

# EFA FTI Global and Regional Activities Program

## Thematic Area: Learning Outcomes

### Phase 2

### July 2011

## Education International commentary

### Introduction

EI welcomes the FTI Secretariat initiative to develop a comprehensive and focused programme with the aim of reshaping and revitalising the FTI process, and appreciates the opportunity to participate in its development. While significant progress has been made over the past decade towards achieving the EFA goals, it is clear that on current trends they will not be met by 2015. Moreover, we fully support the need to address not only problems related to access to education, but also quality issues in education. EI has always defended quality education for all as the main goal of education policy. However, we do believe that the definition of quality education, its constituent components and policies to achieve it, from a global or regional perspective, requires a very careful and balanced approach. It is from this position that we comment on the thematic area of Learning Outcomes in this proposed programme.

### Learning gap – a real issue, but why?

It is obvious that in order to achieve quality education for all, children should not only be able to attend schools, but also to learn. Often, this is not the case – too many school age children continue to drop out of education and do not reach expected learning goals. Assessing the extent and levels (impact?) of this phenomenon is a necessary and valid goal of the GRA programme; however, we feel that the causes of school dropout and its consequent solutions are not properly analyzed by the authors. As the paper states at its outset, it is increasingly being acknowledged that learning gaps exist in education – not all children achieve similar results in schools. This is true not only for underdeveloped countries, but also the OECD area. The background part of the paper emphasizes the gap between poor and rich countries, while there is strong evidence that gap cuts across countries both poor and rich, reflecting the increasing socio-economic inequalities *within* countries and regions. There is wealth of evidence that nutrition, health, security and sanitation issues have enormous influence on learning, especially at early stages of education. According to the EFA GMR 2011, “In developing countries, 195 million children under 5 – one in three – experience malnutrition, causing irreparable damage to their cognitive development and their long-term educational prospects” (Executive Summary, p.5). While the paper almost exclusively focuses on classroom teaching practices, these aspects are ignored. Similarly, teachers pay and working conditions issues, briefly mentioned, do not receive further attention in any of the proposed activities. Finding new innovative methods on how to effectively teach 100 children in improper environments, as proposed in one activity (2.3.2, page 9), may not yield results, even if rigorously tested. It may, however, distract the attention of policy makers towards “soft” and not sustainable solutions. Resources cannot be ignored when planning better learning outcomes.

### Presumptions and reality

Some of the important premises of the GRA part on Learning Outcomes are based on false or misinterpreted information. The assumption that “in many countries the basic structure of system functioning has improved remarkably when it comes to improving access: school construction and teacher training systems are

increasingly able to generate the needed numbers” (p. 2) is highly questionable. As illustrated by the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, “In 2008, 67 million children were out of school. Progress towards universal enrolment has slowed. If current trends continue, there could be more children out of school in 2015 than there are today. Another 1.9 million teachers will be needed by 2015 to achieve universal primary education, more than half of them in sub-Saharan Africa.” (Executive Summary, p. 5) Consequently, switching policy emphasis towards learning outcomes of those in schools may increase the quality of education, but only for a limited few. Most significantly, in our view, the role of teacher education and continuous professional development (CPD) is all too easily sidelined as “...having limited connections to the results, because it is rather theoretical”. (2.3.6, page 12) There is strong research evidence proving that quality initial teacher education continued into professional development and combining both theory and practice is the best approach. (The Nature of Learning, CERI, 2010, Hammond et al, 2005, Hanushek et al, 2005, Angrist and Lavy, 2001) Of course, there is also evidence (OECD TALIS 2009) that teachers tend to receive forms of professional development that they value least (because these are cheap) while those which they value most – such as action-based research, are least available. Nevertheless, it is a well-accepted fact that quality teachers are the single most important school-based factor explaining differences in learning outcomes. However, it has been also acknowledged that determining the relative value of this factor, in statistically measurable terms, is very difficult. There are good reasons for that. Foremost, it is the collective nature of teaching and learning, where, in the best systems, individual competences and efforts depend on interaction with others in learning communities. This makes collaborative and reflective activities the most effective forms of professional development. Therefore, in our opinion, investment in improving all forms of teacher education would be the most strategic approach to improving learning outcomes.

### **Role of quality indicators**

The paper presents a strong case for the introduction of indicators, measuring the progress of student reading after the first two years of studies and towards the end of the primary cycle. Measurement and assessment of student progress is a necessary part of the education process. When explaining the procedures, the paper justly acknowledges the need of oral assessments (direct classroom activity) alongside written tests. However, the main purpose, in our view, should not be the creation of comparative easy-to-measure frameworks which could lead to (competitive) rankings and superficial public debate, but collection of useful information for feedback and improvement. In this respect, as shown from the experience of studies e.g. PISA, the real strength of performance indicators lies in their interpretative value, which depends on how much background information is available. If such indicators are to be developed, they should include several other contextual indicators, particularly the availability of teaching and learning materials and teachers’ access to and forms of professional development, among others. There is little policy value in measuring and comparing students’ progress without having proper data on what contextual factors correlate with them. It is also important to note that creating an indicator on one aspect of learning (reading), however important it is, may force schools and teachers to give less attention to other essential elements of education. The debate on indicators should be inclusive and particularly involve teachers, through their unions.

### **Emphasis on standardized testing - risky**

The paper focuses very much on creating standards and measurement tools in order to assess the implementation of them. If our purpose is to improve learning of students, then teachers ability to measure their students’ progress, adjust their teaching strategies, taking into account the various needs of different students, should be taken into account to. Indeed, as very well defined in pedagogical literature, there are formative, diagnostic and evaluative strands of assessment theory and practice. All are important, but in a balanced combination, both at micro (student, class) and macro (school, system) levels. Emphasis on measuring the end results of students at the macro levels may seem the most efficient strategy, but, as it is well documented in recent history of education policies in developed countries, it may likely lead to dominance of standardized

testing and its twin sister – teaching to the test, as the main education strategies. Results of this have proved to be detrimental to creativity, leadership, collaboration, pedagogical autonomy and professionalism – all key aspects of quality teaching and learning. This could be even more detrimental in systems where teachers' professional development, collective ethos and networks are weak. Classroom videotaping, which has been given a prominent role among the proposed activities, is very questionable. It can be useful as self-analytical tool in CPD activities (it is very expensive), but if used as “monitoring” for supervision purposes, could rather serve to alienate teachers. However, if conceived primarily as effective delivery tool of prescribed “methods-that-work”, it is the least effective learning tool in teachers' education. Teachers learn through doing, experimenting, sharing and reflecting in friendly communicative informed environments. EI itself has been undertaking extensive research in the last few years on quality teaching in developing countries, showing the importance of teachers' ownership and collaborative strategies. Based on our findings we strongly recommend supporting the creation of teachers' networks for professional development, exchange, including sharing of assessment methods with emphasis on diagnostic and formative ones, which by their nature must be implemented by teachers.

## **Conclusion**

In general, while we welcome the reorientation of the FTI process towards the achievement of better learning results, we also see certain limitations and potential risks. The section of the GRA paper on Learning Outcomes adopts a narrow, one-size-fits-all approach towards very diverse contexts. It overemphasizes external control instruments and does not take into account teachers' ownership over the education process. There exists a wealth of research on educational policies which all come to the same conclusion: it will not be possible to achieve sustainable and scalable progress in learning outcomes without progress in teaching – involving teachers' competences, platforms for collaboration and ownership of the pedagogy they use. Drawing on such formative aspects of research evidence would significantly improve the paper.

EI would certainly support research activities aimed at improved database of information on learning contexts, as well as creating teachers' leadership and learning networks in the region, aimed at strengthening teachers' professionalism. We would however, not support, quick superficial results oriented activities, aimed at obtaining a narrow snapshot of students' achievement in a few selected curricula areas, and leaving teachers accountable for the results of a process they have no ownership of.