

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
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Transforming children's lives through innovation in quality education: implications for policy and practice

In response to global initiatives, huge gains have been made in increasing access to education worldwide. But much education in the South is of poor quality and does not address the intergenerational transmission of inequality and poverty.

The drive to achieve universal primary education by 2015, enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals, has achieved substantial increases in the numbers of children attending school. But the issue is now one of quality. This paper argues that, beyond delivering cognitive achievement and development, quality education should help to reduce poverty, injustice, marginalisation and disempowerment, and help fulfil children's rights. It draws on a review of the literature and a Columbian case study to consider how transformative education approaches can contribute to these goals.

It is widely recognised that large numbers of children in the global South are experiencing education of poor quality, in unsatisfactory conditions, with limited resources, often without the support of qualified teachers. Primary education does not adequately prepare pupils for secondary education and research reveals little correlation between time spent in school and either individual or national economic outcomes. Consequently, education continues to be seen as irrelevant, resulting in either low enrolments or high dropout rates.

In attempting to improve quality, attention has turned to measuring educational outcomes. However, this exercise tends to focus on cognitive learning because academic outcomes are relatively easy to measure, and this approach fails to consider the potential of education to give children the relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes that will improve their lives and enable them to question and make informed decisions.

An understanding of quality education that will help empower students and address marginalisation needs to draw on transformative education approaches that aim to enable students to acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant to their lives and will permit them to play an active role in all areas of community life.

A review of the literature looks at the contribution transformative education can and does make to: stimulating economic development; increasing learning retention; better cognitive performance and retention rates; increasing civic engagement; increasing human rights awareness to address discrimination; promoting reconciliation

and reintegration.

To examine these issues, a comparative study in Columbia looked at two primary schools, one urban, one rural, both applying transformative education, or Escuela Nueva, approaches. The schools provide child-centred, community-based education led by teachers who are facilitators for active, participatory and cooperative learning.

Much of the curriculum is designed in conjunction with the local context, and learning programmes are intended to be carried beyond the classroom, so that the child becomes an agent of social change. Children are encouraged to take on roles of responsibility both within and beyond the school, learning about rights, ethics and cooperation.

It was found that this strategy improved both retention rates and learning outcomes because the education is seen as relevant and useful. The biggest obstacles to introducing these approaches into mainstream education are not funding or capacity constraints – although these are significant.

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Monitoring and evaluation of educational outcomes must become more meaningful, and politicians and policymakers must adopt new attitudes towards education provision and outcomes.

Key research findings

- the quality of education in many countries in the global South is poor; it isn't relevant; there are high dropout rates; academic results don't correlate well with improved individual or national economic outcomes
- there is an over-emphasis on measuring education in terms only of cognitive development and performance
- transformative education approaches that are child-centred, participatory and relevant are as effective as conventional methods in achieving academic success but much more effective at promoting participation, rights awareness and empowerment
- transformative education approaches can have an impact on the intergenerational transmission of inequality and poverty

Conclusions

While significant strides have been made in increasing access to education globally, attention now needs to be paid to how education can help to reduce poverty, injustice, marginalisation and disempowerment, and fulfil children's rights. To this end, quality basic education needs to be understood as education that empowers students, and addresses the intergenerational

transmission of inequality and poverty. Policies must include transformative education approaches in the existing concept and practice of quality education, and the assessment of 'effective' education should include outcomes such as individual and social transformation, empowerment and retention rates, and not just simple test scores. The provision of quality education that contributes to the overarching development goals of reducing poverty and inequality will require considerable additional funding and significant shifts in educational policies, objectives and practice.

Key policy lessons/implications of research

- Increase education funding to at least 20 per cent of national budgets.
- Provide more pre- and in-service training for teachers in transformative education techniques.
- Reduce reliance on quantitative assessment and measurement techniques to include self-assessment models that better reflect a child's ability to comprehend or apply the knowledge and skills they have learnt.
- Policymakers must turn their attention from access to quality and consider the contribution that transformative education approaches make to improving educational quality and thus to the promotion of active citizenship.

Credits

Katy Oswald and Kathleen Moriarty¹, 'Transforming children's lives through innovation in quality education: implications for policy and practice', Research Summary of Practice Paper 4. January 2010

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