

Equitable Learning: Our Common Objective

Wednesday, December 8, 2010, 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm

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

On December 8, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings hosted a private luncheon discussion on the role that the teaching profession plays in ensuring equitable learning for all. Susan Hopgood, president of [Education International](#), and Angelo Gavrielatos, federal president of the [Australian Education Union](#), provided opening remarks. Senior Fellow [Rebecca Winthrop](#) moderated the discussion with representatives of teachers' unions, multilateral organizations, professional development organizations and alliances, advocacy groups and academics.

Education: equity and quality. The goal of equitable learning for all is based on the notion that, regardless of factors such as wealth, gender or ethnicity, all people are able to not only access education but access a quality education that supports their lifelong learning and development. Equitable learning tackles the perceived trade-off between access and quality that emerges when there is a singular focus on either increasing access without regard for maintaining quality or on improving learning outcomes to the hindrance of access for the most marginalized populations. Participants noted that all countries should be focusing on the twin goals of equity and quality since no child deserves an inferior education.

Defining quality. While defining a quality education may be an elusive goal, it is essential to consider the elements of quality by asking what benefits student learning. Classroom activities are not just about acquiring a list of specific skills but instead about educating the whole child. At a time when policymakers may be searching for the silver bullet to ensure education quality, it is important not to become too reductionist; while basic literacy and numeracy are essential building blocks of learning, they constitute the educational floor and do not represent a complete or comprehensive quality education.

Situating policy at the classroom level. The individual classroom is the most important unit for policy development since that is where teaching and learning practices meet. Similarly, providing staff rooms give teachers a place to share experiences and learn from each other in order to be reflective practitioners. These hubs of policy in practice should inform local, district and national policymaking. Education policy should be focused on effective teaching practices, not solely on the intended outcomes. The shortcomings of many current evaluation practices are that they are aimed at an external audience – e.g. national-level policymakers and international donors – and generally are not geared toward informing teaching and learning practices internally.

Understanding the role of the teaching profession. As the frontline facilitators of education, teachers should have a leading role in the education quality discussions. Yet at a global level, their voices and perspectives have not been well-represented in the dialogue. The teaching profession often does not receive adequate attention and engagement from many donors. Participants asserted that donors and other influential policymakers should require teachers to be at the decision-making tables in order to leverage the on the ground experiences of teachers. Some distinct progress has been made in this direction, such as the new composition of the EFA Fast Track Initiative Board of Directors to involve union representation, but more work is needed to ensure meaningful participation.

Filling the teacher gap. According to UNESCO, over 10 million teachers need to be recruited worldwide to fulfill the goal of universal primary education in the next five years. Yet there are real concerns about proposed solutions to fill this teaching gap, like alternative teaching certification methods that bypass traditionally-accepted qualifications and threaten to undermine the profession by not insisting on certain basic criteria.

Next steps. The participants asserted that important spaces for impact include greater inclusion of the teaching profession in the international fora where global and domestic policies on equitable learning are discussed and adopted. Additionally, teachers should serve as lead messengers on the importance of equitable learning through more active and coordinated advocacy by the teachers unions. Finally, teachers unions could be doing more to bring their global expertise to under-trained teachers, in part by utilizing virtual communities more effectively.