

Whose Learning Crisis? Critical Reflections on the World Development Report 2018

A briefing note on the World Bank's
World Development Report 2018:
Learning to realize education's promise

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Introduction

For the first time in its decade-long history, the World Bank's annual flagship publication, the World Development Report (WDR), is entirely dedicated to education. The WDR 2018 is entitled "Learning to realize education's promise". It draws attention to what it calls the learning crisis and outlines possible solutions. While it is laudable that the World Bank uses its status to put learning at the forefront of the current development debate, some critical issues arise. Against the background of the World Bank's leading role in the education sector, a question is whether the World Bank has learned from the failure of its own education policies. Moreover, it is uncertain whether the World Bank's conceptualisation of learning is adequate to ensure the global agenda of sustainable and socially inclusive transformation.

Summary of the WDR 2018

Initially, the Report describes the positive effects of learning, including enhanced individual freedoms, increased income, the promotion of economic growth and democracy. The second part elaborates on the learning crisis. The Report states that globally, 125 million children lack basic competencies in literacy and numeracy after four years of schooling. Not surprisingly, learning outcomes are substantially lower in low-income countries and among poor children across all countries. Additionally, the learning gap between rich and poor students increases with rising education levels. The Report also confirms a gender bias according to subject. While girls outperform boys on reading, boys often have better outcomes in mathematics and science.

The Report gives a twofold explanation of the learning crisis. On the one hand, it locates the immediate causes among insufficient basic conditions for learning, such as scarcity of resources, inadequate teacher training, mismanagement and the negative impact of poverty on the cognitive abilities of learners. It locates deeper causes within the complex political economy of education systems. Multiple actors, e.g. communities, government, administration, private sector and international actors, might have competing objectives that can drive

misalignment and incoherence and ultimately pull the education systems away from learning.

In terms of solutions, the report describes three sets of actions. First, it recommends the assessment of learning outcomes as an indispensable tool to shed light on the learning crisis and to make learning a serious goal. Second, it stipulates that evidence-based policies, including early childhood programmes and the removal of financial barriers, would help to prepare learners for learning. Teacher training and incentives would ensure that teachers are skilled and motivated. At school level, adequate infrastructure, technology and management would enable school systems to focus on the main goal of achieving learning outcomes. The third set of actions aims at aligning key actors behind the common goal of establishing an effective education system.

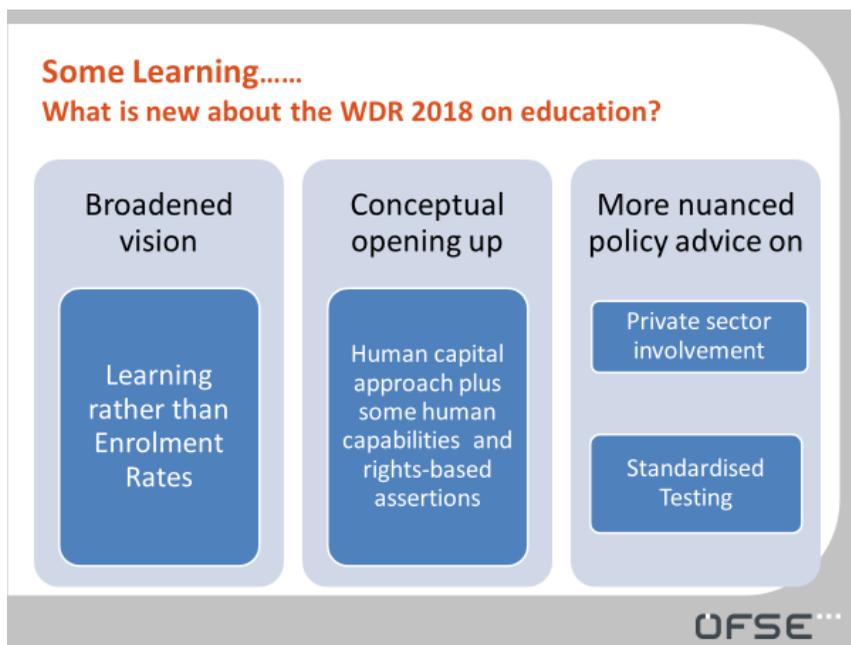
Some learning.....

There are indeed some new elements in the WDR 2018 with respect to the World Bank's traditional approach to education.

At the conceptual level, the report offers some theoretical openings. While for decades World Bank education policies have been based on the human capital theory, the report includes some assertions of human development and capabilities theories as well as some reference to a rights-based approach. This introduces a wider and more complex view of development and the role of education into a paradigm that used to be entirely framed by a functionalist and narrow economic understanding.

At the policy level, the report also includes some unexpected shifts in tone. Most welcome, in particular by civil society organisations, is a more nuanced policy thinking on private sector involvement, on the teaching profession and on standardised assessments of learning. Against the background of the Bank's long-standing advocacy for privatisation and user-fee introduction in education, the Report reads rather cautiously. Viewing well-trained, motivated and adequately remunerated teachers as key to learning is an unexpected innovation in the World Bank record of blaming teachers. Moreover, the report

deploys quite a differentiated approach to learning assessments, dedicating considerable space to the detrimental effects that have been found to result from a narrow focus on metrics, e.g. in the USA.



... but many continuities

The report presents many continuities with traditional World Bank education paradigms. Upon closer reading, the very concept of learning remains narrowly focused on measurable and formally transmitted knowledge and skills. While there is some reference to social skills and creative thinking, what remains key are measurable outcomes in reading and mathematics. In the context of World Bank education policy making, such an instrumental understanding of learning is questionable for a number of reasons.

First, it tends to perpetuate a colonial logic. The predominant narrative throughout the report resembles a problematic European-modernist discourse of skills scarcities in the Global South that supposedly are the cause of 'underdevelopment'. Such a deficit discourse ignores two issues, namely the violent disruption of non-Western epistemologies through colonialism; and, at a more immediate level, the high degree of knowledge, skills and learning that are involved in making a living under very constrained circumstances. The point is not that there is a lack of learning, but rather what kind of learning is valued in order to allow for upward social mobility and how access to the latter is organised. In that logic, the 'learning crisis' is rather a symptom of knowledge hierarchies and power asymmetries at different scales.

Second, an instrumental understanding of learning tends to generate a pragmatic view on causes of and solutions to the 'learning crisis'. Despite a somewhat more analytical discourse than in earlier publications, the description remains profoundly ahistorical, failing to consider both global circumstances and the accountability of powerful supranational actors such as the World Bank itself.

In most countries of the Global South, current education systems stem from those introduced by colonial powers. Largely, continuities outweigh fractures. Colonial education systems were per definition highly segregational and elitist. This heritage weighs heavily in terms of structural patterns of educational exclusion and inequality. Frequently, consistencies include the language of instruction, curriculum and teaching methods. Under these circumstances, many children experience schooling as difficult to access or of limited relevance for their lives.

In more recent years, education systems in the Global South have suffered substantially from systemic underinvestment as prescribed by the World Bank through Structural Adjustment Programmes. These led to cuts in education budgets, introduction of user fees, massive deployment of inadequately trained teachers and uneven development of education systems to the detriment of secondary and tertiary levels.

Third, an instrumental understanding of learning remains stuck in a modernist and functionalist paradigm of education that does not sufficiently account for the mutual conditionality of education and the economic, social and cultural dimensions of society.

The consequences of this conceptual restriction are visible at policy level. In fact, the report claims that the learning crisis could be solved through interventions into the education system without wider societal changes. For instance, the report laudably makes a strong point for early childhood interventions, but does not go far enough. As research shows, 'educability' of children from deprived sectors requires sustainable changes of their environment at the economic, social, cultural and emotional level. Such a multifaceted approach also applies at the higher levels of the education system, for which the report does not adequately address the necessary interlinkage of educational, social and employment interventions.

A key issue at the policy level are the costs of schooling born by families. The report cautiously recommends lowering these costs, but fails to send a strong message for free and public education systems.

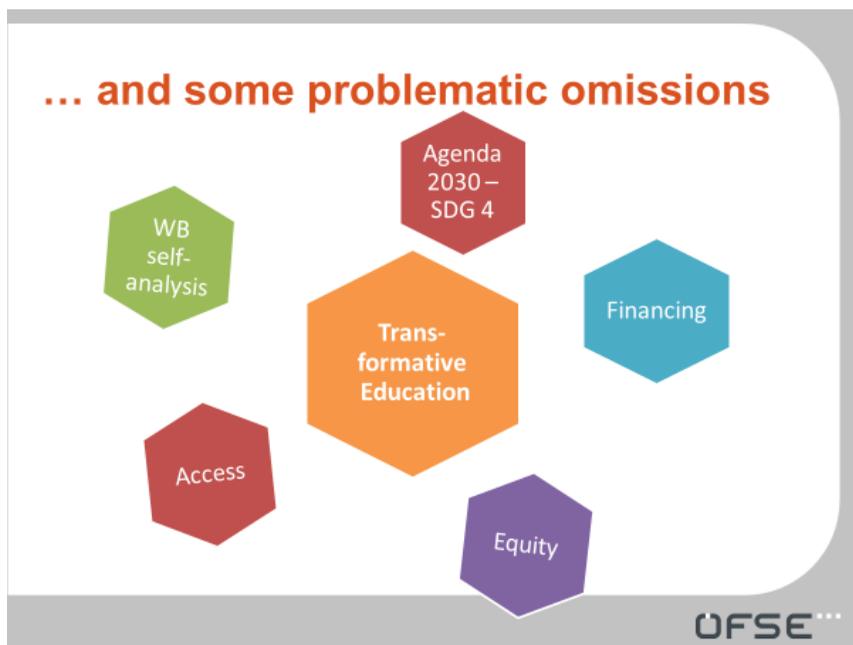
Another important issue are teachers. While there is some acknowledgment of the key role of teachers, the report still cultivates a 'blame the teacher' undertone. It continues to deplore teacher absenteeism as a major flaw, but does not adequately analyse its structural causes. Some of the proposed remedies, e.g. performance-related pay, resemble the World Bank's traditional neo-liberal teacher policies. Their effectiveness is questioned by educationalists and civil society organisations (e.g. UNESCO, 2017; Oxfam, 2017).

... and some problematic omissions

The Report does not adequately address the challenge of granting access to education for 264 million out-of-school children and some 750 million illiterate adults (UNESCO 2017). It insufficiently accounts for the issue of educational and social inequity.

It furthermore fails to deal with the huge financing gap. A publication of global outreach such as the WDR should have called for both adequately funded national education budgets and a substantial increase of international aid to education.

Finally, it is most remarkable that the report hardly refers to the UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goal on Education (SDG 4). While including the improvement of learning outcomes, SDG 4 goes far beyond this, proposing a more comprehensive, complex and transversal education agenda. In alignment with the Agenda 2030 call for a global transformation, SDG 4 invokes a transformative vision of education beyond a narrow economic rationale. Regrettably, the World Bank does not yet seem to have learned from this transformative spirit.



The WDR – a door opener for Global Education policy makers?

Whereas the World Bank Development Report 2018 mainly deals with conditions and developments in the Global South, some key issues are also very relevant for education policies in the Global North. Three of them are mentioned here:

First, there is the conceptual issue. Is the primary function of education to make the next generation fit for the (global) market? Or does it go far beyond this, and does especially Global Education play a key role: to realize and understand global connections, to see how we are embedded in globality, to recognise and reflect attitudes and values, to develop perspectives and visions, to be able to act responsibly in a „glocal“, i.e. local as well as global, context?

Second, the integration of children and youth from deprived sectors in society (key words: poverty, migration) into education not only requires a changed approach in education methods, but asks for a wider transformation in the social, economic and cultural environment of the learners.

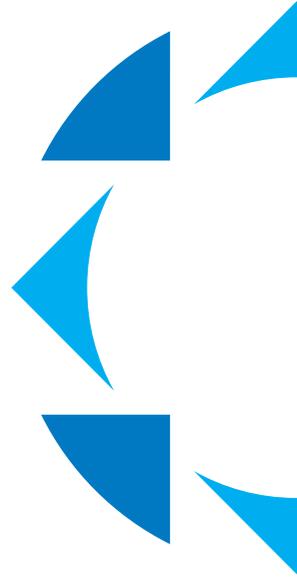
Third, the standardised assessment of learning meets controversy in education research. Global Education offers the chance to enrich this debate by posing the question of which competences should be acquired to meet the challenges of a globalising and complex world, which Europe is part of. Traditional ways of measuring learning will fail when we talk of intercultural competence, a global citizen's economic competence, ethical competences, a global citizen's civic competence or his or her global responsibility.

The WDR is a worth-while document, because it paves the way from education to learning, a debate which can open new and wider channels for policy makers and civil servants with a remit in Global Education in Europe, as well as for GE actors more generally.

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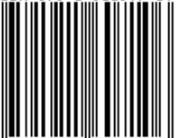
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