by the IEA. Morocco is the only Maghreb country to have participated in the first three editions of the PIRLS survey. In the 2001 edition of PIRLS, 35 countries participated. The results thus obtained reveal a low score recorded by Morocco which occupies the penultimate place. This situation deteriorated further in 2006, in fact, the average score of 323 points obtained is very far from the international average score, ie a difference of (177) points. Consequently, Morocco is ranked second to last on a list of 40 countries.⁵ The 2011 assessment confirms the drop in the level of student achievement in reading. Indeed, with a score of 310 points, the results are below the international average (500 points). Despite the improvement in the average reading score achieved in the 2016 edition, an increase of 48 points compared to the average score achieved in 2011. The results of Moroccan students remain very low and place the country among the bottom three of the list of 31 participants. The achievements of Moroccan students in reading continue to deteriorate over the years. The scores obtained are presented in the table below:

Table T6: Evolution of the average achievement scores of Moroccan pupils in 4th year of primary school since 2001 (PIRLS)

Years	Average reading score
2001	350
2006	323
2011	310
2016	358

Source: Table produced by the author

Given these worrying results in both science (mathematics and science) and literary (reading) subjects, improving the quality of education provided in primary school is a necessity.

5.0 Conclusion

The results of national and international assessments unanimously confirm the low level of student achievement. It goes without saying that the quantitative expansion which has experienced the Moroccan primary education system since the protectorate does not in itself represent a success, because the policies which set themselves as the primary objective of guaranteeing access to education without necessarily aiming for quality remain constantly in an embryonic state. The generalization of access is certainly a necessary step, but it must be considered primarily preparatory to setting up an effective education system. Access is only a step-by-step concern that should pave the way for mechanisms capable of meeting the challenge of quality, because investment in access only makes sense if it leads to quality.

⁵ The survey noted that 74% of Moroccan schoolchildren do not reach the level of minimum performance required by PIRLS

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