

Delivering on a right to basic skills

The organisation of school systems, educational opportunities and achievement

This snapshot provides a summary of the themes and messages emerging in the forthcoming (July 2018) Young Lives education summative report.

1. The challenge of basic education in the SDG era is to deliver basic skills for all

Globally, six out of ten children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.¹ The total includes more than 387 million children of primary school age and 230 million adolescents of lower secondary school age. More than one-half of all children will not be able to read or handle mathematics with proficiency by the time they are of age to complete primary education.²

Challenges for 'basic skills' acquisition were apparent right from Young Lives' earliest data collection in 2002. Among the Ethiopia and India Older Cohort children, 80 per cent and 50 per cent respectively could not read a simple sentence by the age of eight. Across all Young Lives countries, for this cohort and for its Younger Cohort equivalent surveyed in 2009, 40 per cent of children had not managed to establish basic literacy foundations by age eight, despite several years of school in most cases.³ Even if differences are inevitable in final learning outcomes and in later labour market opportunities, **there need not be any inequality in basic skills.**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ marks a crucial turning point in defining global social policy across UN countries, with a pivot from inadequate and incomplete access and completion goals to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which pertain to skills and learning outcomes.⁵ As countries adapt in the SDG era, it is recognised that a central development goal for education should be that all youth in all countries achieve at least 'basic skills'.⁶ Countries are being called upon to demonstrate that they are delivering quality education which develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives.⁷ These objectives advance the human 'right to education'⁸ and the rights of the child to

develop their 'personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.⁹ They refresh the challenge of basic education to **deliver on a right to basic skills.**

This paper draws on research findings from Young Lives to illustrate how the organisation of school systems influences opportunities to learn for 12,000 children across 80 sites in four countries, tracked since 2002. It focuses on four issues facing 21st-century education systems, each of which highlights Young Lives research on the theme of *delivering on a right to basic skills*:

1. 'All children reading'	Establishing the education foundations of literacy and numeracy by age eight, as a platform for basic skills development
2. 'Targeting cognitive poverty'	Reducing to zero the number of children below a 'cognitive poverty' line by age 12-15
3. 'Leveraging private finance'	Capturing and spending financial resources for education and how this influences the achievement of basic skills for all
4. 'Assessing learning and acting on evidence'	Assessing achievement and learning and how appropriate methodologies and reporting can serve policy

2. Delivering basic skills for all is the "civil rights struggle of our generation"

'Basic skills' in this report does not mean any particular final learning outcome at the end of formal schooling. Instead, we refer to basic skills as those required to establish the social foundations to participate fully in society (a right, by virtue of being a member). Basic skills open possibilities that would otherwise be closed: a better chance to enjoy the well-established social benefits of lower fertility, better health and greater civic engagement and to defend and protect rights to survival. Achieving basic skills for all is the "civil rights struggle of our generation".¹⁰

Equality of basic skills is achievable and is the important objective for sustainable development

Educational inequalities are typically very marked in low-income countries – and higher than income inequalities in some cases.¹¹ However, even if differences are inevitable (and in some respects even desirable) in final learning outcomes and in later labour market opportunities, there **need not be any inequality in the basic skills that are a universal foundation for personal and social development.** This is to say that if ‘basic skills’ have a special status to the extent that they may be considered a ‘human right’, then delivering on this right implies that these should not be ‘rationed’ by merit, ability to pay, or public resources. Societies, and by extension states, therefore have a duty to provide for this right and its universality naturally requires a central focus on equity from the early years onwards. This challenge is about prioritising the movement of all children from the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ to a minimum expectation of achievement.¹²

To deliver basic skills for all will require considerable system reorientation towards mass learning

The education systems that have done a remarkable job in providing mass access over the past couple of decades now require models that marry access with quality learning so that all children achieve basic skills. The major reorientation towards basic skills will encourage a dramatic increase in what is known about which children do not attain these skills and why. It will also require countries to capture resources from the public, private and philanthropic sectors in order to increase from \$1.2 trillion to the \$3.0 trillion level needed to deliver on the right to basic skills by 2030.¹³ Countries vary significantly in the governance and financing of schooling, including marked variations in how funds are used between the four Young Lives countries. How systems are organised to deliver education services, and how they ration and distribute financial and human resources, will influence system efficiency and equity – and will therefore impact fairness, rights and the realisation of talents. The key for equity is to ensure that any rationing which is applied still allows all pupils a fair chance to develop basic skills.

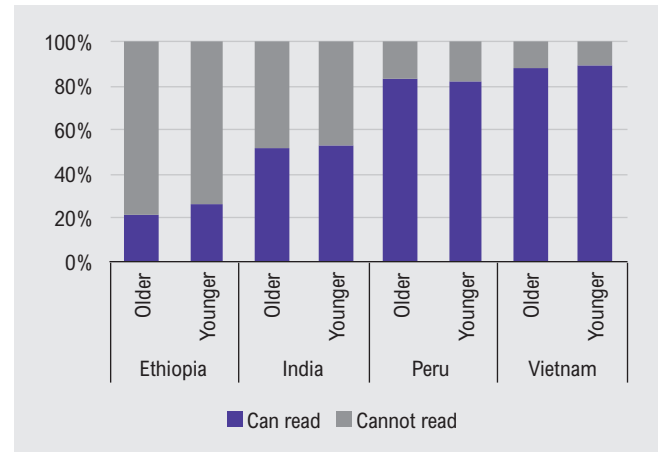
3. ‘All children reading’

Low levels of literacy are common and have been persistent

Foundational skills in literacy and numeracy provide the basis for ‘tackling the learning crisis at its root’¹⁴ are fundamental for participation in modern global society¹⁵ and open the door to lifelong-learning.¹⁶ Yet low levels of literacy are common and remain stubborn in many countries (Figure 1). The most striking findings are: (i) the size of differences in reading rates between Young Lives study countries and (ii) the system inertia that means

improvements in these rates are often slow. In Ethiopia, 4 in 5 Older Cohort children *could not* read a simple sentence by age eight, and in Andhra Pradesh, India, 1 in every 2 children had similar difficulty. Children unable to acquire the education foundations by Grade 2 or 3 (approximately age eight) are a long way from the path to basic skills.

Figure 1: Comparing reading levels at age eight by Cohort



Note: 8 year-olds of Older Cohort in 2002; Younger Cohort in 2009

Experimental studies of literacy teaching with this age group have shown that rates of foundation literacy can be improved rapidly. Young Lives studies on Vietnam’s education system provide insight into quality features that contribute to impressive reading levels, notably a positive focus on teaching foundation skills and the priority given to preparation in the first grades of school which ensures that most children (87 per cent in Young Lives sites, at age eight) establish a basic level of literacy as a foundation for future learning.¹⁷ Vietnam’s strategy demonstrates that it is possible to ensure that all children can establish literacy and numeracy competencies as the education foundations for basic skills development, even during a time of rapid school expansion.¹⁸ The key ingredients appear to be: (i) a narrow curriculum with a majority of time focused on building foundation skills in the early grades, with teachers working to a standard that all children are expected to reach¹⁹; and (ii) a persistent emphasis on the needs of the poor and disadvantaged.²⁰

4. ‘Targeting cognitive poverty’

Delivering on the right to basic skills raises important equity and efficiency questions, relating to the distribution of opportunities to learn

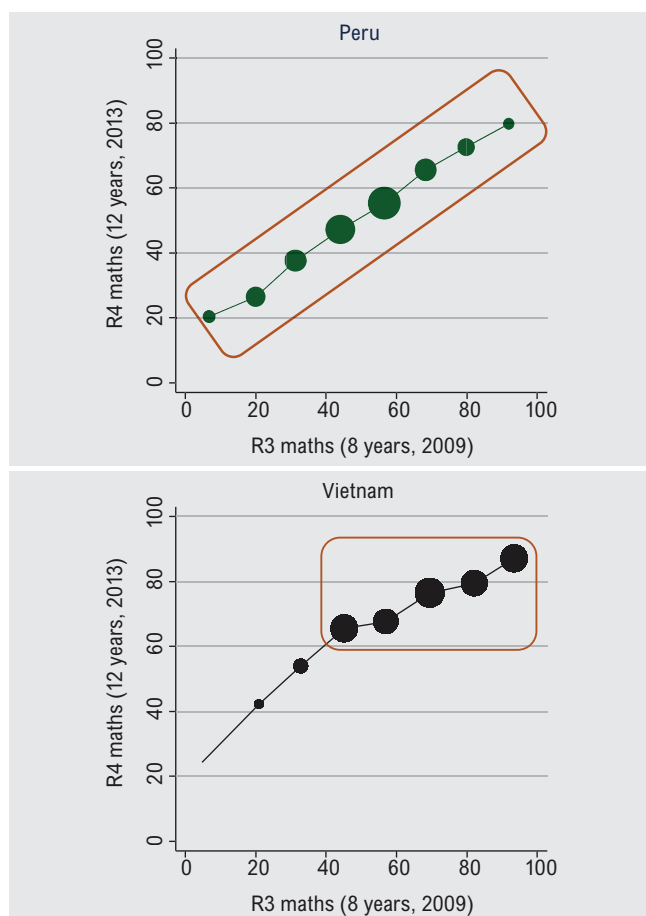
As attention has shifted to monitoring based on SDG indicators of development and learning, the concept of ‘cognitive poverty’ has been proposed as a way to describe the challenges facing many school systems where access may be strong but learning is weak.²¹ This powerful concept shifts attention away from a preoccupation with overall differences and inequalities in learning, towards the idea of a threshold level below which an individual is denied



the basic skills that are required to establish the social foundations to participate fully in society. Delivering on the right to basic skills then requires the percentage of a population below a 'cognitive poverty' line to reduce as close as possible to zero. But such a prioritisation raises important equity and efficiency questions, relating to the distribution of opportunities to learn and any action to support the development of basic skills requires knowledge of who and where the lowest achievers are.

Young Lives' longitudinal research design has been able to improve on the cross-sectional evidence available on student achievement, by providing a dynamic picture of skills development for individual children in the sample from ages eight to 12. Cognitive assessments at different ages were linked in order to highlight patterns of skills development between, as well as within, countries. For example, learning gains towards basic skills are distributed quite differently in Peru and Vietnam, even though samples in these countries demonstrate the fastest rates of learning progress – and each have students at the highest levels of achievement. This indicates substantial variation in how **opportunities to learn** are distributed within these countries, including inequalities in pathways towards attaining basic skills.

Figure 2: Learning profiles for Peru and Vietnam for Younger Cohort children from age eight to 12 (2009-2013)



Source: Young Lives Household Survey Round 3 and Round 4 mathematics assessments. R4 maths score uses only common items across countries, of which there are 13.

These profiles reflect Young Lives findings on Vietnam's approach to support disadvantaged, particularly minority, groups,²² in contrast to indications of 'discrimination' according to two definitions of advantage relevant to Peru: ethnic-majority status and high early ability.²³ Evidence for Vietnam suggests that the use of positive discrimination policies have substantial impact on the acquisition of basic skills *among all children*. Young Lives' school survey data show higher rates of learning progress in school among ethnic minority students, compared with their Kinh counterparts (Figure 2).²⁴ As a result – and in contrast to Peru – Vietnam has been successful in reducing the relationship between pupil background, school and teacher quality, such that students from any background can benefit from a school that adds much value to their learning progress.²⁵ Vietnam's approach reflects a type of 'progressive universalism', as advocated for by the Education Commission, and in respect of 'universalism', captures the notion of basic skills as a right.

5. 'Leveraging private finance'

Education systems which fail to capture and deploy all available resources to invest in the skills of their students may fail to develop the basic skills needed by all young people in the 21st century. What is more, when education systems 'under-provide', it is often the most disadvantaged who are excluded. Demand for education is strong and often rising in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), reflecting high aspirations²⁶ and often rising incomes, while placing strain on public education systems. Provision of high quality basic skills for all young people in resource constrained contexts requires that education systems harness a diverse range of funding sources, including private finance. Notwithstanding important debates around the role of the profit motive in education or the effectiveness of particular delivery mechanisms (such as public-private partnerships), the key question for governments in LMICs is not whether to facilitate private investments in education, but *how to do so equitably*.

In India, Young Lives, in common with a number of other studies, demonstrates a modest positive 'private school effect' on learning outcomes.²⁷ More significant, however, is the apparent efficiency advantage of low-fee private schools, given their much lower recurrent costs when compared to government schools. When public education is perceived to be of poor quality, it is the more advantaged households who are best able to seek alternatives and 'vote with their feet'.²⁸ This may in turn lead to further weakening of the public system, with negative consequences for equity. *De facto* privatisation is, therefore, linked to increasingly inequitable educational outcomes. Schools with higher fees deliver greater 'value-added', widening gaps between more and less advantaged pupils based on the schools they can afford to attend.²⁹ Legislation to ensure that private schools in India enrol less advantaged children (the Right to Education Act 2009) has had very mixed results so far.³⁰ Nonetheless, reforms to ensure the benefits of private finance in education are shared widely are vital to the aim of developing basic skills for all.



'Socialising' private schools is one option, while in Vietnam the opposite approach is adopted. Although schooling is overwhelmingly public, responsibility for (and financing of) education is shared between state and communities, according to the (albeit controversial) principle of 'socialisation' (xã h ì hóa).³¹ Households make contributions to public schools under a long list of categories, providing important additional resources. While socialisation means cost-sharing, what is crucial is that costs are shared, in principle, based on 'ability

to pay'. Accordingly, poorer districts and populations (such as ethnic minorities) are often exempt from certain contributions (for example for full-day schooling charges)³², effectively receiving subsidy from wealthier areas. A key advantage of the Vietnamese approach is that public schools continue to serve the vast majority of young people, of all incomes and abilities, with additional private funding channelled into – rather than away from – the system, potentially improving quality without compromising equity.

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Supporting materials based on Young Lives' education research can be found on Twitter @yloxford with #YLEducation.

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