

## Going back to the basics: on World Bank's focus on education

On page 115 of the World Development Report 2018, the World Bank's new report which focuses for the first time on education, are two powerful images. They are MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) images taken in Dhaka, Bangladesh, of the brains of two infants aged two-three months. The growth of one infant was stunted while the other was not. The images show the stark difference in brain development between the stunted child and the one who is not stunted. The fibre tracts in the brain of the child who is not stunted are denser, and the connections more elaborate, than those in the brain of the stunted child. This is an example of how intense deprivation can hinder the brain development of young children.

The report, titled "Learning to Realize Education's Promise", focusses on education. It is the first of the Bank's annual reports in four decades to do so. There are six main points to note about the report. First, it is good to see that it makes a moral case for education, with a rights-based approach, and sub-sections titled 'Education as freedom'; 'Education improves individual freedoms'; 'Education benefits all of society'.

### Decline in investment in secondary education in India: World Bank

Second, one of the most important sections is not about education but about early childhood development. And rightly so, for the report discusses the far-reaching impact of poverty and chronic malnutrition on the physical and mental development of children.

Poverty undermines a child's learning. "Severe deprivations—whether in terms of nutrition, unhealthy environments, or lack of nurture by caregivers—have long-lasting effects because they impair infants' brain development." The effects of stunting in the early years on physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development prevent children from learning well in later years. "So even in a good school, deprived children learn less."

The report points out that in low-income countries, stunting rates among children under-five are almost three times higher in the poorest quintile than in the richest. The effects of childhood stunting remain into adulthood. If early childhood development programmes are to compensate for poor children's disadvantages, they need to be scaled up and resourced for nutritional inputs, along with a focus on antenatal and postnatal care, sanitation, and counselling of parents for effective early child stimulation. Reduction of child stunting should be one of the major moral imperatives before nations today.

Third, it is good to see that technology is not regarded as a panacea in itself but as something that has the potential to enhance learning — and that the teacher-learner relationship is at the centre of learning. "Technological interventions increase learning — but only if they enhance the teacher-learner relationship."

### Written-off in the hinterland

Fourth, the report acknowledges firmly that on the issue of public vs private schools, the results are still mixed: "There is no consistent evidence that private schools deliver better learning outcomes than public schools, or the opposite... In some contexts, private schools may deliver comparable learning levels at lower cost than public systems, often by paying lower teacher salaries. Even so, lower teacher salaries may reduce the supply of qualified teachers over time."

Fifth, while the focus on learning is welcome, a wider and more nuanced exploration of the reasons for the learning crisis would have been useful. While school enrolments have increased

significantly, massive teacher shortages persist. Further, beyond reading and arithmetic, any meaningful assessment of learning should also consider aspects such as comprehension, problem solving, critical thinking, and innovation. Beyond merely increasing assessment (“Just weighing the pig doesn’t make it fatter,” as the report itself remarks), it is equally important to fund the sector better; improve teacher training; support the continuing professional development of teachers; and help teachers to help the poorest children to learn.

One would have liked to see greater focus on the continuing problems of access and equity, which are still the biggest problems in education. If there is one aspect of education which needs to be quantified and measured in order to make our education systems function better for all children, it is equity. How fair and equitable are education systems? Where are the greatest gaps? Which kids suffer the most from inequitable systems? These questions should be asked as part of an ongoing process of assessment for equity.

As for access, over 260 million children across the world – equal to a third of the population of Europe – are not even enrolled in primary or secondary school. “In 2016, 61 million children of primary school age —10% of all children in low-and lower- middle-income countries—were not in school, along with 202 million children of secondary school age.”

And in a world fraught with conflict, schooling suffers. “Children in fragile and conflict-affected countries accounted for just over a third of these, a disproportionate share.”

It is unconscionable that in the twenty-first century, so many children are still out of school.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President’s plan

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