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Educational measurement

Quality of education

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From the book [Learning at the bottom of the pyramid](#), Sylvia Shmelkes, makes the case for why we must not only rely on measuring learning outcomes, but also evaluate our progress in addressing factors that block the right to quality education for all.

All children learn. Learning and developing are synonyms, as pointed out by Argentine researcher Emilia Ferreiro. Children learn informally through observation, imitation, and experimentation. They learn by listening and by doing. In rural areas and among marginalized populations, this is the principal way in which children learn informally, since they have less access to the media, the internet, books, theatres, and museums. There is an infinite potential for learning. What is limited are the opportunities for doing so.

Formal schooling allows for learning that is difficult to achieve without a systematic methodology (pedagogy) involving the gradual introduction of increasingly difficult intellectual challenges. This is the case of learning to read and write, formalizing the four basic operations of mathematical language, and gradually developing higher order thinking skills. Schooling is also a privileged environment for learning to live together (Jacques Delors, [Learning, the treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century](#), 1998). Identity, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging that goes beyond the family and immediate community are also developed in school, though not always adequately or equitably. These and other goals, such as understanding the natural and social world in which we live, are the purposes of schooling.

However, in marginalized regions in developing countries, even though children may attend school, very little actual learning is taking place, at least in reading, arithmetic, and in some cases, the sciences, which are the areas in which standardized testing is mainly carried out. Research on the causes of poor learning results identifies factors on the demand side, such as poverty, child labour, malnutrition, and distance from school, among others. Many factors also belong to the supply side, such as poor learning conditions, insufficiently trained teachers, teaching in a language other than the

mother tongue of the child, and inadequate pedagogy that fails to relate what children are taught to their immediate context and culture. It is interesting to note, however, that in all standardized tests across the globe, there is always a small percentage of students and schools that achieve good or outstanding results. This is true independently of the level of marginality of the locality, or of the socioeconomic status of the family, and even in the case of students that belong to a minority culture and speak a different language from the dominant one in the country. This proves that any child can learn, but also that schools can make a difference.

The most important factor on the supply side, given basic teaching and learning conditions, is probably the ability to make teaching relevant and learning meaningful. This involves the participation of the immediate community, the ability of the school principal to develop an adequate school culture, and sufficient training and pedagogical performance of teachers. Some conditions require intersectoral policies to mitigate poverty and to combat child labour, as well as to tend to malnutrition and health issues.

When we look at school failure through standardized test results, we are analysing the end of a complex process. We cannot continue to rely on the measurement of learning outcomes as the only way to account for the world's progress in improving the quality of education. We also have to measure whether we are addressing the factors that hypothetically determine poor results and that are in fact blocking the right to a quality education for many children worldwide.

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