

EFA FTI Global and Regional Activities Program Stakeholder Consultation

Thematic Area: Learning Outcomes

General comments

The area of learning identified as the context for improving learning outcomes is reading in the early grades. This is an appropriate choice, as reading is essential for all learning. The intention of adding mathematics in the early grades to the work is noted. The four reasons for identifying reading in the early grades provide a sound basis for initiatives targeting improved learning outcomes. The recognition of reading as fundamental to all other skills and the cost effectiveness of using early reading as a leverage point to improve other skills later is a strength of this paper.

The eight key technical topics identified in this paper emphasise important areas of knowledge about what is needed to improve learning outcomes for diverse populations of students. Some gaps in the scope of the topics have been identified.

Learning indicators and benchmarks

The recognition of the need for a valid evaluation framework to determine the results of efforts to improve learning outcomes is important. A range of benchmarks and indicators is identified, together with the need for more precise benchmarks than the 2009 FTI Secretariat benchmarks.

However, a gap in the discussion seems to be the additional need for a framework of curriculum content and standards. Curriculum frameworks built on standards for reading achievement through the early years of schooling would provide important guidance for teachers, as well as a further means of monitoring progress.

The reference to the value of oral reading fluency benchmarks as an indicator of progress is noted. The number of words read per minute is one aspect of reading fluency which is relatively easily measured. However, a gap here is the lack of reference to recent research that supports the inclusion of prosody in formal definitions of oral reading fluency.

Key technical topics

The list of key technical topics identified in the paper is comprehensive and well-targeted. Each topic is critical for the provision of effective educational opportunities for all. The eight topics, or themes, define key areas of knowledge relevant to improvement of learning outcomes at all levels of schooling, including the early years. Although these topics deal with discrete areas, they are strongly interconnected and this interconnectedness should consistently be taken into account in work on each of the topics.

Research-based instruction in the early grades

While the focus on approaches that 'would make all students literate' is highly relevant to the program, it should be treated with some degree of caution. A gap here is the apparent lack of critical analysis of claims made for the use of scripted lessons and textbooks, and the need for these approaches to be considered in relation to individual student learning needs. There is also no specific reference to research indicating varying individual learning trajectories in reading and mathematics. This topic needs to be expanded to include the need for the monitoring by teachers of individual students' progress and achievement, and for intervention when students experience difficulties.

References to ‘teachers of limited education’ and ‘large classes (60-120 students)’ draw attention to the importance of understanding the contexts in countries where the GRA program will operate.

Teaching reading and basic skills in local languages

The issue of teaching reading and basic skills in local languages is undoubtedly of critical importance in the endeavour to improve learning outcomes for all students. Issues of respect for cultural and ethnic differences are involved. Using the learners’ language will contribute to the resolution of many of the access and quality issues that make an impact on the achievement of the goals of Education for All.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on knowledge about the considerable differences between learning to be literate in the mother tongue and in learning to be literate in a second or additional language. Data is required on the availability of teachers fluent in the local language. Consideration also needs to be given to pedagogical and linguistic principles behind educational language choice, and to bilingual and multilingual education.

Knowledge is needed about the complex issues regarding the linguistic diversity of many lower-income countries, and the consequent difficulties in formulating educational policies. The logistical issues raised here will require investigation in the wide range of local contexts in countries involved in the GRA projects. Research into the acquisition of a second or additional language should be of assistance in locating answers to these critical questions, and in identifying effective practices that can be replicated in diverse contexts.

Effective early-childhood education methodology

The paper identifies key issues in early childhood education including the impact of health indicators on child development.

There is, however, no specific reference to factors in preschool education that are positively associated with the development of strong literacy outcomes in the early years of schooling. Focusing on knowledge about these factors could provide useful examples of practices to be adapted in other contexts including the GRA Program.

Effective and efficient math instruction

The thematic paper highlights the need for targeted studies in determining the variables in mathematics instruction that matter in lower-income environments and the related concern about teachers’ own mathematical knowledge and competence. The scope of the discussion on this topic appears to be at an early stage and further investigations will be necessary.

Teacher training and supervision

Issues in teacher education and professional learning will be central to the realisation of the goal of improved learning outcomes for all children. Several difficulties are noted in the thematic paper but there needs to be greater clarity about how addressing these issues will involve attention to both initial teacher education and continuing professional learning.

A gap in the discussion is seen in relation to initial teacher education where the adequacy of the preparation of teachers to teach reading and mathematics in the early years is of vital importance. Investigation of what is known about standards for effective teacher education and how guidelines for the accreditation of teacher education courses require evidence of attention to the teaching of essential content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge will be helpful.

A second limitation is the lack of reference to the consensus of recent research on effective approaches to teacher professional learning. Knowledge about this consensus about key principles in the design of learning experiences that can impact on teachers' knowledge and practices is necessary. In particular, evidence of the links between teacher development and improved student learning should be taken into account.

Identification of wide-ranging understanding of knowledge about the issues involved in the development and implementation of new opportunities for professional learning for all teachers that take up these recent research findings is essential to improve the quality of teaching. While there is a gap in relation to the importance of ongoing professional learning as well as initial teacher training, there is also no reference to professional learning opportunities for school principals, as instructional leaders, in the teaching of reading and numeracy.

Remediation strategies for students falling behind

A common difficulty for lower-income countries is identified in the thematic paper in relation to the proportion of students who fail to learn basic skills that subsequently become prerequisites for more advanced skills.

A gap exists in relation to knowledge about effective means of building teacher capacity to improve student learning outcomes through early intervention in literacy learning, which has been the focus of much attention in many educational jurisdictions.

Textbook production, financing and distribution, and use

The thematic paper identifies issues relating to teaching resources through the lens of 'textbooks'. This lens may well be too limited. The issues raised here are of major importance, but go well beyond the level of textbooks.

Many of the issues identified in relation to textbooks involve a lack of clarity about the importance of a wider range of teaching resources. These include textbooks but consideration also needs to be given to resources such as clear and accessible research-based curriculum frameworks, graded reading materials, visual aids such as alphabet charts and the potential uses of digital technologies, such as e-books. In the key area of reading, for example, the practicalities involved in the production of reading books in local languages, graded according to expected levels of progress, involve many considerations. Knowledge of how these issues might be addressed will be required.

The list of question posed about this topic needs refinement and categorisation, but there is also a clear need to refocus this issue in the broader context of the development of essential resources for teachers, including research-based curriculum frameworks in key areas of learning.

Performance measurement and evaluation

The eighth theme in the paper is that of performance measurement. There is clear recognition of the multiple challenges in this field, together with the importance of monitoring performance changes and evaluating the outcomes of various experiences. The need for institutionalising a regular program for measuring reading and mathematics achievement in partner countries is acknowledged.

The paper identifies many international comparison tests at the primary school level, and raises particular issues, including the need to build knowledge about how to use the results of standardized tests to improve learning and teaching.

However, there is a gap concerning the importance of balancing standardised assessments with formative classroom assessment. Research evidence indicates that it is important to monitor performance over time through formative classroom assessments. Formative assessment not only provides feedback to students that supports improvement in learning, it also provides teachers with continually updated understandings of students' progress. This enables them to adjust teaching to build on strengths and provide support to overcome weaknesses. Developing understanding of the importance of formative assessment also means that knowledge is needed about the importance of strengthening teachers' practices in formative assessment.

Planning and implementation issues

The final section of the thematic paper relates to planning for implementation of different elements of the GRA program. This planning includes workshops, peer-learning events and conferences for training stakeholders on aspects of new knowledge.

The eight key topics in the thematic paper will be central to all planned activities. The selection of these topics is soundly based. All are significant, and this review has attempted to offer some additional areas for investigation through literature reviews and workshops.

The generation and dissemination of knowledge about strategies and practices for achieving improvement in learning outcomes based on these eight topic areas sets up a sound basis for the GRA program. The generation and dissemination of knowledge about the eight key topics will considerably enhance the potential of using GRA funding to generate and disseminate knowledge that should make a significant difference for many students in lower-income countries.