Center for Global Development

RESEARCH ON IMPROVING SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION (RISE) VISION DOCUMENT 1

The Pivot from Schooling to Education

Key messages

- **One of the greatest achievements in education worldwide has been reaching near universal primary school enrollment and attainment. This feat has been driven largely by closing inequality gaps between genders, incomes, and location (urban vs. rural).**
- **Learning profiles represent gains in learning per year of schooling. Despite massive improvements in enrollment and attainment, learning profiles remain appallingly flat – children leave school lacking basic competencies.**
- **There is a learning crisis *in* school. For example, in South Africa, 40 percent of children were found to be innumerate and 27 percent illiterate—but only one percent had never attended school and another one had percent dropped out.**
- **In addition to lacking fundamental subject-specific skills, children who aren't learning in school aren't gaining other important benefits of schooling, such as labor productivity, higher wages, and female empowerment.**

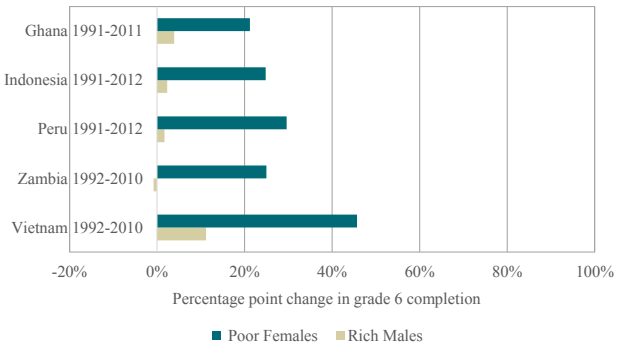
With consistent effort some dreams do come true: the achievement of universal schooling

On December 10th 1948, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which declared in Article 26(1) that "everyone has the right to education." At the time this declaration must have seemed quixotic, even impossible. In 1950 the average adult in the developing world had only two years of schooling (Barro and Lee, 2013). Schooling was spreading slowly but mostly in the domain of triply privileged children—urban, male, and with well-off parents.

In 2015, this once quixotic goal of universal primary schooling has very nearly been accomplished, with success almost universal across countries. Around the globe today, practically every child enrolls in formal schooling, and most persist at least through primary school—even in countries in difficult economic and political circumstances. In Haiti, GDP per capita today is not significantly higher than it was in 1950, and the country has suffered from political dictatorships and natural disasters. Yet schooling grew more each decade since 1950 than in Haiti's entire previous history as a nation from 1806 to 1950. Similarly, Bangladesh, a country born in war and famine, riddled with a troubled political past and consistently rated near the bottom on rankings of government effectiveness, is home to an adult population that had more schooling in 2010 than France had in 1975 (Barro and Lee, 2013).

As the elites were always first to acquire education, the expansion to universal schooling was driven by closing the inequality gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, boys and girls. In Peru, the proportion of rich (top 20 percent) males completing grade 6 increased only from 98 percent to 99 percent between 1991 and 2012 while grade 6 completion of poor (lowest 40 percent) girls increased from 61 to 90 percent (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The expansion towards universal primary completion has come from rapid progress among disadvantaged groups that narrowed attainment gaps



Source: Data from World Bank, 2011

One major factor in the achievement of universal primary schooling is the success of a global advocacy movement. Clemens (2004) counted 15 distinct international declarations of achieving universal primary schooling between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the Millennium Development goal in 2000. This global movement helped create schooling as a powerful norm for all nation-states—even ones in which the domestic politics appeared unfavorable to schooling (Meyer et al., 1977).

The global movement was also successful in expanding schooling in part because it set concrete goals with repeated and reliable measurement and tracked progress across countries. The international education community has pressed for, and helped countries build, the capability to measure progress in schooling. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) reports recent data on school enrollment for all but three of the world's 216 countries.

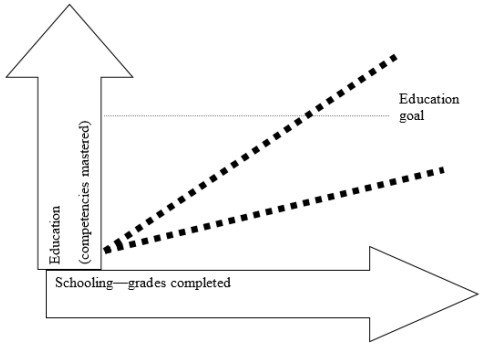
Schooling and education: linked by a learning profile

However, while there was a relentless focus on the expansion of schooling, no country or global movement has really ever set a *schooling* goal. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was about a right to *education*, an education goal. Education is

the process of equipping a child with the competencies they will need to succeed in their family, local, national, and global roles as adults. These competencies can vary across societies and include mastery of fundamental skills like reading for understanding and numerical operations for practical application; mastering bodies of knowledge and an ability to apply that knowledge; transmitting a society and culture's core beliefs and values; and developing one's ability to work with others in groups, creativity, curiosity, and a sense of worth.

Irrespective of the content of a specific competency, all societies' learning progress can be represented by a learning profile, which shows the pace at which children gain the education they need as they persist through schooling, or the relationship for any child between competencies mastered and grade completion. This profile links an education goal and a schooling goal. As shown in Figure 2, a steeper learning profile indicates greater learning per year of schooling exposure. Without a learning profile, measuring progress in education by simply tracking schooling only measures "time served."

Figure 2: The link between education and schooling is a learning profile that links a child's progress in desired competencies mastered and persistence in school

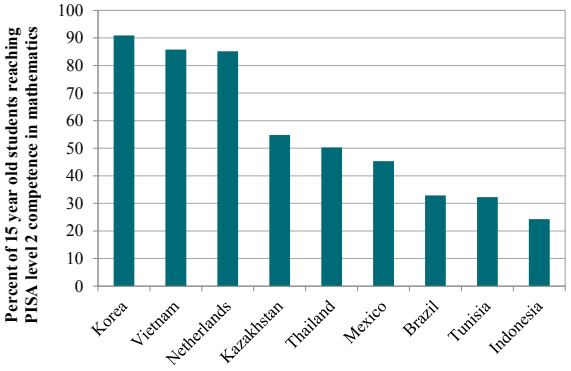


Source: Adapted from Pritchett, 2013

A learning crisis in school

The problem that faces many countries today is that the learning profile is just too shallow—children acquire skills and competencies too slowly while in school so that they finish many years of school and yet still lack basic competencies. In the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), level 2 performance in mathematics for the assessed 15 year old students requires them only to "interpret and recognize situations in contexts that require no more than direct inference, extract relevant information from a single source and make use of a single representational mode, employ basic algorithms, formulae, procedures, or convention, reason and make literal interpretations of the results"(OECD, 2014). Over 80 percent of students reached this modest achievement in Korea, Vietnam, and the Netherlands. But Figure 3 shows that in Tamil Nadu, India only 15 percent of students, in Indonesia only a quarter, in Brazil only a third achieve that goal. Even in upper-middle income countries like Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Mexico, only about a half of students reached even that minimal level of competence.

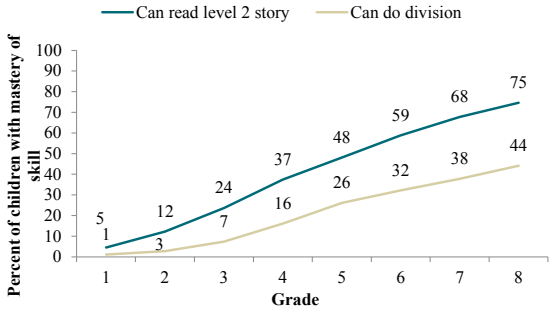
Figure 3: While in high-performing education systems minimal competence in mathematics is nearly universal, in many developing countries most students reach age 15 at high levels of schooling but without minimal competence



Source: PISA, 2012, 2009+

Children arrive at such low cumulative levels of learning because the learning profile is too shallow: they learn and retain too little from year to year. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for India in 2014 assesses over a half a million children in rural India. As shown in Figure 4, very little learning happens from year to year. By the end of primary school (grade 5), less than half of children could read a simple grade 2 level story. This was still a quarter of students by grade 8. Only about a quarter of grade 5 students could do a simple division problem—and less than half could do so by grade 8.

Figure 4: The learning profile in rural India is shallow—there is too little progress in mastery of competencies from year to year to guarantee an adequate education



Source: Data from ASER, 2015

The sad fact is that in today's world if one wants to find children who lack an education, the place to find them is in school. The 2014 UNESCO Global Monitoring Report stated that 250 million children are unable to read, write, or do basic mathematics, and 130 million of those children are in school (UNESCO, 2014). Whelan (2014) calculates that of 100 primary school aged children around the world, 96 will go to some schooling, 91 are in school now, but only 37 will reach a basic level of literacy and numeracy. Spaull and Taylor (2014) combined data on school attainment with the Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessment of the literacy and numeracy of children in grade 6 to estimate how many children who were uneducated (illiterate or innumerate) were out of school and how many were in grade 6. In South Africa, 40 percent of children were innumerate and 27 percent illiterate—but only one percent had never attended school and another one percent dropped out. This means 95 percent of the innumerate and 93 percent of the illiterate children had been in school for six years. *The learning profile was so shallow that children sat through six*

years of schooling and many did not even acquire minimal literacy and numeracy.

Table 1: Schools with shallow learning profiles mean that in-school children are primarily not getting an adequate education

Country	Fraction of the uneducated (innumerate or illiterate) children enrolled in grade 6 (percent)	
	Innumerate	Illiterate
South Africa	95	93
Zambia	82	75
Zimbabwe	81	75
Malawi	75	64
Uganda	65	49
Kenya	59	30

Source: Spaull and Taylor, 2014

Without learning, schooling doesn't produce the benefits of education

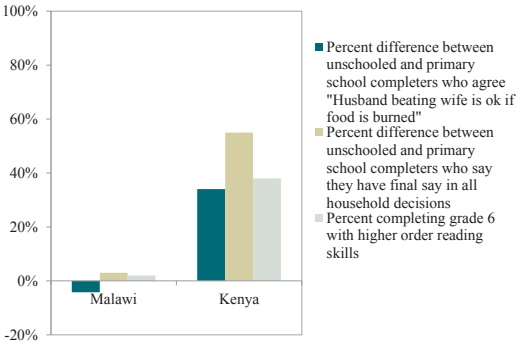
While schooling is an intrinsic right of each child that needn't be justified by extrinsic benefits, it was and is intended by policymakers, parents, and children to be a means to achieving goals other than just learning. At a basic level, nearly all countries expected that expanding schooling would facilitate higher levels of labor productivity and raise access to good jobs and higher wages. Yet in many countries schooling has expanded massively and per capita incomes have stagnated. Hanushek and Woessmann (2012) have shown, not surprisingly perhaps, that expansion of schooling has been much less predictive of countries' economic growth than the cognitive skills gained while in school.

Beyond income, education is key to priming individuals for success in all dimensions of their lives. For instance, many have emphasized the important role of female education in empowering women to resist domestic violence and have greater control over decisions (Klugman et. al., 2014). In Malawi only 2 percent of children complete grade 2 with higher order reading skills, so perhaps it is not surprising there is very little difference in measures of gender empowerment between those completing primary and the unschooled. In Kenya, 38 percent get higher order reading skills, and the difference in empowerment between unschooled and primary schooled is very large (Figure 5).

Conclusion: a pivot back from schooling to education

The global education community has always recognized that the real goal was education—preparing children to be successful adults in their local, national, and global communities—and schooling was merely a means to that goal. When many or most children were out of school, it made sense to focus the global movement on expansion. But success demands change, and now the global education movement is pivoting from a narrow focus of measures and metrics on the expansion of time served in school to a focus on learning outcomes achieved and lives transformed.

Figure 5: Schooling can be transformative in gender relations—but only if schooling brings education



Source: Data from ICF International, 2012, originally seen in Klugman et al., 2014

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Acknowledgments

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This is the first in a series of three documents describing the vision of the RISE (Research on Improving Systems of Education) program. The second vision document is Ambitious Learning Goals Need Audacious New Approaches and the third is Why Research into Education Systems is Needed.

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