THE GLOBAL LEARNING CRISIS

Why every child deserves a quality education

Global Education First Initiative

The UN Secretary-General's Global Initiative on Education

THE GLOBAL LEARNING CRISIS
Why every child deserves a quality education

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and is essential for realizing other human rights. Education empowers people by helping them to acquire skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that are critical to secure their basic socio-economic needs and enable the sustainable development of their societies.

The right to education is universally affirmed in numerous international human rights treaties. Worldwide most governments have enshrined a provision for the right to education in their national constitutions, and as a result, many more children have access to school than they did at the start of the century. But *access* is not sufficient. The *quality* of learning is also crucial. The failure to adequately educate students can be seen as a violation of the right to education as it limits economic development and locks countries into cycles of low growth rates, limited employment opportunities and weak social cohesion.

'Learning' can be defined as the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes. 'Quality learning' encompasses processes through which people acquire the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to fully engage in their communities, express their ideas and talents and contribute positively to their societies.

Here we will explore what quality learning means for pre-primary through secondary schools and how to ensure it is being delivered, including recommendations on how to integrate a focus on learning in national and global education initiatives.

Why access is not enough

The number of out-of-school children has fallen dramatically since the start of the century, and gender disparities have narrowed significantly in many parts of the world. However, there are still large pockets of excluded children, especially on the fringes of society, including rural and indigenous populations, working and street children, the disabled and linguistic and cultural minorities. Children in conflict-affected countries suffer some of the deepest forms of educational disadvantage, and across all groups girls remain the most marginalized. Enrolment of these excluded children must be addressed immediately.

But while enrolling children and achieving adequate numbers of school places and teachers is crucial, it is just the start of the process. The quality of what is learnt and how it is learnt is of great importance too.

The crisis in quality learning is evident. Despite increased enrolments, an estimated 250 million children cannot read, write or count well, whether they have been to school or not. Across the world, 200 million young people leave school without the skills they need to thrive plus an estimated 775 million adults – 64 percent of whom are women – still lack the most basic reading and writing skills.

Concern for the poor quality of education is nothing new. What is unprecedented is the scale at which education systems are failing – not only to impart the basics, but to keep pace with rapid changes in global economic, socio-political and natural environments and equip students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to meet the challenges they pose.

Good quality learning in schools is essential for reaching global goals for peace and prosperity. There is a clear association between provision for quality learning and a nation's democratic stability; between learning and an individual's orientation towards legal behaviour and good citizenship; and between a good classroom climate and civic behaviour [1]. There

is also a clear link between good quality learning in schools and levels of employment, as inadequate learning leaves young people unprepared for the world of work.

There exists important data on enrolment, promotion and completion in education but they reveal little about what or how students are actually learning – information that is critical for understanding the state of education today, and what can be done to improve it.

© Holly Pickett/SIPA

More children are in school than ever before, but what are they learning once they are there?

Improving the quality of learning

Addressing the crisis in quality learning requires us to redefine what education systems are for. The skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that learning and teaching promote must reflect and respond to the needs and expectations of individuals, countries, the global population and the world of work today. They must not only teach basic skills like reading and math, but encourage critical thinking and foster the desire and capacity for lifelong learning that adapts to shifts in local, national and global dynamics. These diverse learning goals may seem disparate, but are actually synergistic – by encouraging active participation and emphasizing critical thinking, children's acquisition of basic literacy and math can be promoted at the same time they are gaining necessary skills for the 21st century.

© UNESCO/J. Idrizi

Transforming the learning environment

The classroom is a microcosm of the world outside where children learn their values, attitudes, skills and knowledge. This classroom experience can be transformative and, therefore, is the place of greatest opportunity *and* where the greatest failure in quality learning is currently taking place. It can be a tough challenge for children to learn to respect human rights, to learn how to learn for their lifetimes and to challenge ideas, in contexts which have historically nurtured hierarchies and competition within classrooms, and place a heavy emphasis on rote memorization.

For many children the active, collaborative classroom has far greater appeal, as well as impact, than the traditional classroom. Therefore, promoting student-centred methods encourages children to attend school, even when this means overcoming obstacles such as distance. Student-centred learning builds on a belief that quality learning and teaching should aim to enable and empower all groups of people. It can actively promote understanding and respect for human rights; inclusion and equity; lifelong learning; and competencies-based learning. These principles are embodied in four global purposes for learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be [2].

For example, girls who are not used to asserting themselves may benefit from an environment that encourages learning through peer support. Active student involvement in the governance and management of the classroom or school can help sow the seeds for adult democratic participation. The truth of these claims has been vividly displayed, for example, in the innovative Community Schools movement in rural Egypt [3].

It is also important that parents be included in discussions on improving classroom learning as their expectations may remain at the level of passive rote learning from textbooks. They must also be brought up to date about how learning can enhance their children's and their own lives.

Extensive recent international research suggests that to achieve quality learning which is valuable in today's world, learners must be:

- ❐ active physically and/or mentally;

- ❐ collaborative – with teachers and/or other learners;

- ❐ and self-directed – with a clear sense of choice and purpose [4; 5; 6].

The three learning practices which accelerate learning for least additional cost are:

- ❐ pupils drawing on teachers' constructive, formative feedback;

- ❐ pupils using meta-cognition and self-regulation strategies;

- ❐ and pupils engaging in peer tutoring and/or peer-assisted learning [5; 6; 7].

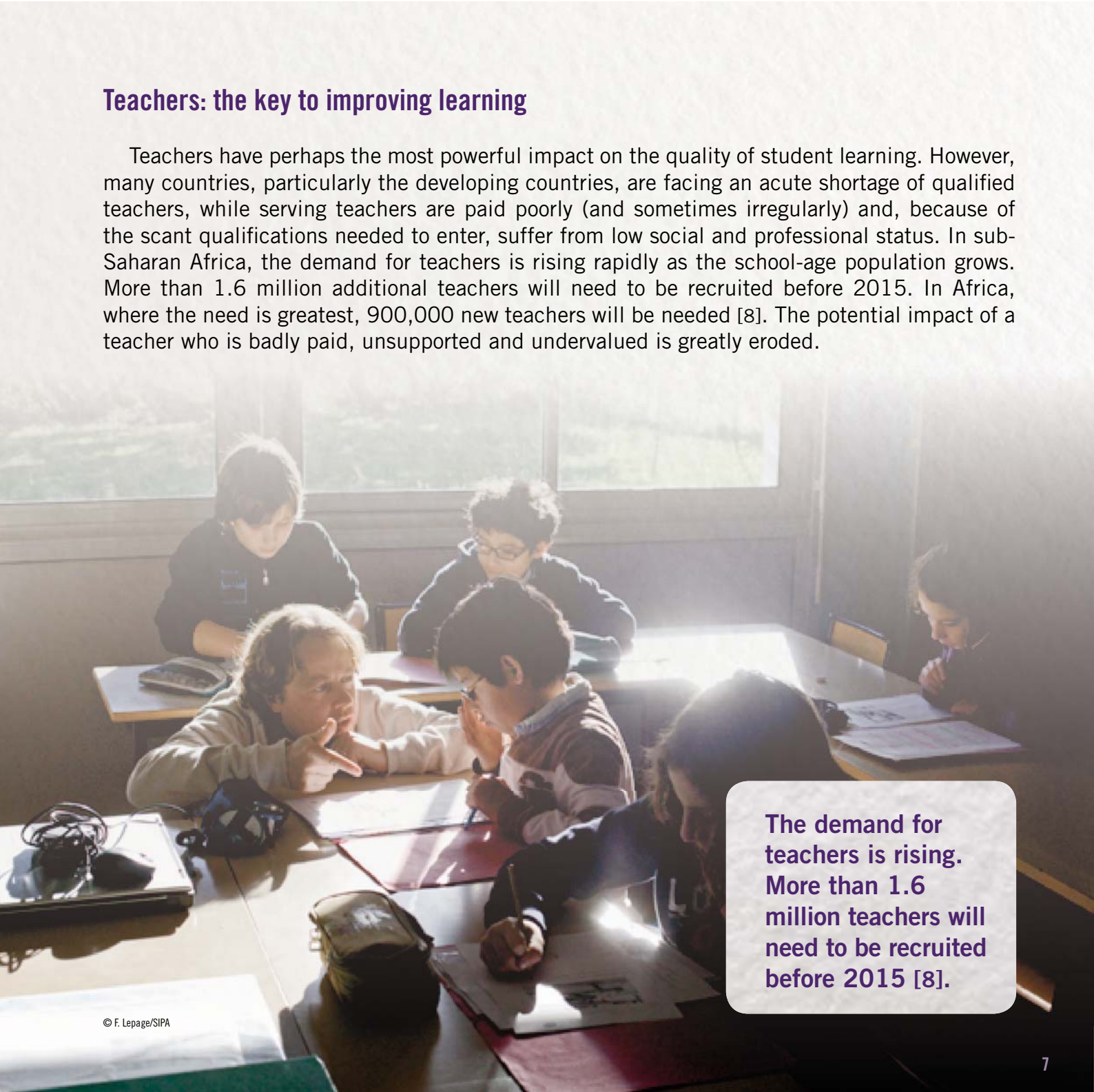## Beyond basic skills: expanding school curricula

School curricula must squarely address the challenges students will face outside of school. While emphasis on reading and mathematics is extremely important, curricula that meet today's challenges go beyond these basic skills to include, for example: physical well-being; social and emotional understanding and well-being; appreciation of and participation in culture and the arts; literacy and communication skills; lifelong learning approaches and cognition; and science, technology and the environment. While intense focus on literacy and numeracy is crucial in any curriculum, addressing these other areas is also vital. For example, girls' learning about physical well-being as well as literacy and numeracy, promises to transform family health and nutrition, providing protection against HIV infection, higher maternal and child life expectancy, reduced fertility rates and delayed marriage. Likewise, the teaching of science, technology and the environment has critical implications for sustainability.

Curricula must break with traditional subject divisions, and provide the basis for lifelong learning and focus on life skills, such as flexibility, resourcefulness, independent and critical thinking. Efforts to develop National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), now undertaken by more than 90 countries, aim to accredit competencies such as exercising responsibility, autonomy, confidence and self-efficacy.

Teachers: the key to improving learning

Teachers have perhaps the most powerful impact on the quality of student learning. However, many countries, particularly the developing countries, are facing an acute shortage of qualified teachers, while serving teachers are paid poorly (and sometimes irregularly) and, because of the scant qualifications needed to enter, suffer from low social and professional status. In sub-Saharan Africa, the demand for teachers is rising rapidly as the school-age population grows. More than 1.6 million additional teachers will need to be recruited before 2015. In Africa, where the need is greatest, 900,000 new teachers will be needed [8]. The potential impact of a teacher who is badly paid, unsupported and undervalued is greatly eroded.

© F. Lepage/SIPA

The demand for teachers is rising. More than 1.6 million teachers will need to be recruited before 2015 [8].

On-going support for professional development, including both pre- and in-service training, is essential for equipping teachers to promote student learning. Pre-service teacher training in education institutions is sometimes overly theoretical and rarely practice-based, so school-based training is now often seen as more effective in developed and developing countries alike. However, regardless of their initial training or lack of training, every teacher needs to engage in on-going professional development to meet the changing needs of learners. Teachers who are constantly learning and improving tend to support their students' achievements most effectively [9], especially when provided with school-based training.

Teachers who have the support and trust of the local community have greater impact on their children's learning. With this support, changes can more easily be made to schooling to suit children's needs and improve the quality of their learning. Parents and communities can also help teachers through involvement with their children's learning and school activities; and by securing facilities and financial support for the school [10]. However, only when the *majority* of teachers engage the *majority* of parents in the community does quality improve on a wide scale. A successful example of teachers improving the quality of children's learning through local participation is reflected in the community schools model of Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia and Niger [3].

No quality learning without quality materials

Quality learning materials serve as the backbone for classroom practices. Yet textbooks are often in short supply, and those that are available can be outdated and irrelevant. When textbooks are poor, learning quality is compromised. Badly written and poorly presented textbooks prevail in many developing countries and poorly trained teachers depend heavily on them.

Poor textbook content can also hinder wider objectives such as social cohesion and even encourage social conflict if, for example, it does not portray all social groups in respectful ways. Revised textbooks in adequate supply and reflecting the valued objectives of the community can powerfully impact learners' abilities to relate classroom material to life beyond school. Textbooks should be used as teacher resources which model the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge laid out in the curriculum, not just subject 'information'.

In a number of countries, over 10 children have to share the same textbook [11].

Learning materials and the medium of instruction need to allow children of all ethnicities and home backgrounds to access learning, including instruction in mother tongue. Learning through an unfamiliar language only is likely to not only be very discouraging but also have long-term negative consequences on the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Where materials and teaching exist only in a second language, it is essential for the teacher to help the students access the meaning, particularly if the students' parents are unable to do so.

An alternative type of learning resource includes self-directed learning materials. These may be workbooks that provide initial explanations and suggest guided activities through which children understand and apply what they have learnt. Children work alone or in pairs at their own pace, with help from other students and the teacher. These materials can be produced jointly by the teacher and students with relevance to the local, as well as global, community. Good examples of these exist in the Escuela Nueva in rural Latin America [12].

Technology has been insufficiently harnessed in schools for a range of reasons. Yet it is vitally important for children who will be the users and pioneers of new technologies. The widespread use of mobile phones in the developing world holds potential as a classroom and home learning resource. The fact that young people often enjoy using technological devices can increase active engagement with learning. Technology in tandem with face-to-face contact with a teacher and/or other students can make excellent use of minimal resources and connect teachers and students with technological advances.

Redefining assessment

Reliable information on learning and classroom processes can help drive improvements in learning, by providing insight into teachers, classroom experiences and the quality of learning. Traditionally, in the developing world, such systems of accountability for quality have been weak, with most of the information drawn from test results. In an expanded vision of what 'quality' means, aspects of education need to be highlighted that reflect quality more holistically. For these to be useful they must reflect classroom processes and *the outcomes that societies value*, even if these are hard to measure.

To date, assessments of education quality have focused mostly on enrolment, drop-out and progression plus test outcomes. These assessments focus on inputs and outputs because they are easier to measure than the processes of learning and teaching themselves. Recently, however, the focus in many western countries has shifted to classroom processes because this is where so much impact occurs.

© Oliver Jobard/SIPA

Drawing on recent rigorous research and debate, the following aspects of education can be said to mark a radical but invaluable shift in emphasis from a focus on inputs and outputs to a focus on learning processes. Countries, international organizations, and other education stakeholders need to ask *how classroom processes reflect change in*:

The value of learning and teaching strategies in classrooms for the full development of all pupils, including the:

☐ activeness, collaboration and self-direction of learners;

☐ helpfulness of the teacher's learning strategies;

☐ relevance of curricula;

☐ relevance and accessibility of textbook content;

☐ promotion and usefulness of technological aids;

☐ learning experiences of different social/ethnic/gender groups within a class;

☐ effectiveness of ongoing site-based teacher professional development;

☐ ensuring a good match between teachers and communities.

To assess such changes, assessments through internal observations of classes as well as teachers' training sessions are essential. A built-in school-wide monitoring system of checklists and reports on progress, and a corresponding network of meetings are also important. These conversations allow the voices of key players, including students and teachers, to be heard, creating potential to make relevant improvements.

Given the widespread use of mobile phones even in the least developed countries, an open-access feedback website might be effective for finding out about learning processes; or, where internet access is weak, a telephone messaging centre with messages recorded and analysed. These allow students, parents, teachers and community members to comment directly to authorities about their experiences of an educational setting. Such a system is being tested in Uganda, and initial results are promising: over 400 new people a day become 'u-reporters' in the text-messaging system of monitoring there [13].

To assess changes in learning, indicators of basic mathematics and literacy are extremely important, as well as indicators of learning that represent the broad range of competencies valued by local governments and essential for lifelong learning, including critical thinking and skills required for lifelong learning. Indicators should be developed to describe the richness and relevance of all pupils' and teachers' values, attitudes, skills and knowledge in relation to stated purposes for education in each country. It is vital to talk with all groups of students and with members of the local community, in addition to collecting test data in a range of domains. Such insight into the experiences of teachers, students and parents can ensure that education is congruent with local values and is supporting students' learning in the most effective way possible.

© Nichole Sobecki/SIPA

Six recommendations to ensure quality education

Quality learning is not only essential for meeting people's basic needs, but is also fundamental in fostering the conditions for global peace and sustainable development. All young people need to learn in active, collaborative and self-directed ways in order to flourish and contribute to their communities. Along with the basics, they need to acquire attitudes, values and skills as well as information. Their teachers, peers, communities, curriculum and learning resources must help prepare them to recognize and respect human rights globally and to value global well-being, as well as equip them with the relevant skills and competencies for 21st century employment opportunities. To achieve this, it is not enough to measure what learners learn: it is essential to target the classroom experiences that fundamentally shape student learning, and emphasize the range of skills required for lifelong well-being and societal cohesion.

To achieve improved learning and teaching in all learning environments, we need to:

1. **Transform classrooms** and diversify learning sites: invest in changing stagnant environments where students receive information passively into active environments where students direct their own learning in collaboration with teachers, peers, the curriculum, learning resources and the local community.

2. **Improve teachers' working conditions** and provide them with ongoing support and training both locally and centrally, so that they can effectively lead student-centred learning. A systematic programme of school-based professional support and development must be implemented comprehensively.

3. **Revise school curricula** to reflect the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values, relevant for the well-being and valuable employment of all groups in the 21st century.

4. **Provide engaging learning materials** in the classroom that reflect relevant skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values and that facilitate students' self-directed, active learning. Technological resources need to be encouraged to keep pace with their increasing use in other areas of life.

5. **Expand learning outcomes** to include competencies and skills that go beyond basic reading and math, and reflect local values, needs and expectations for education.

6. **Increase global investment** in education by governments, aid donors and private corporations.

References

1. Heyneman, S. (2003). Education, social cohesion, and the future role of international organizations. *Peabody Journal of Education*. 78 (3). pp. 25 – 38.

2. Delors, J. (1989). *Report on economic and monetary union in the European Community*. Presented April 17, 1989 by Committee for the Study of Economic and Monetary Union. EU Commission Working Document.

3. Zaalouk, M. (2004). *The pedagogy of empowerment: community schools as a social movement in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

4. Lockheed, M. and Hanushek, E. (1988). Improving educational efficiency in developing countries: what do we know? *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. 18 (1). pp. 21 – 38.

5. Watkins, C. (2010). *Learning, performance and improvement*. INSI Research Matters. Issue 34.

6. Wells, G. (2000). Dialogic inquiry in education: building on the legacy of Vygotsky. In Lee, C. and Smagorinsky, P. (eds.). *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research*. New York: Cambridge University Press, (pp. 51 – 85).

7. Higgins, S. and Dimitra, K. (2011). *Toolkit of strategies to improve learning*. London: the Sutton Trust.

8. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013) *A teacher for every child: projecting global teacher needs from 2015 to 2030*, Fact Sheet #27.

9. Moore, A. (2012). *Teaching and Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

10. Farah, I. (1997). *Roads to success*, 2. Karachi, Pakistan: Institute for Educational Development.

11. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011). *Regional Education Survey, sub-Saharan Africa*.

12. http://www.escuelanueva.org/portal/en/escuela-nueva-model.html, accessed on 8 October 2013.

13. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_62001.html, accessed on 8 October 2013.

The number of out-of-school children has fallen since the start of the century and gender disparities have narrowed. Yet an estimated 250 million children are not able to read, write or count, whether they have been to school or not. To address this crisis in quality learning, education systems need to be transformed, ensuring children not only learn the basics, but acquire the skills they need for the 21st century.