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What does learning for all mean for DFID's global education work?

Christopher Berry [a], Edward Barnett [b,*], Rachel Hinton [a]

[a] UK Department for International Development, United Kingdom
[b] UK Department for International Development & London School of Economics, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The MDGs incentivised a focus on education access over quality. For post-2015, a compelling goal on learning for all will be critical to address the global 'learning crisis'. This poses challenges both with respect to getting global agreement on learning metrics and finding ways to reliably measure learning over time. Furthermore, in order to accelerate progress on learning, robust evidence of what works will need to be generated and more effectively used in programming and policy making. The paper concludes with some reflections on the difficult politics for donors of engaging on a learning agenda post-2015.

1. Introduction

Despite significant progress on getting children into school since 2000, many have still never been to school or dropped out early. For those who remain in school, evidence suggests that many girls and boys in developing countries are not learning enough. Acknowledging that the quality and quantity of data on learning outcomes is inconsistent and limited across countries, the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report estimates that 250 million children cannot do basic reading and maths despite over half of them having spent 4 years in school (UNESCO, 2012). This is a stark statistic and has been termed 'a global learning crisis'.

As 2015 draws near, the debates on a successor agreement to the Millennium Development Framework gather pace. In education, a focus on learning outcomes has become a dominant theme in these discussions, with implications for policy and practice, including for the focus of international donor agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

DFID works to improve education in some of the poorest countries in the world and has invested significant resources in the effort to achieve the current Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on universal primary education as well as the broader set of six Education For All goals (UNESCO, 2000). There are 51 million more children enrolled in primary school in 2014 compared to 1999 and 6 out of 10 countries have now achieved an equal number of girls and boys enrolled in primary school (UNESCO, 2014).

For DFID, a good education is a human right and a necessary ingredient for inclusive economic development and poverty reduction (DFID, 2013). Education enables people to live healthier and more productive lives, allowing them to fulfil their own potential as well as to strengthen and contribute to open, inclusive and economically vibrant societies (Blattman et al., 2012; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008; Hawkes and Ugur, 2012; Jakiela et al., 2010). To make progress on learning post-2015, countries will need to have the political commitment to measure and transparently communicate information on learning outcomes and to generate and use evidence to inform effective policies that ensure learning for all.

Focused primarily on basic education, this article reflects on how learning is being conceptualised and operationalised within DFID and how this is likely to manifest itself in national and international action in the future. It draws on the experience of the MDGs and current post-2015 debates to suggest how learning may be represented in a post-2015 development framework and how evidence-based policy could respond. The paper starts with a discussion of learning from a DFID perspective and considers how a focus on learning may be reflected post-2015. Drawing on research commissioned by DFID and with insight into evidence-based policy making from a DFID perspective, Sections 3 and 4 consider what the evidence base tells policy makers about improving learning, what needs to be done to strengthen the evidence base further, and whether political commitment to learning and evidence can be built. The paper concludes with implications for policy and future research.

2. What is meant by learning and how to measure it post-2015?

The 13 years since the millennium have seen a rapid reduction in poverty: there are half a billion fewer people living below an international poverty line of $1.25 a day (UN, 2013). Child death

* Corresponding author at: DFID, 22 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2EG, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 020 7023 0535.
E-mail address: E-Barnett@dfid.gov.uk (E. Barnett).

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rates have fallen by more than 30%, with about three million children's lives saved each year compared to 2000 (UN, 2013). Deaths from malaria have fallen by one quarter (UN, 2013). It would be wrong to suggest that this progress can be attributed entirely to the global commitment to the MDGs but as the High Level Panel Report for post-2015 suggests, the MDGs did to some extent "set out an inspirational rallying cry for the whole world" (UN, 2013), although there has been variation in how this has played out at in different country contexts.

In education, a clear and results-orientated goal to ensure universal primary education helped to build political consensus in donor and partner countries. The education MDG encouraged a global drive on primary enrolment that has greatly reduced the number of children out of school, down from 108 million in 1999 to 58 million in 2014 (UNESCO, 2014). Globally, however, progress has now stalled and is insufficient to ensure that all girls and boys will complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015 (UNESCO, 2014). In 10 countries, at least half of poor, rural girls have never been to school. In some regions of Afghanistan, Nigeria and Somalia, attendance at primary school can differ by up to 60% between poor rural girls and the general population (UNESCO, 2010). Children with disabilities face far more limited opportunities than their nondisabled peers. At the same, levels of learning have become an issue of increasing concern with evidence emerging from a range of low income countries that levels of basic literacy and numeracy remain low despite attendance at school (UNESCO, 2012).

A challenge for post-2015 is to "carry forward the spirit of the Millennium Declaration and the best of the MDGs" (UN, 2013), while addressing the most pressing challenges faced in global education and ensuring these have resonance in diverse country contexts. One of these challenges is the need to focus on quality and the outcomes of education at all levels, from early childhood through to tertiary education.

Filmer et al. (2006) argue the need for a shift from a focus on measurable output indicators in schooling (e.g. enrolment and completion of school) to monitoring the outcomes of learning achievement. Calling for a Millennium Learning Goal, their study cites countries that were on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal for universal primary school completion (e.g. Brazil and Mexico) but a long way from ensuring that children would achieve even minimal competency levels in maths. Barrett (2011) recognises the role a Millennium Learning Goal could play in ensuring equal opportunity to achieve learning outcomes but cautions that a focus on learning outcomes could result in high stakes tests and be detrimental to the achievement of goals that are not readily measurable. Barrett (2011) therefore makes the case for a process goal with qualitative targets for the assessment of learning which she argues would be more appropriate and more likely to improve education quality. Agreeing on what is meant by improved quality education and how to measure it is challenging.

The concept "quality education" carries multiple meanings and reflects different ideological, social and political values. Sayed suggests that 'the concept of quality is elusive ... frequently used but never defined' (Sayed, 1997:21). Attempting to define the concept, however, may reify the practice of education, reducing it to a technical activity that is static and unaffected by contextual and contingent circumstances (Sayed, 1997).

It can be considered in terms of measurable inputs or outputs, including teachers, infrastructure and textbooks (inputs) and test scores, repetition and dropout rates (outputs), or in terms of the extent to which it mobilises people through the development of knowledge, skills and values supportive of more participatory processes (Shaeffer, 1995). This latter, more democratic, aspect of quality is developed further by Tikly and Barrett (2011) who suggest that it allows quality to be a contested concept, changing over time and across context. Smith (1997), however, suggests that for the notion of quality in education to be a 'really useful concept' rather than a 'catch-phrase', criteria should be developed against which quality can be defined.

A significant challenge to developing such criteria relates to the contextual nature of *quality* education. Hirst and Peters (1970) suggest that any consideration of quality first needs to establish an understanding of the purpose of education. This is likely to vary both across context and time although there may also be a minimum threshold of basic learning needs with more universal application which must first be satisfied before more contextual quality concerns are considered. Bergmann (1996) suggests that a minimum level of learning is a full functional literacy and a good mastery of basic mathematical operations, including the capacity to apply them to simple everyday problems.

While agreeing that the concept of education quality is multi-faceted and contested, DFID's view is that adopting such a position is unlikely to help the millions of children who are either not in school or not learning foundation skills whilst there. The aim for DFID is to sharpen the focus of its investments, be transparent to UK taxpayers about the results it is seeking to achieve, and generate political interest in learning outcomes internationally.

To this end, DFID is seeking to promote a concept of learning that is defined as "a vital and measurable dimension of a quality education" (DFID, 2013). DFID recognises that "achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as developing other non-cognitive skills (critical thinking, problem-solving) are components" of quality education and not a comprehensive definition (DFID, 2013:4). DFID approaches learning in terms of what UNESCO describes as "foundation skills" (UNESCO, 2012). These are the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for getting work that can pay enough to meet daily needs. These skills are considered a prerequisite for continuing in education and training, and for acquiring transferable, technical and vocational skills that improve the chance of achieving employment (UNESCO, 2012). DFID believes that investing in such skills can generate broad political commitment both in the UK and internationally.

From international assessment, to regional and national assessments, governments currently assess learning using a variety of tools and approaches. Community-based and project-based assessments have also gained significant traction over the past 5 years. Each assessment serves a particular purpose and governments should be motivated to decide how best to use what is appropriate in any particular context. There is currently no agreed common global measure of minimum functional literacy or numeracy and no credible way of comparing the results from these different assessment tools and tracking progress over time. A central challenge is for data on learning outcomes to be used by government and citizens to influence education policy and practice. In parallel, while working to mitigate the potential unintended consequences of learning assessments described earlier in this section, DFID is participating in the Learning Metrics Task Force and partnering with organisations such as the UNESCO Institute of Statistics to try to develop a credible way of globally tracking and monitoring learning beyond 2015. Work to develop globally comparable metrics for literacy and numeracy that can be the basis of meaningful and useful measurement and monitoring against a post-2015 learning indicator can also contribute to the first priority which is to ensure political commitment and the development of effective national assessment systems.

3. Engaging with the evidence on what works to improve learning

In this section, we look at one dimension of DFID's efforts to synthesise and make available the growing evidence base on what