A critical analysis of the World Bank's World Development Report on education

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At issue

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The annual World Development Report (WDR) is a flagship World Bank publication. The 2018 report is entitled *Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. In the 40-year history of the WDR, this is the first time its focus has been on education. Many commentators have welcomed this as needed at a time when education systems around the world face so many challenges. Yet there are reasons to be less sanguine. While the report has some redeeming features, it is part of the Bank's longstanding, very narrow - even for economists - view of education.

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The World Bank **World Development Report** (WDR) on education has a fairly simple message, despite its 216 pages: learning in developing countries is in crisis with many statistics given on how so many students are learning so little in basic education. Hundreds of millions of students who have completed a number of years of primary school are illiterate; only 14 per cent meet minimum learning standards in reading and less in mathematics. The sources of this crisis are examined and three solutions are proffered: Firstly, the need for widespread assessments of student learning; secondly, the need to act on the "explosion" of evidence regarding what works to improve learning; and lastly the need to remove technical and political barriers in order to align the whole education system towards improving learning. The nature of the Bank's analysis is problematic when examined along the following three educational dimensions: a very limited view of learning that ignores access; a blame-the-teacher mentality; and a neglect of how to finance the very expensive reforms the WDR rightly calls for.

WDR's narrow view of learning at the expense of access

One basic problem is that the Bank - and perhaps too much of the rest of the international community - cannot keep two ideas in their head simultaneously. The world has long cycled between attention to education access and equity, on the one hand, and quality and learning, on the other hand. In practice expanding access often leads to deterioration in quality, and attention to quality too often leads to ignoring access. Yet clearly, access and quality are intricately connected: "access to what?" and "quality for whom?" are always the questions that should be asked.

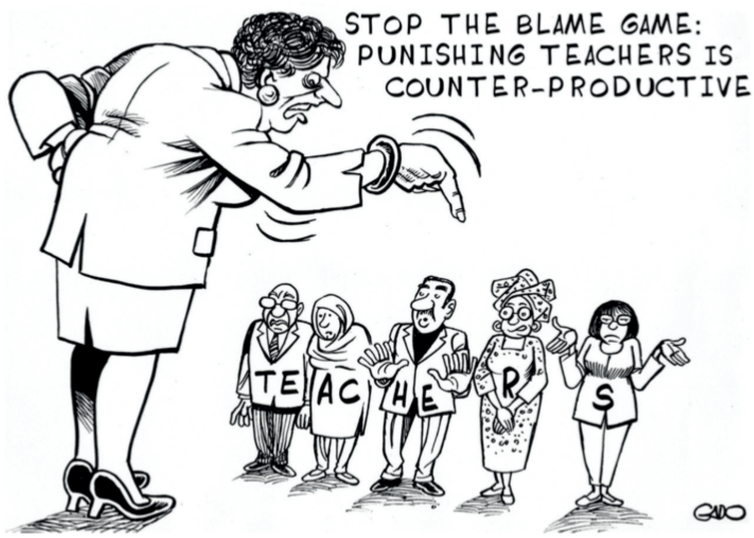
In its focus on the "learning crisis," the WDR gives short shrift to issues of access. While the 260 million children and youth who are out of school are mentioned briefly, there is no attention paid to what is needed to get them an education. And, of course, they are the worst victims of the learning crisis.

The WDR also gets low marks for its narrow view of "learning" - basically focusing on reading and math. While socioemotional skills are mentioned at various points, other than the repeated reference to problematic, narrow blame-the-victim ideas of "grit" and "resilience," there is no attention to what this means for improving a broad idea of learning. Almost all the research the WDR cited to decide "what works" to improve learning is based only on impact on reading and math. This narrow focus compounds the problematic results of attention to early grade reading and math over the last decade that has distorted primary school curricula to focus on what is tested. The massive assessment regime that the WDR recommends will continue the trend and result in the same distortion to tested subjects that was seen in the US' "No Child Left Behind" initiative, whose measurement focus did nothing to improve test scores.

Teachers' absenteeism focus obscures Bank's role in poor teacher pay and training

While there are occasional sensible comments about teachers and teaching in the WDR, the overall tenor of the report is that unmotivated and unskilled teachers are one of the principal sources of the learning crisis. Teachers with too little training are definitely a worldwide problem. But this is a problem in which the Bank has been complicit. For decades, the Bank has criticised pre-service and in-service teacher training as not cost-effective (see for example this 2015 Education International report *The World Bank's doublespeak on teachers*). For decades, the Bank has been pushing the hiring of untrained contract teachers as a cheap fix and a way to get around teacher unions - and contract teachers are again praised in the WDR. This contradicts the occasional places in the WDR in which the Bank argues that developing countries need to follow the lead of the few countries that attract the best students to teaching, improve training, and improve working conditions.

There is no explicit evidence offered at all for the repeated claim that teachers are unmotivated and need to be controlled and monitored to do their job. The Bank has a long history of blaming teachers and teacher unions for educational failures. The Bank implicitly argues that the problem of teacher absenteeism, referred to throughout the report, means teachers are unmotivated, but that simply is not true. As anyone who has worked extensively with teachers in developing countries knows (see *Women Teachers in Africa: Challenges and possibilities, 2017* edited by Nelly P. Stromquist, Steven J. Klees, Jing Lin), even under very trying circumstances, most teachers are very motivated to do the best for their students. This is true even if they must be absent at times in order to get paid or comply with bureaucratic needs - or even if they miss school because they are working at other jobs to make ends meet. Teacher absenteeism is not a sign of low motivation. Teacher salaries are abysmally low, as is the status of teaching. Because of this, teaching in many countries has become an occupation of last resort, yet it still attracts dedicated teachers. Once again, the Bank has been very complicit in this state of affairs as it, and the IMF, for decades have enforced neoliberal, Washington



Accountability in education: Blame game
Credit: UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2017

Consensus policies which resulted in government cutbacks and declining real salaries for teachers around the world. It is incredible that economists at the Bank do not recognise that the deterioration of salaries is the major cause of teacher absenteeism and that all the Bank is willing to peddle are ineffective and insulting pay-for-performance schemes.

WDR silent on how to finance education

The biggest problem with this WDR is the lack of any serious attention to whether and how to finance the learning crisis and other education challenges. Only half a page of the regular text of the report is devoted to finance, supplemented by one five-page "spotlight" section at the end. The tenor of the treatment of finance is unconscionable. The title of the spotlight embodies its problematic nature: "Spending more or spending better - or both?" Spending more gets short shrift - "maybe, sometimes" is the answer, emphasising that more money (in the narrow research the WDR chose to cite) does not lead to more learning (ignoring, e.g., a 2012 OECD study *Does money buy strong performance in PISA?*). This is an even weaker approach than the tenor of Bank reports over many decades in which they have devoted a line or two noting that, "yes, more money is needed," but spend the rest of the report giving narrow views of what more efficient spending would mean.

This approach to finance contradicts the most sensible parts of the WDR, which lay out the many very expensive investments that have to be made to solve the learning crisis, including: much better prenatal and postnatal care; tackling widespread stunting and malnutrition; home visits and caregiver programmes to support parents of zero to three-year olds; daycare centres for the very young followed by three years of quality preschool; making libraries and recreation centres available; eliminating chemically toxic and physically dangerous environments; attracting the best students into teaching; improving pre-service and in-service training; using technologies that complement teachers' skills; improving school management; lowering school fees and costs; providing cash transfers and psychosocial support; remedial and dropout prevention programmes for at-risk youth; and more.

Yet nowhere does the WDR state that implementing this very impressive agenda will be very expensive, and require significant investment. Nor does it mention the costs of getting the 260 million children and youth who are out of school back in school. It also omits to mention decades of UNESCO studies that point out that there is a vast shortfall in the international assistance necessary to improve access to and quality of primary and secondary school in developing countries - to the tune of $40 billion per year - 80 times what the Global Partnership for Education has managed to cajole from donors. Given that the Bank is full of economists, finance should be front and centre, not forever buried in some "yes, but" asides!

WDR's narrow approach

Further significant problems with this report are that it barely recognised the right to education instead of elaborating how it could use the UN's 4As approach (acknowledging the need for accessible, available, acceptable and adaptable education) to frame attention to the learning crisis. The report has a half-hearted brief mention of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, whereas serious consideration would lead to a much broader view of learning issues. The report further has a very narrow view of what constitutes evidence, privileging problematic randomised controlled trials, and essentially treating one study on one topic in one country as universally valid. It offers a very narrow view of what good management means from an institution that has been a management morass for decades. It also promotes a view of higher education that says primary and secondary education are the priority investments, continuing its decades-long relegating of developing countries to compete based on lower-wage labour. It portrays a naïve and unrealistic view of politics and political barriers, with a distorted view of the need for complete system alignment behind the one (narrow) goal of learning. And lastly there is a lack of recognition that the two developing country outliers exhibiting very high achievement test scores - Vietnam (mentioned repeatedly) and Cuba (never mentioned) - are outliers because of socialist egalitarian policies that already make many of the investments the WDR calls for.

The World Bank's politics and ideology

As described, the Bank ignores the finance gap, which its neoliberal policies have helped create, instead blaming teachers for a narrowly defined "learning crisis" that ignores ongoing challenges around access. In its discussion of political barriers, the Bank argued: "Vested interests are not confined to private or rent-seeking interests. Actors in education systems are often driven by their values or ideology". This includes the Bank. The World Bank prides itself on being evidence - and research-based, but it is not. Its premises and conclusions are based on ideology, not evidence. The Bank selects and interprets the research that fits with its ideology. In this sense, it resembles US conservative ideological institutions like the Cato Institute or the Heritage Foundation. However, it differs in two important ways. First, everyone realises Cato and Heritage are partisan. The Bank, on the other hand, makes a pretense of objectivity and inclusiveness. Second, Cato and Heritage are private institutions with limited influence. The Bank is a public institution, financed by taxes, which gives grants, loans, and advice around the world, yielding a vast global influence.[1]

The legitimacy of the Bank - and the IMF - needs to be challenged

The ideology of the Bank is neoliberalism, a term Bank economists barely acknowledge. In the 1960s and 1970s, liberal education economists at the Bank, like Jean-Pierre Jallade, routinely recommended substantial investments in education access and quality financed by progressive taxes. Without any basis in evidence and with specious reasoning, the Bank, along with the IMF, imbibed and spread so-called Washington Consensus policies for the next four decades through Structural Adjustment Programmes and their successors, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), delegitimising governments and starving the public sector of resources.

Of course there is a learning crisis. The world is replete with crises of education, health, poverty, development, environment, war, and more. How the Bank and other neoliberal institutions frame these crises, cast blame, and proffer solutions, as in this WDR, reflects their ideology. In education, the WDR privileges a narrow view of learning, separates it from attention to access, blames teachers, and, unbelievably, does worse than ignore finance - it actually questions whether more resources are needed.

The legitimacy of the Bank - and the IMF - needs to be challenged. A few decades ago, there was a strong "50 years is enough" campaign that did so. That campaign needs to be revisited. We are coming up on the 75th anniversary of the Bretton Woods institutions' founding in 2019. The Bank and the Fund are undemocratic, technocratic, neoliberal institutions unfit for the necessities of today's world. It is high time for a new Bretton Woods conference to re-think and re-formulate the role and nature of these institutions.

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A fully referenced version is available online: tinyurl.com/WDReducation2018

[1] *The Bank (and other aid agencies) like to say that policies are always country-driven and country-owned. This is belied by decades of imposing conditionalities that, for example, forced countries to cut taxes and social services or by a 1200-page manual to "guide" countries in developing PRSPs.*

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