The use of learning assessment data: what are we missing?

Learning assessments are one of the most promising – and least expensive – innovations for measuring quality in education. However, learning data is often missing from policy dialogue, or is simply forgotten to collect dust on a shelf. At the same time, studies on the importance of learning data in policy-making have proliferated. What is the missing link? Why is this wealth of information so often neglected?

We believe that the interactions between different actors in education and decision-making – including those in planning units, national and international assessment teams, development partners, and to some extent, civil society organizations – may provide some answers. Recent IIEP-UNESCO research in the Gambia and Guinea has shown that this may be the right line of inquiry. However, nothing is that simple.

How do you really capture and understand the subtle interactions that influence different actors' decision-making? Factors relating to the political economy – or in other words, the dynamics, power relations, and at times diverging agendas of different stakeholders – are extremely complex to analyse.

Why is it important to keep speaking about the use of learning data?

Investing in education without assessing learning is like paying for a product that you cannot see […] Learning assessments are among the least expensive innovations in education reform. […] A national assessment may cost between US$200,000 and US$1 million. This usually represents less than 0.3% of the education budget of the countries. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018: 8.

The availability and effective use of learning data are essential for diagnosing the health of the
education sector, designing appropriate strategies, tracing hidden exclusions, fostering stronger political engagement, as well as evaluating system progress (World Bank, 2018; UIS factsheet No. 46, 2017). According to the UIS factsheet, used effectively, learning data can potentially reduce inefficiency costs by 5%.

You may say we already know all of this. It is true that much has been published on the topic of the importance of learning data. However, systematic knowledge on why learning data remains underused is still missing.

A new research project on finding the missing link in the use of assessment data

IIEP-UNESCO has recently piloted its new research project on the use of assessment data in the Gambia and Guinea. While it is too soon to present results, preliminary insights suggest that we are asking the right questions and that the interaction of actors is key.

Why these countries?

Gambia has made considerable progress in the use of its assessment data. It has become part of ‘business as usual’ within the Ministry of Education’s operations at central and decentralised levels. One of the main conditions that has enabled this is strong, high-level political support.

The senior management team was the guiding force and the push, and that makes it easier, if the management is there giving you all the opportunities, all the support and pushing you, I think, in all fairness, you try to deliver… management has been the driving force and they tried to build the capacity. Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education Official, the Gambia

In addition, effective formal and informal communication channels have allowed a variety of stakeholders to easily share data for different purposes.

In Guinea, the scenario is completely different, however, the root causes of the current state of affairs still largely stem from the interactions among actors. Communication issues between the Ministry and the unit responsible for data production – coupled with the general scepticism around the way this unit works – has resulted in limited use of learning data. Although the latter can also be explained by a lack of capacities, financial dependency on donors’ agendas and other obstacles, the dynamics between actors hold the key to a better understanding of the enabling factors and barriers to the effective use of learning data in this context.

The political economy: can we really disentangle it?

As part of this research project, we will explore factors that are likely to influence the use of data but are more difficult to assess, such as the impact of diverging agendas and power relations between different actors, as well as often-messy policy-making processes.

How do you research these elements when the most interesting questions cannot be asked or answered directly? How do you research something that is so intangible? The challenge we
are facing is that of operationalizing and making explicit something that is happening behind the scenes.

The main challenge is to formulate sensitive questions on those elements, which are hard to grasp. Participatory qualitative research methods that include interviews and observations seem to be the most promising, but will this be enough to obtain the best sense of different stakeholders’ realities?

Our research teams are meeting as many stakeholders as possible, asking questions that would not only explore the use of learning data, but also the use of evidence in general and the existing culture of planning. We will be sharing insights on our research methodology that could be useful for other actors working on the theme.

Our team is working with countries that are currently seeking to improve the use of their learning assessment data in planning processes so that research results are of direct use for their ministries of education. We hope the outcome will be to provide recommendations on how countries can use learning data in more meaningful ways.

If you want to know more about the project, please consult the IIEP website where you will find the latest updates or contact the research team members!