

Consultation with Critical Perspectives from Scholars on the World Bank's New Education Strategy

Thursday, May 13, 2010, 12:00 pm – 3:00 pm

[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

On May 13, the [Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings hosted an expert academic consultation on the development of the World Bank Group's new Education Strategy (2010-2020). The consultative meeting brought together a small group of progressive critical thinkers from academia and the global education advocacy community. The purpose of the discussion was to gather input and suggestions aimed at strengthening the World Bank Group's work in the education sector.

[Elizabeth King, Director of Education at the World Bank](#), provided an overview of the changes the Bank has witnessed in the last decade that affect the future of education, such as increased concern about youth unemployment and increasing demand from governments to equip youth with the skills valued by the local and global labor markets; greater globalization; the rapid expansion of ICT in schools and the marketplace; and progress on the Millennium Development Goals. She noted that the Bank's new education strategy would address the needs of the world's poorest in this changing context in order to help move them out of poverty.

King then summarized briefly the results of the consultation process thus far, relating that emerging themes have included stressing the connection of education to the whole development agenda and better integration with specific development sectors; the measurement of results and impact, which could help shape the way education is delivered in the future; the development of effective partnerships with governments, other organizations and civil society groups; and the nurturing and training of Bank education staff both in the field and in the home office to ensure education is well-managed, among other topics that will emerge in the new strategy. Opening remarks included a strong caution that the World Bank cannot cover everything that can be labeled "education" and will need to place limits on its education portfolio, such as education for ages zero to 25. King then opened the room for discussion among these leading scholars and advocates on development and education (referred to hereto forth as "discussants").

Education as a basic human right was a leading topic of discussion. Discussants suggested that the Bank should take the lead in stressing the importance of education as a basic human right; however, it was noted that the Education Sector Board is competing with other development sectors such as health, water and sanitation and justice development for funding within its own organization, and that despite conveying the importance of education as a right, that rhetoric has not resulted in increased funding. Other discussants noted that declaring education as a right and then providing an instrumental rationale effectively acknowledges that it is not in fact a right. For example, the instrumental rationale can be interpreted as a defense of education, which should not be necessary if education is indeed a basic right. Further, declaring education as a right could produce stronger activism by the civil society sector and other organizations engaged in the education sector that could help push education to the forefront of national agendas.

Regarding funding for education within the Bank, King cited that the aid levels for education from the Bank have risen to unprecedented levels in the past two years and that the Bank continues to respond to demands from countries for assistance for education, both in terms of financial resources and technical knowledge. Another discussant, however, also cautioned against the risks of building an over-dependency on external aid in poor countries and thus weakening the push in these countries for allocating adequate national resources for a critical development sector. That discussant also noted the World Bank's reversal of its earlier refusal to support recurrent education costs – effectively, in some countries foreign aid is now paying the teachers – and suggested the importance of a transition strategy from increasing external support to recurrent spending in the present to reduced dependence in the future.

Some considered the Bank's conceptualization of education as presented in the [World Bank's Concept Note](#) is too narrow. The Bank was encouraged to broaden its basic education mandate, particularly to include skill development programs and opportunities for out-of-school children and youth. A focus on primary education leaves out many adolescents and young people. King stressed that the strategic priorities for the Bank's in the next ten years would be for children and youth, from early child development to higher education. While King re-emphasized that the Bank cannot be engaged in every aspect of education and that it is important for other international actors to lead efforts on other aspects of education, including adult literacy and lifelong learning, discussants stressed the Bank's role as a global leader and the impact that the institution's attention on a particular issue could have on the sector at large. While the World Bank Education Sector must operate within its own organizational constraints, discussants argued that it can and should play a leadership role, challenging both its own institution and the global education and development communities to rethink fundamental issues, to reconsider and revise priorities, and to explore new and alternative perspectives. King also stressed the importance of the Bank working with its partners in order to meet the immense education challenges in the developing world. In this vein of collaboration, the discussants argued for the World Bank to draw much more heavily on research conducted outside the World Bank or by World Bank-commissioned researchers. Further, the Bank was encouraged to utilize not only the technical expertise, but the funding available to such partners. Although the Bank is one of the largest development financiers, it could strengthen its own programs by partnering with programs funded by partner organizations.

Moreover, in addition to debates about levels of education and modes of delivery, more attention should be paid to the other purposes of education, beyond workforce development and economic growth. Education contributes to building the capacity and commitment of students to play roles as citizens (of their local community, of their nation, of the world), as parents, as exercisers of freedom, and as socially- and environmentally-conscious consumers. Some scholars cited the need for more humanistic language to be employed when framing education policies. By rethinking education – making it more inclusive than just schools and students – the Bank could involve other stakeholders, such as civil society groups and non-education government ministries, which would serve to strengthen education work more generally.

Discussants agreed that a whole-sector approach to education was one way for the Bank to integrate education programs into other sectors and would help to mitigate some of the internal competition that the Education Sector Board at the World Bank faces when vying for funding within its own organization. A holistic approach to education and development also means recognizing that the most important partnerships are within the education community, such as between the national government and local NGOs. The World Bank and other funding and technical assistance agencies should assign high priority to supporting these important dialogues and partnerships.

Discussants noted that since the Bank is in the business of providing loans to national governments, negotiations at the country-level are usually conducted with Ministries of Finance. The evolving role of Ministries of Finance as arbiters of education and social policy over the last few decades is a result of increased external assistance, some of the discussants argued. While the Bank's education sector does work extensively with Ministries of Education (in partnership with key national actors such as NGOs, CSOs, donor agencies, academia and the private sector), finance ministries play a critical role in determining the financing of national education programs, and, as such, remain important stakeholders for the Bank to work with.

Discussion of the World Bank's role and comparative advantage provoked considerable debate. The Bank's poverty reduction mission and its relationship with finance ministries in shaping national education plans are central components of the way it does business and can be used to advance the global agenda on development, with particular attention paid to education. However, its role as a knowledge bank and its ability to effectively engage a broader constituency of stakeholders to support educational development are considered by some to still be aspirational.

Regarding educational data, discussants argued strongly for the World Bank to rely increasingly upon data collected within recipient countries and to strengthen country capacity to use that data to manage their education systems. Utilizing country or regional researchers will add to existing capacity and knowledge about education, as well as reduce the cost of these activities. The Bank has an important opportunity to improve worldwide data on education by utilizing current funds used to collect data for sector assessments, project papers, and evaluations in a more systematic way to build capacity at the country level for a higher

level of quality data collection. In addition to strengthening data collection and analytic capacity within education ministries, comprehensive education support programs should include the establishment of university-affiliated or independent education research institutions. Extending existing collaborations with international partners such as the UNESCO's Institute of Statistics and OECD to include country-level partners, the Bank would help build knowledge about education outcomes around the world and could improve the capture of what does and does not work in different contexts worldwide. Additionally, the Bank should invest in building capacity in relatively "newer" methods of education data collection, including classroom-level observations that provide a more complete picture of the quality of instruction within the classroom, could complement current assessment methods and emphasize under-measured school outcomes such as citizenship, teamwork and critical thinking.

With respect to thinking about future obstacles facing education worldwide, discussants agreed that inequalities in opportunity and quality within individual countries remain a significant issue in many countries. One example cited was South Africa, where teacher-student ratios and other indicators of school quality are highly unequal across the country, resulting in widely different test scores for rural and urban schools. Understanding poverty and inequality will continue to be critical in the future as countries see large gaps in their internal education achievements. Without improvements in the quality of education, children who leave school will not have the skills needed to function in the global knowledge economy.

As the World Bank considers moving from an "Education for All" approach to a "Learning for All" one, it will require a more holistic view of educational reform, one in which the quality of education is central. Quality and quantity are not alternatives in the competition for policy attention and resources. Expanded access had limited value in the absence of improved quality of education. Moreover, improved quality is not simply a technical issue of teaching or mathematics better, but requires broadened participation in and conception of the learning process. For example, the importance of first language – "mother tongue" – in discussion of language of instruction is integrally related to who enters and succeeds in education systems.

To really embrace the "all" aspect, a holistic approach to gender parity in schools would look different than the current approach of enrolling girls in school. It should employ a societal approach to gender in various cultures and communities, and recognize that boys and men are integral in achieving gender parity, helping to mitigate and break inter-generational gender stereotypes with respect to education. The approach to education should also be more learner-centered. One participant wondered if the Bank is really ready to change and to move from a culture of monitoring and assessment to a culture of improving education quality and equality.

An additional future challenge will be the incorporation of teachers into the education plan, which could include more teacher education sessions or accreditation for teachers, different from the student-focused strategies of recent years, which has failed to include teacher preparation, motivation and other aspects as vital to learning. Since foreign funding of teachers' salaries is not sustainable, a challenge for the World Bank to support the development of both funding and learning strategies that will reduce that dependence on external support. There are also ways to engage teachers and improve outcomes for learning, including planning for teacher education in national education plans that are supported in part by the international donor community. King noted the ongoing challenges of both assuring long-term and sustainable external support for education in the poorest countries and also finding sustainable ways for countries to meet their own recurrent education costs over time.

King closed the event by thanking participants for their contributions and discussion, noting the World Bank's appreciation of external critiques of its education policy because they provide an opportunity for the Bank to examine its vision, sharpen its own thinking, and improve its practices and plans for the future. One discussant had questioned the real value of a new strategy in influencing the Bank's future work. Another discussant had expressed a wish for the Bank to open its internal debates about development policy to external audiences. King noted that the World Bank aims to be more transparent, to help stakeholders understand its processes, and to work well with its many partners. She mentioned that staff working groups are discussing the future direction of the Bank and background notes are being prepared. The strategy paper itself will be quite short as they are meant to be accessible to a wide audience, but the development process has ignited many useful discussions within the Bank and with different stakeholders. She concluded the discussion by saying that all comments and ideas would be considered in the development and implementation of the new education strategy.