

From Schooling to Learning

IWGE Meeting 2012:
A Summary of Discussions and
Recommendations



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Box 1. List of participants

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The IWGE meeting of 2012 was hosted by the World Bank in Washington DC. There were 70 participants including representatives from agencies and organizations, as well as eminent scholars who were invited to speak on various topics relating to the main theme of the meeting – ‘From Schooling to Learning’ (see *Box 1*, pp. 6-7, for the list of participants).

What follows is a summary of the presentations, discussions, and subsequent recommendations of the 2012 IWGE meeting. A full report including some of the papers presented at the meeting will be published later. This résumé highlights some of the trends in the discussions and deliberations and presents possible areas for active engagement by national educational authorities for accelerated student learning.

Box 2. About the International Working Group on Education (IWGE)

The IWGE is an informal network of aid agencies and foundations. Since its inception in 1972, it has provided a forum for donor agencies to exchange information and work closely together on education issues. The IWGE is guided by a Planning Committee consisting of representatives from the Aga Khan Foundation, GIZ, Sida, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank. Its Secretariat, the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), coordinates the group’s activities.

The network meets regularly to discuss substantive topics of importance to aid

agencies engaged in education. Its meetings have brought together agencies holding varying perspectives and have provided a forum to exchange views and develop a common understanding in support of education. Themes discussed in previous IWGE meetings include: quality and learning (Florence, Italy, 2000), sector-wide approaches (Lisbon, Portugal, 2001), gender parity and education and emergency (Helsinki, Finland, 2003), governance (Washington DC, USA, 2004), education for rural people (Rome, Italy, 2006), capacity development (New York, USA, 2008), and financing and redesigning national strategies and the global aid architecture (Stockholm, Sweden, 2010).

2 FROM SCHOOLING TO LEARNING

The positive economic impact of education is reflected in its contributions to increased national income and individual earnings. Rate of return studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between years of schooling and earnings, with higher returns resulting from schooling in low-income countries and investment in education for women and children from deprived groups. Recent evidence also shows that levels of cognitive and non-cognitive skills acquired by students during schooling, rather than years of schooling, contribute most to increased income and lead to a more highly skilled workforce. Both PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) cite improved workforce skills as a better predictor of economic growth than average levels of schooling. Many social development indicators are also positively associated with educational levels. Lastly, the present focus on universal primary education (UPE) and gender parity in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) places Education For All (EFA) within the framework of a 'collective endeavour to eliminate poverty'. All of the foregoing points constitute good arguments and a solid rationale for investment in education and the expansion of educational provision.

Countries have invested heavily in the education of their citizens, and the flow of funds from bilateral and multilateral agencies to support the educational efforts of national governments has increased since the beginning of this millennium. These efforts by national governments and partner agencies have had a tremendous effect, especially at the level of basic education, in least developed countries.

According to the 2012 Global Monitoring Report (GMR), countries have made remarkable progress in enrolling children at the primary level, increasing net enrolment ratios from 84 per cent in 1999 to 91 per cent in 2010. Total enrolment rose by two-thirds in low-income countries and the number of non-enrolled children declined from 108 million in 1999 to 61 million in 2010. Ensuring that enrolled children progress through the system and complete the primary cycle is equally as important as bringing them to

school. Furthermore, it is not enough to expand provision to enrol and retain a larger number of students in schools; it is also essential that these students receive a *quality* education. This key concern – how to move from access to ‘Education for All’ to ensuring ‘learning for all’ – was the main focus of discussions at the 2012 IWGE meeting.

3 THE POOR STATE OF STUDENT LEARNING

While countries have reason to celebrate their success in improving access to education, what matters and what makes a difference is *learning outcomes*. Measures to increase the rate of learning are also critical to benefit from previous investments made to expand schooling facilities. But are children learning what they are supposed to learn in schools? The answer may be 'no'.

Recent studies on learning outcomes indicate that levels of learning among primary school children are very low. A good share of youth who graduate from primary schools in some developing countries cannot read a single sentence. In fact, the knowledge gap between developing and developed countries is widening even where gaps in schooling are narrowing. The amount of learning that occurs over one school year is very low in developing countries when compared with that in developed countries. Results from PISA, TIMSS, and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) confirm this pattern. For example, SACMEQ results for three periods between 1995 and 2007 show that learning is occurring very slowly in many African countries. Furthermore, substantial variations in levels of learning have been found among children from different schools within a country.

How to accelerate learning is a major challenge confronting national governments and partner agencies. Investment priorities are shifting from creating facilities to improving gains in learning on the basis of the conviction that, given an opportunity, all children can learn.

The belief that school inputs have a significant positive effect on enhancing learner achievement is not always supported by research evidence. Many studies, including those by PISA, have shown that higher national income or higher levels of educational expenditure do not necessarily enhance student learning. What is perhaps more important is where school resources are invested and how the available resources are used. Furthermore, there is a need to focus on teachers and their competencies, teaching and learning conditions, classroom practices, and teaching and learning processes. There is also a need to develop accountability measures and to enforce these at all levels, from the system level to the classroom level.

One proposal made during the meeting was the development of *Cohort Learning Goals* and appropriate metrics for the learning agenda including all children in a given age group whether or not they attend formal schooling. Tracking the distribution of achievement for an entire cohort each year enables the impact of student attainment and student learning to be examined simultaneously. Combining grade attainment profiles with distributions of grade learning achievement will help to extrapolate Cohort Learning distribution and track its changes over time. It is argued that this is a powerful metric which allows simulation of both the effects of increased student attainment (schooling goal) and improved learning accomplished over the course of one year of school (learning goal).

A closer analysis of Cohort Learning Goals indicates that: (1) the distribution of student achievement in developing countries is far behind that in Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries; (2) only a small fraction of students who have not mastered a skill in a given year can gain mastery over the course of the following school year, implying that very little learning occurs from grade to grade; and (3) the learning profile of students needs to be increased significantly, as improving student attainment at the existing rate of learning will not yield large improvements in learning. The increase in Cohort Learning profiles can be attained not through increasing inputs, but through empowering primary stakeholders with autonomy to search for ways to meet performance metrics and find solutions.

Several contextual factors need to be taken into consideration when thinking about appropriate intervention strategies. There is a need to focus on early childhood development (ECD) programmes to get children ready for schools and getting schools ready for students. In addition, resource allocation within schools at times favours later grades, although early grades are critical in terms of improving grade-to-grade learning.

Teachers, no doubt, play an important role in facilitating gains in student learning. Studies show that teacher quality is a significant factor in improving student learning, underlining the importance of recruiting quality teachers and providing them with support and opportunities for continuous professional development (mentoring, communities of practice, etc.). Some of the widely disseminated results of large-scale, international assessments have helped, if not resulted, in innovative, targeted ways of working with schools and teachers. Similarly, recent United States (US) government

initiatives to develop a document that teachers could sign, called 'Transforming the Teaching Profession', are a good example of ways to strengthen collaborative efforts to increase student achievement.

Classroom learning is also affected by what goes on outside the classroom and the school. Health and nutrition factors, parental involvement in keeping children engaged in studies after school hours, and parental engagement with schools are also important factors affecting student learning. Some of these issues have been closely examined in studies made by the Aga Khan foundation.

4 EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS FOR IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES

Some country experiences, such as in Pakistan, indicate that students who stayed in school without dropping out performed better in studies. Better student learning conditions could help get more out-of-school children into school and reduce dropouts. One possible conclusion is that learning and equity should be considered together, and that school attendance is connected with learning outcomes. This requires systemic interventions and improvements.

Appropriate metrics for the learning agenda, although important, do not drive the learning improvement process. Metrics should be seen as a support mechanism. It is important to set high standards and establish effective measurement tools, but only in conjunction with a support system to help teachers improve their practice and teaching and learning processes. In other words, measuring systems and the progress they make are necessary and important, but one needs to take care during implementation and when interpreting results. It is important to avoid the 'blame game', particularly toward teachers, as otherwise nothing may change. In short, teachers need more support in order to effect change.

Although the proposed elements and interventions discussed are all important, the emphasis needs to be on developing effective systems to improve learning of all children in every context. The World Bank approach may be summarized as 'scan globally, act locally' and their strategy as 'invest early, invest smartly, and invest for all'. The World Bank also adopts a systems approach to implementing this strategy, relying on a set of knowledge tools, of which the main four are: (1) student assessment including education management information systems (EMIS), robust tracking of learning, Steps Skills Measurement; (2) implementation of policies via service delivery instruments; (3) a systems approach for better education results (SABER) with data on policy and institutional choices; and (4) impact evaluation.

No one agency may be strong in all these four areas of knowledge tools. Currently, the World Bank is assisting countries in using classroom observation protocols and linking these data with student learning in Latin American countries and Asian countries, such as Indonesia.

Efforts to improve learning require a consensus on what learning *is*. Building this consensus is the first step in effecting system-wide reform in education. This change should be aligned to all elements and be coherent at all levels of the system, and among all actors. Important aspects of improving the learning process are: (1) an emphasis on the philosophy of support and positive pressure; (2) shared leadership and respect, and a professional, collaborative approach with internal accountability; and (3) a reliance on research as the basis of improvement strategies. Needless to say, the formulation of policy is easier than the implementation of reform measures. It has been said that policy is only 10 per cent of the equation and implementation is 90 per cent.

The main difficulty in formulating and implementing education reforms is that there are 'black boxes' in education. There is plenty of evidence from research regarding what constitutes effective learning in the classroom, but this information rarely enters policy dialogue and decision-making, and lessons learned are not integrated into the classroom. In many cases no clear definitions are available for the minimum facilities necessary to create a conducive teaching and learning environment. Is it possible to establish a mechanism to define the minimum teaching and learning conditions in the classroom? While it is true that several countries have defined these standards, there is limited enforcement of these norms uniformly across all segments of the process.

All agree that the key black box is the learning process that takes place in the classroom. Classroom practices centre on the teacher and therefore the key to reforming them is a highly capable and passionate teacher. Even where teachers are neither capable nor passionate, it is important to treat them as though they are, and to provide the training and resources necessary for their development. Unfortunately, efforts to closely monitor the effect and relevance of teacher training on classroom practices are not systematic and the results necessary for follow-up actions are not easily available.

Any problems in the teaching and learning process are not the sole responsibility of just one element. In the case of the teacher, his or her effectiveness depends on their response to a given teaching and learning situation. The capacity and ability to improve learning is found in different elements and in all aspects of the system. A systemic intervention thus requires an integrated view of the education process. No sole element can effectively support learning in isolation from the other elements. Unfortunately, adequate evidence of the impact of each of the interventions on student learning is not available.

5 IMPACT EVALUATION

Impact evaluation measures changes in outcomes that can be attributed to a specific intervention. For example, it may be useful to assess the impact of interventions to improve the teaching and learning process on gains in levels of learner achievement. Impact evaluations make a serious methodological effort to establish cause and effect relationships between inputs and outcomes.

Some of the key issues on impact evaluations are: (1) how programmes work, which is more difficult than assessing whether or not programmes worked; (2) how to generate and use more effectively administrative data for impact evaluations; (3) how to communicate more effectively the results from impact evaluations; and (4) the extent to which an institutional decision is based on the results of impact evaluations.

Evaluating the cost of interventions and the direct benefits of such interventions is not always easy. A number of impact evaluation studies do not collect reliable data on costs and benefits of interventions. These studies do not provide conclusive empirical evidence on the importance of and need for retaining some of the intervention strategies.

Impact evaluation studies raise a number of difficult questions. At what level should impact be measured? Should impact be measured at the individual level, institutional level, or at the system level? What periods of time are usually taken into account for measuring impact? The effects of interventions on learner achievement take time to become apparent, therefore a realistic timeframe is necessary in order to measure their impact. In any study the problem of maintaining the difference between the treatment and the control group may arise over a long period of time. Therefore, in addition to a rational timeframe it is important that such measurements be continuous and rely on long-term panel data. Unfortunately, funding agencies and governments often expect immediate results – an expectation that is difficult to meet.

It is also important to assess the external validity of findings of impact evaluation studies. How far can one use a specific evaluation in a specific context to apply those results in a totally different context? It is also important to specify the core ideas that are

being evaluated. The results of these core ideas can be applied to varying contexts, and they can help to improve the external validity of impact evaluation studies.

One common trend in all these efforts is that only what gets measured gets done. Therefore, reliable measurements are important. However, collection of extensive data is not only time-consuming but also very expensive.

6 STUDENT ASSESSMENT

There is convincing empirical evidence that skills, both cognitive and non-cognitive, are key to economic growth, happiness, and sociability. This may be one of the reasons why a good share (nearly 60 per cent) of the wealth of nations is vested in the skills and knowledge of their citizens. Empirical analysis in the past attempted to establish a relationship between number of years of schooling and contribution to productivity and national income. However, more recent analyses have indicated the role of cognitive skills, rather than the number of years of schooling, as a better predictor of contributions to national income.

It is important to assess the skills gained by children during their education. There are several international, regional, and national surveys on assessing students with regard to the skills they learned during their schooling. International student assessment studies may have a more instructional focus, as in the case of those conducted by the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), or on skills acquired, as in PISA, led by the OECD. Irrespective of the focus, these studies are regarded as a best available source of cross-nationally comparable information on learning outcomes in participating countries. For example, it is estimated that children in low-income countries are at least four to five grades behind children in rich countries. This may imply that four to five years of their lives are being wasted for which education is partly responsible.

This indicates that there are good reasons to participate in these international surveys and more than 100 countries are already participating in at least one such survey. Participation in these international surveys helps countries to learn how to better assess students. However, participation is not a substitute for conducting national surveys on student assessments.

International surveys on student assessment make learning outcome statements or standards, develop sample constructs or items and assessment standards, help countries to specify standards and sample items, and at times extend funding support to carry out national surveys. National surveys can decide how their current standards for both learning and for assessment of learning are

defined, and how they match international standards. They can also decide whether or not they would like to share the results of the assessments with other countries.

Regardless of the nature of the surveys – national or international – it is important to link these assessments to classroom assessments. This will be of interest to teachers and will help them to use the results to improve instruction, although this will be a complex, difficult, and challenging task. Another equally important matter is how to link assessment to accountability in relation to those actors involved in the educational process.

Very often, the correlation between investment in education and test results is not very high. Yet the education sector receives some of the highest levels of investment. One of the reasons for the low correlation between spending and test scores in education may be wastage, which amounts to around US\$7 billion and several millions of student years in low-income countries. Although assessment will not eliminate the extent of this wastage in education, it can help to reduce it by improving learning among more children.

At times funding, especially external funding, is tied to learning outcomes. The indicative framework developed by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) – formerly the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) – is relied upon to monitor plan implementation and to assess progress. Some proponents of this approach argue that putting such targets and accountability measures exerts pressure on national governments to initiate steps to ensure that schools function effectively. In any case, empirical evidence on student learning is a very useful tool for governments allowing them to monitor progress and funding agencies to extend support to governments and educational institutions.

7 INVESTMENT PRIORITIES AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Research evidence on factors influencing student learning indicates a large number of variables. The time students spend in school (years or days), teacher attendance, the subject competency of teachers, availability of desks and chairs in the classroom, availability of library facilities, tutoring programmes for students, and so on, all influence student learning. However, level of qualification, length of experience, and training status do not emerge always as influential variables for predicting student achievement.

A recent review of World Bank interventions found that teacher incentives and contract programmes, such as pay for performance on learner achievement, produce strong results, and that accountability and school-based management produce weak results. Interventions that combined school-based management and teacher incentives produced the strongest results, demonstrating, perhaps, that programmes for accountability need to create links between powers given to the community and teacher motivation.

A recent impact evaluation on school accountability in Mexico demonstrated strong results for parental empowerment. A randomized control trial designed after a compensatory education programme in rural areas in Mexico showed that the most effective component was parental involvement in school management. It also showed that training designed to help parents play their role in school management and allocation of school funds for parent-school meetings both positively influenced learning outcomes. Similarly, studies on interventions by Save the Children showed that children with access to book banks and other services perform better on tests. This is more so for children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, where there are fewer learning resources at home. Although many interventions are school-based, investment is also necessary to promote learning throughout the day.

8 MOVING BEYOND THE MDG AGENDA IN EDUCATION

Should the world have a new set of MDGs to guide its work in the post-2015 period? Do we need a collective vision and a common agenda to draw the road map for beyond 2015? All participants agreed on the need for a shared vision and a common agenda, but opinions varied on the process needed to prepare the collective post-2015 agenda and the content of the agenda itself. Governments and development partners need to meet to decide goals for beyond 2015, rather than developing a vision and setting goals on behalf of national governments. For example, the MDG goal of attaining universal primary education was a great achievement. However, many heads of states did not prioritize education and this remains one of the reasons why attainment of the goal is not on course. This mistake should not be repeated.

Countries and development partners have focused on equity and quality in education while emphasizing learning for all. There is therefore a need to develop normative frameworks and properly formulated targets in consultation with (and with the complete participation of) national governments.

It was felt that education has fallen from the top position of the international agenda. However, if another set of MDG goals is created for post-2015, governments may provide increased support. The major questions are: how can education move to the top of the development agenda? Is it likely to get consensus for a new set of MDGs? How do we get our leaders to endorse a vision for learning for all children? It seems that there is a need to change the way in which we talk about education in order to attract the attention of heads of state. There is a need to emphasize the role of education in economic development and to form coalitions with organizations from both business and civil society to support educational development. Furthermore, the education community needs to gain the confidence of governments to enable it to effectively deliver results.

No doubt there is consensus on learning as a goal, but there is less agreement on strategies to be adopted to improve learning outcomes in a given country. Bilateral and multilateral organizations are making serious efforts to improve service delivery. For example,

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) is reframing education work through child-friendly education (of which child-friendly schools [CFS] is a part). USAID is in the process of forming partnerships, focusing its resources (to do fewer projects, but better), significantly increasing the number of technical staff in its ranks, and increasing involvement with GPE and governments. The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) would like to follow up on the discussion from the biennale on education in Africa, held in Maputo, regarding expanding basic education with a focus on the core knowledge and skills (cognitive, life, social, and pre-vocational skills) needed for sustainable development. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that responsibility for education is shared between public authorities, private sectors, and individuals.

The current state of the world economy is an obstacle to investment in education. Consequently, there is a need to strengthen the argument for education beyond something that is inherently important, or a human right. But to increase the profile of education on the global agenda, and to get heads of state to invest in this over the long term, would necessitate an increase in trust in the ability of education professionals to efficiently deliver results. However, progress in bringing education back to the top of the global agenda is hampered by weak global leadership in the education sector. This is in stark contrast to the fact that education is at top of most national agendas. What is the role of a global framework when global leadership to guide developments in education remains weak? While stronger global leadership in facilitating knowledge-sharing and technical cooperation in education and research would be beneficial to countries at all levels of development, it would be particularly beneficial to low-income countries that lack the national capacity needed to fully benefit from global knowledge assets.

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Student learning is central to the educational process. Countries have made commendable progress in expanding access, increasing enrolments, and retaining children in schools. Although these are important steps to accelerate learning among larger numbers of children, student learning continues to be poor especially in developing countries. The low level of learning contributes to widening of the knowledge gap between developing and developed countries. There is therefore a need for added emphasis and focused attention to initiate measures to maximize gains in learning.

Interventions to accelerate learning should consider all children under all types of learning arrangements and opportunities. They should also consider schools under all types of management, as well as alternatives to schools such as formal, non-formal, and informal learning situations. There is a need for *system-level improvement* rather than improvements in selected institutions.

Intervention strategies in the past focused on provision of increased levels of inputs. However, schools with the same level of inputs perform differently primarily because of the way school resources are used. Therefore, while inputs are important, intervention strategies to improve learning need to go beyond providing inputs. The focus should be on strengthening the capacity of the system to translate or transform these resources to enhance learning.

Strengthening the system's capacity involves linking school-level activities in a more directed manner towards learning outcomes. This may include improving classroom learning conditions and improving teaching and learning processes. Governance of institutions and management of resources within institutions are important. Strategies to increase learning outcomes should align governance, management, accountability, and financing mechanisms.

An information gap exists on indicators related to the learning process. Data on learning achievements, even when available, are rare, sporadic, and limited in many developing countries. There is a need to develop information based on learning and on indicators as part of EMIS.

Many countries are involved in international and regional student assessment surveys. For example, nearly 65 countries are participating in TIMSS and PISA studies and 15 countries in Africa participate in SACMEQ studies. Participation in these helps to benchmark educational performances of countries and also provides experience in developing and carrying out national surveys on student learning.

One of the suggestions was to extend the idea of learning for all to all children in the cohort, irrespective of status of enrolment in schools or their alternatives. This may promote a focus on developing Cohort Learning Goals and appropriate metrics for learning. An analysis of distribution of achievement of an entire cohort each year provides valuable insights on the level of student learning.

There is also a need to define what constitutes learning conditions and what are the minimum facilities necessary to create a conducive teaching and learning environment in the classroom. Many countries have not defined minimum learning conditions and even where these are defined they are rarely enforced. Teachers can be effective only where learning conditions are of an acceptable level.

Teachers matter for making gains in student learning. Therefore, the importance of recruiting quality teachers, and of providing support and opportunities for their continuous professional development, must be emphasized.

At times, both funding (external) and progress in plan implementation are dependent on the results of student assessment surveys. The indicative framework developed by GPE is therefore crucial to monitor plan implementation and assess progress.

Studies have shown that factors influencing learner achievement include the time students spend in school, teacher attendance, the subject competency of teachers, the availability of desks and chairs in the classroom, the availability of library facilities, and tutoring programmes for students.

Parental involvement in school affairs has a positive influence on school effectiveness and improved student learning. Therefore, various forms of parental involvement need to be encouraged to make schools and their functioning more effective.

All interventions take time before their effects on learner achievement become apparent. Therefore, there is a need to allow a reasonable timeframe in order to assess the impact of measures taken on gains in learning.

National governments and funding agencies may try to link funding to institutional performance reflected through gains in learner achievement. However, any pressure on institutions to produce quick results, which is very often the case, may not be supportive of the efforts made by institutions.

There is a global consensus on learning as a goal and it is expected that this consensus will remain, even in the post-2015 period. Therefore, countries need to continuously work to evolve strategies and develop mechanisms to realize this goal.

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The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) is an international centre for advanced training and research in the field of educational planning. It was established by UNESCO in 1963 and is financed by UNESCO and by voluntary contributions from Member States. In recent years the following Member States have provided voluntary contributions to the Institute: Australia, Denmark, India, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

The Institute's aim is to contribute to the development of education throughout the world, by expanding both knowledge and the supply of competent professionals in the field of educational planning. In this endeavour the Institute cooperates with training and research organizations in Member States. The IIEP Governing Board, which approves the Institute's programme and budget, consists of a maximum of eight elected members and four members designated by the United Nations Organization and certain of its specialized agencies and institutes.

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