

Learning at the Bottom of the Pyramid: The global learning crisis, the UN SDGs, and an educational equity agenda

Blog

Educational equality

This article draws from the recent [IIEP Strategic Debate](#).

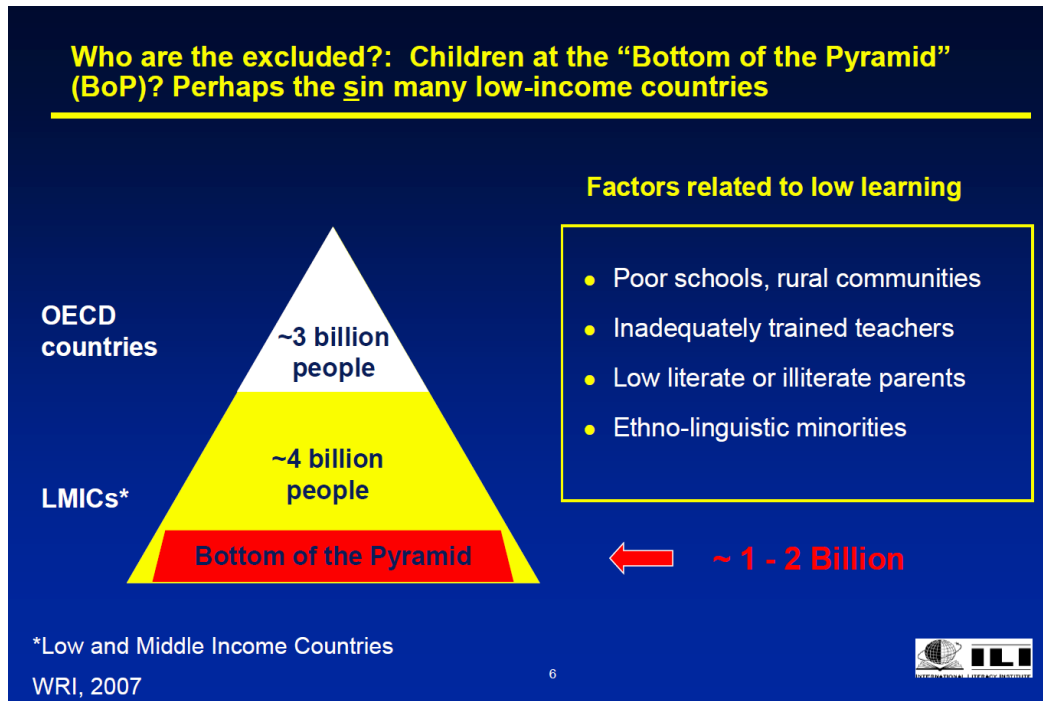
The [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#) estimates that one in five children between the ages of six and seventeen are out of school. In the poorest countries, this figure rises to one in three. Many of those who are in school are failing to learn the basics, with as many as six out of ten children of primary and lower secondary school age not achieving minimal proficiency levels in mathematics and reading. What will it take to remove all barriers and get all children and youth learning? What kinds of collaboration, innovation and evidence-based planning and policy-making can finally open the door to equal opportunity and education for all?

Drawing on two of his recent publications, [Learning at the Bottom of the Pyramid](#) and [Learning as Development](#), Dan Wagner, Professor and [UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy](#), Director of the [International Literacy Institute](#), and Director of the International Educational Development Program at the [Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania](#), provides some insights.

WHO ARE THE BOTTOM OF THE PYRAMID?

The global learning crisis and educational equity are key issues in every country. In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we tend to equate this global learning crisis with low-income countries. However, the learning crisis and educational equity affect disadvantaged children, those at the bottom of the pyramid, in every country, and not simply those countries deemed by international agencies to be low-income countries. In any country, children who are at the bottom of the pyramid are those least likely to be in the good schools, living in rural communities, taught by inadequately trained teachers, with low literate or illiterate parents, and especially those from ethno-linguistic minorities,

who may have moved to the city, and are speaking a language that is not their family language.



[Click here](#) to see Dan Wagner's full presentation at the IIEP Strategic Debate

OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING SDG4

For children at the bottom of the pyramid there are three main obstacles to achieving SDG4:

1. **Learning research** (basic and applied) has tended to be biased by Western models. About 90% of the research is on population samples in the West, with little research on how children learn in developing countries. We need to be careful about how we use conclusions on learning based on samples that very are different from the context we work in.
2. **Learning measurement** has tended to focus on international comparative reliability and national averages rather than “local validity”. International and regional assessments mainly assess students from middle- and high-income backgrounds, not students from low-income backgrounds. We cannot claim “local validity” if the most disadvantaged students are not part of the standard assessments.
3. **Learning equity** (narrowing the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots”) has not been central to national education planning and policy. The bottom

of the pyramid is often ignored or under-represented. Ministers of education may focus policies on where the votes are, and voters are generally more educated. The marginalized, those living in rural areas, or those with low literacy levels tend to participate less in votes. How can we come up with national education policies that sensitize ministers to look at learning equity?

THREE CHALLENGES, THREE SOLUTIONS

1. **Learning research:** A lot of research still needs to be done if we are to understand how to improve learning at the bottom of the pyramid. Almost all of our research focuses on school-aged children in formal school settings. Most researchers do not have the opportunity to work with children that are out of school, living in rural areas, nor to observe and understand classroom realities. We do not know much on how students who are at the bottom of the pyramid learn.
2. **Learning measurement:** The large majority of resources on learning assessment goes into international or regional comparable assessments. Is this in best interests of children and especially those children at the bottom of the pyramid? What matters most: ranking countries, or trying to understand how to improve the education of those children that are pulling down the ranking averages? From the learning at the bottom of the pyramid perspective, we need learning measurements with “local validity” if we are to reach the marginalized and disadvantaged students. When comparability is of less importance, there is a case for using [smaller, quicker, and cheaper assessments](#).
3. **Learning equity:** Establish better indices for “closing the gap” and “raising the floor”. We do not yet have the data to produce a Learning Gini index that will allow us to show learning gap trends over time in countries. If the SDGs are to raise the national level of learning, whatever measure you use, is it better to invest in the top, the middle or the bottom of the pyramid? Some data are beginning to show that in low-income countries if you invest at the bottom of the pyramid you move the national average higher than if you invest in the middle or the top of the pyramid. This is a very important question, as most ministries of education tend to invest resources in the middle of the pyramid.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A LEARNING EQUITY AGENDA

To address SDG4 on inclusion and equitable education we need to:

- Focus research, policy and practice directly at the bottom of the pyramid to address the problem that has been “hiding in plain sight”. We know that the most disadvantaged need help in all countries and we have not focussed enough on this.
- Reduce the learning gap. We have been successful at getting children into school, we now need to reduce the learning gap.
- Raise the learning “floor” and to pay more attention within countries to local, population-focussed solutions rather than magic bullets for the world.

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